



Race, Firearms, and Religion in the 20th Century

Brian Zhang; Michael McLaughlin

Florida State University, Department of Religion



Abstract

The 20th century's civil rights movement marked a cultural shift in the United States. During this time of change, different ideological groups emerged with their own solutions on how to campaign for these rights, one prevalent group being the Black Panther Party. Founded in 1966, the Black Panthers was a controversial group to the public due to violent encounters, despite this, the Panthers actively worked to develop social programs for African American communities across the country, such as free breakfast for school children and health clinics. The churches of these areas were the holding grounds for these programs, interlocking the Panthers with the symbol of Christ. By analyzing historic newspapers, this research explores the relationship between the Black Panther Party and the churches they associated with to not only tell their story but also examine the public perception on them as well. A total of 28 churches were evaluated and out of these, 12 held relevant sources. A total of 71 sources were compiled into a database, and out of these, Sacred Heart Church stood as an outlier consisting of 28% of all sources found. The investigation into Sacred Hearts reveals a controversy involving the Panthers allegedly distributing a coloring book depicting violence towards police. While the pastor and Panthers deny involvement, the press takes a critical and doubtful position towards them. This research works to use this story as part of the greater connection of faith, race, and firearms in 20th century America.

Methodology

Utilize historic newspaper database, newspapers.com, to investigate keywords relating to church and Panther activity in a two-part project. The first part involved searching for the church name along with "Panther" from the years 1969-1970 and narrowing the database down to articles written in the area of the church. After the articles have been narrowed down, they are then archived in Dropbox where once all relevant articles about the church have been placed, a thorough reading and analysis is conducted. The second part involves broadening the search, where instead of looking for Panther activity, the goal was to learn more about the minister behind the church. This was done through keeping the church name and location in the search but replacing the term "Panther" with "rev" "pastor" or "minister" to attempt to find relevant articles. The date range is also widened, now placed between 1965-1975. The process of archive and analysis remains the same. These two parts work to examine not just the relationship between the Panthers and the church, but also the connection between the Panthers and the individual minister. Their own involvement with their respective churches gives context on future Panther involvement. This research includes a total of 28 churches across the country.

Results

Out of the 28 churches reviewed, 12 had relevant sources towards the Panther party. Out of these 12, a total of 71 sources were found, leading to an average 6 sources per churches with sources and 3 sources per church overall. One church held significantly more sources than the others, this church being the Sacred Heart Church in San Francisco, California. Out of the 71 sources found, Sacred Heart held 20, making up around 28% of all relevant sources found. This church also stood out amongst the others analyzed as while they all discussed the Panther programs at these churches, the sources related to Sacred Heart seem to focus more on the Pastor, Father Eugene Boyle, than the Panther programs themselves. By examining each historic newspaper source, the story of why the press was so focused on Boyle comes out along with an idea of the public perception at the time. Boyle was accused of allowing Panther's to print and distribute coloring books portraying violence against police to children. Though Boyle fought and denied this, he also stood as a progressive voice for civil rights all the while. The San Francisco Examiner's malicious rhetoric towards Boyle's actions indicate a negative public view towards him.

Conclusions

The controversy of Eugene Boyle and Panther party involvement across the country is just one aspect of the overall narrative connecting faith, race, and violence in 20th century America. In the research conducted, out of the 28 churches evaluated, the majority of the churches, 16 to be exact, did not have any sources on Newspaper.com database. The churches that held more than the average 6 sources tend to involve controversy with the pastors or party. The involvement of the church as seen in the Boyle's accused violence, shows this as an example of the press perpetuating these stories of Panther controversy, while leaving their free breakfast and other programs in the dark to the public. Further research on other social and religious groups during this time period will be done to aid the discussion of race, firearms, and religion.

