

US Latino urban riots - Aaron Fountain



There have been at least 64 riots in Latino communities since 1964, but most have been forgotten. Aaron Fountain gives an overview of the rebellions.

On June 13, 1971, [rioting broke out at Roosevelt Park](#) after police attempted to arrest a young man standing in a crowd of several hundred rowdy youth. A small scuffle escalated into a brawl leading officers to fire upon the crowd, wounding at least nine people. Outraged, nearly 500 youth moved into the downtown area where they overturned cars, shattered windows, looted, and severely damaged and destroyed buildings. Police attacked rock- and bottle-throwing protesters with tear gas but were overwhelmed. The [New Mexico National Guardsmen](#) came into the city to assist officers. After two days of rioting, the city tallied over [\\$3 million](#) in damages. Shocked by the level of carnage, one journalist of the [Albuquerque Journal](#) [wrote](#), "It was something you'd think couldn't happen in Albuquerque, but it did."

Unlike the riots in Watts in 1965 or Detroit in 1967, Albuquerque lacks the evocative label of 1960s urban uprising. The actors were primarily Mexican American, and the riot occurred in the summer of 1971. Despite these anomalous characteristics, the rebellion was one of at least 14 Latino urban riots that occurred that year.

This year marks the 45th and 50th anniversaries of at least 17 Latino urban riots. These incidents have happened at least 57 times since 1964, but they are remembered in isolation. Preserving this history is crucial because the issues that sparked them, such as municipal neglect, discrimination and poverty, still exist in many communities around the country. Sadly American political culture portrays Latinos as recent arrivals, which makes it appear that these issues are temporary. Failure to address persistent issues in the community might increase the likelihood of another urban uprising in the near future — a plausible claim considering the incident of social unrest in [Anaheim, California](#) in 2012. Most Americans are unaware of Latino urban riots because they fall outside of the black-white binary. Despite numerous books and documentaries about the 1960s and '70s, these riots are rarely, if ever, mentioned. Sociologist Gregg Lee Carter published the only comprehensive piece of scholarship about the topic where he [listed 43 riots](#) in Mexican-American and Puerto Rican communities between 1964 and 1971. Nevertheless, there are some shortcomings in the list: some of the riots were melees, he missed several incidents, and they continued well beyond 1971.

I have provided an updated version of Carter's list with hopes that people will become more interested in recovering this history and learn from it. By looking at several online newspaper databases and the

works of other scholars, I included 25 additional riots. I disregarded racial violence, school and prison settings, as well as eliminated several of the incidents in Carter's list. To determine what constituted a riot, I factored in that the event had to have at least 100 participants, result in significant property damage (destroying and/or severely damaging vehicles and buildings), and trigger a police response. With the exception of Los Angeles in 1992, Latinos were the primary actors in these riots; however, there were several incidents where whites and Blacks participated in almost equal numbers. There were numerous other incidents of civil unrest, but because property damage was minimal I did not include them. This list is incomplete because not all newspapers are digitized. Additionally, there was a discrepancy in reporting when Blacks and Latinos both rioted because some journalists reported only on Black rioters.

A glance at this list reveals some unique characteristics. Unlike Black riots of the 1960s, Latino riots occurred mostly in the 1970s, and they continued well into the early 1990s. Over two-thirds of them were in Puerto Rican communities. They occurred in major cities and in communities as small as [Coachella, California](#), which had about 9,000 residents in 1970. Rioting broke out mostly in the Northeast. New Jersey had the most with 17 incidents.

In February 1968, government officials signaled alarms of anger in the Latino community. The Select Commission on Civil Disorder [reported](#) that "the rising needs of the Spanish-speaking people are being neglected as we grapple with the more massive pressures from the Negro population." Political and police officials apparently ignored this warning when they admitted to indifference. "For all intents and purposes—politically, economically, and socially—the Puerto Rican community has been invisible," [noted](#) Greater Urban Coalition leader Gustav Heninburg after the [1974 riots](#) in Newark, New Jersey. "Until Sunday [the riots], nobody had taken them seriously." In many communities, it took a riot just for local officials to acknowledge the Latino community.

