University of Delaware
Disaster Research Center

PRELIMINARY PAPER
#203

PATTERNS OF PROPERTY DAMAGE IN
THE LOS ANGELES UNREST

Kathleen J. Tierney
Lisa Reshaur

1994
Patterns of Property Damage in the Los Angeles Unrest

Kathleen J. Tierney
Lisa Reshaur

Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice
Disaster Research Center
University of Delaware

David Ames

School of Urban Affairs and Public Policy
University of Delaware

Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, Los Angeles, CA, August 5-9, 1994. Peter Park made suggestions on several drafts of this paper. The authors also wish to thank David Racca and Richard Sacher for assistance with GIS analyses and mapping.
Introduction

The rioting that broke out on April 29, 1992 following the not-guilty verdict in the police brutality trial of the officers charged with beating Rodney King was one of the most deadly and damaging episodes of civil unrest in U.S. history. Although estimates vary, a total of 51 deaths and over 2,000 injuries were attributed to the unrest (Koehler, et al, 1993). Approximately 20,000 police, California Highway Patrol, National Guard, and military personnel were used to restore order in Los Angeles City and County, and over 16,000 people were arrested. The disturbances lasted a shorter time than the 1965 Watts riot, but the geographic area covered was significantly larger, more people were killed and injured, more law enforcement personnel were mobilized, four times as many persons were arrested, and property damage was much greater.

A number of papers and publications have appeared that present a general picture of the conditions leading up to the riots and of who participated. The Los Angeles Times (1992) and the Institute for Alternative Journalism (1992) have published chronologies and collections of articles containing descriptive material that provide a context for understanding the origins and dynamics of the unrest. A volume edited by Robert Gooding-Williams (1993) includes essays by leading scholars that address the political and demographic sources of racial tension in Los Angeles, the public response to the verdict and the subsequent rioting, and the broader cultural significance of the unrest. Analyses by Oliver, Johnson, and Farrell (1993), Petersilie and Abrahamse (1993), and Morrison
and Lowry (1993) describe the sociodemographic context and the multi-ethnic character of the uprising. This paper attempts to add to what is known about the Los Angeles disturbances by presenting detailed data on the businesses that were singled out for attack and on the spatial distribution of riot-related property damage. Although the ultimate goal of this ongoing project is to develop and test models explaining patterns of riot-related property damage, the data presented here are largely descriptive.

Research on Past Episodes of Unrest

Roughly in the middle of this century, race-related violence began to shift from the pogrom-like "communal" form, which generally involved attacks on blacks by groups of whites in contested areas of the community, to "commodity" riots, which broke out in predominantly black neighborhoods (Feagin and Hahn, 1973; Janowitz, 1969). As the term suggests, commodity riots generally involve the looting of goods and firebombing and other kinds of attacks on commercial property. As black and white neighborhoods became more segregated and more distant from one another and as police began to take a more active role in attempting to control riots, the commodity form of rioting became more prominent.

In contrast with media and popular accounts that characterize riot-related violence as an uncontrolled explosion of pent-up rage, property attacks in riot situations are socially patterned, exhibiting considerable consistency across episodes. Research indicates, for example, that, rather than being looked upon as deviant, looting generally receives community approval; norms emerge that permit and even encourage attacks on particular types
of property. Community participation is widespread; looting is public and collective, often involving friendship groups, families, and neighbors (Quarantelli and Dynes, 1970).

Research on earlier riots also indicates that attacks on property during civil disorder episodes do not merely spread out from a point of origin, as contagion models would suggest; in the 1965 unrest in Watts, for example, property violence generally didn’t spill over from one neighborhood to the next, and patterns of riot spread were not consistent over the duration of the disturbance (Stark, et al., 1974). Targets are not chosen for convenience or because participants are venting their frustrations on any object that happens to be accessible. Rioters concentrate on business establishments and commercial areas, while schools, churches, other community institutions, and residential property generally escape damage. Riot participants are also selective in the types of businesses they burn and loot, but the targets chosen are by no means the most lucrative ones. For example, banks are far less likely to be selected than businesses providing liquor, food, clothing, and other consumer goods.¹

