Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences
http://hjb.sagepub.com/

Latinos and the 1992 Los Angeles Riots: A Behavioral Sciences Perspective

David E. Hayes-Bautista, Werner O. Schink and Maria Hayes-Bautista

Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences 1993 15: 427
DOI: 10.1177/07399863930154001

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://hjb.sagepub.com/content/15/4/427

Published by:

http://www.sagepublications.com

Additional services and information for *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences* can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://hjb.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

Subscriptions: http://hjb.sagepub.com/subscriptions

Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

Citations: http://hjb.sagepub.com/content/15/4/427.refs.html

Downloaded from hjb.sagepub.com at UCLA on February 17, 2011

Latinos and the 1992 Los Angeles Riots: A Behavioral Sciences Perspective

David E. Hayes-Bautista
UCLA
Werner O. Schink
Department of Social Services
Maria Hayes-Bautista
UCLA

The role of Latinos in the Los Angeles civil disturbance of 1992 has not been explored. An early explanation was that Latino residents of South Central Los Angeles participated in the riots because they were Central American, poor, isolated, and unemployed. Census data from the Summary Tape File 3 show that Latinos in South Central are virtually identical to Latinos living in neglected areas outside of South Central and not markedly different from more affluent Latinos in nonneglected areas. Thus Latino participation cannot be explained by virtue of internal composition. This article suggests that Latino participation can be better explained by using a collective behavior approach. The civil disturbance occurred in two distinct phases. The arson phase was a classic replay of the long, hot summers of the mid 1960s and showed elements of the solidaristic and expressive behavior so common to that period and did not have any noticeable Latino participation. The generalized looting phase, which did include noticeable Latino involvement, was individualistic and instrumental, akin to looting that often takes place in the case of a natural disaster. In conclusion, it is noted that collective behavior can be quite useful in understanding Latino collective behavior, fads, taste, and public opinion formation.

On April 26, 1992, the streets of downtown Los Angeles were blocked off for the second annual LA Fiesta, celebrating the Cinco de Mayo. On nearly a dozen large open air stages, musicians and singing artists from Mexico, Central America, and South America performed for audiences. Scores of merchants set up their booths, selling items from food and snacks to leather

AUTHORS' NOTE: Special *agradecimiento* to Ada Arensdorf for editorial and manuscript assistance above and beyond the call of duty.

Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences, Vol. 15 No. 4, November 1993 427-448
© 1993 Sage Publications, Inc.

from the SAGE Social Science Collections. All Rights Reserved. Downloaded from hjb.sagepub.com at UCLA on February 17, 2011

and electronic goods. Over one half million Latinos gathered in the long afternoon sunshine to savor the event. Large knots of families, pushing strollers with young children and towing grey-haired grandparents, descended on the area, enjoyed the day, and departed. During the entire event, not a single criminal event was reported, including shoplifting or pocket picking.

Only 3 days later, on April 29, and only a few blocks away, angry crowds torched stores, eyes gleaming, while some chanted "burn, baby, burn." Against a backdrop of wailing sirens and the crackle of sniper fire, stores were broken into and plundered. When the air had cleared 3 days later as the National Guard moved in, Los Angeles had experienced the most costly, deadly urban civil disturbance in American history.

Both the initial media coverage of the riots and the policy analyses that followed portrayed them as an issue involving the Black and Anglo population of Los Angeles, with Korean-Americans cast as a bystander population caught up in the swirl of events. Latinos did not figure largely in the public presentation. There were televised images of Latino-looking persons emerging from grocery and shoe stores, replayed over and over. In response, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) Border Patrol was sent into the Latino areas of South Central to restore order by rounding up pedestrians and deporting those it could.

On May 1, while fires were still being extinguished, a group of Latino elected officials held a press conference in the historic Latino barrio of East Los Angeles. In part, they congratulated the two million Latinos of East Los Angeles for refusing to take part in the disturbances. And it was true: there were many heavily Latino districts in the county that had experienced no civil disturbance. Indeed, so peaceful were the largely Latino barrios that one official worried out loud that maybe, because Latino areas had behaved themselves so well, they would be "punished" for their good behavior by not being showered with the federal largess that would be expected in the wake of urban unrest, such as had happened after Watts in 1965. Some of the Latino officials expressed the view that although there were Latinos that had participated, they must have been Central Americans because it is known that many Central Americans live in South Central, as if that one fact alone explained who did and who did not participate in the disturbances.

Latinos from the South Central region at times interpreted the press conference as an attempt to "distance" the east side Latino political establishment from the central city regions.

In September 1992, the office of State Assemblyman Curtis Tucker (1992) released a report endorsed by the California State Legislature, which viewed

Downloaded from hjb.sagepub.com at UCLA on February 17, 2011

the riots through a Black/Anglo lens. The report laid the cause of the riots strictly on structural conditions: poverty, unemployment, discrimination, and homelessness.

Mayor Bradley appointed former baseball commissioner and former Olympic Games organizer Peter Ueberroth to head up a private effort, called Rebuild L.A. (RLA), to repair the damage. This group appointed members and began developing an agenda to attract private investment to the region. The initial members and the initial beneficiaries of corporate largess were Black organizations.

What had been overlooked during these initial efforts was the role that Latinos played in the riots.

- Most of the initial victims of crowd violence were Latinos.
- One third of the dead were Latino.
- An estimated 20% to 40% of businesses damaged were Latino owned.
- One half of those arrested were Latino.
- The vast majority of largely Latino areas did not experience civil disturbance.

As these data about Latinos' roles in the civil disturbances began to emerge from the police and sheriff's departments, public consternation began to mount about Latinos and the future of Los Angeles. When the RAND corporation report about arrests was released, many public officials were in an uproar when it was discovered that 51% of those arrested were Latinos, many of whom were immigrants. Immediately, there were demands to increase the rate of deportations.