These riots varied in severity. Rioting in [Oxnard, California](#) in July 1971 lasted for nearly two hours with several buildings destroyed and damaged. But rioting in [Camden, New Jersey](#) in August 1971 lasted for four days with property damages estimated in the millions. Today, Oxnard doesn't bear any of the scars of rioting, but Camden, on the other hand, lost its middle-class tax base and remains the [poorest](#) and one of the most dangerous city in the country.

Not all of these incidents were sparked by police violence. The three-day riot in [Passaic, New Jersey](#) in August 1969 began after the eviction of a Puerto Rican household of twelve. In other incidents, rioting occurred after a public gathering. The riots in [Hartford, Connecticut](#) in September 1969 allegedly began when a crowd stood outside the Hartford Times office building to protest the publication of an article where a fireman made disparaging comments about the Puerto Rican community. "They are pigs, that's all pigs," he said. "A bunch of them will be sitting around drinking beer and when one is finished... he just throws the bottle anywhere... They dump garbage out of their windows. They lived like pigs." It's unlikely for a newspaper to publish such comments today, but as long as disadvantaged communities suffer from economic, political, and social marginalization, mending police-community relations won't be enough to avoid riots.

At least one riot exposed intra-Latino conflict. In December 1990, several hundreds of Puerto Rican youth in Miami's [Wynwood neighborhood](#) went on a rampage after the acquittal of six officers who beat a drug dealer to death. Expressing Puerto Ricans' perceived insignificance in the city, local resident Clemente Montalvo said, "We want the people to know that we exist." Continuing, he said, "Cubans get everything; we get nothing. When the Cubans jump, they get what they want." Nearly 26 years later, the myth of Latino sameness prevails in American political culture. The dominant issue of immigration and the common assumption that all Latinos are Mexican has rendered Puerto Ricans invisible.

Like most rebellions, the underlying issues of discrimination, municipal neglect, poverty, police harassment, poor housing, poor schools and unemployment were all factors. But unique to Latinos, many [expressed frustrations](#) that the black-white binary overshadowed problems in their communities. It took a riot in 1991 for [Washington, D.C.](#) political officials to acknowledge the sense of alienation in the

Salvadoran community. This could occur in other cities that have always been defined by the black-white binary where local officials might struggle to incorporate Latinos into the political system. Oddly, Latino urban riots never lead to a national discourse about race relations. Nor did any right-wing dialogue emerge about a Latino underclass culture, which was the [explanation](#) for Black urban riots. This could be explained by the fact that most coverage of Latino riots reported them as isolated incidents. Whatever the case may be, the absence of any such dialogue shows that even rioting could not eliminate the black-white binary.

It was not until the [1992 Los Angeles riots](#) that Americans acknowledged that race expanded beyond black and white. Images of Korean shop owners protecting their stores and whites, Blacks, Latinos and Asians rioting and looting revealed a complex picture of race in America. Yet this appears to have been forgotten after the unrest in Ferguson and Baltimore. Several memes and [tweets](#) circulated on social media claimed that Latinos and Asians have never rioted nor would they ever engage in such activities. These individuals attempted to juxtapose Latinos and Asians with Blacks as being less troublesome. Riot-shaming neglects the fact that identical outbreaks of violence have occurred in Latino communities and the reality that they could happen again.

There are numerous low-income and working-class Latino communities that sit on powder kegs, but they have been rendered invisible by the immigration debate. Public officials' and commentators' efforts to paint Latinos positively in the midst of anti-immigration sentiment has also led to the neglect of these communities.

