Collective Violence

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3

Riots

Although U.S. residents were shocked by the urban riots of the 1960s, rioting goes back to the colonial period and has occurred throughout U.S. history. Nor have riots been limited to American shores. In Europe throughout the 1700s and into the early 1800s, food riots were common. As Europe urbanized, fewer people were producing food on their own, as they no longer worked on farms, and thus had to buy food from others. Many were too poor to do so. As a result, poor Europeans would seize grain that was being transported through their towns and would force other grain to be sold at a price lower than the listed one. To accomplish these goals, they would sometimes attack the people who owned, transported, or sold the grain. Other Europeans during this time rioted because of opposition to the military draft, taxation, the use of new farm machines that threatened their jobs, and other issues (Hobsbawn 1962).

This chapter examines the riot as a significant form of collective violence. It first outlines the types of riots and then reviews the history of riots in the United States. Next it discusses the various explanations that scholars have of riots and also considers their consequences. The last section discusses prison riots, many of which have occurred in the United States and other countries during the last few decades.

Types of Riots

A **riot** is a fairly spontaneous, noisy, and violent outburst of disorder by a large group of people. Like *terrorism*, the term *riot* sounds very negative to many. Thus to characterize the urban violence that broke out in cities across the United States in the 1960s, many social scientists preferred terms such as *urban revolt* or *ghetto uprising* (Balbus 1977; Feagin and Hahn 1973). Some

riots are explicitly political in nature, while others are very apolitical, or, as Gary Marx (1972) calls them, "issueless riots." Given this book's theme of group violence aimed at political and social change, the discussion in this chapter highlights the political nature of many riots, while recognizing the apolitical nature of others.

Several scholars have presented typologies of riots according to the motivation and goals of their participants. Usually we don't actually *know* their motivation and goals. Rather we *infer* them from the physical and social characteristics of the location in which the riot occurs, the precipitating event that sparks the riot, and the social backgrounds of the people who participate in it.

A basic distinction in these typologies is between riots that have political underpinnings and consequences and riots that are largely apolitical in their origins and dynamics. Clark McPhail (1994) refers to these as *protest* and *celebration* riots, respectively. A **protest riot** occurs in response to discontent with existing social, political, and/or economic conditions. A **celebration riot,** as the name implies, occurs as part of the general rejoicing that accompanies a major event, such as the victory of a favorite athletic team.

Some riots contain elements of both types. A recent example is the riot that occurred in Chicago on the night of June 14, 1992, after the Chicago Bulls basketball team won the National Basketball Association title. Boisterous celebrations began across the city, but in the black ghetto areas they took an ugly turn as hundreds of stores were looted, more than 1,000 people arrested, and almost 100 police officers injured (Rosenfeld 1997). Although the Bulls had won the NBA title both before and after 1992, the rioting that year was probably by far the most extensive. Rosenfeld (1997) argues that it resulted from discontent over a massive welfare cut in April 1992 and from continuing dismay over the acquittal that same month of the four Los Angeles police officers for beating Rodney King. Thus the motivation for the rioting was both celebratory and political.

Erich Goode (1992) categorizes riots according to their participants' motives and goals. The first type is the **purposive riot** (also called **instrumental riot**), which results from discontent over specific issues and aims to achieve specific goals. Examples include riots by workers as part of labor-management strife, the New York City antidraft riot discussed previously, and many prison riots. The second type is the **symbolic riot** (also called **expressive riot**), which is meant to express discontent but not to achieve a specific goal. Many of the urban riots of the 1960s fit into this category. A third type is the **revelous riot,** which occurs after a celebration by a crowd that gets out of hand and is equivalent to the celebration riots discussed previously. Such celebrations often involve a lot of drinking, which can easily promote violence in this sort of setting. A final type is the **issueless riot,** which has no observable motivation or goal. An example is the rioting and looting that sometimes occur when police go on strike (Goode 1992; Marx 1972).

What Do You Think?

As the text notes, many social scientists sympathetic to the conditions facing African Americans prefer terms such as *urban revolt* or *ghetto uprising* to characterize the urban riots of the 1960s (Balbus 1977; Feagin and Hahn 1973). To these scholars, those riots were ultimately an expression of discontent over negative social conditions and not simply the acts of irrational, criminalistic individuals. Robert M. Fogelson (1971:21) summarizes this view: "The 1960s riots were articulate protests against genuine grievances in the black ghettos. . . . [T]hey were attempts to call the attention of white society to the blacks' widespread dissatisfaction with racial subordination and segregation."

Other observers at the time were much more critical of the 1960s riots. There was no place for these riots in a law-abiding society, they said, and even if the riots were an expression of grievances, in a democracy people have other avenues for expressing their discontent and attempting to change political and economic policy.

A later section examines the evidence on the degree, if any, to which social conditions motivated the 1960s rioting. In the meantime, try to answer the following questions. Is *riot* the appropriate term for the 1960s urban violence, or would a term such as *urban revolt* be more appropriate? Are riots ever justified in a democratic society? Are they justified if the people engaging in them have few other ways of making their grievances known?

What do you think?

The next section discusses the history of riots and rioting in the United States, focusing on *protest riots*, to use McPhail's (1994) category.