Demographic shifts. The arrest statistics should have been an indicator that the public perception of South Central might not coincide with the demographic reality. For decades, South Central has been viewed as almost exclusively Black, and until recently, that was the case. As seen in Figure 1, in 1980, 66.7% of the population was Black, and only 13.7% was Latino. However, by the 1990 census, Latinos were the majority, 50.1%. Blacks were suddenly a large minority at 44.8%. By 1993, Latinos are an estimated 58%. Given that Latinos are over 50% of that area's population, a 51% arrestee figure is not surprising (see Figure 1).

Demographics of Southern California

Alarmed at the seeming exclusion by omission of Latinos in the reconstruction activities, a group of Latino organizations met in June of 1992 to

Downloaded from hjb.sagepub.com at UCLA on February 17, 2011

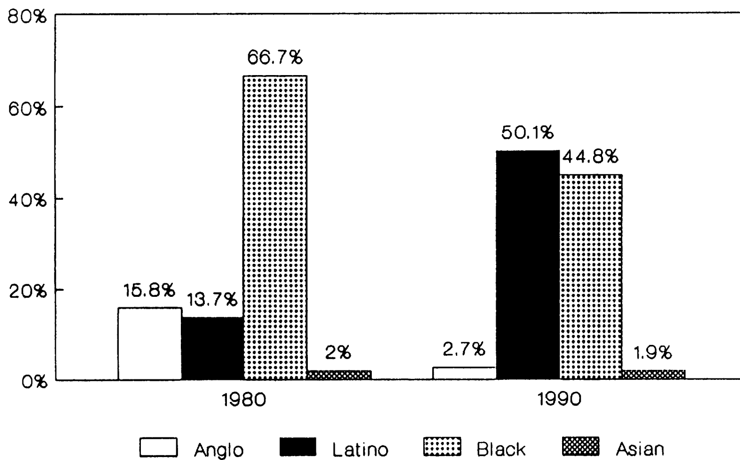

Figure 1. South Central Los Angeles changes in ethnic composition, 1980-1990.
SOURCE: 1990 Census STF 3

develop a Latino analysis of the situation and to provide the outlines for a Latino agenda for reconstruction. Eventually numbering over 30 different organizations, this group called itself the Latino Coalition for a New Los Angeles. Rather than simply march on city hall, the Latino Coalition decided that their long-range planning would be best served by a database analysis of both the role of Latinos in the riots and in the formation of a strategic community development plan. The Latino Coalition asked the authors of this article to perform the data collection and analysis. The plan was written during the summer and fall of 1992 and was released in February of 1993 (Latino Coalition for a New Los Angeles, 1993).

Research Issues

In the snap judgment of some Latino leadership, those Latinos who did participate in the riots did so because they possessed certain characteristics that were not believed to be common to other Latino areas:

Central American;
heavily immigrant;
poverty stricken;
linguistically isolated; and
recent arrivals in the area.

Downloaded from hjb.sagepub.com at UCLA on February 17, 2011

Although Latino leaders appeared to be quick to distance themselves from the Latino riot participants, the Latino Coalition wished to study the data before endorsing any such idea. In general, the Latino Coalition wanted to compare Latinos in the three areas (South Central, neglected areas, and nonneglected areas) to see if there were major differences that could account for riot activity in some regions and peace and quiet in others. The Latino Coalition was interested in developing an explanation for Latino participation in the civil disturbance. The coalition was further interested in presenting an overall plan for economic reconstruction that would be based on the characteristics, dynamics, and needs of the Latino population in the entire county of Los Angeles.

Data and Methods

The primary data source for the plan was the 1990 Census Summary Tape File 3 (STF 3). This data source provides detailed information at the census tract level. Each census tract contains approximately 5,000 people; thus for an area the size of Los Angeles County with 7.8 million residents, a 5,000-person unit is quite fine grained. At times, to gain an appreciation of the dynamics of change, the 1980 STF 3 data were used for comparison. These data were accompanied by city and county departmental data (e.g., police, sheriff, fire) on the actual chronology of the events of the riots.

Area of Analysis

Because there were incidents and damage far beyond the city limits of Los Angeles, the County of Los Angeles was the primary area of analysis. Within the county, there were three different areas compared:

South Central. As defined by the RLA effort, this contained the area bounded by Pico Avenue on the north, Rosecrans Avenue on the south, Van Ness Boulevard on the west, and Alameda Boulevard on the east.

Neglected areas. These were census tracts *outside* South Central in which 20% or more of the population lived in poverty. They could be located anywhere in the county outside of South Central.

Nonneglected areas. These were census tracts outside South Central in which less than 20% of the population lived in poverty.

Ethnic Stratifications

When the structure of the STF 3 files allowed it, variables were reported by ethnic group: Anglos (non-Hispanic Whites), Latinos, Blacks (non-Hispanic),

Downloaded from hjb.sagepub.com at UCLA on February 17, 2011

and Asians (non-Hispanic including other). Some of the major variables such as population, labor force participation, education, and family structure can be analyzed by ethnicity.

However, the majority of STF 3 variables are not identified by ethnicity; for example, the number of persons who own a house. These are reported only by census tract, with no further breakdown available. To approximate Latino figures for these variables, a proxy measure was used: Latino predominant census tracts (abbreviated as Latino PCT). These were census tracts in which 50% or more of the population was Latino. Although not a precise measure, it gives an indication of Latino behavior, for those heavily Latino census tracts will tend to reflect Latino influence to some noticeable degree.

A Comparison of South Central Latinos

Background Similarities

In some important and surprising ways, the Latino population of South Central Los Angeles in quite similar in background characteristics to the rest of the Latino population in both neglected and nonneglected areas.