Major cities with long-established Latino communities such as Cleveland, Milwaukee and Detroit have seen an increase in [concentrated poverty](#) between 2000 and 2013. In Philadelphia, Latinos have the highest poverty rate — at [44 percent](#) as of 2016 — and are located in the poorest congressional district in Pennsylvania. Even worse, local officials often ignore the population. During a 2015 roundtable discussion about police-community relations, *Al Dia*, a Philadelphia-based Latino newspaper, [noted](#) that out of “22 panelists there wasn’t a single Latino.” Their absence was striking considering the fact that the community has dealt with the issue of police brutality for [decades](#).

The Northeast is filled with cities and towns where residents are severely disadvantaged. Since the 1970s, low-income Puerto Ricans along with some Dominicans and Blacks [have left](#) New York City and New Jersey for affordable housing and safer neighborhoods in other parts of New York as well as Pennsylvania and New England. Although they find what they were looking for, they also encounter a whole new set of challenges.

In Pennsylvania, these groups have settled in cities such as Allentown, Reading, Lancaster and York only to encounter high unemployment, overcrowding, [slumlords](#), [poor schools](#), and [persistent poverty](#).

They are [segregated](#) into deteriorating homes where their children contract high levels of [lead poison](#). The Reading and Allentown school districts, which are [81 percent](#) and [68 percent](#) Latino, are the [most fiscally disadvantaged](#) school districts in the nation. In Allentown, students articulate these frustrations in the schools, which were plagued with [violence](#) last fall. Meanwhile, Allentown city officials have invested close to \$1 billion into a [downtown revitalization project](#), even though local residents feel that they are [not reaping](#) the benefits.

Another example is Rhode Island. Latinos are located in cities such as Central Falls, Providence, Pawtucket and Woonsocket. Statewide, Latinos have the highest [poverty rate](#) and are also [overrepresented](#) in the prison system — making up 12 percent of the state’s population, but 24 percent of the prison population. Once released, ex-felons are [discriminated](#) against in public housing and employment.

In October 2015, Pawtucket avoided a violent altercation after [200 students](#) protested an incident of police brutality at Tolman High School. While standing outside city hall, the crowd became aggressive after someone smashed a car window. The students started spitting and threatening officers. Police responded with pepper spray. Luckily violence was avoided, but it served as a sign to local officials concerning boiling [frustrations](#) in the community.

Police-community relations remain tense in poor and working-class communities. From 2010 to 2014, the [Houston Police Department](#) has killed civilians at a higher rate than New York and Los Angeles. In fact, Houston police have killed more people than Los Angeles police despite having a smaller population. The vast majority of unarmed victims have been Black and Latino. As of today, there has been no prosecutions or significant discipline of an officer. San Francisco has had [several incidents](#) of police shooting unarmed Latino men. Many of these killings have occurred near or in the Mission District, a predominately working-class Latino community. Over the past several years the area has experienced rapid [gentrification](#) that has led to a [27 percent decrease](#) of the Latino population between 2000 and 2013. Both of these cities pride themselves in their [ethnic diversity](#) and social tolerance, but this narrative hides an [ugly history](#) and [grim reality](#).

The similarities between now and then are striking, which is why the history of Latino urban riots need to be preserved. Fortunately, some scholars are doing just that. Newark Public Library archivist [Yesenia Lopez](#) is archiving the history of over a dozen Puerto Rican riots in New Jersey. Graduate students are researching the history of the [Camden, New Jersey](#) and [Pharr, Texas](#) riots of 1971. Still, more needs to be done, because most of these riots risk falling into oblivion.

This history is important because it's a reminder that the black-white binary is problematic. Continuing to see racial conflict this way not only renders Latinos as invisible, but also makes it appear that they are unaffected by the most pressing social justice issues of our times. This should also serve as a lesson for Latino political organizations and media outlets who generally focus primarily on immigration. Viewing Latinos as recent arrivals renders insignificant the experiences of those here prior to recent waves. It dehistoricizes social and economic issues within the community. Unless these issues are addressed, some communities might articulate these grievances in an unpleasant way.