Various explanations have been offered for the patterns of

¹ Data collected by Raine (1967) following the Watts riot suggested that liquor stores were most heavily selected for attack, followed by food stores (including those that sold liquor) and stores selling furniture, clothing, and paint and hardware. Other businesses that sustained damage included restaurants, drug stores, and department stores. Based on their review of research on major 1960s riots, Feagin and Hahn (1973: 173) indicate that "[t]he targets of looting included grocery stores, liquor stores, clothing shops, and other businesses that offered gratification of consumer desires," adding that looters may also use civil unrest situations to retaliate against particular business owners.
victimization that have been observed in U. S. urban disorders. Conservatives like Banfield (1968) characterize looting episodes as acquisitive rampages or "forays for pillage" undertaken mainly by young inner city males--ignoring the fact that much looting involves items of little value, the widespread participation of family units in looting episodes, and the fact that riot-related property attacks appear to have both instrumental and symbolic dimensions. Other analyses focus on business owner characteristics as important factors in victimization. It has been argued, for example, that the properties most frequently singled out for attack are those whose owners are, for one reason or another, perceived as community outsiders (Dynes and Quarantelli, 1968; Quarantelli and Dynes, 1970). Not surprisingly, given the circumstances leading up to those episodes, white-owned stores were disproportionately targeted in the urban disturbances of the 1960s; in some cases, such as the 1965 Watts and 1968 Washington, D. C. riots, Jewish proprietors were reportedly more likely to be singled out than other white business owners. The evidence for this sort of targeting is equivocal, however; while nearly half of the business owners in the Watts merchant survey (Raine, 1967) were Jewish, white owners who were not Jewish suffered greater monetary losses on the average.²

² It is hard to know what to make of these data, since the sample was small and probably not representative, and the analyses in the report consisted mainly of crosstabulations. Berk and Aldrich (1972: 543) suggest the term Jew, rather than reflecting a business owner's actual religion or ethnicity, may be generally applied to white owners by residents.
Some writers suggest outsider status may be related not only to being selected for attack but also to the severity of the violence that is directed at a business. For example, Porter and Dunn (1984) note that the businesses that were totally destroyed in the 1980 Miami riot were larger in size than those that were vandalized but left standing, a pattern they believe is attributable to the fact that "the bigger stores were large, outside-owned businesses with little, if any ties to the community" (1984:131).

Past research also indicates, however, that race, religion, or absentee ownership per se do not explain victimization. Who "belongs" in a community and who is considered an outsider is a matter of collective definition. In the 1968 riots in Curacao, for example, in which poor blacks were the main participants, Jewish-owned businesses tended to be victimized, but Askenazi Jews, who were newcomers to the island and not as well-integrated, suffered more losses than Sephardic Jews, who had lived there longer and were more assimilated. Many foreign-owned properties were not damaged even though they presented convenient targets. Whites who could speak the local dialect were considered community insiders and were not attacked, and during the disturbances crowds of blacks were seen helping white tourists to safety (Anderson and Dynes, 1975).

Some explanations attribute riot victimization to proprietors' use exploitive of business practices, such as price gouging, charging high credit, or failing to return money to the community
by employing residents. Fogelson, for example, argued that in the Watts riot, participants "were so highly selective in their violence that, with few exceptions, they looted and burned only white-owned stores which charged outrageous prices, sold inferior goods, and applied extortionate credit arrangements" (1967: 353). While this was undoubtedly an overstatement, the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (1968) did find that resentment of ghetto merchants' business practices was widespread in many of the cities that experienced riots and suggested that this resentment could have been a factor explaining why some businesses were singled out for attack.