A Brief History of U.S. Riots

The Colonial Period

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, rioting in the United States goes back to the colonial period. We cannot fully understand the history of this country without appreciating the role that rioting has played in it (Rubenstein 1970).

In the 1700s, taxation, as you surely remember from your colonial history lessons, was a sore point with the colonists, and they often rioted against tax collectors and other officials appointed by England. Rioting also occurred for other reasons, such as land disputes. An estimated 75 to 100 riots of all types occurred between 1641 and 1759. Once hostilities with England escalated, rioting became a favorite colonial tactic, with at least 44 riots occurring

from 1760 to 1775 as "an instrument of resistance to and rebellion against British policy" (Brown 1975:51). After the victory over England, many people, and particularly farmers, faced prison because of their debts, and they often rioted and otherwise fought with state militia. The famous Shays' Rebellion, which involved a group of farmers, began with a riot of six hundred people in front of the courthouse in Springfield, Massachusetts, in protest against the legal punishment they were facing.

Rioting in the Nineteenth Century

In the first half of the nineteenth century, rioting was "as much a part of civilian life as voting or working" (Rosenfeld 1997:484). Common in Northern cities, it usually took the form of mob violence by native-born whites against blacks, Catholics, and immigrants. From 1830 to 1865, at least 70 percent of U.S. cities with populations over 20,000 experienced at least one major riot. One historian has dubbed this period the "Riot Era" (Brown, 1975:19), and another observer calls it the "Turbulent Era" (Feldberg 1980). Abraham Lincoln himself despaired in 1837 of "the worse than savage mobs" and "the increasing disregard for law which pervades the country." He continued, "Accounts of outrages committed by mobs form the every-day news of the times. . . . Whatever their causes be, it is common to the whole country" (quoted in Feldberg 1980:4).

From 1824 to 1849, at least 39 riots were directed against blacks in cities such as Philadelphia, Cincinnati, New York, Buffalo, and Pittsburgh. As historian Richard Maxwell Brown (1975:206) observes, "The underlying causes of these riots were white fears of social amalgamation with blacks, distrust of black education, dislike of black efforts at self-improvement, and hatred of abolitionism." Underlying these fears, he continues, was a "deep-seated racial prejudice . . . in which whites saw blacks as 'something less than human.'" As one example of the rioting to which this prejudice led, in August 1834 a mob of whites, worried about black job competition, ransacked a black neighborhood in Philadelphia and beat up many of its residents.

Blacks were not the only targets in the Riot Era. During the 1850s, the so-called Know-Nothing Party, discussed in more detail in Chapter 5, was virulently anti-Catholic. Its members roamed the streets in cities such as Baltimore and New Orleans, beating and sometimes killing Catholics (Anbinder 1992). Mob violence in Northern cities also broke out during that decade against abolitionists and, again, against blacks. As discussed earlier, New York City was the scene of perhaps this country's worst riot in 1863, when Irish Americans rioted against the military draft and killed several hundred blacks, whom they blamed for the draft (Bernstein 1990). Rioting against blacks also marred the Southern landscape after the Civil War, as whites worried about gains being made by the newly freed slaves (Brown 1975).

Rioting after the Civil War was more economic in motivation, with some of it fitting the ethnic competition model outlined earlier. During the

1870s, Chinese immigrants, who had come to this country to help build the railroads, presented a threat to white labor when railroad construction began to decline. Native-born whites feared that the Chinese were competing for the relatively few jobs that remained, not only taking jobs away from native-born whites but also forcing down wages. Riots against Chinese immigrants in cities in California and other states led to several deaths and the passage by Congress of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 that prohibited Chinese immigration (Hing 1993; Kim 1994; Salyer 1995).

On the heels of the anti-Chinese riots came labor riots, especially during the railroad strikes of 1877 during which rioting broke out in several cities that resulted in dozens dead (Bruce 1959; Lens 1973; Taft and Ross 1990). Perhaps the most famous labor riot of this period was the Haymarket Riot that began during a labor protest in Chicago in May 1886 after someone threw a bomb that killed several police and spectators (Henry 1963). Labor riots continued into the next century, especially in 1919 at steel industry plants in several states and in 1934 at sites of the cotton and textile industry.

Race Riots in the Early Twentieth Century

The early 1900s also saw several large race riots, as whites, many of them fearing that blacks would compete for their jobs and move nearby, attacked blacks in several cities. One of the worst riots occurred in East St. Louis, Illinois, in 1917 and ended with 39 blacks and 9 whites dead (Rudwick 1964). Then, in the summer of 1919, riots, instigated by whites but meeting black resistance, broke out in at least seven cities, including Washington, D.C., and Chicago, that resulted in dozens more dead (Waskow 1967).

The Washington riot began when several hundred white sailors, Marines, and civilians began beating blacks after a report that two black men had jostled a white woman. The Chicago riot started when a black man died after he was stoned by whites for entering a "white" area of a Chicago beach. When a white police officer refused to arrest any of the whites and then arrested a black man for a minor offense, he was attacked by black bystanders. Fights broke out between blacks and the police and then between whites and blacks; the rioting continued for seven days. Later that summer, riots broke out in Knoxville, Tennessee, and Omaha, Nebraska, after white mobs tried to break into a jail in each city to capture and lynch a black prisoner.