Nationality. Most Latinos of South Central are of Mexican origin, giving lie to one common misperception that only Central Americans participated in the looting and not Mexicans. South Central Latinos are quite similar in national origin (73.2% Mexican origin) to Latinos in neglected areas outside of South Central (76.0% Mexican) and in nonneglected areas in the rest of the county (76.9% Mexican). There are pockets of Central American concentrations in the Pico-Union/Koreatown area. But even there, Mexicans predominate, even if only slightly (44.1% Mexican). By and large, chances are that when Latinos were involved, there were many of Mexican origin among them.

Linguistic ability. One measure of linguistic ability and/or isolation in an area is the concentration of monolingual English speakers. Although STF 3 data do not allow us to determine the rate of English speakers among the Latinos, by looking at the English speakers in Latino PCTs within the three areas, we can gain an idea of relative linguistic isolation. Of adults in Latino PCTs in South Central, 29.1% were monolingual English speakers. This is actually a higher rate than in Latino PCTs in neglected areas outside of South Central, where only 19.4% of adults were monolingual English speakers, and only slightly lower than the 31.9% in Latino PCTs in nonneglected areas.

Downloaded from hjb.sagepub.com at UCLA on February 17, 2011

Immigrant concentration. Adults in Latino PCTs anywhere in the county are largely immigrants. Of adults in Latino PCTs in South Central, 64.3% were foreign born. Adults in Latino PCTs in neglected areas outside of South Central had a higher concentration of foreign born, 69.2%. Nonneglected areas had a slightly lower rate of foreign born, 51.1%.

Transiency. It has often been stated that South Central has a transient, recently arrived population. Latinos in South Central were not more likely to have recently moved into their residences than Latinos outside South Central. Of adults in Latino PCTs in South Central, 53.7% had moved into their housing unit between 1985 and 1990. This is actually slightly lower than for adults in Latino PCTs in neglected areas where 59.0% of adults had moved, and only very slightly more than the 50.7% in Latino PCTs in nonneglected areas.

Behavioral Similarities

Besides the background characteristics, there are some important areas of behavior in which Latinos of South Central resemble Latinos in the rest of the county.

Labor force participation. In general, Latinos in Los Angeles County, as well as in the state of California, have the highest rate of labor force participation of any group. This holds even in South Central, where fully 80.6% of Latino males participate in the labor force, nearly identical to the 81.5% who participate in neglected areas and 82.0% in nonneglected areas. Overall, the non-Latino male labor force participation rate is only 74.5% and the Black rate is substantially lower. (see Figure 2).

Family formation. Overall, Latinos in Los Angeles County are more likely than any other group to form households composed of couples with children, the classic nuclear family. Interestingly, Latinos in South Central are more likely to form couple-with-children households (48.7%) than Latinos in neglected areas (40.9%) or in nonneglected areas (41.3%) (see Figure 3).

Background Differences

There are differences between Latinos in the three different areas. However, the division between Latinos is seen between those in the nonneglected areas compared to both those in South Central and in neglected areas. In short, the 1.55 million Latinos who live in South Central and in neglected areas

Downloaded from hjb.sagepub.com at UCLA on February 17, 2011

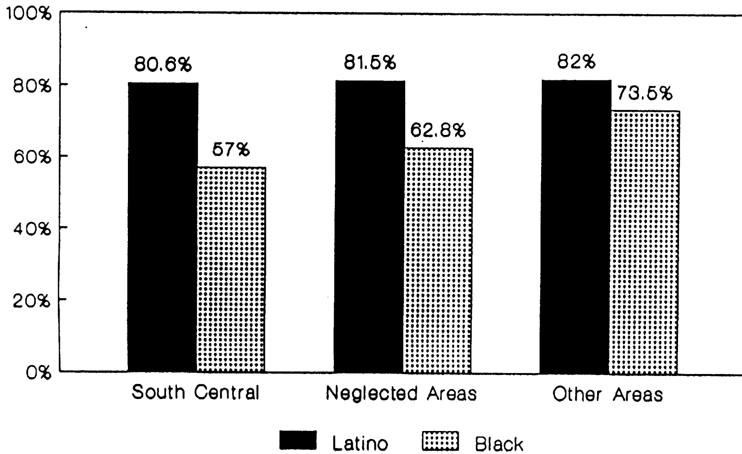

Figure 2. Labor force participation by location (male Latino & Black, Los Angeles County, 1990).
SOURCE: 1990 Census STF 3

outside of the South Central share much in common, whereas the more affluent 1.75 million Latinos in nonneglected areas are different, but only by a matter of degree.

Poverty rates. Of Latinos in South Central, 36.4% live in poverty, compared to the 30.1% of Latinos who live in neglected areas outside of South Central. Those Latinos in nonneglected areas have a much lower poverty rate, 14.6%, but this is not surprising because the definition for a nonneglected area is that less than 20% of its residents are living in poverty. Poor Latinos living anywhere in the county share one thing in common: They are all more likely to be poor than their Black neighbors who live in the same areas (see Figure 4).

Educational attainment. In general, Latinos have the least amount of educational attainment of any group. As measured by high school graduation, Latino adults in South Central have the lowest rate of high school graduation of Latinos anywhere (18.0%). Latinos in neglected areas have a slightly higher rate of graduation, 27.5%, and Latinos in nonneglected areas have the highest, 50.0% (see Figure 5). In all areas, Black adults have a much higher rate of high school graduation.

