

The Harlem Riot of 1964: Racism and Racial Justice in New York City, Past and Future

Overview: With the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement in the 2013 and the consequent 2020 uprisings, debates over what “racial justice” means have populated mainstream and academic media alike. But what did struggles for racial justice look like in mid-1960s New York? How did students in 1965 understand racism and struggles for Black freedom in the wake of the 1964 Harlem Riot, and how may this have inflected how they saw New York’s future? Students will analyze essays written by students in 1965 reflecting on the Harlem Riot of 1964 and making predictions about the future of racism and racial justice in New York City. Offering the Civil Rights Movement in New York City as context—and optional points of comparison like the 1964 School Boycott—this lesson encourages students to think about the multifaceted meanings of racial justice and the many shapes movements toward racial justice can take. Students will draw on their learning to reflect on present day issues of racism and struggles for justice in New York while gaining understanding about how their peers understood these issues—albeit conceptualized differently—in a different historical moment. How did the Harlem Riot inflect the predictions of students in 1965? What parallels can students think of today?

Focus questions:

- How did the Harlem Riot of 1964 shape how students in 1965 were thinking about the future of New York City?
- How do the Harlem riots of 1964 figure into the struggle for racial justice in New York City?

Lesson objective:

- Students will analyze essays to discern how students in 1965 understood the riots in Harlem, and racism and racial justice struggles in New York City.

Resources and materials:

- Primary Sources: 1965 Student Essays

- (1) <https://doi.org/10.7916/ptzg-1397>
 - This essay discusses contemporary poverty in Harlem, mentions the Harlem riots of the summer of 1964, and refers to ongoing racial segregation in the New York City public school system.
- (2) <https://doi.org/10.7916/j3s9-fa29>
 - Summary of the cause of the Harlem Riot with facts; mention of Kitty Genovese.
- (3) <https://doi.org/10.7916/11d8-g866>
 - This essay also discusses poverty in Harlem, casts blame on slumlords, and gestures to economic reinvestment (perhaps urban renewal) in the neighborhood as a resolution. Refers to ongoing unrest in the city over the struggle for racial justice and also refers to the Harlem riots the year prior.
- OPTIONAL (4) <https://doi.org/10.7916/6vgy-7e79>
 - This brief essay identifies the 1964 Freedom Day school boycott as a major Civil Rights action. The essay continues to discuss the poor conditions in “slums,” and their continued existence as a hub for crime and juvenile delinquency.
- Secondary Sources
 - VIDEO on the riots in Harlem, historical footage: ny.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/amex26-soc-64ntharlem/1964-anger-in-harlem/?student=true&focus=true
 - [PBS one-pager "1964: Anger in Harlem"](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/line/1964/anger-in-harlem/)

1. Introduce Unit / Motivate Students

Ask students to write down a few ideas on how they imagine New York’s future. After a couple of minutes, choose a few volunteers to share their predictions with the class. Then show students the call for submissions from 1965 (“New York’s Future As I View It”), as a way of showing them that New Yorkers their age 60 years ago had to confront the same question they just did.

Ask students:

- How do you imagine those New Yorkers from 60 years ago would have responded?

- How was their world different from ours? Do you think this affected their predictions?

After a few volunteers have shared their answers, tell the class that today we will learn about one of the things that defined the city in the 1960s: **The Harlem Riot of 1964.**

2. Model / Teach

- Introduce key concepts that are central to this topic:

Riot: “A riot is the language of the unheard. And what is it America has failed to hear? ... It has failed to hear that the promises of freedom and justice have not been met.” DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

Merriam-Webster defines a riot as “A tumultuous disturbance of the public peace by three or more persons assembled together and acting with a common intent.”

However, Anya Kalucki, Rishika Vaid, Loey Waterman, and Sal Ryan say: “Although deceptively simple, the term riot holds countless interpretations, varying amongst person to person...Yet, most of these descriptions fail to acknowledge the deeper concepts intertwined with the term itself. Riots are often heavily racialized and politicized, influenced by methods and systems masked from the public view. The term is commonly associated with a negative connotation, linked to violence and chaos, especially when compared to its counterpart, protest, which carries an air of positivity and peace. Yet, the situations these terms describe are noticeably more similar than different, making it interesting to treat them as labels used to brand an overarching event type.”

<https://sites.tufts.edu/rcdkeywords/riot/>.

Discussion questions:

- What do you think of when you hear the word “riot”?
- Based on the quote from Kalucki et al, do you think that’s a word we should use? In what cases? Why or why not?

