

In the second part of this distant place study you will find:
 further quantitative and qualitative sources, specifically with regard to Detroit's
 changing demographic and cultural characteristics
 an introduction to Alter Road, a locality comparable in size to Great Missenden

Racial disintegration in Detroit

A brief history

Figure 2 lists ten key events in Detroit's history since 1900 that have shaped the city's economy as well as its social and cultural geography. A number of these events relate not only to racial integration, but also disintegration – the growing and entrenched *segregation* of white and African American residents. Among these events is the foundation of Motown, which is widely recognised as having played an important role in promoting the racial integration of music in the 1960s and 1970s (Figure 1).

Founded in 1959, the Motown record label became another successful brand of the city of Detroit. Motown fused the predominantly 'black' soul music with the predominantly 'white' pop sound. The company signed bands such as the Supremes, the Jackson 5 and the Spinners (known as the Detroit Spinners in the UK).

However, race riots in the 1940s and 1960s demonstrated that racial harmony was not always possible in the pursuit of the 'American Dream' in Detroit. In the 1970s, city authorities were accused of supporting the racial segregation of schools and housing, reinforcing **ghettos** and the racial divide for which the city is well-known today.

1903	Henry Ford founds Ford Motor Company in Detroit.
1944	Ford, retooled for the Second World War, shows the world how to produce a B-24 bomber in an hour (or 650 a month) – a key part of Roosevelt's 'Arsenal of Democracy'.
1959	Berry Gordy Jr founds the Motown Record Company in Detroit.
1967	Race riots result in action by the National Guard to quell the disturbance. More than 7200 people are arrested and 2000 buildings destroyed over five days.
1973	Detroit elects its first African American mayor, Coleman A. Young.
1977	A major redevelopment of downtown Detroit known as the Renaissance Center opens. This seven-skyscraper office and retail complex (a 'city within a city') includes the GM headquarters.
1984	Mayor Coleman declares Halloween a 'vision of hell' as youths set 800 fires across the city.
1991	Crime rates peak across the city at 2700 violent crimes per 100 000 people.
2009	General Motors files for bankruptcy but the company survives after a government-backed reorganisation.
2013	Governor of Michigan declares a financial emergency in the city.

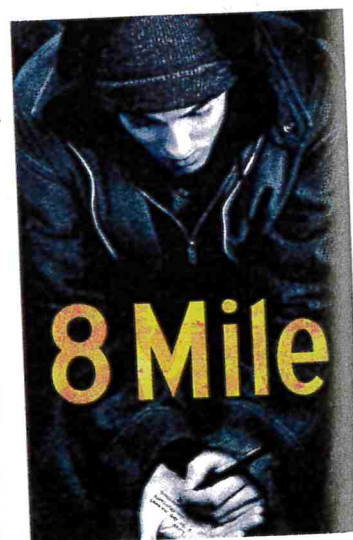
▲ **Figure 2** Ten key events in Detroit's history

Mapping a segregated city

Figure 5 is a map of Detroit produced using 2010 US Census data, which shows the pattern of the predominantly African American population of the city, surrounded by the white population of Detroit's suburbs. Each dot represents 25 residents of the city: red shows the distribution of white residents, blue for African American residents, green for Asian, orange for Hispanic, yellow is for all other ethnic groups.



▲ **Figure 1** 60s Detroit soul band, the Spinners



▲ **Figure 3** 8 Mile was a critical and box office success; 'a rap movie masterpiece' (Vibe magazine)

The distinct dividing line between red and blue areas on the north side of the city is in fact a highway – 8 Mile Road (Figure 4). 8 Mile is also the name of a 2002 film featuring the music artist Eminem (Figure 3). The film is a semi-autobiographical tale: Eminem stars as an aspiring white rapper seeking to make it big in Detroit's African American music scene. Eminem's character, Jimmy 'B-Rabbit' Smith, lives north of 8 Mile Road.