Downloaded from hjb.sagepub.com at UCLA on February 17, 2011

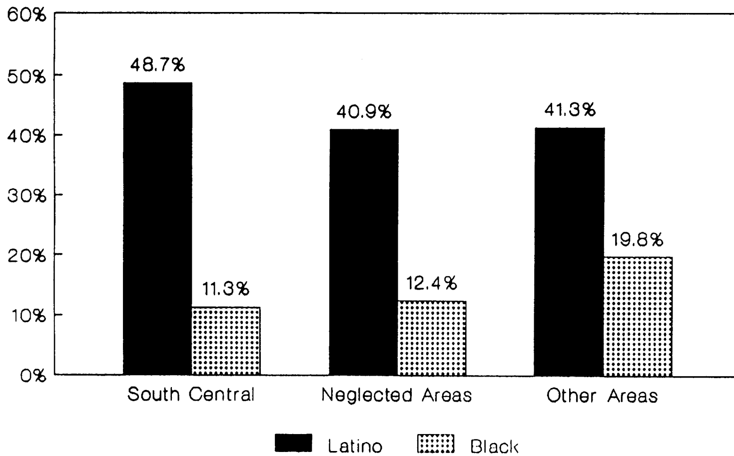

Figure 3. Couple with children households (Latino and Black, Los Angeles County, 1990).
SOURCE: 1990 Census STF 3

Home ownership. Often seen as a key to stabilizing an area, home ownership varies by area. Only 24.5% of housing units in Latino PCTs in South Central are owner occupied, virtually identical to the 24.9% in Latino PCTs in neglected areas. Latinos in nonneglected areas have a much higher rate of home ownership, 54.3%, which is nearly identical to that of adults in non-Latino PCTs in nonneglected areas, 55.4% (see Figure 6).

Fallacy of Composition Argument

In terms of community profiles revealed in the 1990 census, Latinos in South Central do not differ substantially from Latinos in neglected areas in the rest of the county, and both of these groups of Latinos differ only by matter of degree from Latinos in the nonneglected areas of the county, by virtue of being somewhat poorer and less educated. However, some key characteristics, such as high rates of family formation and labor force participation, are common to all Latinos. Thus the key to Latino participation in the riots cannot be sought only in the "objective conditions" in which Latinos live; if poverty alone caused riots, Latinos should have been looting nearly everywhere in the county.

Downloaded from hjb.sagepub.com at UCLA on February 17, 2011

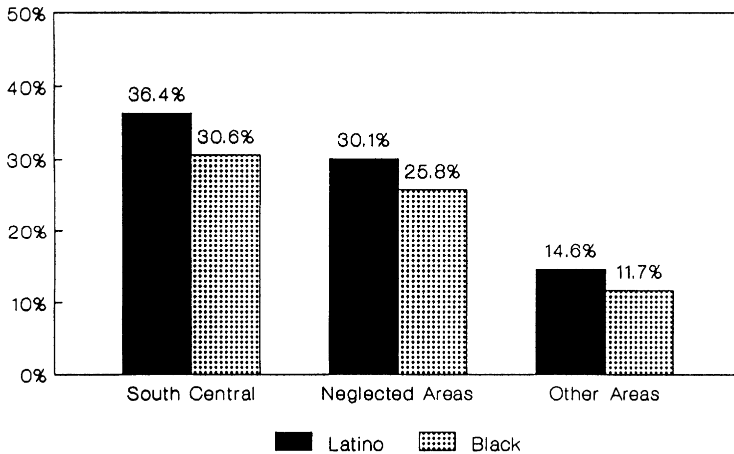

Figure 4. Percentage of Latino and Black population below poverty by area, Los Angeles County.
SOURCE: 1990 Census STF 3

Los Angeles Riots as Collective Behavior

The Behavior of Crowds

Immediately after the riots, some Anglo commentators seemed genuinely surprised that the city that had seemingly transcended racial strife and conflict, the city that portended a multicultural future, would break out in rioting. Forgotten in the debate is that crowd behavior is a recurring feature of urban life. The seemingly irrational behavior of large groups of people has been the subject of study since the days of the French Revolution in 1789 (LeBon, 1960), although such behavior had been at least noted since the days of the Crusades (e.g., the Children's Crusade). During the 20th century, a recurring phenomenon has been the race riot.

There is no generally agreed upon label for the cataclysm that shook Los Angeles between April 29 and May 1992. Different commentators have called the events the Rodney King riots, the uprising, the rebellion, a bread riot, and a civil disturbance. Interestingly, no one has yet called it a race riot. Yet some of the events of that period of civil disturbance conform very much to the mold of the race riots of the long, hot summers of the mid to late 1960s. However, another part of the civil disturbances does not fit the model of a

Downloaded from hjb.sagepub.com at UCLA on February 17, 2011

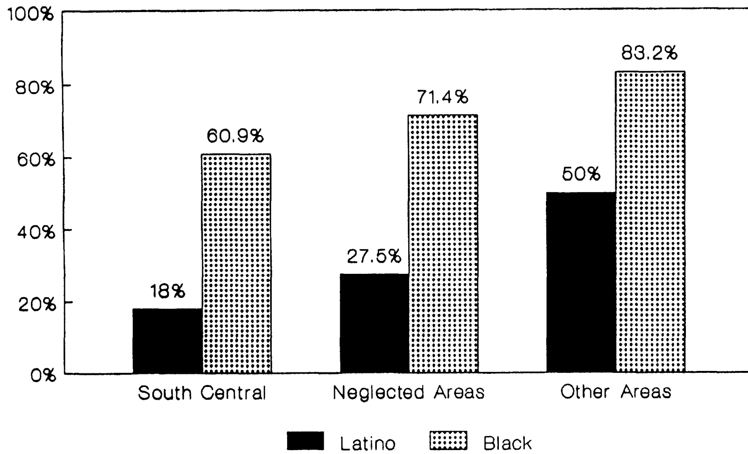

Figure 5. High school graduation by location (Latino and Black, Los Angeles County, 1990).
SOURCE: 1990 Census STF 3

race riot; it appears to be more on the order of a prototypical loss of crowd control. Both types of phenomenon can be most easily understood as manifestations of collective behavior.