Racism: Merriam Webster defines racism as,

“1: a belief that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race.

2a: a doctrine or political program based on the assumption of racism and designed to execute its principles

2b: a political or social system founded on racism

3: racial prejudice or discrimination”

Ibram X Kendi states that, "Racism is a marriage of racist policies and racist ideas that produces

and normalizes racial inequities." (p. 17-18, How to Be an Antiracist).

Discussion question:

- What do you make of Dr. Kendi's quote about racism? How does that fit or conflict with your understandings of racism?

Racial Justice: "Racial Justice is a vision and transformation of society to eliminate racial hierarchies and advance collective liberation, where Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders, in particular, have the dignity, resources, power, and self-determination to fully thrive." [RACE FORWARD]

<http://www.raceforward.org/what-racial-equity-0#:~:text=Racial%20Justice%20is%20a%20vision,self%2Ddetermination%20to%20fully%20thrive.>

Discussion question:

- How do you think about or envision racial justice? If you don't use that term, what term or idea do you use instead? (ie liberation, antiracism, etc.).

Civil Rights Movement: A nationwide movement for equal rights for African Americans and for an end to racial segregation and exclusion arose across the United States. [LOC]

<https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/united-states-history-primary-source-timeline/post-war-united-states-1945-1968/civil-rights-movement/>.

Discussion question:

- What do you know about the Civil Rights Movement already? Who was involved? When, where, and why?

What was the Harlem Riot of 1964?

In late July of 1964, Harlem erupted into riots over the killing of James Powell, a Black teenager, by an off-duty white police officer. The insurgency resulted in one death, over one hundred injured, and approximately four hundred fifty arrests. Many factors led up to the Harlem Riot of 1964. Despite being home to the Harlem Renaissance and heralded as "Black Mecca" in the 1920s, by the 1960s the African American neighborhood had suffered decades of economic and social marginalization leading to high unemployment, poor housing stock, and other social ills. In addition, many Harlemites experienced the acute sting of racialized police surveillance and violence. On a national level, 1964 also saw major developments within the Civil Rights Movement

and the national socio-political arena it operated in: Lyndon Banes Johnson rolled out his “Great Society” program and “Freedom Summer” unfolded across the nation in national civil rights protests. A product of the national and local events preceding it, the Harlem Riot of 1964—lasting from July 18-26, 1965—would cast a long shadow on the visions of the future for students in 1965.

Sources:

- Blurb paraphrased from largely paraphrased from: [PBS one-pager "1964: Anger in Harlem"](#)

OPTIONAL: What was the Freedom Day School Boycott of 1964?

Ten years after the ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), by 1964 New York City schools remained largely racially segregated. In fact, segregation was *increasing* due to red-lining and housing discrimination in New York City. The City underfunded and overcrowded schools predominantly attended by Black and Puerto students; Harlem only had one highschool at the dawn of the 1960s. Local civil rights groups organized against this continued segregation throughout the 1950s, but an insufficient 1963 reform plan introduced by the Board of Education to meet these demands sparked new energy within the local movement. Civil Rights activist and prominent minister Reverend Milton Galamison alongside famed Civil Rights leader Bayard Rustin, the NAACP, CORE, the Urban League, and others organized a massive, single day school boycott in protest of continued segregation in NYC schools on February 3, 1964: “Freedom Day.” Over 460,000 students stayed home or walked out of the school with around 4,000 teachers joining the protests—despite significant risks to their jobs. Parents and children protested in from of 300 public schools, attended “Freedom Schools” in public parks, and rallied at City Hall.

Sources:

Blurb paraphrased from an excellent blog post by Dolan Cochran, Educator Coordinator for Public Programs and Content at the Tenement Museum.

<https://www.tenement.org/blog/the-1964-freedom-day-boycott-in-new-york-city/>

Additional resource:

- Video clip of Malcolm X and Adam Clayton Powell speaking about the 1964 school boycott: https://crdl.usg.edu/record/ugabma_wsbn_wsbn36360

3. Group Work

Divide the class into groups and distribute an essay to each group (ideally, one copy per student, so each can read individually). Give them time to read the essay.

Once they are done reading, ask each group to discuss the worries and predictions of the author of their essay, making a list.

After they have had some time to talk about that, ask each group how these worries and predictions are connected to the Harlem Riot of 1964, if at all, and to make special note of any specific events or themes mentioned in their essays.