Racial rioting continued periodically over the next few decades. Two notable riots occurred in the Harlem area of New York City in 1935 and again in 1943. Harlem residents had long resented white police and been dismayed by their economic circumstances. Many had also been active in the socialist movement that was so popular during the 1930s. Against this backdrop, the 1935 and 1943 riots were perhaps not that surprising (Fogelson 1971). The 1935 riot began when a black youth was caught shoplifting in a Harlem department store and detained in a back room for the police. When, coincidentally, a hearse parked near the store, a crowd that had gathered assumed

that the youth had been killed. The rumor of his death quickly spread, and rioting began. The 1943 riot started when a white police officer tried to arrest a black woman for disorderly conduct and then shot a black soldier who tried to help the woman. Although the solder suffered only a minor wound, the rumor grew that he had been killed, and rioting again broke out. The two riots combined killed six people and injured several hundred (Capeci 1977; Fogelson 1971).

The 1960s Urban Riots

During the 1960s, major riots involving black participants occurred in cities throughout the northern United States. Many of these riots were precipitated by reports of police brutality or unfair treatment against blacks. At least 239 riots occurred from 1964 to 1968. These civil disorders involved more than 150,000 participants, of whom approximately 50,000 were arrested. About 75 percent of the outbursts were limited to window breaking and car burning; 20 percent included looting and greater destruction of property; and 5 percent involved more widespread looting and property destruction, including arson (Downes 1968). Another estimate puts the number of urban riots from 1963 to 1970 at 500. These involved an estimated 350,000 participants and resulted in almost 250 people dead—most of them shot by police and the National Guard—9,000 injuries, and more than 50,000 arrests (Gurr 1989c).

As mentioned in Chapter 1, when the 1960s urban riots occurred, many scholars and other observers were shocked and assumed that the riots represented a historical aberration unique to that decade. As this historical overview suggests, this view falls prey to the "myth of peaceful progress" (Rubenstein 1970). Instead, the 1960s riots and more recent ones in Miami in 1980, as well as Los Angeles in 1992 after the acquittal of the police officers for beating Rodney King, are best seen as falling squarely into the American historical tradition (Brown 1990; Button 1989; Rubenstein 1970). To acknowledge this is not meant to glorify the riots but rather to underscore their underlying political and social character.

Explaining Riots and Rioting

Explanations of riots are subsets of the explanations of collective behavior reviewed in Chapter 2. When we try to understand why riots occur, we are really asking about the social conditions that help lead to riots and also about the factors that make some individuals more likely than others to take part in them. A riot will not occur unless people choose to take part, but they will not be motivated to riot unless certain social conditions exist beforehand. Explanations of riots thus ask what kinds of people take part in riots and what kinds of social conditions underlie those riots.

Who Riots?

The "Scum of the Earth" View.   Let's start with the "kinds of people" expla-
nations. For many years, the dominant view of the types of people who riot
was what Rule (1988) calls a "scum of the earth" perspective. From LeBon
and the other "irrationalists" of the late nineteenth and early twentieth cen-
turies through Kornhauser's (1959) more sophisticated "mass society" view,
rioters were depicted as criminals, insane, and/or socially isolated. Italian
theorist Scipio Sighele (1868–1913), one of LeBon's contemporaries, charac-
terized rioters and collective violence participants as "criminals, madmen, the
offspring of madmen, alcoholics, the slime of society, deprived of all moral
sense, given over to crime" (in Rule, 1988:95), while Kornhauser viewed
them as "socially atomized" individuals who, because they lack friendships
and ties to conventional institutions, feel alienated and anxious.

How correct is this "scum of the earth" perspective? Today, most schol-
ars would say that it's hardly correct at all. While some rioters in some riots
might fit the "scum of the earth" model, most do not. The most extensive
evidence on this point comes from studies of rioters in nineteenth-century
Europe and in the urban disturbances in the United States in the 1960s.
Rioters in both periods were remarkably similar to nonrioters in their friend-
ships and organizational involvement, criminal pasts or lack of them, and
other aspects of their lives (Caplan and Paige 1968; Fogelson 1971; Kerner
Commission 1968; Murphy and Watson 1971; Skolnick 1969; Tilly 1978).
Far from representing the "scum of the earth," rioters instead seem fairly typ-
ical of the areas in which they live.

Data from the 1965 riot in the Watts district of Los Angeles illustrate
this point with regard to criminal background and other dimensions. Of the
3,371 adults who were arrested, more than half had no previous criminal
convictions, and the remainder had convictions for relatively minor offenses.
Overall their criminal backgrounds were less serious than those of Los
Angeles adults who were arrested throughout the year for nonriot reasons.
Most rioters had lived in Los Angeles for at least five years and thus were not
recent migrants to the area. Their median educational level, slightly more
than ten years of schooling, was similar to that of residents of South Los
Angeles in general (Oberschall 1967)

In short, rioters seem representative of the people in the communities
from which they come. However, rioters do tend to differ from nonrioters in
certain respects (Goode 1992). First, they tend to be more "socially available"
for rioting, meaning that they have fewer social obligations that prevent
them from being at the site of a riot. Thus, they are less likely than nonriot-
ers to be married, or, if married, to have children. They are also somewhat
less likely to be employed (McPhail and Miller 1973). Second, rioters tend to
be fairly young—in their teens and twenties. This might be because people
in this age range are more socially available. However, it might also be

because people in this age range are more apt than older people to engage in daring, unconventional behavior, including rioting and other law-breaking behavior (Steffensmeier and Allan 1995:97). Third, rioters are far more likely to be men than women. The reasons for this gender difference have not been studied. However, it's likely that men are much more apt than women to engage in the type of behavior that rioting involves—violence, vandalism, and the like—because of their socialization into "masculine" ways of behaving. A similar explanation helps account for the greater involvement of males in criminal behavior (Barkan 1997; Messerschmidt 1997).