Collective Behavior

The behavior of crowds has been characterized by Smelser (1964) as "uninstitutionalized behavior," that is, the behavior of collectivities that is spontaneous and undefined, as contrasted with the daily life of organized behavior, which is structured and institutionalized. Blumer (1951) provided a framework for analyzing the social-psychological aspects of collective behavior in which a definite group takes on a short, spontaneous life for specific reasons. The behavior of a crowd is distinguished from simply a group of individuals acting independently in that a collective behavior group consists of interaction and a sense that, via the interaction, they constitute a group (Turner & Killian, 1972). Pedestrians moving in the same direction on a sidewalk are not a collective phenomenon; a protest march is. A collective behavior crowd is not like a business or bureaucratic organization guided by institutional rules and procedures, but it is nonetheless a collectivity with norms and leadership (Park & Burgess, 1921).

Downloaded from hjb.sagepub.com at UCLA on February 17, 2011

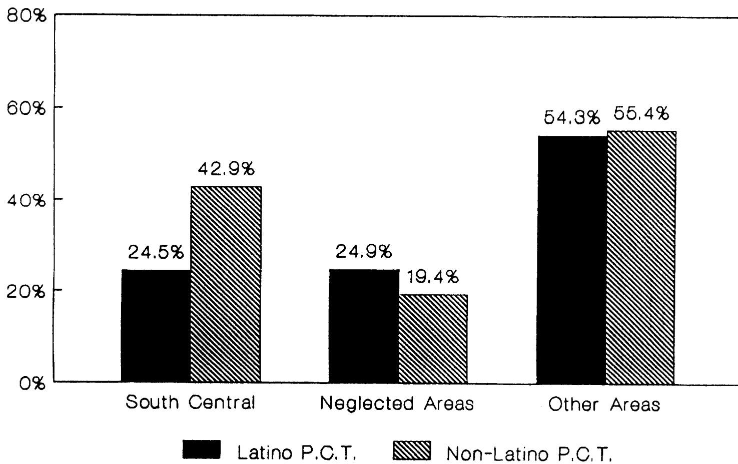

Figure 6. Owner occupied housing units, by ethnic predominant census tract, Los Angeles County, 1990.
SOURCE: 1990 Census STF 3

Race Riots

In all of the analysis of the Los Angeles civil disturbance, no one has yet called it a race riot. Yet, when the history of race riots in the 20th century is studied, it is clear that the initial portions of the disturbance very much fit the pattern of the classic race riot (Boskin, 1969).

On the eve of the era of long, hot summers, Lieberson and Silverman (1965) analyzed the period between 1913 and 1963 and counted 72 identifiable race riots in that period. Nearly all of them involved Anglos and Blacks. At times, the race riots consisted of Anglos invading Black areas and inflicting damage; at other times, they consisted of Blacks creating disturbances in their own areas over perceived Anglo injustice. Shortly after their study was done, the country erupted in a series of race riots of a new type. The Kerner Commission (Kerner, 1968), deputed by President Johnson to try to shed some light on the race riot activity that followed on the heels of the civil rights movement, counted hundreds of disorders. In the peak year of 1967, the Kerner Commission counted 51 such disturbances in the first 9 months alone. The members of the commission noted two characteristics of the race riots of the 1960s:

Downloaded from hjb.sagepub.com at UCLA on February 17, 2011

1. They were not "interracial," with Blacks ganging up on Whites; rather, the activity was directed against symbols of White authority.
2. In all cases, a major *causus belli* was police aggravation.

Race riot behavior is characterized by some key features:

participants are local residents;
behavior is taken as a collective, with a sense of group driving the norms of the activities;
behavior is open and public, with no attempt to hide actions;
there is public approval and sanction of behavior; and
major property targets are commercial establishments. (Smelser, 1964)

Natural Disasters

Another type of collective behavior occurs when a natural disaster such as a flood or hurricane takes place. In these situations, individuals in a crowd of people can take similar actions, but they are not linked in the ways that race riot behavior is. A case in point is the looting behavior. After Hurricane Andrew devastated south Florida in the fall of 1992, there were instances of looting reported and the National Guard was called out. Many people can be involved in this behavior, but it differs from race riot behavior in some key, important ways:

- Although many individuals can participate in identical behavior (i.e. breaking and entering a store), they do so as individuals, not as members of a crowd.
- Persons outside the community are often involved in looting.
- Private property is likely to be the target as well as commercial property.
- There are severe community sanctions against taking advantage of the misfortunes of others due to a natural disaster.

The looting that took place after the initial race riot phase, particularly that which involved Latinos, fits this last model.

The chronology of the Los Angeles civil disturbance can be divided into two different phases: the arson phase, and the generalized looting phase. Each phase was distinct, with different groups involved for different purposes with different behavior.

The Arson Phase

The first phase involved the heavy arson, so visible on television coverage. This phase was a classic race riot that could have been a replay of the long, hot summers of 1967 (Fogelson & Hall, 1968).

Downloaded from hjb.sagepub.com at UCLA on February 17, 2011

Rumor. A race riot classically consists of a group of people protesting, as a group, a perceived racial injustice. As such, the group must communicate among its members. The usual form of communication is the rumor process (Allport & Postman, 1947; Peterson & Gist, 1951; Turner & Killian, 1972). Through rumors, the crowd communicates with itself and establishes a mechanism to spread ideas about norms and behaviors.

Symbolization. In a race riot, a particular act, often called a "precipitating incident" (Conant, 1968; Smelser, 1964), symbolizes to a crowd of people the generalized sense of injustice they have individually felt for some time. The beating of Rodney King was such a symbolic incident for many in the Black community. Following on the heels of the killing of a Black teenage girl by a Korean grocer in South Central over a bottle of orange juice worth $1.98, which went nearly unpunished, and following a lengthy history in which Black males had been beaten or killed while being arrested, sensitivities were quite high. What made the Rodney King incident such a precipitator of collective behavior was that, unlike other incidents, this one was recorded on videotape and repeatedly replayed for over a year to the general public. Although other incidents had been grudgingly accepted as one more case of police brutality, there was an immediately prior standing sense of wrongs not being righted in the 30-day suspended sentence given to the Korean grocer.

