

Chicago Race Riots of 1919 / Red Summer

What: A violent racial conflict between Black Americans and white Americans who lived in neighboring, segregated communities on the south side of Chicago. Because of the week-long violence and resulting economic impact, this is thought to be the worst of the many race riots that occurred across the US during the “Red Summer” of 1919.

Where: Chicago. IL

When: July 27 to August 3, 1919

Some historical context

- [The Causes of the Chicago Race Riot](#), written 2 months after the riot by Walter White, then an NAACP investigator, described race prejudice and economic competition as the two most prominent causes of the 1919 Chicago Race Riot. The [Chicago Commission on Race Relations](#) came to a similar conclusion. The commission’s report, published in 1922, described the primary causes of the riot as inadequate housing, inconsistent law enforcement, and pervasive racial discrimination.
- This race prejudice and economic competition were fueled by two pivotal events during the first part of the 20th century. Both events altered patterns of population and employment in Chicago.
 - 1915: The beginning of the “Great Migration” with southern Black Americans moving to northern and western cities in search of jobs and a better life.
 - 1918: The end of World War I with Black Americans returning to the US after serving honorably and proudly with the US army in Europe.

In Chicago, the Black population grew from 44,000 in 1916 to 109,000 in 1919. Because of jobs in meatpacking and other industries, most of this growth was on the south side of Chicago. The increased competition for jobs and housing was between Black communities and neighboring communities, particularly established Irish communities that had gradually gained political power and fought to maintain that power.

- The 1919 Chicago Race Riot was one in a series of more than 2 dozen similar events that occurred during the [Red Summer](#) across the US, in both large cities and small towns.

A brief outline of events – refer to the “resources” for more detailed information

- [Segregation in the city](#). In 1919, Chicago was a segregated city, not by law but by social custom. This was true for the beaches along Lake Michigan. The beach near 29th street was divided by a color line – one side of the line designated for white swimmers and the other side designated for Black swimmers. This color line extended out into the lake.
- [A drowning in the lake](#). On the hot afternoon of July 27, several Black teen-agers, including 17-year old Eugene Williams, were floating on a raft in the lake and inadvertently crossed the line between the “Black” and “white” beaches. White men on the beach noticed and began throwing stones at the Black teenagers. One stone hit Mr. Williams in the head. He fell off the raft, sank, and drowned.
- [First response](#). Fights broke out between Black and white people on the beach. Responding police officers did not arrest any of the stone throwers. Instead, they

arrested a Black man, based on a complaint made by a white man. This served to increase, rather than decrease, fighting among people at the scene.

- Expanding riots. As reports of Mr. Williams' death spread, violent fighting also spread from the lakefront into nearby neighborhoods. Both Black and white people organized into groups in response to the growing violence. White gangs, often made up of young men from local Irish "athletic clubs" attacked Black citizens who were on their way to work. The white gangs also roamed into nearby Black neighborhoods. Black citizens also formed into groups to protect one another and their communities. Although most of the violence and destruction occurred in the "Black Belt" on the city's south side, occasional violence was reported in other parts of the city.
- Government response. Initially, the Chicago Police Department turned a blind eye to the expanding violence. Chicago Mayor (William "Big Bill" Thompson) and Illinois Governor (Frank Lowden) engaged in political brinkmanship, with neither willing to be the first to call in the National Guard. The largely white Chicago police force was unable to reduce the violence. After 2 days, Governor Lowden authorized the deployment of 3500 National Guard troops and the Cook County Sheriff deputized between 1000-2000 men to maintain order. With relative peace restored, the guardsmen and sheriff's deputies distributed food within the "Black Belt" and transported families to safety. Arrangements were also made allowing Black workers to pick up their wages from meatpacking plants, which had been closed for several days, at specified locations within the city.

Immediate aftermath

- During the week-long violence, 38 people were killed and more than 500 injured, mostly Black people. Between 1000 and 2000 Black residents were left homeless. At one point, as many as 30 arson fires were reported in Black areas.
- The economic impact of the riot was substantial, particularly in low-income neighborhoods. Parts of Chicago's industry were shut down for several days during and after the riot. Businesses in other parts of the city, including the city's main business district, were affected by the reduction or suspension of street care services. Many people living on the city's south side stayed home to avoid being attacked on their way to work.
- Initial reports in the Chicago press sided with the Irish gangs. In contrast, newspaper reports in other cities reported that white gangs engaged in coordinated large-scale violence, including arson.

Lasting legacy

- The Chicago Race Riot became a model for subsequent racial violence, for example the destruction of the Greenwood section of Tulsa, OK in 1921.
- Many Black families left the city during and after the riot, many returning to familiar communities in the south. Within the city, both Black and white communities continued to segregate themselves into racial and ethnic neighborhoods. Chicago remains one of the most segregated cities in the US.

- In 2019, Jefferson Pinder created [Float](#) a piece of performance art memorializing the death of Eugene Williams a century earlier. And the [Chicago Race Riots Commemoration Project](#) began using artistic markers to “educate people about Chicago’s worst incident of racial violence.”

Resources for more information about Chicago 1919

- Hannah Ayers & Lance Warren (2020). [Red Chicago](#) (video: 27:01). *The Future of America’s Past*.
- Caitlin Biebrich (2019). [The Chicago race riots of 1919](#). *Discovering Digital History*.
- Dan Bryan (2012). [The Chicago riots of 1919](#). *American History USA*.
- Dan Bryan (2012). [Prelude to a Riot](#), Irish Athletic Clubs and the Black Belt in 1919. *American History USA*.
- Claire Hartfield (2018). *A few red drops: The Chicago Race Riot of 1919*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.
- Wikipedia. [Chicago Race Riot of 1919](#).

Resources for more information about Red Summer 1919

- Deneen Brown (2021). [Red Summer](#): When Racist Mobs Ruled. PBS: American Experience.
- Abigail Higgins (2019). [Red Summer of 1919](#): How Black WWI Vets Fought Back Against Racist Mobs. *History.com*.
- Natasha Ishak (2020). [Black World War I Veterans Were Honored In France And Lynched At Home During The Red Summer Of 1919](#). *Allthatsinteresting.com*.
- Cameron McWhirter (2012). *Red Summer: The Summer of 1919 and the Awakening of Black America*. New York: St. Martin’s Press.