Despite such claims, there is little empirical evidence indicating that owners of looted businesses were actually worse in this regard than those who were spared. Like "outsider" status, business exploitiveness is a matter of interpretation, and labeling some owners as exploitive may merely reflect post hoc justifications of actions taken. The most systematic study conducted on the targeting of businesses in the 1960s unrest (Berk and Aldrich, 1972), which included data on eight cities that had experienced riots, found that business practices, while of some importance, were only one of several sets of factors that may have explained riot victimization. Among the other potentially

---

3 It should be noted here that included among business practices in this study are actions that can be interpreted as helpful to the community, rather than exploitive, such as contributing to local churches and charities and providing extra services to customers. To explain these findings, the authors hypothesized that customers may find even seemingly altruistic behaviors abrasive when engaged in by some merchants, and that they
contributory factors identified in that study were the attractiveness of the merchandise sold, defined in terms of the price of goods; the race of the owner (but in the cases they analyzed, not the owner's religion or absentee owner status); customers' familiarity with the business, as measured by the frequency with which inner city residents patronized various businesses; and, most obviously, business location—that is, proximity to heavily damaged areas. Those authors argued that while riot participants do select their targets, they have various reasons for doing so, ranging from simple familiarity and accessibility to retaliation and symbolic protest.4

Past studies actually contain little information on riot-related property damage—which is surprising, since attacks on property are by far the most common form of collective violence in recent U. S. riots. Earlier books and papers that address the topic of business damage are generally journalistic, descriptive, and selective in what they report (see, for example, Cohen and Murphy, 1966; Porter and Dunn, 1984); they lack detailed information on the businesses that were affected and the kinds of damage they experienced. Even more thorough studies, like the one conducted by Berk and Aldrich, do not take into account the type and severity of the riot-related damage businesses experienced, and the statistically significant relationships they identified were

may see owners who offer help and advice as patronizing.

4 Berk and Aldrich also point to factors their study didn't take into account that might also explain damage patterns, including actions taken by police to control riot spread.
also quite weak. Despite all the research that has been done on various riot-related topics (e.g., participation, the demographic characteristics of communities that experienced riots, riot control), not much is known either about the kinds of businesses and business owners that have been attacked in riot situations, or about why those businesses, rather than others, became targets for looters and arsonists. In this project, our ultimate objective is to test several different models that might explain the patterns of riot-related damage that occurred in Los Angeles. At this time, we are still in the process of assembling the data sets necessary for those analyses. What we present below are some general findings on patterns of damage and victimization.

Data on Businesses and Business Damage

The data used for this paper were obtained from several sources. As it does in all major community emergencies that result in property damage, following the unrest the Los Angeles Department of Building and Safety systematically inspected buildings throughout the City of Los Angeles to document the nature and extent of riot damage. These data were combined with another data set obtained from the Los Angeles City Clerk’s office, which includes information on individual businesses that suffered riot-related losses. Using the two data sets and adding additional codes, we developed a master data file. The data were then transferred to a Geographic Information System (GIS) data base, enabling us to map the damage by census tract; eventually, we plan to relate the data on businesses to other census and GIS-based
data. There are 1,530 businesses in the data set—although because of missing-data problems cases are left out of some analyses. To the best of our knowledge, this number closely approximates the total number of businesses in the City of Los Angeles that sustained riot-related losses. The data set does not include information on businesses in other hard-hit cities, such as Long Beach, or in the unincorporated areas of Los Angeles County. The preliminary analyses presented here focus on business location, business type (SIC code), owner ethnicity, percent of damage to the business, and the nature of the damage the business sustained.

Owner Ethnicity, Business Type, and Riot Damage. The businesses in the data set were assigned a four-digit SIC code, and then later grouped into a smaller number of meaningful SIC categories. The ethnicity of business owners was determined from owners' names, which were included in the City Clerk's data set. With assistance from Korean, Chinese, and Latino coders, we were able to establish ethnicity for Korean, Chinese and other Asian, and Hispanic business owners. Where a corporation, rather than an individual was recorded as the owner, the designation "Corporate" was used. Because surnames can be similar, it was not possible to distinguish between Anglo and African-American business owners; in this analysis, those owners are included in the group designated "Other," which constitutes about 25% of the businesses in the data set.5

5 Besides Anglos and African-Americans, the "Other" category also includes business owners from various ethnic backgrounds, e.g., persons with Arabic and Armenian surnames.
Building and Safety assessments of business damage were assessed in percentage terms; they ranged from minimal to 100%. In addition to containing information on the extent of damage, the records also indicate whether the damage was caused by fire, vandalism, or some other source (e.g., excessive heat from a nearby fire). 6

Table 1 shows riot losses in the various SIC categories, cross-tabulated with business owner ethnicity. As the table indicates, the largest concentration of riot-damaged businesses is in the retail sales category; of the 1079 businesses that we were able to classify by SIC code, 70% were involved in sales. Within that category, apparel stores, eating and drinking establishments, and markets were most frequently attacked. Hard-hit service-sector businesses included those offering personal services (e.g., beauty and barber shops) and those providing "health, education, and social services," typically physicians’ offices and clinics.