Beliefs and Attitudes.   Another focus of the "kinds of people" approach centers on beliefs and attitudes. Are certain people more likely to take part in riots because of their beliefs and attitudes? To put it another way, do rioters have beliefs and attitudes that differ from those of nonrioters and that also lead them to riot? To assess this possibility, researchers have investigated whether the attitudes of participants in protest riots, to use McPhail's (1994) term noted previously, differ from those of nonrioters. Ideally, researchers would be able to examine these attitudes *before* a riot occurs and then see whether people with certain attitudes are more likely to take part in the riot. However, this sort of research design is almost impossible because we can never know in advance when a riot is about to occur. As a result, the typical study assesses rioters' attitudes after a riot and compares them with those of nonrioters. However, even if rioters have some different attitudes, it's possible that these attitudes stem from taking part in the riot and did not precede it. Another problem is that it is not easy to interview rioters, so relatively few comparisons of rioters' and nonrioters' attitudes exist.

The studies that we do have indicate that rioters' beliefs differ somewhat from those of nonrioters but are less different than we might expect (Goode, 1992). Once again, the most extensive evidence on this point comes from studies of participants in the U.S. urban uprisings of the 1960s. In one such study, David O. Sears and T. M. Tomlinson (1971) interviewed 124 blacks arrested in the 1965 riot in the Watts area of Los Angeles and a random sample of 586 blacks who lived in the area of the rioting. Although the riot participants generally had more favorable views about the riot than the random sample, about two-thirds of both groups nonetheless called the riot a "protest" and also felt that the targets of the riot "deserved" to be attacked. Two-thirds or more of both groups attributed the riot to long-standing grievances and frustration in the black community, and over half of both groups also felt that the riot would have "favorable" effects. The authors concluded that the similarity of views between riot participants and nonparticipants suggested that the former "were not particularly unusual or deviant in their thinking" (Sears and Tomlinson 1971:380). Further, the general support for the riot found in the random sample meant that the Watts community as a whole did not view the riot "as an alien disruption of their peaceful lives, but

as an expression of protest by the Negro community as a whole, against an oppressive majority" (Sears and Tomlinson 1971:386).

An additional study supports the view that rioters' attitudes were generally similar to those of nonrioters. Clark McPhail (1971) analyzed data on participants and nonparticipants in several of the 1960s urban riots and found that the two groups differed significantly in only a few of the several dozen attitudes that he examined. In particular, the rioters didn't generally feel more deprived or frustrated than their nonriot counterparts. This suggested that relative deprivation didn't explain their decisions to riot. The overall similarity of views between the two groups led McPhail to conclude that attitudes by themselves were insufficient to explain riot participation.

However, other studies of attitudes in the 1960s riots reached a different conclusion. James A. Geschwender and Benjamin D. Singer (1971) compared the views of 499 people arrested during the 1967 Detroit riot with the views of a like number of their neighbors who had not taken part in the riot. The rioters were twice as likely (26 percent compared to 13 percent) to report feeling angry about whites or pleased that whites had been the targets of rioting. Similarly, in a study of the Detroit and Newark riots of 1967, Nathan S. Caplan and Jeffery M. Paige (1968) found that people who took part in both cities' riots held more militant, "black power" beliefs than people who lived in the areas of the riots but chose not to take part. Paige (1971) also found that participants in the Newark riot were more likely than nonparticipants to be both knowledgeable about the political process and distrustful of it. This finding led him to conclude that rioting should be considered a "form of disorganized political protest engaged in by those who have become highly distrustful of existing political institutions" (Paige 1971:820).

Although these studies do point to ideological differences between rioters and nonrioters, it remains unclear whether the rioters' beliefs motivated their rioting or instead resulted *from* their rioting and, especially, from their treatment if they were arrested (McPhail 1971; McPhail 1994). This "causal order" methodological problem makes it difficult to conclude that attitudes played a large role in decisions to join the rioting. Another problem is that it's possible that the attitudes identified in these studies merely reflected the rioters' gender (male) and age (young).

One way to avoid these methodological problems would be to study the willingness of people to engage in a hypothetical riot or similar situation and to study whether people who would be willing to take part hold different attitudes from those unwilling to participate. Using such an approach, H. Edward Ransford (1967), in a sample of Los Angeles black residents taken shortly after the Watts riot, examined responses to the question, "Would you be willing to use violence to get Negro rights?" Willingness to use violence was higher among people who felt more politically powerless and more dissatisfied with their living conditions. Because this study involved willingness to take part in a riot but not actual participation in a

riot, its results must be regarded as provocative but not quite conclusive on the attitudes-rioting issue.