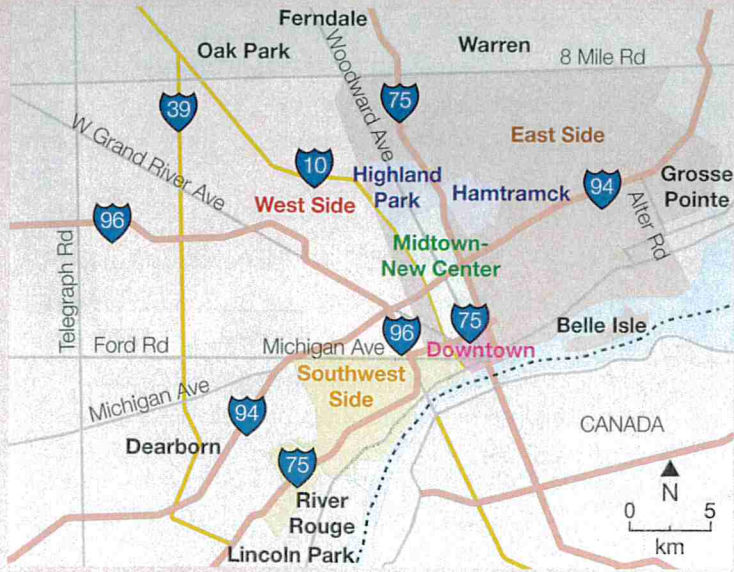


Figure 4 Map of the districts of the city of Detroit and its surrounding suburbs

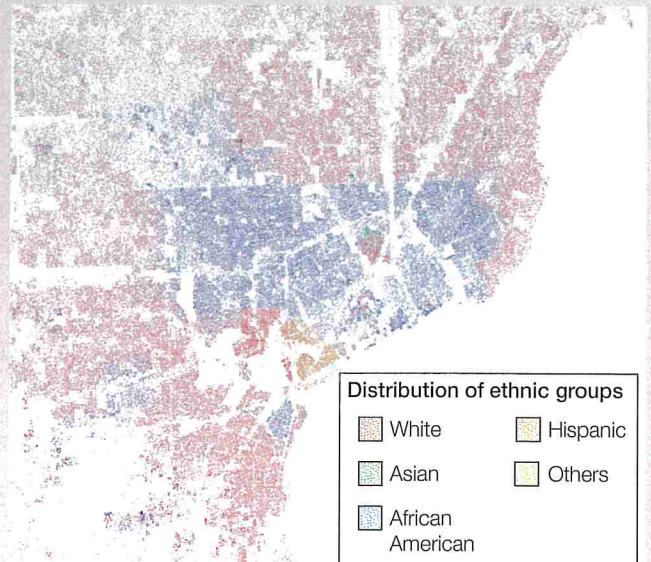


Figure 5 Race and ethnicity, Detroit (2010)