With respect to business owner ethnicity, Korean-owned businesses constituted approximately 34% of those suffering riot-related damage; those owned by members of other Asian nationalities constituted another 9%. The "Other" category, a mixed group consisting of Anglos, blacks, and other non-Asian, non-Hispanic ethnic group members, constituted the second largest group victimized in the riot; and corporate owners (many of whom probably

6 Although a business obviously could have suffered more than one type of damage—e.g., it could have been looted, otherwise damaged, and then burned—this data set records only the most significant source of damage.
fit into one or another of the ethnic categories used here) constitute another 20%. Twelve percent of the victimized businesses were owned by Latinos. Clearly, this was a riot in which minority business owners, particularly Koreans, were the main victims.

As Table 2 indicates, the pattern of Korean victimization is even more pronounced for those businesses that were completely destroyed. Korean-owned businesses make up approximately 46% of the 403 businesses that sustained 100% losses; if other Asian nationalities are included, Asian-owned businesses account for about 55% of the total.

Table 3 presents data on fire damage, again classified by owner ethnicity and business type. To the extent that arson is an indication of damage severity, Korean-owned establishments once again appear to have borne the brunt of the violence committed against property. Approximately 41% of the fire-damaged businesses were Korean owned, and another 9% were owned by other Asians. Businesses operated by proprietors in the "Other" category constituted the second largest group victimized by arson. While just under one-half of the businesses were damaged by fire, nearly 60% of Korean-owned businesses had such damage, as compared with 51% for other Asian-owned businesses, approximately 44% for those owned by Latinos and "Others" (whites, blacks, and various other ethnic groups) and 40% for those under corporate ownership.7

7 Because fires spread from their points of origin, and because we have no data at this time on the specific locations where fires were initially set, we cannot say with confidence which
A series of two-way analyses of variance were performed to explore how owner ethnicity, business type, and riot damage were related. Table 4 contains a listing of the relationships that were shown to be significant in these analyses, only some of which will be discussed here. First, the ANOVAs confirm what was shown in Tables 1-3, that the relationship between Korean ownership and both percent and type of damage was highly significant. Those relationships were not significant for other Asians or Hispanics, although there was a relationship between the "Corporate" ownership category and damage severity. Clearly, in the case of Koreans, ethnicity was related not only to being a target of violence but also to severity and type of violence.

Further analyses revealed an interesting set of relationships among proprietor, business, and damage characteristics. Regardless of who owned them, certain types businesses were singled out more frequently for severe damage and arson. Businesses that were most likely to sustain 100% losses included eating and drinking establishments, markets and grocery stores, entertainment and lodging establishments, jewelry stores, and health-related service establishments. Arson targets included eating and drinking establishments, jewelry stores, and health-related service establishments.

businesses were the primary targets of arson. Nevertheless, these data are very suggestive.

* The relationships were also significant for "Other" businesses—that is, non-Asian, non-Hispanic businesses and those for which owner ethnicity was not determined.
Korean-owned businesses in this data set tended to be concentrated in particular SIC sectors; Koreans were more likely than other owners to operate apparel stores, eating and drinking establishments, market and grocery stores, jewelry stores, liquor stores, and certain service- and finance-related businesses. This concentration is somewhat consistent with overall patterns of Korean business ownership in Los Angeles, as described by Light and Bonacich (1988). Many of these businesses were the same types that proved to be attractive targets for damage overall. Koreans appear to have been at risk not only because of their ethnicity and easily-identifiable outsider status, but also because they tended to operate the kinds of businesses that made attractive targets for looting and other types of damage.