Organizational and Interpersonal Contacts.   In view of the mixed results on this issue, a fair conclusion is that attitudes sometimes matter but don't seem sufficient by themselves to explain involvement in rioting. Whatever attitudes people taking part in a particular riot do have, many more people with similar attitudes don't take part. As noted in Chapter 2, recognition of this basic fact of collective action has recently led scholars to emphasize the organizational and interpersonal contacts that pull people into such activity, including riots (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1988). When the 1960s riots were studied, however, these contacts were not yet enjoying such scholarly emphasis. Thus we lack detailed information on their importance for individuals' decisions to take part in the riots.

In one of the few studies of this issue, Benjamin D. Singer (1968) analyzed data from interviews of several hundred people arrested for participating in a major riot in Detroit in the summer of 1967. One question put to the arrestees was how they found out about the riot. About one-fourth, 26.9 percent, knew about it from firsthand experience; 8.8 percent received a phone call about it; 39.0 percent were informed by someone in person; 16.5 percent heard about it on the radio; and 9.0 percent heard about it on TV. Thus almost half heard about it from someone, either in person or by phone. If those who learned about the riot from firsthand experience are disregarded, the percentage who heard about it from someone rises to almost two-thirds. This figure underscores the importance of interpersonal contacts for participating in the Detroit riot, but it does not tell us what percentage of those who heard about the riot from a friend did *not* participate.

The Underlying Conditions for Riots

So far we've been looking at micro explanations of riot behavior, examining possible characteristics about people and their interpersonal networks that might motivate them to take part in riots. Let's now turn to the more macro explanations of riots that focus on the social conditions that precipitate them. Here the key question is not why some individuals take part in riots and others do not, but why riots occur in the first place. This line of research focuses not on the characteristics of people who take part in riots but on the characteristics of the communities that experience them.

A key question here is the degree to which poor socioeconomic conditions and other sources of strain in a community help account for rioting, as the structural-strain theory would predict (see Chapter 2). The dozens of riots in U.S. cities in the 1960s once again gave social scientists valuable data with which to answer this question. In doing so, they sought to explain why some cities experienced riots and others did not, and, in the cities that had

riots, why some cities were more likely than others to have severe riots. Their research led to a large number of studies but not to definitive answers to the question just raised (Bloombaum 1968; Downes 1968; Downes 1970; Eisinger 1973; Kerner Commission 1968; Lieberson and Silverman 1965; Lieske 1978; Morgan and Clark 1973; Spilerman 1970; Spilerman 1971; Spilerman 1976; Wanderer 1969).

Let's examine this body of research carefully. Implicit in much of the research was the view that the 1960s riots were ultimately an expression of discontent over negative social conditions and not simply the acts of irrational, criminalistic individuals (Fogelson 1971). Thus, several studies found that rioting tended to be most common and most severe in cities with the greatest poverty, highest unemployment, and most dilapidated living conditions. For example, Bryan T. Downes (1968) collected information on 239 riots, or *outbursts*, as he called them, that occurred from 1964 to 1968. These civil disorders involved more than 150,000 participants, of whom some 50,000 were arrested. As noted earlier, about 75 percent of the outbursts were limited to window breaking and car burning; 20 percent included looting and greater destruction of property; and 5 percent involved more widespread looting and property destruction, including arson.

Downes compared the cities in which the outbursts occurred to those in which none occurred. Not surprisingly, the former cities tended to be larger and more densely populated and to have higher proportions of African Americans than the latter. Compared to the outburst-free cities, the outburst cities were poorer and had significantly higher unemployment and more dilapidated housing. All of these factors also helped explain the intensity of the violence of the outbursts in the cities that experienced them: the worse the living conditions, the more intense the violence. Downes concluded that the cities experiencing the outbursts, including the most violent outbursts, had distinctively worse social and economic characteristics than those not experiencing them and that these structural differences helped explain why some cities had outbursts and others did not.

However, other scholars discounted the importance of structural differences among cities for their odds of experiencing a riot. To these scholars, such differences were much less important than the development of a "riot ideology" that made rioting acceptable in the major cities of the time. As T. M. Tomlinson (1968:30) observed, "What produces riots is the shared agreement by most Negro Americans that their lot in life is unacceptable coupled with the view by a significant minority that riots are a legitimate and productive mode of protest. What is unacceptable about Negro life does not vary much from city to city, and the differences in Negro life from city to city are irrelevant."

Supporting this view, Seymour Spilerman (1970, 1971, 1976) found that the key variable affecting both the likelihood and severity of rioting from 1961 to 1968 was the proportion of a city's population that was African American: The higher this proportion, the more likely the city was to have a riot. The

social and economic conditions besetting riot-prone cities were, he argued, simply "incidental characteristics of cities with large Negro populations" (Spilerman 1970:645). Thus cities with more African Americans were more likely to have riots simply because they had such a high African American population. The frustrations that led to the riots were, Spilerman (1971:771) argued, "nation-wide in impact and not rooted in circumstances peculiar to the stricken communities." Spilerman's conclusion that structural conditions did not influence the odds of rioting is widely interpreted as evidence against a structural-strain explanation for the rioting (McPhail 1994; Myers 1997).

