

A RIOT OF COLOR: THE DEMOGRAPHIC
SETTING OF CIVIL DISTURBANCE IN LOS ANGELES

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**A RIOT OF COLOR: THE DEMOGRAPHIC
SETTING OF CIVIL DISTURBANCE IN LOS ANGELES***

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the demographic and socioeconomic context of the Los Angeles riot of April 1992. We consider how recent waves of immigration have changed the ethnic composition of Los Angeles's largest black ghetto, setting the stage for interethnic conflict, and how the ghetto population's economic and family characteristics augmented the supply of potential rioters. The characteristics of the arrested rioters and of their targets are inconsistent with the common view that this disturbance was primarily a "rebellion" by blacks against white injustice.

When the police officers who beat Rodney King were exonerated by an all-white suburban jury on April 29, 1992, street corner disturbances immediately erupted in two black neighborhoods of South Central Los Angeles. Within a few hours, these disturbances escalated into a three-day riot that damaged people and property over an area of almost 60 square miles. Since then, these three days of mob violence, arson, and looting have usually been represented in the press and other public

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forums as a political protest by blacks against manifest injustice to a fellow black, brutally mistreated by white police officers.

A careful look at the sequence of events and the actual participants in terms of race and ethnicity suggests that this view greatly oversimplifies and misrepresents the civil tensions that erupted on April 29, 1992. Although whites who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time were harassed and beaten, the truly systematic targets of violence were retail establishments, ranging from neighborhood convenience stores to discount houses and supermarkets; Korean shopkeepers were especially at risk. And over half of those arrested by the Los Angeles police during six days of civil disturbance were Hispanic, not black.

In this paper we adopt a demographic perspective on this "riot of color" that engulfed selected parts of metropolitan Los Angeles while leaving most of the area unscathed. Although demographic factors cannot "explain" riots, they are one salient, quantifiable facet of the tensions and processes that fuel them. An understanding of the demographic setting can sharpen social science interpretations of civil unrest in cities and how it propagates.

Our analysis suggests that the local demographic setting in this instance was ripe for unrest. Ethnic tensions existed, and a large percentage of youthful men in the area were at liberty to participate. In the following pages, we consider how (1) disparate rates of population growth and the succession of ethnic groups within neighborhoods set the stage for competition and conflict, and (2) the population's distinctive economic and family circumstances augmented the supply of potential participants, whose involvement sustained the anarchy for several days.

I. SPATIAL PATTERNS OF ETHNIC SUCCESSION IN LOS ANGELES

Territorially based ethnic tension is endemic in California, especially metropolitan Los Angeles. The region's ethnic and racial diversity has been fueled by a substantial influx of immigrants, and the area known as South Central Los Angeles underwent a rapid succession of ethnic groups during the 1980s. By 1990, residential settlement patterns presented a complex mixture of intermingling and separation along racial and ethnic lines, as depicted in the series of maps shown in Figs. 1 and 2.¹

Residential patterns have transformed economic relationships among various groups in the population. Groups once the majority of inhabitants in certain areas were by 1990 just one of several minorities there. In Los Angeles County as a whole, ethnically non-Hispanic whites ("Anglos"), previously the majority of the population, had become a numerical "minority" by 1990. Their waning presence resulted mostly from Hispanic and Asian immigration, furthered to a degree by an exodus of whites from the area (see Table 1). During the 1980s, the county's Anglo population decreased by 8.5 percent; the Hispanic population increased by 62 percent and the Asian population by 110 percent. The non-Hispanic black population² increased by less than 1 percent.

BLACK RESIDENTIAL DIFFUSION

Like many other urban areas outside the South, Los Angeles acquired a sizable black population during and after World War II (see DeGraaf, 1962). During the 1940s and 50s, Southern blacks left impoverished rural origins for industrial employment opportunities; later, the decline of industrial employment in the metropolitan Midwest prompted

¹The maps in Figs. 1 and 2 were prepared by Professor William Bowen, Department of Geography, California State University, Northridge, and are used with his permission.

²Census data distinguish "black" as a racial classification and "Hispanic" as an ethnic one. About 6 percent of persons who reported themselves as "black" also reported themselves as "Hispanic." Most are Spanish-speaking immigrants from Caribbean countries.