Town	State	Start date	Group
New York	NY	8/29/1964	Puerto Rican
Chicago	IL	6/12/1966	Puerto Rican
Jersey City	NJ	6/19/1966	Puerto Rican
Perth Amboy	NJ	7/30/1966	Puerto Rican
New York	NY	7/23/1967	Puerto Rican
New Haven	CT	8/19/1967	Puerto Rican
Paterson	NJ	7/1/1968	Puerto Rican
New York	NY	7/10/1968	Puerto Rican
Trenton	NJ	6/12/1969	Puerto Rican

Waterbury	NJ	6/30/1969	Puerto Rican*
New York	NY	7/23/1969	Puerto Rican*
Passaic	NJ	8/3/1969	Puerto Rican
Hartford	CT	9/1/1969	Puerto Rican
Los Angeles	CA	1/9/1970	Mexican-American
Coachella	CA	4/5/1970	Mexican-American*
Jersey City	NJ	6/11/1970	Puerto Rican
New York	NY	6/12/1970	Puerto Rican*
New York	NY	6/14/1970	Puerto Rican
Hoboken	NJ	6/24/1970	Puerto Rican
Los Angeles	CA	7/2/1970	Mexican-American
New York	NY	7/15/1970	Puerto Rican
New Brunswick	NJ	7/23/1970	Puerto Rican
West Chester	PA	7/25/1970	Puerto Rican
New Bedford	MA	7/29/1970	Puerto Rican*
Hartford	CT	7/31/1970	Puerto Rican*
Hoboken	NJ	8/28/1970	Puerto Rican
Los Angeles	CA	8/29/1970	Mexican-American
Los Angeles	CA	1/30/1971	Mexican-American
Pharr	TX	2/6/1971	Mexican-American*
New York	NY	5/6/1971	Puerto Rican*

Bridgeport	CT	5/20/1971	Puerto Rican*
New York	NY	6/9/1971	Puerto Rican
Albuquerque	NM	6/13/1971	Mexican-American
New York	NY	6/13/1971	Puerto Rican
Oxnard	CA	7/19/1971	Mexican-American*
New York	NY	7/27/1971	Puerto Rican
Lakewood	NJ	8/18/1971	Puerto Rican*
Camden	NJ	8/19/1971	Puerto Rican
Hoboken	NJ	9/4/1971	Puerto Rican
Los Angeles	CA	9/16/1971	Mexican-American
Paterson	NJ	10/11/1971	Puerto Rican
Santa Paula	CA	6/12/1972	Mexican-American*
Boston	MA	7/16/1972	Puerto Rican*
Chelsea	MA	9/9/1972	Puerto Rican*
Dallas	TX	7/28/1973	Mexican-American*
Long Branch	NJ	8/22/1973	Puerto Rican*
Philadelphia	PA	7/30/1974	Puerto Rican*
Newark	NJ	9/1/1974	Puerto Rican*
Springfield	MA	8/28/1975	Puerto Rican*
Wilmington	DE	10/20/1975	Puerto Rican*
Chicago	IL	6/5/1977	Puerto Rican*

Houston	TX	5/7/1978	Mexican-American*
Anaheim	CA	7/24/1978	Mexican-American*
Worcester	MA	6/21/1979	Puerto Rican*
Meriden	CT	9/6/1979	Puerto Rican*
Garden City	KS	8/9/1980	Mexican-American*
Holyoke	MA	8/13/1980	Hispanic*
Lawrence	MA	8/9/1984	Hispanic*
Perth Amboy	NJ	6/11/1988	Hispanic*
Vineland	NJ	8/29/1989	Puerto Rican*
Miami	FL	12/3/1990	Puerto Rican*
Washington	DC	5/5/1991	Central American*
New York	NY	7/6/1992	Dominican*
Lancaster	PA	9/24/2000	Puerto Rican*

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