Comments made for months prior to the trial of the officers who beat Rodney King were that with the videotape as the "smoking gun," some measure of justice was to be expected. Thus when the verdicts of not guilty were announced, many members of the Black community were stunned: It seemed as if once again, justice had been denied them.

The Milling Stage

The verdicts were announced at around 4:00 p.m. on April 29, 1992. In the Black sections of South Central, Black residents poured out of their houses and into the streets. This is a classic phase of collective behavior called "milling," which serves to bring people into contact with each another and draws their attention to the symbolic act (the beating of Rodney King), arouses curiosity, and focuses attention on the ambiguity of the situation (Turner & Killian, 1972, p. 38). The outcome of the milling process is a social contagion. Black residents stood together in the streets commiserating with one another about the string of injustices suffered by Black people.

Downloaded from hjb.sagepub.com at UCLA on February 17, 2011

Formation of Solidaristic Crowd

As a result of the milling and rumor processes, groupings of Black residents began to form a sense of group. Particularly around the flashpoint corner of Florence and Vermont Avenues, older teenagers (most likely gang members, judging from their style of dress and the constant "throwing" of gang signs during the evening) provided a nucleus for the formation of solidaristic crowds because they were already accustomed to working in concert with one another. In addition, they provided a sense of leadership that is necessary for a crowd to gain a sense of collectivity.

In a solidaristic crowd, there are definite roles that different individuals take, communicating and interacting with one another in a definite way (Lewis, 1972; Turner & Killian, 1972, p. 87). We can identify the major roles as

The active core. These are the ones who actually engage in physical behavior. In the Los Angeles situation, there were persons who engaged in physical activity, such as throwing items at cars, breaking windows, pulling out passengers and beating them, breaking store windows, breaking and entering into stores, and then finally, setting fires, all in an escalating fashion.

The cheerleaders. These do not take part physically but they voice their approval, providing a reinforcement to each new level of behavior. The cheerleaders at Florence and Vermont would both provide verbal approval for each new act of violence and would egg on the active core to greater destruction.

The spectators. These neither engage in physical activity nor voice verbal approval. However, by their very presence, they provide a sense of legitimacy to the proceedings.

The solidaristic crowd feels a sense of righteousness about its behavior, which consists of acts they would normally not commit in other circumstances. However, the very breaking of normal bounds of behavior provides a sense of unification and empowerment. With each new attack of passing cars, and then on stores, the sense of the group's power grew.

There is a definite performer-audience relation. For example, in the beating of the White trucker, Reginald Denny, his attackers postured publicly, raising their arms in signs of triumph and brandishing weapons before striking him, as if playing to a crowd.

During these early phases, many, if not most, of the victims of attacks on automobiles were Latinos. This is not surprising because Latinos are now the majority population in South Central.

Downloaded from hjb.sagepub.com at UCLA on February 17, 2011

Inappropriate Police Response

Police Chief Daryl Gates made his reputation after the Watts Riots of 1965 by claiming that the previous chief of police was unable to handle urban rebellion. On analysis, the police under his command in 1992 repeated virtually every mistake committed by police forces during the years of the long, hot summers of the mid-1960s.

Lohman (1947) detailed, decades earlier, successful stages in controlling a race riot. Drawing upon the experience gained in the 1940s, his suggestions were

> isolate the crowd;
> divide the crowd into small units, so as to disrupt the rumor process and eliminate the sense of crowd solidarism;
> create diversions so that the spectators are drawn away;
> remove the individuals who are involved in the precipitating incident;
> remove crowd leaders without force. (p. 86)

During the disturbances of the 1960s, the Kerner Commission (1968) and other analysts (Hundley, 1968) noted a number of common police tactical mistakes that generally served to make matters worse:

> failure to isolate or remove individuals involved in the precipitating incidents
> failure to stop the communication process by not dividing the crowd into smaller units
> attacking along a frontal line as in a military situation, which only serves to polarize the police from the different segments of the crowd
> withdrawal of police, which simply enhances riot activity
> presence of police who do not exert control encourage and promote more hostile activity.

The Los Angeles Police Department managed to commit nearly every possible error. As the milling process began, the police retreated. Even though the active core had begun to attack vehicles, no police action was taken. In a controversial decision, just as the solidaristic crowd was gaining a sense of its own identity, the officer in charge of the 77th Street station ordered all officers off the streets and into the station house.

Their retreat from the streets served to legitimatize the forming solidaristic crowd (Janowitz, 1968). The police absence for nearly 3 hours allowed the crowd to develop its own processes and culminated in the looting of stores and the arson of various buildings.

Expressive. The solidaristic nature of the arson phase was evidenced in the plainly expressive nature of the crowd. The participants in this phase were

Downloaded from hjb.sagepub.com at UCLA on February 17, 2011

clearly upset at the verdict in the Rodney King trial and were expressing their outrage. In an eerie reminder of the era of long, hot summers, as soon as the first buildings went up in flames to the general cheer and approbation of the cheerleaders and spectators, hand-lettered signs appeared that repeated the old slogan of the race riots of the 1960s, "Burn, baby, burn." In a modern updating that perhaps epitomized the solidaristic, expressive race-riot nature of the arson phase, at least one sign read "Burn, Simi Valley, Burn." (Simi Valley was an exclusively White area in which the Rodney King case was tried.)