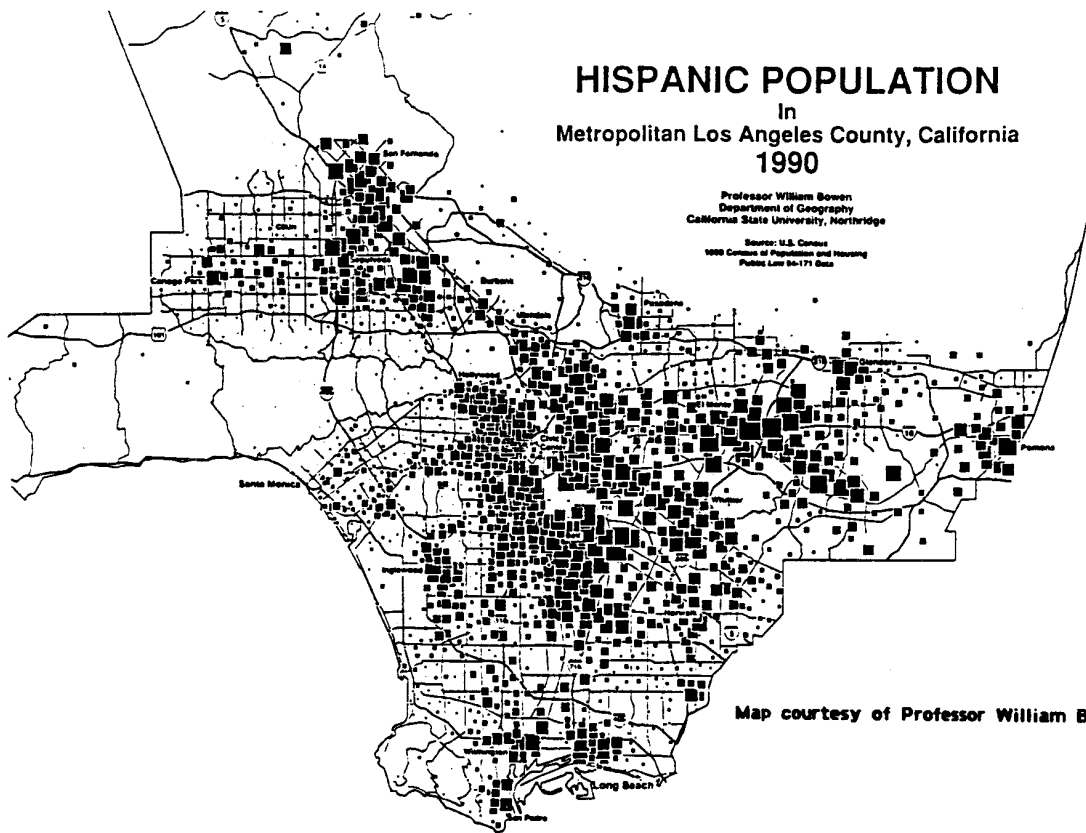
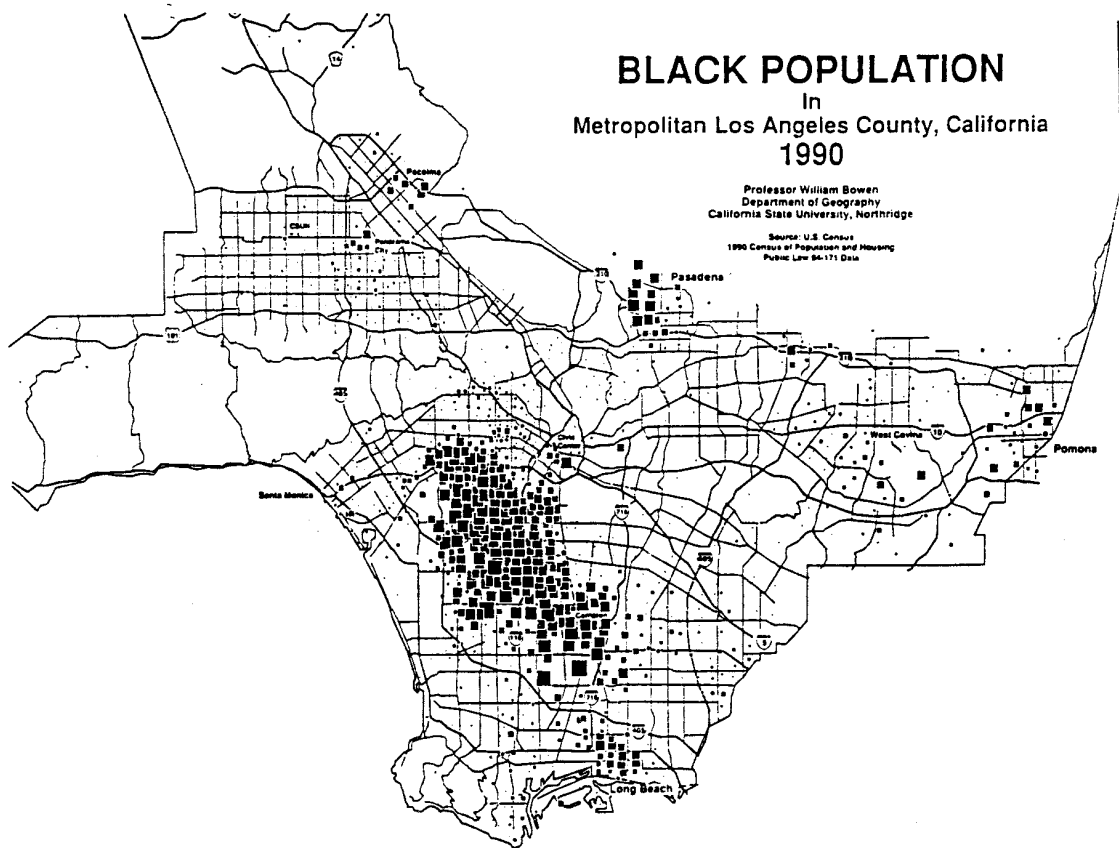
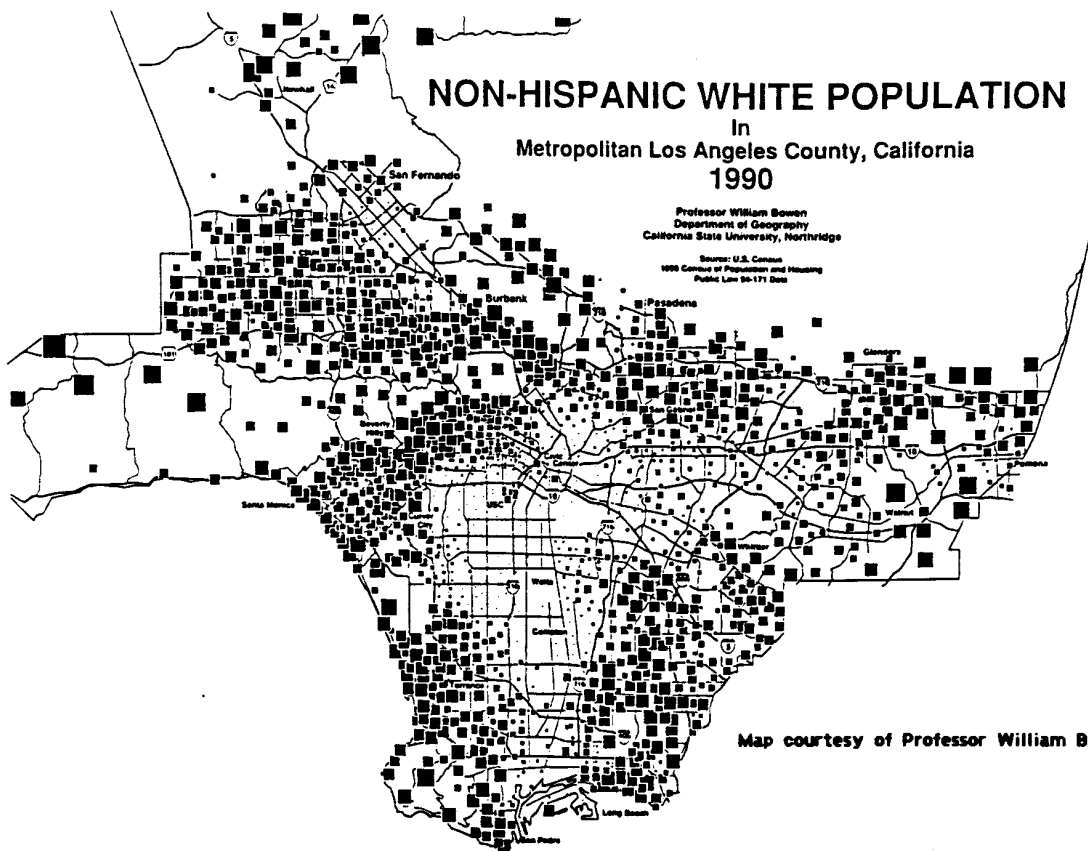
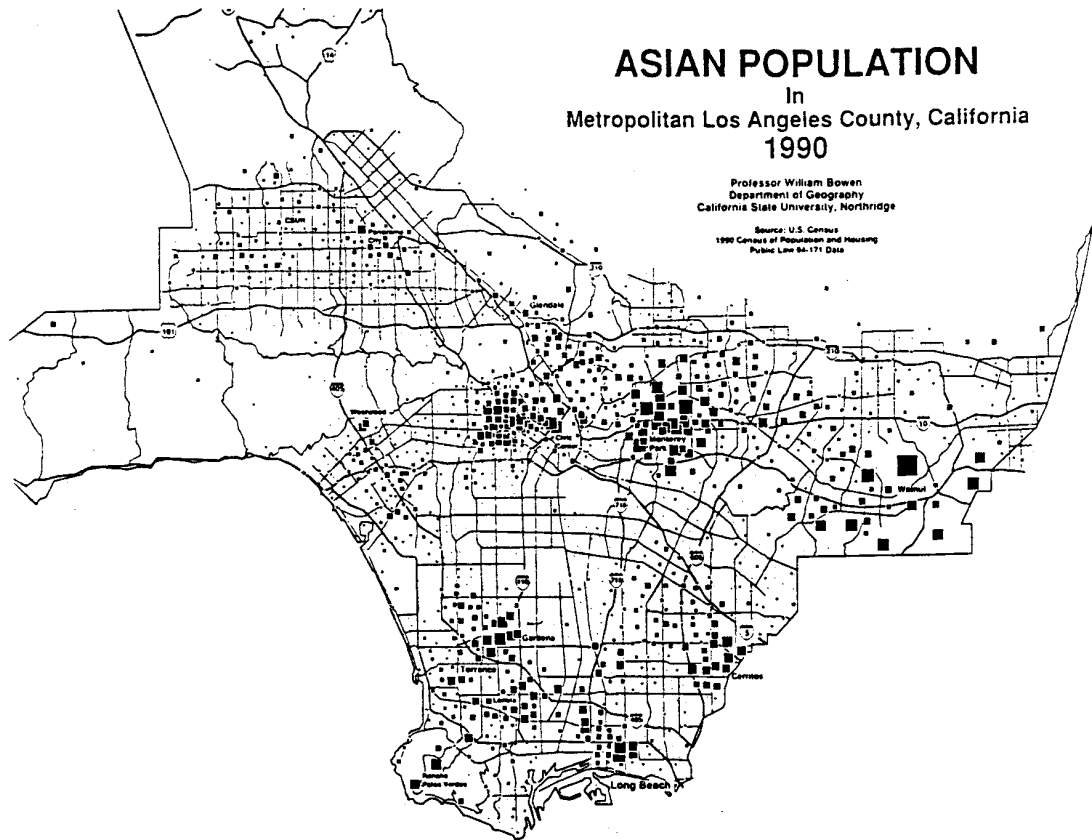


Fig. 1--Residential Patterns of Blacks and Hispanics
in Los Angeles County, 1990



Map courtesy of Professor William Bowen, CSUN

Fig. 2--Residential Patterns of Asians and non-Hispanic Whites
in Los Angeles County, 1990

Table 1
Ethnic Succession In Los Angeles County, 1980 - 1990

Racial or Ethnic Classification	Number of Inhabitants		Percent Change	Percent of All Inhabitants	
	1980	1990		1980	1990
Los Angeles County					
Non-Hispanic White	3,953,603	3,618,850	(8.47)	52.9	40.8
Black	943,968	992,974	5.19	12.6	11.2
Non-Hispanic Black	926,360	934,776	0.91	12.4	10.5
American Indian, Eskimo, and Aleut	48,120	45,508	(5.43)	0.6	0.5
Asian and Pacific Islander	455,415	954,485	109.59	6.1	10.8
Chinese	93,747	245,033	161.38	1.3	2.8
Filipino	99,043	219,653	121.78	1.3	2.5
Japanese	116,543	129,736	11.32	1.6	1.5
Korean	60,618	145,431	139.91	0.8	1.6
Other	85,464	214,632	151.14	1.1	2.4
Hispanic origin	2,066,103	3,351,242	62.20	27.6	37.8
Total Inhabitants ^a	7,477,517	8,863,164	18.53	100.0	100.0

SOURCE: Tables prepared by Eugene Turner and James P. Allen, Department of Geography, California State University, Northridge. Their tables are based primarily in STF-1 (complete count) records of the 1980 and 1990 Censuses of Population.

