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The War on Poverty in Bakersfield, California

By Daniel Rios

This article examines the political conflict in Bakersfield, California during the mid 1960s among community organizers and the local city government. There are two important political communities under examination: a middle-class African American political community and an overwhelmingly conservative establishment. As the War on Poverty emerged across the U.S, debates over policy characteristics and funding were contested on the national, state, and local levels. In Bakersfield, African American organizers pushing for anti-poverty programs were met with opposition from conservative officials on both sides of right. While African American organizers clashed with conservative opponents, they were in conflict with Black working-class youth who were alienated by African American middle-class politics of respectability and self-help. I have three main arguments. First, structural forms of racial and discriminatory practices in employment, wages, housing, educational, and other aspects of Bakersfield life were the core causes of the poor living conditions for the African American community. Second, racial and economic motivations rooted the conservative establishment's opposition to anti-poverty programs. And finally, the social, economic, and political struggles among Black residents played a significant role in the development and transformation of a more radical Black working-class who drawn influence from the emerging Black power movement. Essentially, Bakersfield's story of the war on poverty and the conversations, actions, and organizations that occurred reflected the larger political struggles that transpired within Black communities across the U.S—reformist and radical, Negro and Black, middle class and working-class. Indeed, the conflicts and cooperation between Black residents who were determined for community empowerment was a result of their divisions that included class, ideological, and generational differences.