Potential discussion questions:

- How does the author describe the Harlem Riot of 1964?
- How does the author describe the problems of the time in Harlem? What do they envision as the ideal solution?
- Compare and contrast how those students thought and talked about racism in New York City to how we might discuss racism today.
- What would racial justice in New York City look like to you?

4. Assessment

Ask the groups to choose one or two spokespeople, who will share with the rest of the class how their assigned essay discussed the Harlem Riot of 1964.

Optional homework assignment

- ★ Visit the Studio Museum (opening in Fall 2026) or The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem! Harlem is home to many great histories beyond the insurgency of 1964.

Extra Resource: The Civil Rights Movement in/and New York City

Date	Event (N) = National (L) = Local	Source
May 17, 1954	(N) <i>Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas</i> . Supreme Court rules that school segregation is unconstitutional.	https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/brown-v-board-of-education
May 31, 1955	(N) <i>Brown II</i> .	https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/brown-v-board-of-education
1956	(L) NAACP Schools Workshop formed to integrate New York City schools.	https://www.mcny.org/exhibition/civil-rights#:~:text=By%20the%201964%20federal%20Civil.school%20boycott%20protesting%20segregated%20schools.
September 4, 1957	(N) The Little Rock Nine.	https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/civil-rights-movement-timeline
1958	(L) The Harlem 9. “In 1958, one year after nine Black students made national and international news when they desegregated Little Rock Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, desegregation activists in Harlem organized their own protest. Nine mothers in Harlem decided to keep their children out of local junior high schools to protest both segregation and the conditions in those schools. They knew that their children’s schools had poorer facilities, more limited curriculum, and more unlicensed teachers than the city’s segregated white schools.”	https://docs.google.com/document/d/17HAtwyeqzEVN37VxBg41klkurvlugQ1WHwNK-_wmHeo/edit?tab=t.0
1959	(L) Anti-school busing protest in Glendale, Queens.	https://www.mcny.org/exhibition/civil-rights#:~:text=By%20the%201964%20federal%20Civil.school%20boycott%20protesting%20segregated%20schools.

		4%20federal%20Civil,school%20boycott%20protesting%20segregated%20schools.
February 1, 1960	(N) The Greensboro Four.	https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/civil-rights-movement-timeline
November 14, 1960	(N) Ruby Bridges integrates William Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans.	https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/civil-rights-movement-timeline
August 28, 1963	The March on Washington – Harlem resident Bayard Rustin, a key organizer.	https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/civil-rights-movement-timeline
February 3, 1964	(L) “464,000 New York City school children — almost half of the city’s student body — boycotted school as part of a protest against school segregation. This was one of the largest Civil Rights Movement demonstrations.” + Bayard Rustin also a key organizer!	https://www.zinnedproject.org/newss/tdih/nyc-school-children-boycott-school/#:~:text=On%20Monday%2C%20Feb.,Queens%20College%20Civil%20Rights%20Archives. + Helpful summary: https://www.tenement.org/blog/the-1964-freedom-day-boycott-in-new-york-city/
July 2, 1964:	(N) LBJ signs the Civil Rights Act of 1964 into law.	https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/civil-rights-movement-timeline
July 18-24, 1964	(L) Harlem insurgency; Harlem experienced its first major riot in over 20 years, sparked by the killing of James Powell, a Black teenager, by an off-duty white police officer. The insurgency resulted in one death, over 100 injured, and approximately 450 arrests.	https://www.britannica.com/event/Harlem-race-riot-of-1964 Secondary literature: + Christopher Hayes, <i>The Harlem Uprising Segregation and Inequality in Postwar New York City</i> (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).
February 21, 1965	(L/N) The assassination of Malcolm X.	https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/civil-rights-movement-timeline

Additional potential discussion questions:

- What connections can you make between New York City's school boycott of 1964 and the wider Civil Rights Movement?
- What connections can you make between the New York City school boycott and Harlem insurgency of 1964?
- What do you make of frequent mentions of urban "slums" especially those cited in Harlem?

Other essay options

1. <https://doi.org/10.7916/vn5s-8p21>
 - a. Harlem riots, environmental pollution.
2. <https://doi.org/10.7916/2hc4-4w15>
 - a. Harlem/Selma comparisons.
3. <https://doi.org/10.7916/vz3c-m268>
 - a. Selma comparison, housing, debate as organizing theme.
4. <https://doi.org/10.7916/qe97-b414>
 - a. Dated Harlem riots, discrimination against Black and Puerto Rican New Yorkers discussed.
5. <https://doi.org/10.7916/fzrm-vb08>
 - a. Discussion of the oppression of Black and Puerto Rican New Yorkers.