^aDetail does not add exactly to total because some Asians and Pacific Islanders and some American Indians are counted as Hispanic and some Hispanics identified their race only as "Other." The discrepancy is less than 1 percent of the total population.

urban blacks to pursue their fortunes in the West. From 1940 to 1990, the black population of Los Angeles County quintupled to about 993,000 persons, concentrated in an area about 6.5 miles wide and 18 miles long (see Fig. 3). The earliest area of black settlement (and still its focus) is South Central Los Angeles (see Fig. 4).

By 1990, a further transformation was apparent. Statewide, black population growth had moderated relative to past decades, and increasing numbers of blacks were leaving Los Angeles County. The magnitude of black outmigration from the county offset much of the black population's natural increase there. During the 1980s, black population increased a mere 5 percent countywide, less than a third as fast as the nonblack population.

Within Los Angeles County, the pattern of black settlement also changed. During the 1980s, blacks moved away from South Central neighborhoods, settling in Inglewood and Hawthorne to the west and in Downey, Paramount, and Long Beach to the southeast. These residential shifts reflect upward social mobility, for the most part, as those blacks who prospered moved to better housing and better neighborhoods. Still, South Central remained home to some 278,000 non-Hispanic black residents in 1990, 53 percent of the area's population (see Table 2).

HISPANIC RESIDENTIAL SUCCESSION

As blacks moved out, Hispanics moved in (see Fig. 5). During the 1980s, immigration from Mexico and Central America combined with high rates of natural increase to swell the county's already large Hispanic population by 60 percent. By 1990, Hispanics had become the dominant ethnic group in the northeastern half of South Central Los Angeles (see Fig. 4). Just west of downtown, the Pico-Union district also became a Hispanic enclave, populated mostly by Salvadoran immigrants (see Fig. 6, below).