Other scholars disputed the view by Spilerman, Tomlinson, and others that structural differences among cities mattered little for their riot potential. In a study of 1967 riots, William R. Morgan and Terry N. Clark (1973) found that housing inequality, total population, police force size, and the size of the African American population predicted both the likelihood and severity of rioting, but that the size of the African American population was less important than the other factors. The authors concluded that differences in the structural conditions facing African Americans from city to city did indeed affect the potential for cities to have riots. In response, Spilerman (1976) found fault with much of Morgan and Clark's (1973) methodology and stood by his earlier conclusion that rioting potential had little to do with structural differences among cities. Instead, he argued, the rioting was best understood as the result of the nationwide riot ideology outlined previously. This ideology was fostered by TV coverage of Civil Rights protest and urban disorders that helped create a "black solidarity that would transcend the boundaries of community" (Spilerman 1976:793).

In one of the most recent studies on the issue, Daniel J. Myers (1997: 108) reanalyzed Spilerman's data with advanced statistical techniques and found that "local conditions did indeed contribute to the occurrence of racial rioting in the 1960s," but in a very complex manner. For some conditions, rioting was more likely in cities that were "worse off," as might be expected, but for other conditions rioting was *less* likely in such cities. Supporting the ethnic competition theory (see Chapter 2), rioting was more likely in cities with higher African American unemployment (see also Olzak and Shanahan 1996; Olzak, Shanahan, and McEneaney 1996). Finally, a "diffusion" process was also at work, as cities were more likely to have riots if they were near other cities that had already experienced rioting.

Although the link between cities' structural conditions and their rioting potential remains in dispute, a cautious conclusion based on the work of Myers (1997) is that some of these conditions, and especially African American unemployment, did indeed matter. Moreover, even if a nationwide sense of frustration and thus riot ideology fueled riots in cities despite any differences among them, as Spilerman and others argued, this frustration and ideology still stemmed from the poor living conditions of African Americans in *all* of these cities, regardless of whether the conditions in some cities were not quite

as bad as those in others (Downes 1968). Put another way, the 1960s riots would not have occurred if conditions in the urban ghettos had been more like those in their much wealthier suburbs. If this is true, then the structural-strain theory better explains the 1960s riots than the theory's critics assume.

The Consequences of Riots

The literature on riots devotes more time to trying to explain why they occur than to documenting their consequences. However, several studies do explore the consequences of riots and generally find that they're quite effective in dramatizing grievances and bringing them to the attention of the public, state officials, and other parties. Less clear are the practical consequences of riots and in particular whether they lead to changes in public policy. The general view is that such changes do occur, although they are fairly limited in scope.

The best evidence on this point comes, not surprisingly, from studies of the 1960s urban riots in the United States (Button 1989; Button 1978; Isaac and Kelly 1981; Schram and Turbett 1983). After the urban riots, the U.S. government generally increased its spending for programs that benefit African Americans. This consequence was especially true for welfare benefits. However, funding in other areas, for example low-income housing, increased only slightly. Efforts by local governments to increase spending to improve urban conditions were even more limited and sporadic, and many cities did little at all. Moreover, any positive consequences that the riots did have for improving living conditions tended to be more short term than long term. As James Button (1989:296) observes, "While the black riots clearly had an impact on certain social and economic programs in the short run, it is less certain that these outbursts had any direct effect on longer term changes in the living conditions of ghetto residents." But he does think that the riots helped lead to equal employment opportunity legislation that eventually helped improve the socioeconomic status of African Americans by the early 1970s.

In 1968, however, the response of local, state, and federal governmental officials to the riots became more punitive, involving an increasing number of arrests and the growing use of deadly force (Button 1989; McAdam 1983). This shift in tactics was partly due to the intensity of several riots during that year, which prompted the federal government to mobilize the National Guard and U.S. Army to deal with the riots. As Button (1989:298) observes, "It was clear by the late 1970s that forceful repression from the national level would be used if necessary to quell the massive riots." Thus over time the reaction of government at all levels changed from a positive response focused on improving living conditions in urban areas to a negative response involving legal control, in the forms of arrests and deadly force.

One other consequence of the 1960s riots remains to be noted, and that is the strengthening of "black pride" and the mobilization of political change

groups in African American communities and the election of African Americans to local political office (Button 1989). By the 1970s, African American mayors were more likely to be found in cities that had experienced riots in the 1960s than in cities that had not. As Button (1989:300) concludes from the evidence, "Although the linkage here may not always be easy to trace, it does seem that the ghetto violence helped provide some of the local organizational and other prerequisites for successful electoral representation of blacks."

All in all, the consequences of the 1960s riots were mixed at best for African Americans. Although they did lead to increased expenditures in African American communities and other political and economic benefits, they also eventually led to a punitive, law-and-order response that stigmatized African American residents and delegitimated their violent protest. The riots also prompted a white backlash, alienating potential white supporters for addressing the grievances of black communities (Button 1989). This was a marked change from the situation earlier in the 1960s, when the nonviolent Civil Rights protests in the South and the violent white brutality that greeted them won many white supporters to the Civil Rights cause. As Button (1989:301–302) observes of the 1960s riots, "By late in the decade, however, the massive violence eroded some of this support and the resulting backlash contributed to changes in the systemic response to black grievances."