References

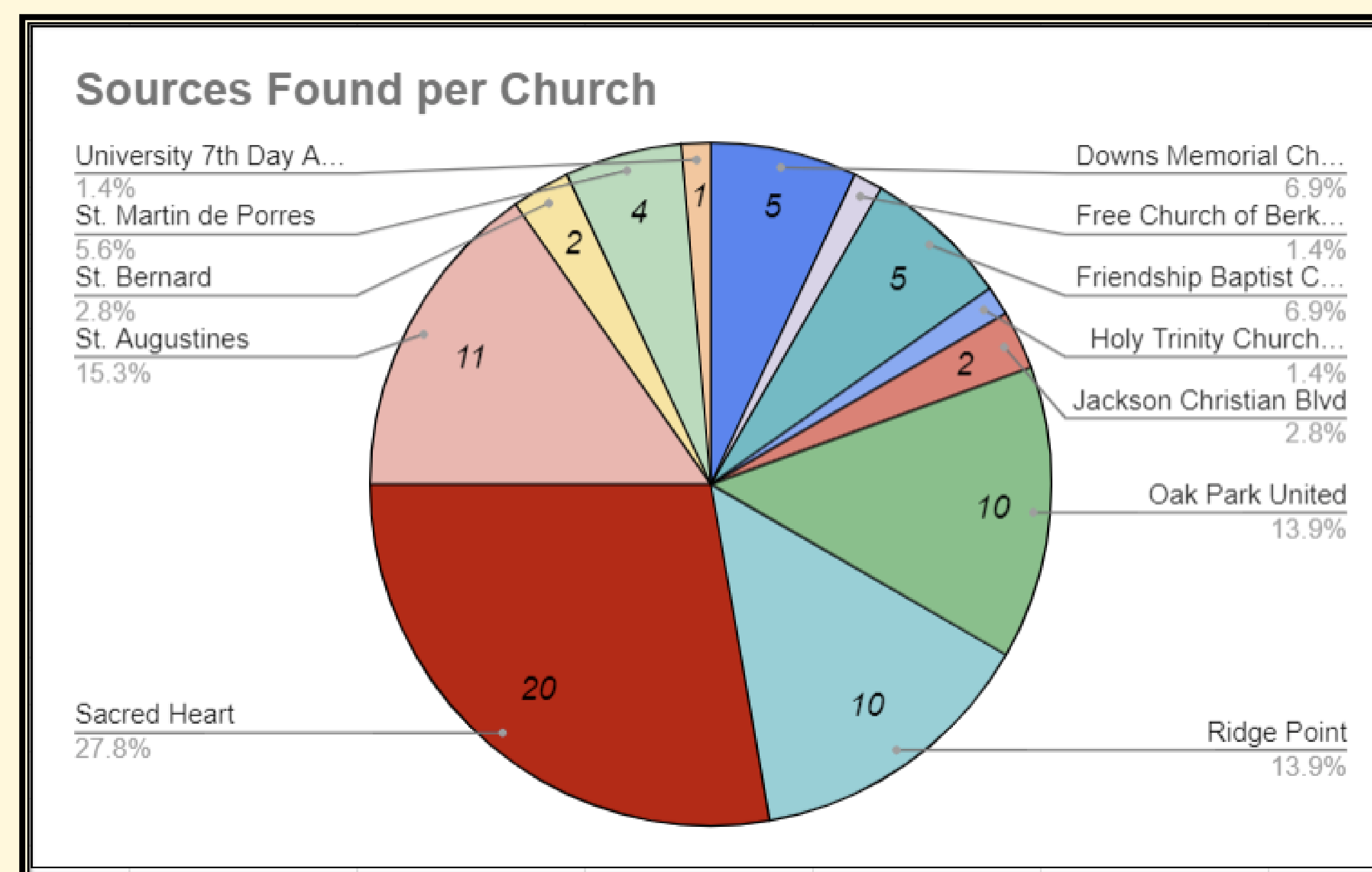
Murch, Donna Jean. Living for the City Migration, Education, and the Rise of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California. University of North Carolina Press, 2010.

"Priest's Angry Reply to Panther Accusation." *The San Francisco Examiner*, 25 June 1969, pp. 5-5. *Newspapers.com*, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/458917343/>. Accessed 13 Feb. 2022.

Alkebulan, Paul. Survival Pending Revolution : the History of the Black Panther Party. University of Alabama Press, 2007.



A prominent example of a historic Newspaper source; this one regards a Pastor's response to Panther activity at his church, Sacred Heart Church, in San Francisco, California.



Pie chart displays distribution of sources among churches that had relevant sources. Not shown on this chart are the 16 churches that had no relevant sources in the database.