As building after building erupted in flames and various stores were looted, the pattern of the riots of the 1960s continued. The focus of the looting in the arson phase was the liquor stores, rifle shops, and furniture stores (Lieberson & Silverman, 1965). The arson and looting was not generalized, but was very specifically aimed at those institutions that symbolized the parlous state of racial relations. In the new multicultural Los Angeles, Korean-owned shops came to be a target as well as Anglo-owned establishments. Because the new form of commercial development in Los Angeles has taken the form of mini-malls, occupying spaces once occupied by gasoline stations, when a specific shop was looted and burned, the flames spread to the other businesses, engulfing them as well. Ironically, a new form of enterprise was emerging, which favored Latino businesses: the establishment of swap meets, essentially an old-fashioned Mexican marketplace of stalls where recent and undocumented immigrants could rent stalls for as little a $100 a month to try their hand at commercial enterprise. Many of the owners of these large buildings were Korean. Thus, as anger was expressed at the Korean owners, the businesses burned were Latino. As in the 1960s, private dwellings were rarely the target of arson and looting in the arson phase.

The Generalized Looting Phase

The cover of *National Review* magazine for May 15, 1992, had a photograph of an apparently Latino male lugging away an armload of soft drinks from a looted grocery store. Coverage by CNN (Cable News Network) repeatedly showed shots of allegedly Latino crowds emerging from various stores with their arms piled with booty. Clearly there were Latinos involved in looting. However, the nature of their participation in this phase has been quite misunderstood. The facile observation has been that they too were protesting the Rodney King verdict and were standing shoulder to shoulder in solidarity with their Black neighbors. However, their participation signaled

Downloaded from hjb.sagepub.com at UCLA on February 17, 2011

the end of the arson phase and the emergence of a separate, but related phenomenon, the generalized looting phase.

As the second day of the riots dawned, April 30, the skies of Los Angeles were thick with smoke from hundreds of buildings burning. Fire-fighting crews were unable to respond to all the distress calls; indeed, at times they operated under sniper fire. Airplanes that normally approach Los Angeles International Airport over South Central were diverted away, for fear of sniper fire or even hidden surface to air missiles (SAMs), and made their approach over the Pacific Ocean. Sirens rang throughout the city, stores and businesses were closed, governmental offices were shuttered, and schools were shut down. Socially, what Los Angeles experienced was akin to a natural disaster in which normal municipal functioning had broken down in the wake of a force majeur.

What followed was a breakdown in civic order, which is common in the wake of a hurricane, flood, or earthquake (Hundley, 1968; Quarantelli & Dynes, 1970). Accompanying the civic breakdown was a generalized looting phase. Most of this looting was unlike the arson-phase looting in three important ways.

Individualistic. In the arson phase, solidaristic crowds enjoyed the looting either directly or vicariously with a sense of groupness. During the second day of the riots, there were still small groups of solidaristic crowds, almost exclusively Black, engaging in looting with identifiable active cores and cheerleaders. The spectators had changed as looting spread to heavily Latino areas, so that the spectators were increasingly Latino as the day wore on. Often, the active core would invite the spectators to join in. Initially, few did.

However, the police repeated another common error noted in the 1960s: Although during the second (and third) day they were increasingly physically present, often they would not move to intervene in the looting. Lohman (1947) and Hundley (1968) had noted that the presence of inactive police who do not attempt to exert control only further promotes the emergence of norms that allow deviant activity. One poignant scene caught on video tape showed a group of bystanders pleading with a policeman to stop the looters: The policeman simply turned and walked away from the scene.

Thus the generalized looting phase began. Yet, the looting was increasingly the work of individuals, not of a crowd with performer-audience relations. People were looting on an individualistic basis, looting almost in private. At most, a family group might loot together (parents and toddler children), but there was no longer the sense of looting being done with group sanction (Mintz, 1951).

Downloaded from hjb.sagepub.com at UCLA on February 17, 2011

Outsiders. It should be noted that all ethnic groups were represented in this phase: Anglo, Asian, Black, and Latino. Shop owners interviewed subsequently shared their perception that Anglo looters, in particular, came from the San Fernando Valley and places farther away. The presence of outsiders is common in natural disaster types of looting. In contrast, the looting in the solidaristic phase was very much the work of local residents.

Instrumental. Unlike the solidaristic crowds who looted to show their anger and displeasure, the looters during the generalized looting phase were not making a political statement. Their looting, besides being individualistic, was very instrumental. Some looted because the opportunity presented itself; some looted because they saw the chance to obtain some item that they had desired; others looted because stores were closed and they needed food. The furthest thing from their minds was protesting the Rodney King verdict.

Community sanctions. Usually, looting in a natural disaster is rare and limited largely to outsiders because of the sense of community sanctions that restrain local residents. That these sanctions did not function at first is evident because looting did occur, and obviously involved locals as well as outsiders. However, that community sanctions were still present nonetheless is evident in two unique features of the Los Angeles riots: stealth and remorse. Unlike the exultant solidaristic crowds, the looting in the generalized phase was carried on in stealth, with looters running sheepishly out of stores clearly not completely secure in their behavior that broke social norms of property rights. Especially in the Latino communities of Pico Union and Koreatown, there was a well-articulated community revulsion at participation in the looting. As a result, a quite noticeable quantity of the looted goods was returned. The total amount has not been calculated and could only be a small fraction of all that was taken. However, the fact that there was a feeling of remorse at all, and a return of stolen goods, is evidence that the generalized phase was more of the natural disaster type. In areas affected by the initial arson and solidaristic looting phase, where there was crowd approbation of looting, there was no mention of remorse or return.

