

Maxine Waters, Causes of the L.A. Riots

The rage of African Americans in the inner cities, so powerfully conveyed by the rappers, exploded into violence in South Central Los Angeles in April 1992. As in other inner cities, the growing inattention of the federal government, combined with an epidemic of crack cocaine, had hastened the deterioration and despair. Following the acquittal of four white police officers for allegedly beating Rodney King, a black man, protesters burned and looted sections of the city for four days. The riots resulted in 38 deaths, 3,700 burned-out buildings, and damages estimated at more than \$500 million. In the following document, drawn from her testimony before the Senate Banking Committee, Congresswoman Maxine Waters (1938–), who represented South Central Los Angeles, explores the causes of the riots.

The riots in Los Angeles and in other cities shocked the world. They shouldn't have. Many of us have watched our country—including our government—neglect the problems, indeed the people, of our inner-cities for years—even as matters reached a crisis stage.

The verdict in the Rodney King case did not cause what happened in Los Angeles. It was only the most recent injustice—piled upon many other injustices—suffered by the poor, minorities and the hopeless people living in this nation's cities. For years, they have been crying out for help. For years, their cries have not been heard.

I recently came across a statement made more than 25 years ago by Robert Kennedy, just two months before his violent death. He was talking about the violence that had erupted in cities across America. His words were wise and thoughtful:

There is another kind of violence in America, slower but just as deadly, destructive as the shot or bomb in the night. . . . This is the violence of institutions; indifference and inaction and slow decay. This is the violence that afflicts the poor, that poisons relations between men and women because their skin is different colors. This is the slow destruction of a child by hunger, and schools without books and homes without heat in winter.

* Maxine Waters, "Testimony before the Senate Banking Committee," *Congressional Record* (1992).

What a tragedy it is that America has still, in 1992, not learned such an important lesson.

I have represented the people of South Central Los Angeles in the U.S. Congress and the California State Assembly for close to 20 years. I have seen our community continually and systematically ravaged by banks who would not lend to us, by governments which abandoned us or punished us for our poverty, and by big businesses who exported our jobs to Third-World countries for cheap labor.

In LA, between 40 and 50 percent of all African-American men are unemployed. The poverty rate is 32.9 percent. According to the most recent census, 40,000 teenagers—that is 20 percent of the city's 16 to 19 year olds—are both out of school and unemployed. . . .

We have created in many areas of this country a breeding ground for hopelessness, anger and despair. All the traditional mechanisms for empowerment, opportunity and self-improvement have been closed.

We are in the midst of a grand economic experiment that suggests if we "get the government off people's backs," and let the economy grow, everyone, including the poor, will somehow be better off. . . . The results of this experiment have been devastating. Today, more than 12 million children live in poverty, despite a decade of "economic growth," the precise mechanism we were told would reduce poverty. Today, one in five children in America lives in poverty. . . .

While the budget cuts of the eighties were literally forcing millions of Americans into poverty, there were other social and economic trends destroying inner-city communities at the same time.

I'm sure everyone in this room has read the results of the Federal Reserve Board's study on mortgage discrimination that demonstrates African Americans . . . are twice as likely as whites of the same income to be denied mortgages. . . .

In law enforcement, the problems are longstanding and well documented as well.

Is it any wonder our children have no hope? The systems are failing us. I could go on and on. . . . We simply cannot afford the continued terror and benign neglect that has characterized the federal government's response to the cities since the late 1970s.