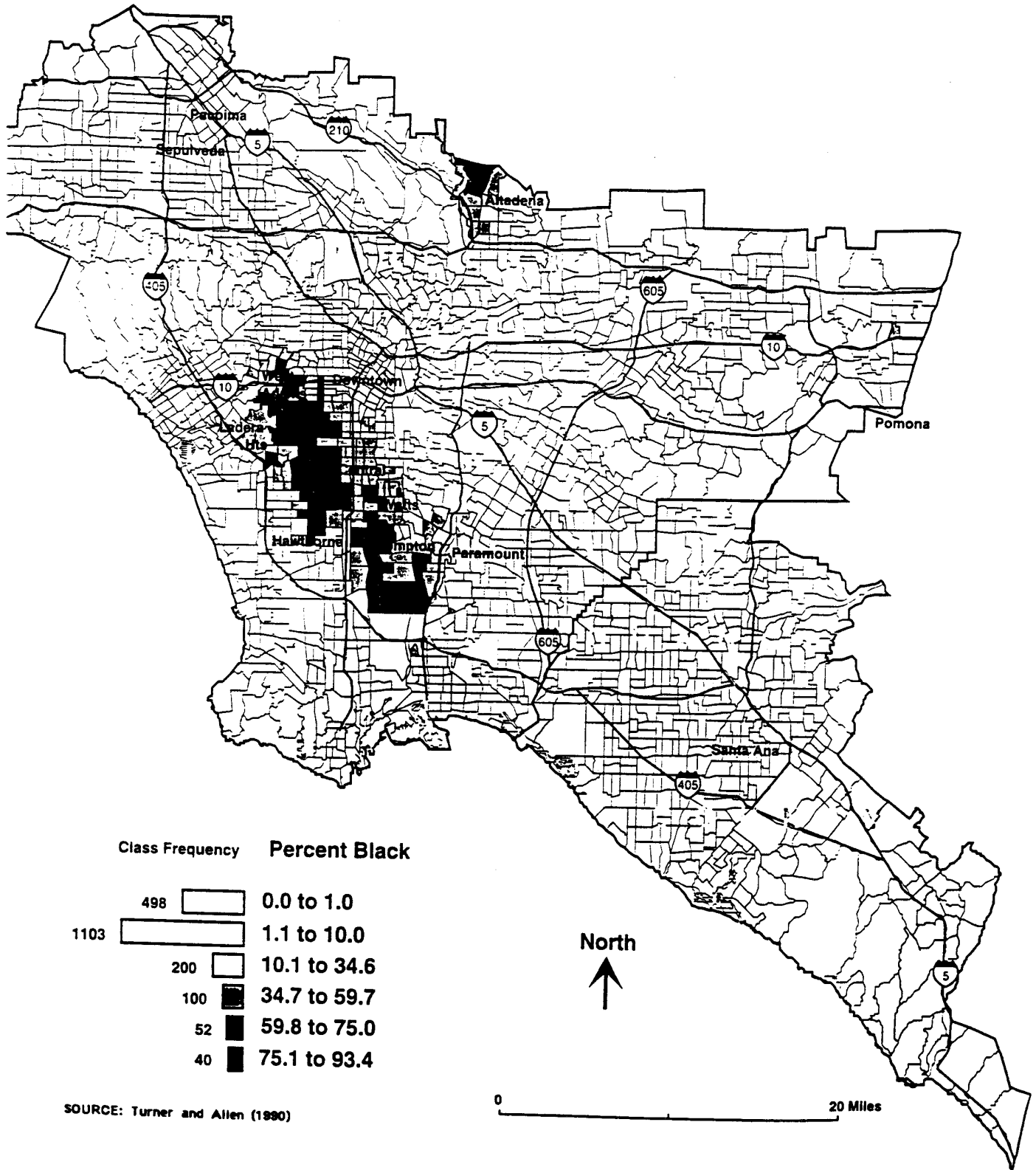


Fig. 3--Concentration of Black Population in Census Tracts of Los Angeles County

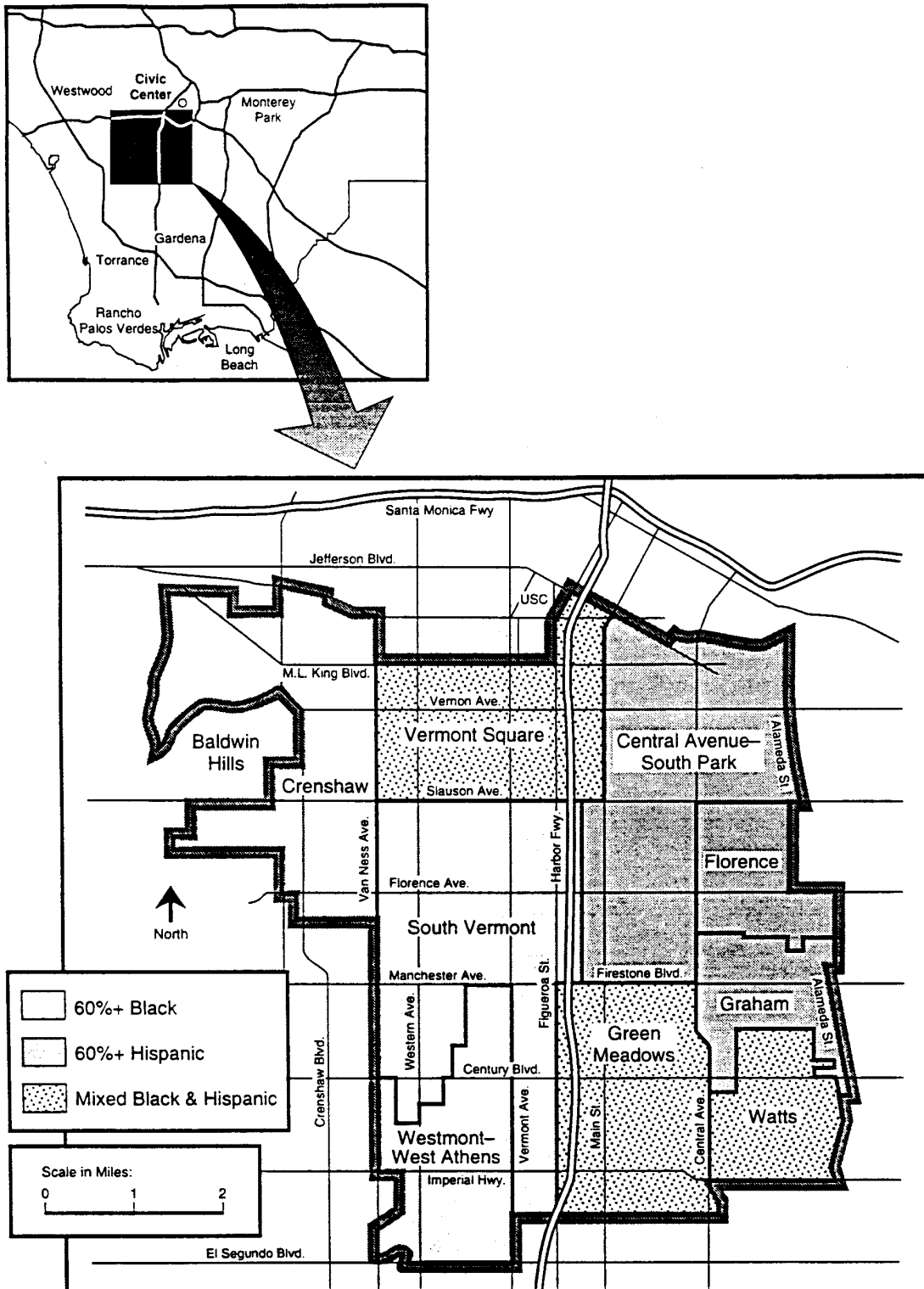


Fig. 4--Neighborhoods of South Central Los Angeles

Table 2

Ethnic Composition Of Neighborhoods In South Central Los Angeles: 1990

Neighborhood	Racial and Ethnic Status						
	Non-Hispanic			Other Non-Hispanic			
	Black	Hispanic	Black	Hispanic	Other	White	Asian-Pacific Islander
Number of Persons							
Crenshaw	54,683	1,761	9,095	2,041	582	69,956	
Vermont Square	33,986	1,899	32,926	717	391	70,445	
South Vermont	62,530	2,062	28,683	593	561	95,808	
Westmont-W. Athens	27,641	544	10,728	372	124	39,903	
Central Ave-S. Park	38,102	3,435	63,592	944	477	107,402	
Watts	18,260	579	13,101	98	107	32,158	
Green Meadows	30,153	1,319	18,237	429	155	50,390	
Florence	4,502	547	29,057	87	112	34,672	
Graham	8,356	217	13,522	208	147	22,475	
Total, South Central	278,213	12,363	218,941	6,147	2,656	523,209	
Percent of All Persons							
Crenshaw	78.2	2.5	13.0	2.6	0.8	100.0	
Vermont Square	48.2	2.7	46.7	0.7	0.6	100.0	
South Vermont	65.3	2.2	29.9	1.4	0.6	100.0	
Westmont-W. Athens	69.3	1.4	26.9	1.2	0.3	100.0	
Central Ave-S. Park	35.5	3.2	59.2	0.8	0.4	100.0	
Watts	56.8	1.8	40.7	0.3	0.3	100.0	
Green Meadows	59.8	2.6	36.2	0.9	0.3	100.0	
Florence	13.0	1.6	83.8	1.1	0.3	100.0	
Graham	37.2	1.0	60.2	0.9	0.7	100.0	
Total, South Central	53.2	2.4	41.8	1.2	0.5	100.0	

SOURCE: Tabulation prepared by A.F. Abrahamse (RAND) from Census of Population, 1990, STF-3.

NOTE: According to the Bureau of the Census, "black" is a racial classification and Hispanic" is an ethnic classification. About 4.3 percent of South Central residents who reported themselves as "black" also reported themselves as "Hispanic." Most are Spanish-speaking immigrants from Caribbean countries. Most Hispanics report their race as either "white" or "other."

^aIncludes American Indian, Eskimo, Aleut, and other.

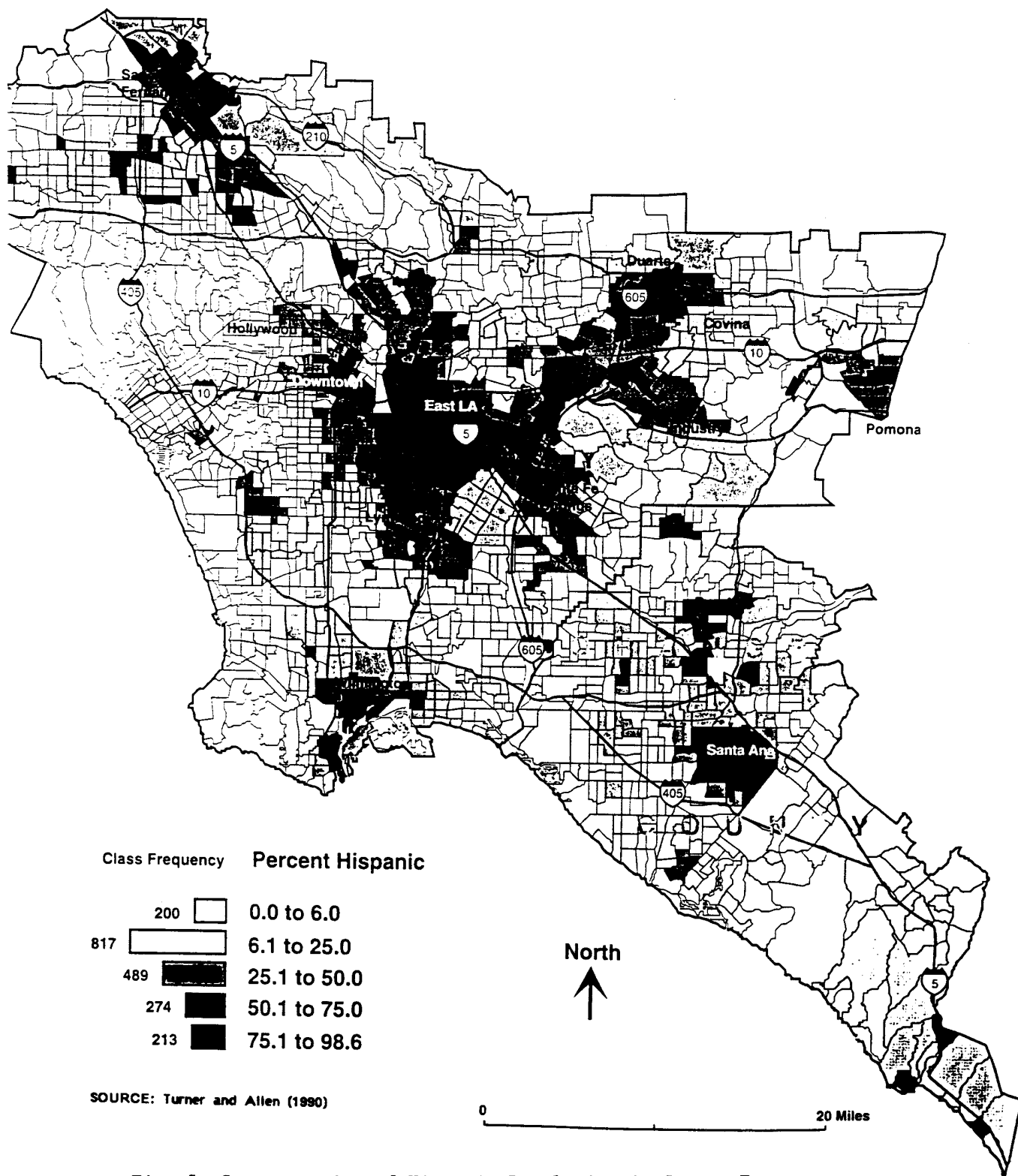


Fig. 5--Concentration of Hispanic Population in Census Tracts of Los Angeles County