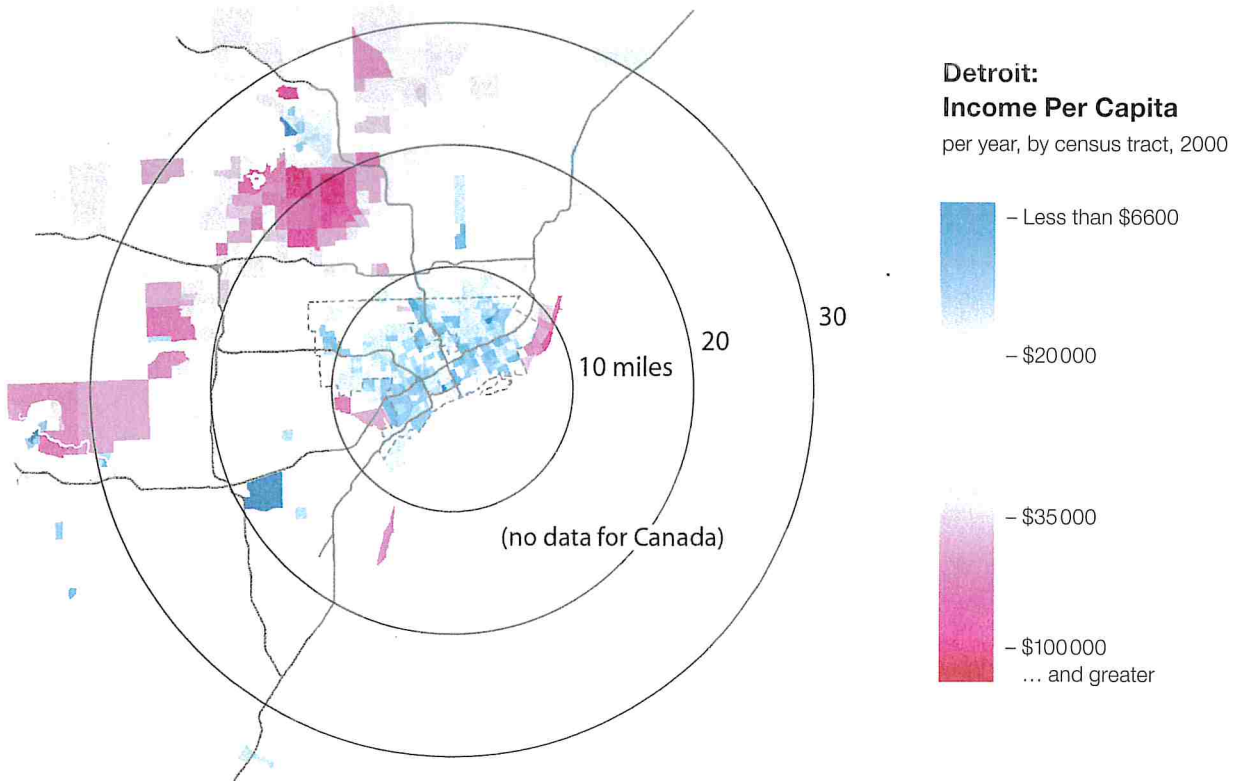


Figure 6 Distribution of wealth in the city of Detroit and its wider metropolitan area

Social processes create spatial patterns

White flight ...

In the second half of the twentieth century, Detroit's troubled times prompted middle-class white families to move out of the city to the suburbs of metropolitan Detroit. This migration was a choice made possible by their higher incomes, as they could afford to commute back into the centre. Eventually, many jobs followed this relocation to the suburbs: a new socio-economic, spatial pattern was created by this process of 'white flight'.

... and racial integration?

In recent decades, a similar movement of African American middle-income families from the city to the suburbs has taken place. Though fewer in number, they also sought better schools, less crime and a higher quality of life. Social commentators have debated whether or not this movement might reduce the level of segregation around, if not within, the city of Detroit.

Detroit's other Berlin Wall: Alter Road

Not yet mapped on GPS navigation systems, unofficial barriers block the road bemusing and frustrating both drivers and pedestrians who attempt to cross Alter Road into the suburb of Grosse Pointe Park from East Side, Detroit (see Figure 4). These barriers range from wooden fences and concrete walls (Figure 7) to heaped Christmas trees and overgrown scrub. Like 8 Mile Road, Alter Road has become a visible demarcation line of the social divisions within Detroit.

In what appeared to be an official endorsement of the growing barrier between neighbours, the authorities of Grosse Pointe Park undertook a range of measures in 2014 to restrict movement of traffic along Kercheval Avenue, a major commercial thoroughfare that crosses Alter Road (see Figure 4). Construction cones, reinforced with snow banked up against them, appeared earlier in the year. Although this blockade was quickly removed, a roundabout and farmers' market impeded the flow of traffic again within a matter of months.

This barrier of wooden sheds and concrete curb stones became a national story:

'(Alter Road) represents a huge dividing line separating the haves and have nots...' (*Los Angeles Times*, 2014)

Segregation at a local scale

However, in contrast to the integration optimists, some researchers have sounded a note of caution. They theorise that racial mixing in these outlying areas may only be temporary, with African Americans moving into older neighbourhoods that are already falling out of favour with the white middle classes:

'Much to their chagrin, many new black suburbanites found that integration was just a phase between when the first blacks moved in and the last whites took their children out of the public schools.' (*A Dream Deferred*, *New York Times*, 2011).