Prison Riots

Most of the discussion so far has concerned the 1960s urban riots, as they were the subject of so much research. However, prison riots have also captured scholarly and public attention. Since the first such reported riot in 1774, more than 300 prison riots have occurred in the United States, with an estimated 90 percent of those occurring since the early 1950s (Martin and Zimmerman 1990). A substantial literature now examines the causes, dynamics, and consequences of prison riots (Braswell, Dillingham, and Montgomery 1985; Colvin 1992; Irwin 1980; Mahan and Lawrence 1996; Martin and Zimmerman 1990; Useem 1985; Useem and Kimball 1989). What do we know about them?

Explaining Prison Riots

Although many studies have tried to make sense of the causes of prison riots, it remains true that "there is relatively little reliable and valid information" about why they occur (Martin and Zimmerman 1990:712). One problem is that the conditions popularly thought to account for prison riots—such as poor food, overcrowding, harsh treatment by prison guards, and inadequate vocational and educational programs—exist in most prisons, yet most prisons don't have riots. While prison riots might well not occur without these

poor conditions (just as the 1960s urban riots would not have occurred without poor structural conditions in the cities that experienced them), these conditions only rarely lead to riots. Indeed, a recent study found little relationship between variation in prison conditions and the likelihood of prison riots (McCorkle, Miethe, and Drass 1995). Thus, when riots do break out other processes must be at work.

One of these processes might be a weakening in the formal and informal social control mechanisms that characterize any prison. By "formal social control" is meant the rule of prison officials and guards over the inmates, and by "informal social control" is meant the understandings that inmates have among themselves and with prison staff about how the daily routine of prison life should operate (Irwin 1980). When these mechanisms are disrupted, social control in the prison breaks down and the potential for a riot increases (Martin and Zimmerman 1990).

Another process underlying at least some prison riots harkens back to relative deprivation theory (see Chapter 2), which assumes that dashed expectations can lead to frustration and discontent and thus to collective violence. If inmates expect improvements in their lives and then find that these improvements are not forthcoming, their increased discontent might lead to rioting. Although, as noted in Chapter 2, relative deprivation theory has received little support in the collective violence literature, it does seem to explain some of the prison riots that have occurred during the last few decades.

An example of both of these processes is the West Virginia State Penitentiary (WVSP) riot that broke out on January 1, 1986 (Martin and Zimmerman 1990; Useem and Kimball 1989). In the years before the riot, the conditions at WVSP were widely viewed as substandard, and in 1983 the West Virginia Supreme Court ordered massive changes; these, however, were not implemented because of lack of funds. Then, in September 1985, a new warden, the third in three years, assumed command and restricted visitation, limited private possessions, and imposed other controls, thereby making it even clearer than before to the inmates that the promised reforms would not occur. On January 1, 1986, several guards on the evening shift called in sick, and some critical guard posts were left empty. This situation required a lockdown, but none occurred, thus reducing the formal control that the inmates would face if they rebelled. Taking advantage of this opportunity, the inmates took control of the dining hall during dinner and then captured the prison's north wing, along with 16 hostages. After three days of negotiations with the governor that led to a promise to improve prison conditions, the inmates surrendered. The uprising had most likely been planned by members of a motorcycle gang.

Although conditions at the WVSP had been substandard, many other prisons at the time had similar conditions and did not experience riots. Thus the conditions by themselves cannot explain why the WVSP uprising broke

out on New Year's Day of 1986. Instead, the harsh new measures of the new warden were responsible, as they antagonized the inmates, who saw their rising expectations of improved prison conditions dashed. This weakened their interest in helping to maintain order in the prison. Thus by January 1, the prison's "informal control system was in disarray" (Martin and Zimmerman 1990:729) and the reduced staff numbers gave the inmates the opportunity for which they evidently had been waiting.

Another example is a riot that occurred six years earlier in the Santa Fe, New Mexico, state prison on February 2, 1980. This riot was arguably the worst in U.S. history, costing $200 million and resulting in the deaths of 33 inmates and the injuring of approximately 400 others (Colvin 1982; Colvin 1992; Mahan 1985; Morris 1983; Useem 1985; Useem and Kimball 1989). It started when some inmates attacked and beat four prison guards in the south wing, after which the other guards in this wing were captured. Inmates then began to attack, beat, torture, and kill other inmates. Most of these targets were inmates thought to be informants, or prison snitches; and inmates who wanted revenge against other inmates for previous perceived wrongs. Several guards were also beaten and raped.

Interviewed later, most inmates blamed the riot on the substandard living conditions of the prison. One inmate said, "It's been too crowded, the food is bad, the goddamned guards talk to you like you're a dog. We're not dogs" (in Useem 1985:672). Another recalled, "There was one dormitory designed for 45 men, and they had 120 in there. It is a jungle after lights out. You couldn't go to the restroom at night without stepping on someone, and that was all it took for a fight to break out" (in Useem 1985:672).