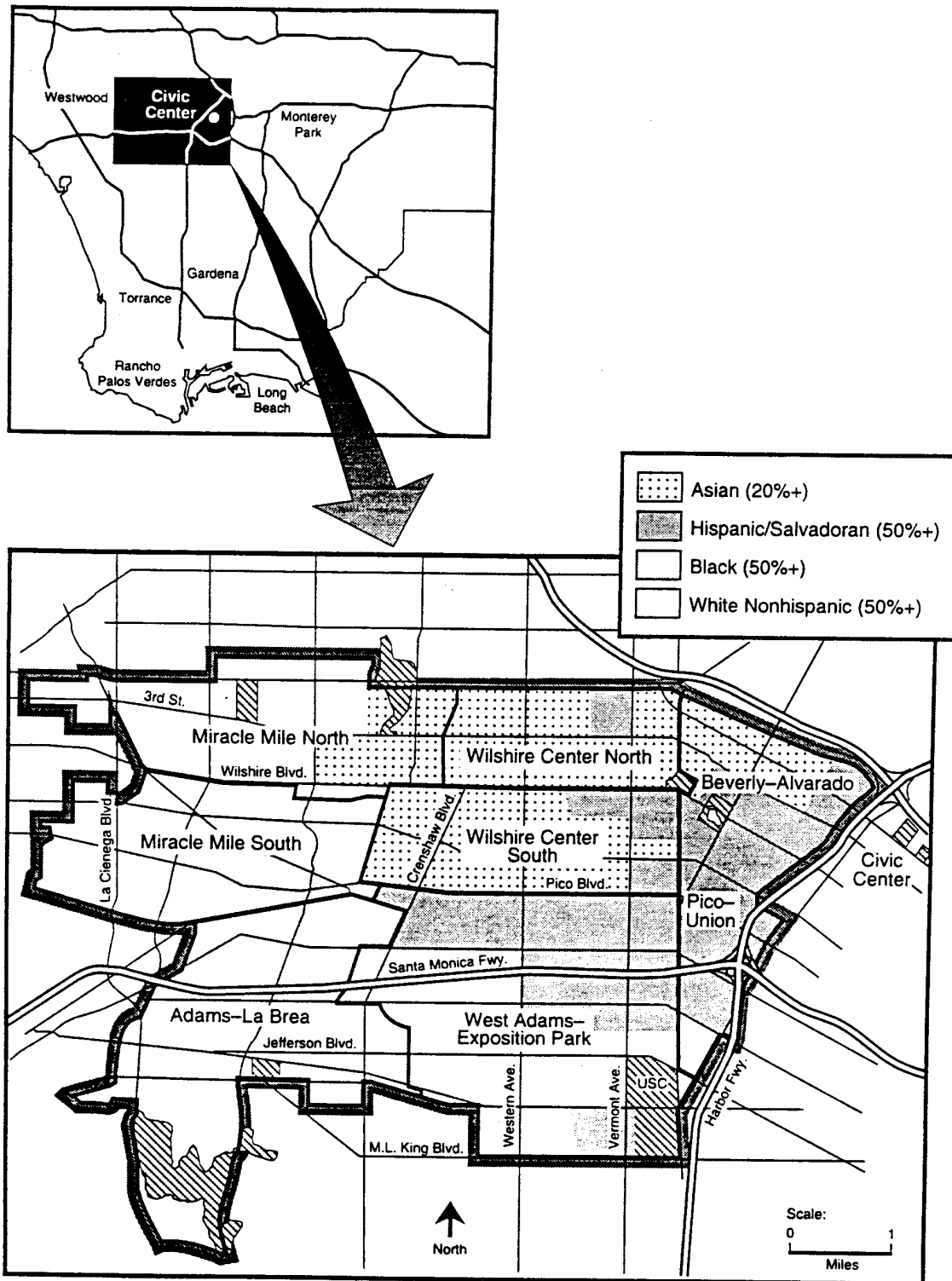


Fig. 6--Neighborhoods of the Wilshire District

ENLARGEMENT OF ASIAN ENCLAVES

The Asian population of Los Angeles County more than doubled during the 1980s, but from a much smaller base than the groups discussed above. Most of this growth derived from immigration and infused the county with linguistic, cultural, and religious diversity. The newcomers came mostly from China, the Philippines, Korea, and Japan; they ranged from destitute "boat people" to wealthy business people.

The scattered communities where these Asian immigrants have settled form a mosaic whose pieces reflect commonalities of cultural and ethnic origin. These enclaves nearly encircle the black/Hispanic core of Los Angeles County, but do not overlap that core (see Fig. 2). Indeed, only 1 percent of South Central's population is Asian. Elsewhere in the county, Asians collectively constitute only a minority of all residents. (Less than 1 percent of the 1,600 census tracts in Los Angeles County had Asian majorities in 1990.)

Koreatown, in the Wilshire District about three miles north of South Central, is of special interest because it was a major target for arson and looting during the 1992 riot. Koreatown's identity derives less from its numbers of Korean residents than from the heavy investment Koreans have made there in commercial enterprises along Wilshire Boulevard and Western and Vermont avenues. The Wilshire District, shown in Fig. 6, has about 74,000 Asian residents, mostly in the eastern part: Beverly-Alvarado, Wilshire Center North, and Wilshire Center South (see Table 3). In the area we have designated Koreatown, about 60 percent of the Asian population is Korean and 28 percent Filipino; most of the rest is Chinese or Japanese.

Just east of Koreatown is the county's principal community of Salvadorans, centered on Pico-Union. Here, virtually all the census tracts populated by substantial numbers of Asians actually have larger numbers of Hispanics.

The western part of the Wilshire District also suffered riot damage. It consists of a non-Hispanic white neighborhood, Miracle Mile

Table 3

Ethnic Composition Of Neighborhoods In Wilshire District Of Los Angeles: 1990

Neighborhood	Racial and Ethnic Status						
	Non-Hispanic		Other Non-Hispanic			All	
	Black	Hispanic	Black	Hispanic	White	Asian-Pacific Islander	Other ^a Persons
	Number of Persons						
Adams-La Brea	32,385	1,293	16,739	2,140	3,031	455	56,043
W. Adams-Exposition Pk	45,428	3,876	60,338	6,747	7,285	1,103	124,777
Beverly-Alvarado ^b	1,948	70	27,478	3,790	9,479	279	43,044
Pico-Union ^b	1,872	226	62,687	6,632	3,745	608	75,770
Miracle Mile North	1,570	116	2,368	32,726	2,575	80	39,435
Miracle Mile South	16,542	446	5,293	19,878	3,319	344	45,822
Wilshire Center North	5,341	368	26,774	12,191	21,895	403	66,972
Wilshire Center South	6,545	691	49,106	6,651	22,972	446	86,411
Total, Wilshire District	111,631	7,086	250,783	90,755	74,301	3,718	538,274
	Percent of All Persons						
Adams-La Brea	57.8	2.3	29.9	3.8	5.4	0.8	100.0
W. Adams-Exposition Pk	36.4	3.1	48.4	5.4	5.8	0.9	100.0
Beverly-Alvarado ^b	4.5	0.2	63.8	8.8	22.0	0.6	100.0
Pico-Union ^b	2.5	0.3	82.7	8.8	4.9	0.8	100.0
Miracle Mile North	4.0	0.3	6.0	83.0	6.5	0.2	100.0
Miracle Mile South	36.1	1.0	11.6	43.4	7.2	0.8	100.0
Wilshire Center North	8.0	0.5	40.0	18.2	32.7	0.6	100.0
Wilshire Center South	7.6	0.8	56.8	7.7	26.6	0.5	100.0
Total, Wilshire District	20.7	1.3	46.6	16.9	13.8	0.7	100.0

SOURCE: Tabulation prepared by A. F. Abrahamse (RAND) from Census of Population, 1990, STF-3.

NOTE: According to the Bureau of the Census, "black" is a racial classification and "Hispanic" is an ethnic classification. About 4.3 percent of South Central residents who reported themselves as "black" also reported themselves as "Hispanic." Most are Spanish-speaking immigrants from Caribbean countries. Most Hispanics report their race as either "white" or "other."

^aIncludes American Indian, Eskimo, Aleut, and other.

^bParts of LACDRP Statistical Area 9.11 (Westlake-Downtown). Beverly-Alvarado contains Census Tract Nos. 2126, 2127, 2128, 2129, and 2131.

North; a mixed black-and-white neighborhood, Miracle Mile South; and a heavily black neighborhood, Adams-La Brea. The area between Koreatown and South Central is West Adams-Exposition Park, a mixed black and Hispanic neighborhood.

ETHNIC TENSION

The pattern of ethnic succession in this part of Los Angeles County reveals territorial competition and potential underlying tensions between groups (see Oliver and Johnson, 1984). The black community of South Central Los Angeles may regard the incursion of Hispanics as "threatening" (since the latter now form a demographic majority in nearly half of the traditional black ghetto). Black-Hispanic rivalry for political power and patronage jobs is certainly evident in Los Angeles County, although it is less apparent in residential neighborhoods.

The relationship between blacks and Asians is very different. Asians are the most rapidly increasing racial group in Los Angeles County, but they have entered South Central Los Angeles economically only, not as residents.³ That is, Asians entered this territory as shopkeepers--Korean and Filipino owners of the multitude of convenience stores who work on the premises stocking shelves and ringing up sales--but made their homes outside South Central's traditional boundaries.

