

The Unintended Consequences of the Carceral State: Chicana/o Political Mobilization in Post–World War II America

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The twenty-first century has witnessed an explosion of scholarly interest in the expansion of the carceral state in the post–World War II United States. This scholarship centers on how repressive laws, combined with more aggressive policing and sentencing guidelines, fueled the 500 percent rise in the nation’s prison population since the 1960s. With black and Latino men imprisoned at several times the rate of white males, the consequences of mass incarceration have fallen primarily on these men, their families, and their communities. Another facet of the literature focuses on how increasingly aggressive police practices, such as police stop-and-frisk tactics, have greatly expanded in recent years. Due to the Supreme Court’s “reasonable suspicion” doctrine, police officers have almost unfettered freedom in choosing whom they stop and interrogate on the street. To cite but one example, more than 80 percent of stops made by the New York Police Department between 2004 and 2012 were of blacks and Latinos. These aggressive and biased law enforcement tactics, the scholarship tells us, have lessened civic engagement, endangered the children of incarcerated individuals, and stigmatized whole generations of brown and black men as criminals.¹

The destructive consequences of the carceral state are real. They do not, however, tell the whole story. Populations negatively impacted by overly aggressive policing and mass

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¹ On the rise of the carceral state, see Jonathan Simon, *Governing through Crime: How the War on Crime Transformed American Democracy and Created a Culture of Fear* (New York, 2007); Marie Gottschalk, “Democracy and the Carceral State in America,” *ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 651 (Jan. 2014), 288–95; Carla Shedd, “Countering the Carceral Continuum: The Legacy of Mass Incarceration,” *Criminology and Public Policy*, 10 (no. 3, 2011), 865–71; and Heather Ann Thompson, “Why Mass Incarceration Matters: Rethinking Crisis, Decline, and Transformation in Postwar American History,” *Journal of American History*, 97 (Dec. 2010), 703–34. Jonathan Simon has found that in the early 1970s “nearly 90 Americans were in prison for every 100,000 free residents,” but by 2000 the ratio had risen to nearly 500 per 100,000. See Jonathon Simon, “Rise of the Carceral State,” *Social Research*, 74 (Summer 2007), 471. On stop-and-frisk tactics and the “reasonable suspicion” doctrine, see William A. Margeson, “Bringing the Gavel Down on Stops and Frisks: The Equitable Regulation of Police Power,” *American Criminal Law Review*, 51 (July 2014), 743–49.

incarceration can and do respond to assaults on their communities. In particular, police misconduct, because of its immediacy and often-violent nature, has historically provoked vociferous responses. Those reactions have usually come in the form of individual complaints or short-term protests; but in the right circumstances they have also triggered broad social movements and political mobilization. This essay provides one example of how the carceral state fueled a social movement. With a focus on the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD), this article examines how the expanded capabilities and aggressive practices of U.S. law enforcement after World War II shaped the rise of Chicana/o political mobilization. Because the LAPD had come to view Mexican American youths as a criminally inclined group, officers started in the 1940s engaging in increasingly aggressive tactics in Mexican American neighborhoods. Specifically, this essay addresses how aggressive enforcement tactics, which turned into chronic police misconduct, emerged as a key political issue for the city's Mexican Americans. By tapping into Mexican Americans' animosity toward the police, local activists in the immediate postwar years, and Chicana/o militants in the 1960s, organized the community for political and social empowerment. While authorities tolerated the immediate postwar Mexican American activism, during the later period the LAPD reacted with hostility to the militant tactics and tough rhetoric, engaging in classic acts of political repression to destroy movement organizations. These repressive tactics, however, only mobilized larger segments of the Chicana/o community behind the movement's goals and objectives.²

“The Criminal Element” and Police Misconduct

The LAPD's identification of Mexican American youth as a criminal element to be contained stemmed from the zoot suit hysteria of the early 1940s. During World War II many Mexican American youths began wearing a style of dress called a zoot suit. Part fad, part symbolic protest, wearing the zoot suit, which in the male version exaggerated the traditional American business suit, was a form of youthful rebellion intended to outrage authority figures. Its purpose, along with the aggressive attitude the zoot suiters struck, was to demonstrate the resentment that these youths felt at the discrimination in their schools, at their jobs, and from police.³

Law enforcement officials, other civic leaders, and especially the press interpreted the zoot suit phenomenon as a sign of Mexican American youth's inherent delinquency. Local newspapers equated the term *Mexican* with zoot suit criminality and fueled public panic with sensationalized and highly exaggerated headlines. The story under the headline “2 Mexicans Held as Molesters,” for example, referred to the arrest of two youths on disturbing-the-peace charges for making harassing statements to a white woman as she walked down the street. Other headlines warned of “zoot gangster attacks,” “zoot suit revolution,” and “zoot arsenal.” In response, a Los Angeles County Grand Jury convened a special hearing in October 1942 into the causes of Mexican American youth crime, during which area law enforcement officials declared that Mexican Americans were biologically inclined to violence and criminality. At the hearing Los Angeles Sheriff's Department captain Edward Ayres declared that this inclination was due to a biological need

² On social movement theory, see Donatella Della Porta and Mario Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction* (Oxford, 1999). Sidney G. Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics* (New York, 1998).

³ Edward J. Escobar, *Race, Police, and the Making of a Political Identity: Mexican Americans and the Los Angeles Police Department, 1900–1945* (Berkeley, 1999), 178–85.