Although prison conditions are typically substandard and thus by themselves cannot explain why a riot begins, the New Mexico inmates, similar to their West Virginia counterparts, felt that the conditions had worsened since a change in prison warden occurred five years earlier. In addition, the reduction of educational and vocational programs during this period angered inmates, weakened their informal social control networks, and reduced their incentive to behave. The establishment of a system of prison snitches during this time led inmates to distrust each other further. Thus, as with the West Virginia prison riot, an increased sense of deprivation combined with weakened social controls set the stage for the New Mexico uprising.

The Consequences of Prison Riots

While most attention in the scholarly literature on prison riots is on their causes, several studies also explore their consequences. The immediate consequences are obvious: property destruction, injury, and death. Inmates sometimes kill each other and sometimes kill prison guards and other prison personnel, and guards, police, and other law enforcement agents often kill the inmates who riot. Perhaps the most notable example of this latter dynamic occurred after inmates in the Attica, New York, state prison rioted

in 1971. The inmates, most of them black, had been angered by their alleged mistreatment at the hands of the white prison guards. They rioted, held prison guards as hostages, and took control of the prison, holding it for four days while they negotiated with state officials for the release of the hostages in exchange for improvements in prison conditions. Then, acting on the orders of the New York governor, state troopers stormed the prison and in the process killed 32 inmates, as well as 11 guards whom the inmates had been holding hostage. Critics denounced the governor's decision to storm the prison and said he should have allowed more time for the negotiations to work (Mahan 1985; Wicker 1975).

The longer-term consequences of prison riots are less obvious but perhaps just as important. Often, they lead to improved living conditions in the prison that experienced the riot (Useem, Camp, and Camp 1996; Useem and Kimball 1989). From the perspective of prison officials, the goal is to reduce inmates' anger and frustration over their living environment and in this way to prevent future outbursts. Yet any such improvements in living conditions are fairly limited at best, and, for better or worse, most prisons remain horrible places in which to live even after these improvements are implemented (Kappeler, Blumberg, and Potter 1996).

Another long-term consequence of prison riots concerns the way that prisons are administered. A growing literature identifies prison management problems that might make riots more likely and proposes changes in prison management and administration to prevent future riots (Boin and Duin 1995; DiIulio 1987; Montgomery 1997; Useem and Kimball 1989). The debate here is whether a strict, disciplinarian style of management is more effective than a more relaxed style in which inmates are allowed freedom of movement and other privileges designed to keep their frustration to a minimum (Boin and Duin 1995). This debate carries over into the prisons in which riots have occurred. In response to the riots, some prison administrators have strengthened their control over their inmates with stricter rules on their behavior, whereas others have loosened their control while still maintaining proper security measures. The dilemma for prison administrators is how to strike the right balance between these two styles of management. Prison discipline must be maintained, but not at the expense of inhumane treatment that increases the chances of future prison violence.

What Would You Do?

As the previous examples indicate, prison riots often involve the taking of hostages. Inmates hold hostages for at least two reasons. First, they hope to gain concessions from the prison warden and state officials on improving the prison conditions that helped to prompt the riot in the first place. Second, they hope

that the holding of hostages will prevent or at least reduce a violent response by police, state troopers, and other law enforcement officials.

Suppose that you are the assistant to a governor in a state in which the major prison has just had a riot. The violence has ended for now, but the inmates hold about two dozen hostages, most of them prison guards but some of them cooks and other nonguard workers. The inmates are demanding better living conditions, including reduced crowding in their cells, more exercise time, better food, and better plumbing facilities.

Having taken a criminal justice course in college, in which the terrible living conditions in prisons were discussed extensively, you're at least somewhat sympathetic to the inmates' grievances and partial to their demands. At the same time, you're concerned that while granting them concessions in return for the release of the hostages and an end to the crisis might help in the short run, it will only make future rioting and hostage-taking more likely. The governor asks for your advice. You must decide whether to urge the governor to grant the inmates the concessions that they want.

What do you tell the governor?

Conclusion

Riots are probably the most spontaneous of the forms of collective violence treated in this book and hence the least predictable and perhaps the most difficult to explain. History suggests that we should not be surprised when they occur, but that doesn't mean that we shouldn't try to understand their causes and consequences.

In explaining riots, we need to consider both why they occur and, once they do occur, why some individuals are more likely than others to choose to take part in them. The historical evidence from Europe and the United States suggests that rioters aren't very different from nonrioters in their beliefs, attitudes, and social backgrounds. They might be younger than average and more likely to be male than female, but their beliefs and backgrounds don't seem to fit the "scum of the earth" model popular in earlier conceptions of riots and rioters.

In considering why riots occur in the first place, most scholarly attention focuses on the underlying negative social, economic, and political conditions said to prompt frustration, strain, and other social-psychological states that make rioting seem to be an appropriate response. But a puzzle remains. While it's true that almost all protest riots occur amid these conditions and almost certainly wouldn't occur if these conditions didn't exist, it's also true that these conditions usually exist without any rioting occurring at all. As an example, U.S. cities are in many ways worse off now than two

decades ago (Hacker 1992; Wilson 1996), and yet they're not experiencing riots, at least at the time of this writing. By the same token, most prisons are greatly overcrowded and beset by many kinds of the structural problems thought to underlie riots and other forms of collective violence, yet most prisons don't experience riots. The lack of rioting in such circumstances suggests the need to merge macro perspectives with micro ones to develop a fuller understanding of why riots occur and why people take part in them.