The Korean community in Los Angeles has emerged as an ethnic community engaged in small businesses (Lee, 1989; 1992). During the riots, blacks and Hispanics of South Central and Pico-Union jointly looted and burned retail establishments thought to be owned by Asians (especially Koreans) or non-Hispanic whites.⁴ Manifestly, the Korean shopkeepers had nothing to do with the injustice of the jury's verdict

³Some Japanese, Chinese, and Koreans live inside the northern boundary of South Central, but their numbers are not increasing. However, a colony of 750 Cambodians recently settled in the Central Avenue-South Park neighborhood.

⁴Black and Latino shopkeepers hastened to label their storefronts (e.g., "BLACK-OWNED") or personally stood by to deflect rioters; most such establishments were spared, but some were heedlessly or accidentally torched.

in the King case, or with the harassment of blacks by white police. However, relations between blacks and Koreans had been especially tense ever since a Korean grocer in South Central killed a black teenager in 1991 during an argument about payment for merchandise.⁵ In both individual and crowd behavior, one grievance often revives another.

⁵The grocer was a middle-aged woman who spoke little English; the victim was a teenage girl. The woman was tried and found guilty but sentenced to probation--a result that infuriated many blacks.

II. WHO RIOTED?

However widespread were the grievances of South Central's residents, it should be noted that the active participants in the riot were mostly adolescent and young adult males. The only available statistical descriptions of active participants are based on arrests. RAND obtained and analyzed riot-related arrest data for the period April 30 (when curfew was imposed) to May 5 (when crime statistics returned to pre-riot patterns).⁶ A year later, the *Los Angeles Times* reported the results of its analysis of 694 people convicted of riot-related felonies (more than 90 percent of them looters).⁷

The RAND arrest data indicate that 88 percent of persons arrested for riot-related activity⁸ were male and 80 percent were between 18 and 34 years of age. According to the *Times* data, 89 percent of the

⁶Many rioters were not arrested, and we do not know how accurately arrestees reflect the composition of all participants. The statistics analyzed by RAND exclude all juveniles and also adults processed through the courts of East Los Angeles, Downey, Culver City, Inglewood, and Compton. No arrest statistics were reported for April 29, the day the riots began--apparently because few arrests were made until the next day. The arrest data were obtained from the Los Angeles Municipal Court by the American Civil Liberties Union and were analyzed by Joan Petersilia and Allan F. Abrahamse of RAND. See Petersilia and Abrahamse, 1993.

⁷See "Most Looters Endured Lives of Crime, Poverty," *Los Angeles Times*, May 2, 1993, pp. 1, 34-35. According to the *Times*, its study is based on 694 probation reports sampled from nine courthouses across Los Angeles County. It covers 43 percent of the riot-related felony cases concluded as of late April 1993. The *Times* cautions that its study "does not cover the thousands of rioters who were not arrested, nor those arrested on misdemeanor charges, usually curfew violations." The *Times* further notes that the participation of Latinos may be underrepresented because some were turned over to immigration authorities and not processed through the courts, and that the sample does not include juveniles, whose cases are not public.

⁸Petersilia and Abrahamse defined riot-related arrests to include charges of civil disturbance (curfew violation, disorderly conduct, false alarm, vandalism, trespassing, disturbing the peace, arson), traffic violations (driving under the influence, hit-and-run, etc.), drug possession or sale, and crimes against property (burglary, receiving stolen property, theft, auto theft, forgery, looting). Some of these crimes (e.g., driving under the influence) are quite common in ordinary times, but arrest rates for all were higher during the riot period.

convicted felons were male and 50 percent were 25 or younger. This concentration of young men will focus our further inquiry. Why were so many participants "available" here but not elsewhere in the county? How do young males in South Central differ from their counterparts elsewhere in the county? More generally, what demographic clues might inform a social science interpretation of how the riot propagated spatially?

AVAILABILITY OF YOUNG MALES

A first noteworthy feature of South Central Los Angeles is the abundance of young men at liberty to participate in civil disturbances. The 1990 census recorded nearly 90,000 male residents between the ages of 16 and 34, over 17 percent of South Central's total population and 59 percent of all working-age males (16 to 64 years of age). Although these fractions are similar for Los Angeles County as a whole, what distinguishes the young men in South Central is the large proportion who are neither in school nor employed.

The 1990 census data released so far do not enable us to focus exactly on the young males of interest here, but for males 16 and older, 42 percent were either unemployed or not in the labor force (see Table 4). (For the 16-34 age group, this proportion surely is higher, given what else we know.) In round numbers, then, we estimate that close to 50,000 men aged 16-34 were "available" to participate. That is, they were not obliged to show up at school or for work on the first full day (Thursday) following the initial evening of widespread rioting.⁹

Demographically, South Central Los Angeles was ripe for civil disturbance: It contained a critical mass of young males who had no regular occupation, little reason to feel bound by social rules, and the physical energy needed to stone, loot, burn, and run from the police. The jury's exoneration of the police who beat Rodney King triggered the action, but the resulting explosion of human energy lacked political focus. Both the recorded events and observers' descriptions indicate

⁹Consistent with this observation, the *Times* reports that among the convicted felons it sampled, 66 percent were not employed and 60 percent were high school dropouts.

Table 4

Employment Status Of Persons 16 Years And Older: Comparison Of Black
And Hispanic Populations Of South Central Los Angeles, 1990

Employment Status	Black		Hispanic	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Number of Persons				
<i>In labor force:</i>				
In Armed Forces	118	24	59	0
Civilian:				
Employed	42,877	50,964	53,200	27,280
Unemployed	10,493	7,559	7,596	5,879
Not in labor force	37,335	62,670	14,531	34,741
TOTAL	90,823	121,217	75,386	67,900
Percent of Total				
<i>In labor force:</i>				
In Armed Forces	0.1	0.0	0.1	0.0
Civilian:				
Employed	47.2	42.0	70.6	40.2
Unemployed	11.6	6.2	10.1	8.7
Not in labor force	41.1	51.7	19.3	51.2
TOTAL	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

SOURCE: Tabulated by A. F. Abrahamse (RAND) from Census of Population, 1990, STF-3.

NOTE: Entries in this table include persons 65 years and older, few of whom are in the labor force; however, the available data do not identify them separately by sex and race or ethnicity.

that most participants were rioting for fun or profit, not as the vanguard of a "rebellion" or "insurrection." Among the 694 convicted felons, 60 percent had a prior arrest record, and half of these repeat offenders had prior felony convictions; two of every five convicted felons had lived at their present address one year or less; another 11 percent were homeless or transients.

SOCIALIZATION OF YOUNG MALES

This relatively large pool of young males at liberty to assemble reflects both the presence (or not) of employment opportunities and individual choices. The former depends largely on the economy; the latter reflect behavioral norms, which can be reinforced or undermined by local economic conditions. Insofar as families instill those norms, our present interest centers on the types of family situations that prevail in South Central Los Angeles and among the *Times* sample of convicted felons.

The 1990 census describes the family situations only of the contemporary children from whom South Central's future population of youthful males will derive, but the data are revealing. Many of these children apparently lack adult supervision and persuasive adult role models. South Central is home to nearly 182,000 children under 18 years of age (see Table 5). The census shows about 44 percent living with both parents, 46 percent with one parent, and 10 percent with neither parent. Most single parents are mothers (82 percent), and more than half of all single parents work outside the home. Although children might have other adult male role models, only 52 percent actually live with their own fathers. Specifically:

- 38 percent of South Central's children aged 12-17 live in families where their mother is the only parent present (compared with 22 percent countywide);
- In families with children aged 18 and older present, 50 percent of those in South Central are headed by women with no husband present (compared with 31 percent countywide);

Table 5
Presence And Age Of Children By Employment Status Of Parents:
South Central Los Angeles, 1990

Age of Child and Status of Parents	South Central L.A.		Los Angeles County	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Under 18 years:				
<i>Living with two parents:</i>				
Both parents in labor force	37,771	20.8	827,805	35.6
Father only in labor force	33,407	18.4	610,735	26.3
Mother only in labor force	3,609	2.0	36,723	1.6
Neither parent in labor force	5,207	2.9	60,113	2.6
Total	79,994	44.1	1,535,376	66.0
<i>Living with one parent:</i>				
<i>Living with father:</i>				
In labor force	12,192	6.7	123,905	5.3
Not in labor force	2,916	1.6	17,282	0.7
Subtotal	15,108	8.3	141,187	6.1
<i>Living with mother:</i>				
In labor force	31,625	17.4	296,384	12.7
Not in labor force	37,019	20.4	198,329	8.5
Subtotal	68,644	37.8	494,713	21.3
<i>Living with neither parent</i>	17,817	9.8	154,834	6.7
All children under 18 years	181,563	100.0	2,326,110	100.0

SOURCE: Tabulation prepared by A. F. Abrahamse (RAND) from Census of Population, 1990, STF-3.