Moreover, in affluent white districts that border the city, such as Grosse Pointe Park, there is evidence of the ways in which residents seek to maintain the divide between the city of Detroit and their homes, by using physical barriers (Figure 7).

✓ **Figure 7** A wall has been erected to prevent travel on foot or by vehicle from East Side, Detroit into Grosse Pointe Park.



News articles at the time noted the disparity between both the ethnic make-up and average wealth of the residents of these two areas:


- ◆ Majority ethnic group: 82 per cent of the residents of the City of Detroit are African American; 85 per cent of the residents of Grosse Pointe Park are white.
- ◆ Median household income: City of Detroit \$26 955; Grosse Pointe Park \$101 094.

A I'm aware that the homeless people I walk by on the way to work are predominantly African American, unlike the tech entrepreneurs in Madison Heights (a suburb of Detroit). I don't assume that everyone starts on a level playing field. I studied physics and view the world as a complex collection of systems; if everyone started on an equal footing then economic success should be randomly distributed, and, obviously, it is not. (Entrepreneur recently moved to Detroit)

B I remember last year, a performer from Midtown donned black face to put on a performance as Michael Jackson. The video they posted got a lot of likes, to my disgust. When I said something about it, I was told I was being overly sensitive and that there was nothing wrong with blacking up. Of course, these were the same group of people who thought it was funny to utter racial slurs as jokes at a comedy open mic night ... (Detroit resident)

C I'm a Detroiter, and I believe the only way to overcome the race issue is to stop talking about it. Why should we continue to perpetuate this idea that we're different because our skin color/ethnicity/culture is different from our peers? Are whites not capable of this? Are blacks not capable of this? Are 'Latinos' not capable of this? It's time to stop telling people they're different or less important because they're black, or that they're somehow more important because they're white. Everyone is human, we all bleed red. Something like a 'racial map' only intensifies the division we already see in this great city. (Detroit resident)

D The (predominantly white) people of Grosse Pointe are likely to say that their relative wealth is the money that built Detroit. They mean it's old money, because it's where the descendants of the great auto-industry – particularly the Fords – still live. When, in fact, it was the labour of working-class Detroit that built Detroit. It's the lion's way of telling history. (Social worker, Detroit)

 **Figure 8** Blogging on race and renewal in Detroit

ACTIVITIES

- S**
- 1 Study Figures 4, 5 and 6 along with associated text.
 - a Describe the spatial pattern presented in Figure 5. Use information about the layout of Detroit in Figure 4 in your description.
 - b To what extent does the pattern you have described in your answer to activity 1a correlate with the spatial pattern of different income groups presented in Figure 6?
 - c What are the strengths and possible weaknesses of Figures 5 and 6 as sources of data for a place study of Detroit?
 - 2 Find the lyrics of 'Lose Yourself', a rap co-written by Eminem for the film *8 Mile*. What can you infer from the words about the quality of life for some people growing up in the city of Detroit or just beyond its northern border?
 - 3 Why is Eminem's music seen by many people as an important force of change with regard to racial integration in Detroit, and the USA more generally?
 - 4 Read the Alter Road example.
 - a Outline the reasons why, in 2014, a farmers' market was built blocking Alter Road at a major intersection.
 - b Explain why these sheds made news headlines, nationally and internationally.
 - 5 Using online map resources (such as Google Earth) explore the areas just either side of Alter Road (a trip along Kercheval Avenue is instructive). Refer to Figure 4.
 - a How does the district of East Side, Detroit differ from the suburb of Grosse Pointe Park in terms of the quality of the built environment?
 - b How do these observations inform your understanding of Alter Road as a place?
 - 6 Read the different blog comments about race and renewal in Detroit in Figure 8.
 - a Make a list of issues raised that relate to race.
 - b How and why do the opinions of these bloggers on racial issues differ?
 - c Why might a 'racial map' of Detroit intensify the divisions already seen within this place, as blogger C notes?

STRETCH YOURSELF

How might the classification of people as *insiders* or *outsiders* be used to describe or understand the situation of African American or white residents of the city of Detroit and those of its wider suburbs today?