**Some Empirical Patterns in a Riot Process**

Author(s): Margaret J. Abudu Stark, Walter J. Raine, Stephen L. Burbeck, and Keith K. Davison

Summary by: Austin Barber, University of Arkansas

**Summary**

While most prior empirical studies focus on either the individual attributes of riot participants or riot community attributes, the author aims to quantify what occurs during riots to understand riot behavior (i.e., analyze the behavioral dynamics of “the crowd”). Most researchers agree that rioting and riot participation stem from prior states or processes, rather than inner dynamics within the crowd. However, the author argues that there is a need for more empirical data on the behavioral processes of individuals during the riot. The underlying research question for this study is *are there spatial and temporal patterns which characterize the behavior of the acting crowd*? Additionally, *if so, what do these suggest about the forms of riot behavior and the mechanisms by which they spread*? The author finishes the study by stating that one conclusion can be clearly drawn: that existing theoretical formulations of the crowd participating in collective violence do not compute well against the close analysis of more systematic empirical inquiry.

**Methods**

This study categorizes, quantifies, and analyzes detailed spatial and temporal data on over 1,850 instances of crowd behavior during the Los Angeles Watts riot of 1965. The riot is conceptualized as a finite series of incidents, events, or behaviors occurring between the actor and a target, and through staff interactions with all available data, a system of classifying riot behavior was created. Specifically, the reports would include the following: (1) some subject (the initiator) (2) was doing something (the behavior, action, or event- type) (3) to somebody or something else (the target) (4) at some particular time (the temporal frame) and (5) at some specific address (the spatial frame). The information was then coded to produce three empirical patterns: spatial, temporal, and temporal-spatial.

**Results**

Findings reveal that spatial configuration of the riot actions represent a pattern of incidence/non-incidence and frequency that differ greatly from one another. However, temporal patterns are marked relatively more clearly by indicating different riot days exhibit distinct patterns of riot growth, specifically, the number of new areas entering the riot, their intensity of entering, and the duration of their participation. The temporal-spatial spread profiles concluded that crowd activities can be better understood if they are not grouped together as an overall and instead investigated each individual instance of criminality within a riot.

**Implications**

To achieve a better understanding of riot processes and collective violence, it is important to address rioting as a complex, diverse, and interactive process. Understanding the thought process of rioters while engaging in violent behavior may prove to better alleviate future instances of collective violence. The author contends that the study raises broader issues on how to study collective violence, specifically what to look at and what conclusions can be drawn from what is examined as well as how it is examined. Additionally, researchers need to look beyond the riot participant and collective community and instead further study the diversity of behavioral processes associated with rioting interactions.

Stark, M. J., Raine, W. J., Burbeck, S. L., & Davison, K. K. (1974). Some empirical patterns in a riot process. *American Sociological Review,*

*39*(6), 865-876. doi: 10.2307/2094159