- South Central's children more often start out life in a one-parent family because they are born to women who have never been married. Fully 37 percent of the children born to women under age 35 have mothers who have never married (compared with 20 percent countywide).

The *Times* data on people convicted of riot-related felonies demonstrate a link to this demographic context. These data reveal that few of those who were arrested for felonies were members of two-parent families. Only 11 percent were themselves married; and of those still at home, twice as many lived with one parent as with both.

HISPANIC PARTICIPATION

As the riot spread from its origins in black neighborhoods of South Central, it picked up new recruits--specifically, Hispanics who did not particularly share the black grievances but may have lacked allegiance to the established order. During six days of rioting, 51 percent of those arrested for riot-related crime were classified as Hispanic on their arrest records; 43 percent of the 694 convicted felons were classified as Latino.¹⁰ In every category of crime except illegal possession of firearms, Hispanic arrests exceeded black arrests. Nearly all arrestees, both Hispanic and black, were male, but the Hispanics were younger. About 60 percent of the Hispanic arrestees (but only 30 percent of the black arrestees) were between 18 and 24 years of age.¹¹

Although rigorous comparisons between arrest rates and populations at risk are not feasible, it appears to us that riot participation rates for young males (18 to 24 years) were about the same for blacks and Hispanics; the Hispanic population of South Central Los Angeles and nearby areas is heavily weighted with young adult males and has few males over 45. On the other hand, riot participation by older males

¹⁰Latinos may be underrepresented in the *Times* sample of convicted felons, since some were turned over to immigration authorities and not processed through the courts.

¹¹These arrest statistics exclude juveniles (persons under 18 years of age).

seems to have been much more common among blacks than among Hispanics, given the populations at risk (see Table 6).

We are not sure of the reason for the different age pattern of black and Hispanic rioters, but we suspect that it is connected to family structure. Hispanics tend to marry young and have children soon after; domestic commitments may well limit the "availability" of all but the youngest Hispanic males for riot participation. Consistent with this hypothesis, over 60 percent of all Hispanic households in South Central are married couples; just 7 percent are composed entirely of unrelated individuals (usually single persons living alone). By comparison, only 28 percent of black households in South Central are married couples, and nearly a third are composed entirely of unrelated individuals (see Table 7). The latter group includes single males 25 to 34 years of age, whose participation in the riots was not constrained by family responsibilities.¹²

¹²The 1990 census data now available do not include tabulations of household size by race, ethnicity, or sex, so we cannot confirm this hypothesis. Comparing the proportions of family and nonfamily households by age of head for a heavily black and a heavily Hispanic neighborhood lends some support to our interpretation.

Table 6

**Relative Incidence Of Riot Arrests By Age And Ethnicity:
Black And Hispanic Males, South Central Los Angeles, 1990-92**

Age Interval	Number of Persons		Percent of Total		Percent of Arrestees		Relative Incidence	
	Black Male	Hispanic Male	Black Male	Hispanic Male	Black Male	Hispanic Male	Black Male	Hispanic Male
18 to 24 years	13,809	20,876	15.9	29.5	28.8	56.9	1.82	1.93
25 to 34 years	21,070	25,845	24.2	36.6	42.5	30.6	1.76	0.84
35 to 44 years	15,130	13,949	17.4	19.7	22.8	9.9	1.31	0.50
45+ years	36,987	9,989	42.5	14.1	5.9	2.6	0.14	0.18
TOTAL	86,996	70,659	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	1.00	1.00

SOURCE: Population counts are from the Census of Population, 1990, STF-3, for South Central Los Angeles. Arrests for riot-related crimes are based on records of the Los Angeles Municipal Court for 30 April through 5 May 1992.

NOTE: "Relative incidence" is the ratio of arrestees to population, each measured as a percentage of the relevant total. It is the clearest indicator of riot participation rates by age, given the uncertainty of absolute values for both numerator and denominator.

Table 7
Comparison Of Black And Hispanic Populations
Of South Central Los Angeles: 1990

Item	Percent of Households	
	Black	Hispanic
Household and Family Composition		
<i>Family with own children:</i>		
Married couple	11.2	51.5
Male head, no wife present	2.1	8.3
Female head, no husb present	18.7	14.8
<i>Family without own children:</i>		
Married couple	16.8	8.8
Male head, no wife present	3.4	5.2
Female head, no husb present	15.2	4.3
<i>Nonfamily household^a:</i>	32.5	7.1
All households	100.0	100.0
Mean household size (persons)	2.78	5.28

SOURCE: Tabulations prepared by A. F. Abrahamse (RAND) from Census of Population, 1990, STF-3.

NOTE: About 6 percent of those who reported themselves as "black" also reported themselves as "Hispanic." Most are Spanish-speaking immigrants from Carribean countries.

^aConsists of unrelated individuals or a person living alone--mostly the latter.

III. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

In our view, the salient *preconditions* for South Central's riot were (1) territorially based ethnic tensions and (2) an abundance of young men with time on their hands. The *occasion* for the riot was an event of deep emotional significance to many inhabitants of South Central: the acquittal of white police who beat a black arrestee. The announcement of the verdict triggered several street-corner disturbances that under other circumstances might have been self-limiting or easily contained by competently organized police action. But on April 29, 1992, the disturbances flared into three days of arson, looting, and random violence.

Although some observers insist on describing the riot as a political statement--a "rebellion" against the white power structure --we find such a description misleading. Half of those participating in the riot were Latinos, not ethnically linked to Rodney King. The rioters' primary targets were not the property of or institutions controlled by the white power structure, but retail shops owned by Koreans. A number of establishments owned by blacks and Latinos were also trashed and looted. Probation reports on those convicted of riot-related felonies clearly indicate that looting was the primary motivation for most rioters who were caught; few were consciously "political."

Ethnically charged events, especially interethnic violence, defamatory speech, and commercial fraud, are common and perhaps inevitable features of a multiethnic society. But they seldom result in anything more than graffiti, a shouting match, or one-on-one violence. What made South Central ready for conflagration, we think, was a long accumulation of grievances against ethnically different neighbors who were accessible for reprisal, combined with the availability of a large pool of idle young men who had little stake in civil order.

TERRITORIALLY BASED ETHNIC TENSION

Territorially based ethnic tension is endemic in California and a number of other multiethnic states. In California, one of every four cities has no racial or ethnic majority; its population is composed of three large ethnic groups ("Anglo," Latino, black) and perhaps a dozen small ones (Filipinos, Koreans, Vietnamese, Hmong, Armenians, Iranians, etc.), each clustered residentially but in adjoining neighborhoods. The tides of immigration and assimilation continuously wash against the conventional boundaries of these neighborhoods, so that one's ethnic territory and ethnic identity are never entirely secure.

The salient aspects of ethnic difference include race, national origin, language, social customs, recency of arrival, and civil status (citizens, legally resident noncitizens, illegal residents). Though nearly all such groups are quick to adopt some of the values and lifestyles of the prevailing popular culture (as revealed by television) and to learn the prevailing language, most cling fiercely to their ethnic identities--that is, to their sense of a shared history and shared future that makes them responsible for each other's welfare.¹³

According to an idea articulated as early as 1782 and gaining currency throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, America was destined to be a melting pot of immigrant ethnic groups, each losing its separate identity in a new blend that drew the best genetic and cultural qualities from its components.¹⁴ The idea was so appealing to both the popular and scientific mind that contrary evidence was rarely noted. Yet, throughout our history, conspicuous divisions have persisted between blacks, Anglos, Asians, and Latinos; between Protestants, Catholics, and Jews; and between Irish, Italians, English, and other national-origin groups. The divisions are reflected in ethnic endogamy,

¹³Ethnic identity has its roots in some historical community of people who inhabited a specific territory, developed a common language and culture, and practiced endogamy. The surprising feature of ethnic identity is its persistence for generations among those who left their homelands to mingle with other populations, as has been the case of immigrants to America. This discussion draws freely on Lowry (1982).

¹⁴See Gordon (1964), Chapter 5; for ethnic persistence, see Glazer and Moynihan (1963) and Yancey, Erickson, and Julian (1976).

voluntary associations, and exclusionary practices in employment, education, and housing.