These high losses may be attributable in part to the greater presence of Korean businesses in South Central and adjacent downtown areas. Ong and Hee suggest in a recent paper that as many as one-third of all Korean-owned stores in the city were located in South Central, noting that "Koreans are the latest immigrant group to operate in South Central, replacing the Jews who left in large numbers after the Watts Riots" (1992: 8). Using data from the California State Insurance Commissioner's office (which contains information only on businesses that had insurance), they also found Koreans to be highly overrepresented among victimized businesses.¹ Ong and Hee suggest that the high losses Koreans experienced may be

¹ According to Ong and Hee, the insurance records indicate that Latinos were second-hardest-hit, after Korean owners, which is not consistent with our data.
due in part to the fact that many merchants were forced to abandon their stores during the riots, since "most owners felt it was unsafe to stay and protect their property...[g]iven the anti-white and anti-Asian nature of the attacks on persons by the rioters" (1992:10).

Geographic Distribution of Damage. Using GIS techniques, the data were linked to a census tract map of Los Angeles. Besides making it possible to plot the spatial distribution of riot damage, GIS provides a framework for analyses we plan to conduct later using census and other data (see discussions below). Of the 756 census tracts in Los Angeles, 195 sustained some degree of riot damage. Map 1 shows those areas, highlighting tracts in which it was possible to identify one particular group of business owners that sustained more damage than others. One pattern that is immediately apparent is that, while South Central Los Angeles neighborhoods were hard-hit, a considerable amount of activity took place outside South Central, most notably in the Koreatown/Pico-Union district, Hollywood, and Venice. The area affected by the 1992 unrest was approximately three times the size of the area damaged in the Watts riot.

There were many sections of the city in which riot damage was distributed among owners from different ethnic groups. However, it was more common for one particular ethnic group to experience more damage than the others in a given geographic area. When that

10 A group was considered "dominant" in a census tract if more than half of the damaged businesses in the tract were owned by members of that group.
occurred, it was Korean-owned businesses that were most likely to be overrepresented; there are 54 census tracts, representing about 28% of the total riot damage, in which Korean owners are the dominant ethnic group. Areas where damage was particularly heavily concentrated tended to be those in which Korean business ownership was also prominent; three of the four tracts with the most severe damage showed this pattern.

Map 2 shows the spatial distribution of fire vs. other types of riot damage. Fire was the dominant source of damage in 49% of the tracts; other types of damage predominated in 46% of the remaining tracts. Thus, fire damage and looting tended to vary independently, and there were very few areas of the city where one or the other type of damage did not predominate. This resembles the pattern Stark et al., (1974) identified in the Watts riot, in which looting and arson developed independently and appeared to have been the product of separate sets of crowd actions. Not surprisingly, the areas with the most concentrated fire damage are also those that have large numbers of Korean-owned businesses; one-third of the fire damaged census tracts are also those in which Korean ownership predominates.

Discussion and Further Directions for Research

Other riot studies contain little systematic information on the businesses that suffered losses. Although these analyses are quite elementary, they do constitute an important first step in exploring patterns of riot-related property damage. Clearly, the ethnicity of business owners was strongly associated with
victimization in the 1992 unrest; Koreans bore a disproportionate share of the losses suffered, both in terms of the frequency and severity of attacks. Consistent with what earlier riot studies have suggested, the types of goods and services businesses offered also made a difference. Regardless of who owned them, certain kinds of businesses, especially markets and grocery stores, eating and drinking establishments, apparel stores, discount stores, and liquor stores, presented attractive targets. What all these businesses seem to have in common is that they are used on a frequent basis by neighborhood residents. It may be the case that, as Berk and Aldrich (1972) suggest, familiarity with a business and the merchandise it offers may be a factor in its selection by looters. Or it may be that in high-volume businesses there is simply more of an opportunity for hostile contacts to occur between business operators and their customers, leading to more frequent retaliatory attacks when a riot breaks out.