Conclusions

The early Latino reactions to the events of the Los Angeles disturbances, that only Central Americans would riot and loot, and not Mexicans, is clearly not true. Equally not true is the facile argument that poverty alone caused the riots. When Latinos in South Central are compared to Latinos in other parts

Downloaded from hjb.sagepub.com at UCLA on February 17, 2011

of the county, there are no major discernible differences. And equally as unreal is the superficial explanation that Latinos and other minorities are an uncivilized mass, barely held at bay by a thin, blue line of police. Shellow and Roemer (1966) adumbrated Los Angeles of 1992 when they commented that the best forms of police control of an unruly crowd happen when the police officers see the crowd as a heterogeneous collection of human beings with the rights of citizens rather than an undifferentiated mob of outlaws.

Latino participation, like Black, Anglo, and Asian, needs to be interpreted through the framework of collective behavior. When viewed as such, the tragic events become very understandable and, not coincidentally, one can see how they can be containable and even avoidable. Surprisingly, no one has yet bothered to view them as such. Even RLA has continued to take the narrow view that poverty and lack of services alone explain the riots.

We can summarize Latino participation in the riots in three ways:

1. Latinos were involved in an individualistic, instrumental way, much akin to behavior in the wake of municipal breakdown following a natural disaster: By and large, they were not protesting the Rodney King verdict in a solidaristic, expressive fashion.
2. Latino involvement was not due to internal composition of Latinos in South Central (i.e., being Central American) but due to the natural processes of collective behavior.
3. Latino involvement is explained more by the fact of breakdown in municipal order than by anything else: Latinos behave the way almost any population does in such circumstances.

Theoretical Conclusions

Surprisingly and sadly, no one has yet seen the Los Angeles civil disturbance for what it was, yet another incident in a lengthy history of collective behavior around the issue of the treatment of Black citizens by municipal police force, and the sequelae in multicultural, post-Anglo urban America.

As the Latino population grows, the theoretical lenses used to view it must also grow. Now compromising a population of some 3.5 million in Los Angeles County alone (and nearly 9 million in California), the theoretical perspectives need to expand away from those based on a folkloric, traditional minority group lost in mainstream society, to a more comprehensive view based on the fact that Latinos are creating a civil society involving millions of people.

As part of this shift in view, collective behavior provides an unused theoretical framework. Collective behavior studies not only race riots and

Downloaded from hjb.sagepub.com at UCLA on February 17, 2011

ephemeral crowd behavior, it also studies larger aggregates, such as mass movements, general publics, and the formation of public opinion and public tastes. Clearly, as Latinos grow to become 50%, 60%, and 70% of major metropolitan areas such as Los Angeles, San Antonio, Miami, and other cities, the effects of movements of taste and opinion need to become the focus of study. With three television networks broadcasting in Spanish, 13 radio stations, 37 newspapers, and dozens of magazines, the larger Latino mass public of Los Angeles is already communicating with itself. The sudden emergence of fads such as lowriders, *banda* music, the influence and change of dances from *Punta* and *soka* to *quebradita*, are all signaling important items in the emergence of Latino society.

The theoretical job of Chicano studies and Hispanic studies is to perceive the emergence of Latino society, with all the variation that is common to large publics numbering in the millions. Only when a comprehensive, theoretical view involving millions of Latinos has been developed can we begin to say that we understand this phenomenon known as Latinos.

References

Allport, G. W., & Postman, L. (1947). *The psychology of rumor*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

Blumer, H. (1951). Collective behavior. In A. M. Lee (Ed), *Principles of sociology* (pp. 168-169). New York: Barnes & Noble.

Boskin, J. (1969). The revolt of the urban ghettos 1964-1967. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, *382*, 1-14.

Conant, R. W. (1968). Rioting, insurrection and civil disobedience. *The American Scholar*, *37*(3), 420-433.

Fogelson, R., & Hall, R. (1968). Who riots? A study of participation in the 1967 riots. In *Supplemental Studies for the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

Hundley, J. R. (1968). The dynamics of recent ghetto riots. In R. A. Chikotsa and M. C. Moran (Eds.), *Riot in the cities* (pp. 147-148). Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.

Janowitz, M. R. (1968). *Social control of escalated riots*. Chicago: University of Chicago, Center for Riot Study.

Kerner, O. (1968). *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

Latino Coalition for a New Los Angeles. (1993). *Latinos and the future of Los Angeles: A guide to the twenty-first century*. Los Angeles: Latino Futures Research Group.

LeBon, G. (1960). *The crowd: A study of the popular mind*. New York: Viking.

Lewis, J. M. (1972). A study of the Kent State incident using Smelser's theory of collective behavior. *Sociological Inquiry*, *42*(2), 87-96.

Lieberson, S., & Silverman, A. (1965). The precipitants and underlying conditions of race riots. *American Sociological Review*, *30*, 887-898.

Lohman, J. D. (1947). *The police and minority groups*. Chicago: Chicago Park District.

Downloaded from hjb.sagepub.com at UCLA on February 17, 2011

Mintz, A. (1951). Non-adaptive group behavior. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, *46*, 150-159.

Park, R. E., & Burgess, E. W. (1921). *Introduction to the science of sociology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Peterson, W. A., & Gist, N. P. (1951). Rumor and public opinion. *American Journal of Sociology*, *57*, 159-167.

Quarantelli, E. L., & Dynes, R. R. (1970). Property norms and looting: Their patterns in community crises. *Phylon*, *31*, 168-182.

Shellow, R., & Roemer, D. V. (1966). No heaven for hell's angels. *Trans-action: Social Science and Modern Society*, *3*(5), 12-19.

Smelser, N. J. (1964). Theoretical issues of scope and problems. *Sociological Quarterly*, *5*(2), 116-122.

Tucker, C. (1992). *To rebuild is not enough: Final report and recommendations of the Assembly Special Committee on the Los Angeles Crisis*. Sacramento, CA: Assembly Publications Office.

Turner, R. H., & Killian, L. M. (1972). *Collective behavior*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Downloaded from hjb.sagepub.com at UCLA on February 17, 2011