Ethnic cohesion and residential clustering go together; but they are most likely to cause interethnic trouble when some ethnic populations are growing locally and others are shrinking--whether because of differential vital rates, in- and out-migration, or assimilation and upward social mobility. We have pointed out how the black ghetto of South Central has been reshaped by the numerical growth and territorial expansion of Los Angeles' Latino population, and nearly surrounded by a growing population of Asians who enter the ghetto as shopkeepers but live outside the area. This pattern of ethnic pressure on residential neighborhoods, less familiar than the black-on-white pressure that prompted the "white flight" to the suburbs in the 1960s, is a source of tension in other California cities as well as in Los Angeles.

YOUNG MALES WITH TIME ON THEIR HANDS

South Central's large pool of young males, neither steadily employed nor in school, is a pattern repeated within other California cities. The daily lives of these youths include drug and alcohol abuse and frequent criminal enterprises. Among those convicted of riot-related felonies in Los Angeles County, 60 percent had criminal records and only a third were employed. Three-fifths were high school dropouts.

Young males of all ethnic groups have abundant physical energy and a taste for risky enterprises. An important function of the traditional family is to restrain this energy and channel it into socially useful activities. An important function of the economic system is to provide rewarding opportunities for socially useful activities. In South Central and elsewhere, families and the economy have jointly failed in these functions, leaving young males largely unprepared for adult life and responsibilities and for serious engagement in the world of work.

Regrettably, the failures of socialization and employment opportunities reinforce each other. South Central's family structure is weakened by the inability of adults to find jobs that will support an

intact family; poorly socialized young men are generally the last and most reluctantly hired, and only when labor is scarce. Most reformers pin their hopes on education and job-training by public institutions, expecting them to take over the traditional family's now-abdicated responsibilities. But even this is probably too late.¹⁵

PROGNOSIS FOR MORE RIOTS

If, as we contend, territorially based ethnic tension is endemic in multiethnic states such as California and most cities contain a large pool of young idle males instantly available for vandalism and looting, we ought to expect more riots. We do, but only one per city.

We think that the Los Angeles riot of April 1992 could have been prevented by competently organized police action between the time of the initial disturbances and the general conflagration. To be sure, it is easy to criticize failed police tactics from the comfort of an academic armchair, but in this case it seems clear that the police command structure simply evaporated, leaving the troops in the field without guidance. The chief of police was attending a fund-raising party in Beverly Hills during the crucial hours, and none of his subordinates seemed willing to commit manpower to the trouble spots even though officers were assembled and ready for action.

Such a conspicuous breakdown usually has civic consequences. In this case, Los Angeles acquired a new police chief, and he meticulously prepared for the next likely riot flashpoint--the verdicts in the federal court trial of the police who beat Rodney King. Because two officers were found guilty of violating King's civil rights, black leaders declared a victory and there was no riot. But it was also clear that the police would respond quickly and much more effectively to street-corner disturbances this time around.

In the aftermath of a riot, many who participated have second thoughts. It is generally agreed that the damage inflicted by rioters to their own turf was a heavy blow to economic enterprise in South

¹⁵Levitan, Belous, and Gallo (1988) judiciously reviews the evidence of change in family structure and its consequences. The authors are less judgmental than we are.

Central Los Angeles, and that it deprived the residents of access to convenient retail and financial services. Residents of South Central who did *not* riot--a clear majority--are unlikely to welcome a replay.

Incidents of interethnic violence or injustice will surely occur in the next few years, and some will result in street-corner disturbances. We doubt that these disturbances will flare again into a major riot. Before that can happen, Los Angeles must first forget what it learned this time.

Appendix

CHRONOLOGY OF THE 1992 SOUTH CENTRAL LOS ANGELES RIOT

This appendix furnishes a brief account of events for readers unfamiliar with the three-day civil disturbance that is the focus of this paper. The account draws heavily on a story in the *Los Angeles Times* for July 5, 1992, and from the *Times's* subsequent book, *Understanding the Riots*. Evans (1993) presents related information.

The first two recorded incidents took place in South Central Los Angeles on Wednesday afternoon, April 29, shortly after the King verdict was announced by the media. Both occurred in neighborhoods that are solidly black and generally prosperous: Hyde Park (near Crenshaw Boulevard and Florence Avenue in Fig. 4) and the intersection of Florence and Normandie Avenue. Hyde Park especially stands out as a prosperous and stable black neighborhood: 85 percent of its residents in 1990 were black, median household income was \$24,886, nearly 64 percent of the dwellings were owner-occupied homes, the unemployment rate was only 6.4 percent, and the crime rate was 86 per thousand residents as compared with 127 for South Central as a whole.

At 3:43 p.m., the police received a report that a young man at the corner of West 67th Street and 11th Avenue in Hyde Park had thrown a brick at a passing pickup truck. Others joined the attack on moving vehicles, then went on to beat a white pedestrian and throw him in a dumpster. A crowd soon assembled and moved toward shops and markets a few blocks away, where the looting began.

The second disturbance was reported at 4:17 at Normandie and Florence. Here also, blacks pelted passing vehicles with stones and broken concrete, dragged light-skinned motorists from their vehicles, then robbed and beat them. Police responding to emergency calls retreated under a fusillade of rocks and bottles. At 6:30, an 18-wheel truck hauling 27 tons of sand blundered into the intersection. Its white driver, Reginald Denny, was pulled from his cab and beaten nearly to death while TV cameras recorded the scene. Denny was finally

rescued by several black men and women who got him back into the cab of his truck and drove it to Freeman Memorial Hospital.

The only focused political protest of the day occurred in front of police headquarters (Parker Center), demanding Chief Darryl Gates's resignation. About 6 p.m., several hundred demonstrators carrying signs gathered at Parker Center, over four miles northeast of the disturbances in South Central. Many of the demonstrators were white; signs identified representatives of the Progressive Labor Party and the Revolutionary Community Party. When the crowd began to break the windows of Parker Center, a police cordon forced the demonstrators back; the crowd turned down 1st Street, smashing automobiles and storefronts.

By 10 p.m., emergency calls were reaching the Los Angeles Police Department from all over South Central, and the violence had spread north to mixed black-and-Hispanic neighborhoods between the Santa Monica Freeway and Pico Boulevard. The Highway Patrol closed exit ramps on the major roadway through the riot area, the Harbor Freeway, hoping to prevent motorists from blundering into the chaos of the surface streets. Mayor Tom Bradley declared a local state of emergency and Governor Pete Wilson ordered the National Guard to activate 2,000 reserves.

In South Central, crowds roamed the streets, smashing, burning, and looting throughout the night. Hispanic residents of the area joined in, and people of all ages picked over the merchandise of burned-out stores. On Thursday, a particularly senseless orgy of violence occurred in Watts; as reported by the *Los Angeles Times*,

About 200 blacks and Latinos smashed through the gates of the Watts Labor Community Action Committee, an anti-poverty organization that had brought jobs and social services to Watts after the 1965 riots. Inside, armed staff members held off the rioters--for maybe five minutes. Then looters chased them down Central Avenue, shooting, and set the complex on fire.

Sixteen vehicles used to ferry Watts residents to shopping centers and medical offices were burned or vandalized. The offices were reduced to a pile of charcoal between roofless walls. Also destroyed were the contents of the commercial center--including a coin laundry, toy store, youth enterprise project, furniture and appliance shop, and food stamp office. Earnings from the commercial center helped pay for a homeless

shelter, job training center and a senior citizens' housing project.¹⁶

Also on Thursday, the rioters literally mobilized. Carloads of young men from South Central sped up Western and Vermont avenues into Koreatown, the area between Pico and Santa Monica boulevards where most of the county's Koreans live. During the night, Korean vigilantes had organized to protect their shops and warehouses, erecting barricades and mounting armed guards. Though they were able to repel some assaults, by nightfall minimalls as far north as Santa Monica Boulevard and as far west as Fairfax Avenue were burned and looted. According to newspaper accounts, the looters came from all over Los Angeles once the word had spread that merchandise was available without payment; but Hispanic residents of Koreatown and Pico-Union (just east of Koreatown), being already on the scene, carried off most of the goods.¹⁷

By Friday morning, the National Guard was in place and the worst violence was contained, though looting continued throughout the day. There were also minor disturbances in other areas of the county where blacks and Hispanics were locally concentrated, but the tide of violence receded. The riot was over.

¹⁶*Understanding the Riots*, p. 81.

¹⁷Over the weekend, some looters had second thoughts, whether of conscience or of possible police inquiries. They moved the looted furniture and television sets from their dwellings to some anonymous alley or curb, or to depots established by civic groups for this purpose.

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A RIOT OF COLOR: THE DEMOGRAPHIC SETTING OF CIVIL DISTURBANCE IN LOS ANGELES

Morrison, Lowry