The data presented here are only suggestive. One obvious limitation is that the analyses focus only on damaged businesses, not on the entire population of businesses in the riot area. For example, with respect to owner ethnicity and riot damage, the data make a strong *prima facie* case that rioters selectively chose Korean-owned businesses as their targets. With a population of just over 73,000, Koreans constitute about 2% of the city's population of approximately 3,485,000. Clearly, their losses were disproportionately high; community residents and leaders in both the African-American and Korean communities acknowledge that, once
rioting broke out, hostility against Koreans and Asians in general was a major factor in its spread. However, without being able to classify all Los Angeles businesses (including those that were not damaged) in terms of owner ethnicity, it is not possible to say how much more likely Koreans were to be attacked than other business owners.  

Similarly, some areas may have attracted looters and arsonists simply because they had higher concentrations of businesses, and certain kinds of businesses may have been disproportionately damaged simply because there were more of them to attack. To address this issue, we plan to compare the data on business damage with general data on the distribution and density of different types of businesses in Los Angeles census tracts. One byproduct of these analyses will be to identify neighborhoods in or adjacent to the riot area that had comparable levels of commercialization, but that experienced varying levels or different types of damage, which will then enable us to explore what accounts for those differences.

These analyses indicate where riot damage was concentrated and which businesses suffered losses, but not why those patterns occurred. To address that question, our next step will be to develop and apply several different explanatory models. One line of inquiry will use the concept of the "assembling process,"

---

11 We are not implying that all looters and arsonists had grievances against the owners of the businesses they attacked. Tension between African-Americans and Koreans was undoubtedly a factor, but many riot participants (according to some accounts, the majority) were not black, and many other factors besides inter-ethnic antagonism need to be considered in explaining riot-related property damage.
(McPhail and Miller, 1973; McPhail, 1994), which relates crowd action, including riot behavior, to ecological and situational factors that affect individual and group availability for participation. Explanations based on the concept of the assembling process emphasize variables such as the size of the population in a given area, ongoing social routines, and competing obligations that might preclude participation. Analyses are planned that will use data on traffic density, transportation patterns, population density, and related variables.

Although extensive efforts were made following the unrest of the 1960s to link both the occurrence of riots and riot participation to various community sociodemographic indicators, with certain notable exceptions (e.g., the size of the nonwhite population in a community) those efforts generally proved futile (Spilerman, 1970; McPhail, 1971). Nevertheless, some analyses have attempted to link the 1992 unrest to sociodemographic trends, particularly population succession in South Central Los Angeles (see, for example, Oliver, Johnson, and Farrell, 1993). Susan Olzak’s extensive research (e.g., Olzak, 1986; 1987) also points to the important role played by immigration in intergroup antagonism and collective violence. For these reasons, we plan to explore the extent to which population characteristics—particularly the presence of multiple ethnic minorities and changes in population composition over time—are associated with damage patterns.

It may also be the case that the losses sustained in the riot are to some degree explainable by patterns of police deployment—
that is, that more damage was sustained in the areas that were poorly guarded. The police were unable to mobilize effectively in the early hours after rioting began to break out, and their failure to manage the incidents that occurred initially was clearly a factor in the spread of the violence. After the riots, many members of the Korean community claimed that the City failed to move decisively to protect Korean merchants, sacrificing areas like Koreatown in order to protect more affluent, Anglo parts of the city. (For a discussion of the groups that emerged in Koreatown and other parts of the city to defend Korean-owned properties during the riots, see Yu, 1992). The Webster Commission report observed that the police response was not consistent across the various geographic areas affected by the unrest, commenting that "[i]t is possible that there is a correlation between the level of enforcement and the level of incidents" (Special Advisor to the Board of Police Commissioners, 1992: 132). Thus, it will be necessary to explore the extent to which the police department response was a factor in business victimization.

Finally, knowing which businesses suffered riot-related losses opens up a number of possibilities for future research, making it feasible to seek information on such topics as pre-riot contacts between business owners and customers, the nature of the relationships that existed between proprietors and local residents, and the dynamics of the unrest—for example, at what stage in the disturbance attacks were made on particular businesses and how crowd actions developed and progressed at different locations.
Following businesses over time could also lead to a better understanding of the long-term impacts of riot victimization, a topic about which virtually nothing is known.

REFERENCES