Mexican Americans had to let blood because they were descendants of the Aztec Indians, who engaged in human sacrifice. His report went on to argue that whites were like house cats that could be trained, but Mexican Americans were like wildcats that needed to be caged. Liberal activists and academics scoffed at the idea of a biological inclination to crime but argued just as deterministically that racial discrimination and other societal factors led “inevitably” to juvenile delinquency. With this consensus among conservatives and liberals regarding Mexican American criminality, police officers were free to use harsh, often-brutal, methods to suppress what had become the city’s “criminal element.”⁴

In general, Mexican Americans viewed the LAPD’s harsh methods as an affront to their dignity. They viewed police as disrespectful, arbitrary, and excessively violent and brutal. Parents complained that rather than curbing delinquency, police attitudes and methods were alienating their children from American society, thus creating a greater impetus toward crime. The types of police behavior that angered Mexican Americans ranged from discourteous language to unnecessary stop-and-frisk field interrogations, unwarranted arrests, and excessive use of force, especially beatings and shootings. After viewing the brutal methods used by LAPD officers to arrest two young Mexican American youths, Dolores Figueroa wrote to Los Angeles mayor Fletcher Bowron demanding to know if her own two young sons, ages eight and four, would be “kicked and slapped by a policeman . . . just because they are Mexicans and make ‘good suspects.’” While it is impossible to know how much police misconduct occurred, a survey published in 1953 showed that that only 21 percent of Mexican Americans believed that the LAPD respected suspects’ civil rights (versus 35 percent of whites) and 44 percent of Mexican Americans perceived LAPD officers to be “brutal in performing their duties” (versus 11 percent of whites).⁵

The consequence of the community’s perceptions was a steady stream of Mexican American complaints against the LAPD. Mario Torres made a typical complaint in 1948 when he protested his treatment by LAPD officers who stopped him in his car for no apparent reason. When Torres objected, one of the officers threatened him saying, “Shut up, don’t get snotty, kid, or we will go to headquarters and we know how to take care of kids like you.” The officers “jerked” Torres out of his car and pushed him into the back of the patrol car with “a big shove.” When Torres told the officers that he now “really believed the stories that I had heard about conditions in the Eastside where people are being shoved around by policemen for no reason,” one officer responded, saying, “You guys are just like the niggers, the minute you are picked up you start hollering discrimination.” After the officers heard by radio that Torres had no warrants, they released him. Torres made a complaint to the Police Commission, which accepted the officers’ denial that they had mistreated Torres and simply dismissed Torres’s letter.⁶

The Torres case exemplifies how the LAPD dealt with Mexican American allegations of police misconduct. Officials responded to charges of systematic misconduct by saying that they could only investigate detailed complaints. But even when the charges were specific, as in the Torres incident, officials found ways to ignore the claims, from accepting officers’ version of events to impeaching the integrity of the complainant or alleging that

⁴ On newspaper coverage, see *ibid.*, 197–202, esp. 201. On Edward Ayres’s report, see *ibid.*, 207–20.

⁵ Dolores Figueroa quoted in Escobar, *Race, Police, and the Making of a Political Identity*, 175. G. Douglas Gourley, *Public Relations and the Police* (Springfield, 1953), 75.

⁶ Mario Torres to P[olice]. C[ommission]., Sept. 1, 1948, Los Angeles Board of Police Commissioners, Supplementary Files (Los Angeles City Records Center, Los Angeles, Calif.); W. J. Bradley to P[olice]. C[ommission]., Oct. 10, 1948, *ibid.*

the complaint was politically motivated. The inability to obtain redress for their grievances exacerbated Mexican Americans' mistrust of the police and eventually became another important issue of concern in the Mexican American community.⁷

Mexican Americans in Postwar Los Angeles

A newly energized and politicized Mexican American community was well positioned to address the anger and frustration that arose from police misconduct. In the 1930s a new generation emerged that strove to gain equal citizenship in American society. Born and/or raised in the United States, members of this generation not only understood American institutions, including the legal system, but had also absorbed and adopted the promise of the "American dream." They recognized that their second-class citizenship and the concomitant discrimination they faced limited their potential, and they were determined to protest and counter their unequal status in American society.⁸

Mexican Americans combined this politicized attitude with the sense of citizenship that they gained during World War II to become a potent political force throughout the Southwest. Their wartime experiences both at home and on the front lines broadened their perspectives, gave them a greater sense of being part of American society, and provided them the resources to demand equality. They emerged from the war proud that they fought in record numbers and more economically secure through their expanded engagement in the civilian labor force. These increased resources and a sense of pride from their war effort laid the foundation for increased activism.⁹

Filled with a new sense of citizenship, the returning veterans and their home front counterparts took the lead in fighting their disadvantaged status. Despite their gains during the war, Mexican Americans were still mired at the bottom of wage and occupational scales. Low-paying, menial jobs meant low income, which translated into substandard housing and poor health. The educational system still discriminated against Mexican American children by putting them into subpar segregated schools or placing them in nonacademic, vocational learning tracks. They continued to suffer from discrimination in housing and public accommodations. Their determination to end their chronic disadvantaged status led Mexican Americans to forge a social movement that, among other things, challenged the LAPD's practices in their communities.¹⁰

The emergence of the Mexican American movement led almost inevitably to efforts to reform the LAPD. While returning veterans were certainly aware of the resentment brewing in their community over incidents such as that of Mario Torres, the publicity over a series of violent encounters made police brutality a major issue in Los Angeles. In particular, the primarily Mexican American Community Service Organization (CSO) aggressively

⁷ Joseph Gerald Woods, "The Progressives and the Police: Urban Reform and the Professionalization of the Los Angeles Police" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1973); Helen Taylor, "Police Brutality, L.A. Mayor Rebuffs Pleas for Protection of Citizens," *Daily People's World*, Oct. 10, 1948.

⁸ Mario T. García, *Mexican Americans: Leadership, Ideology, and Identity, 1930–1960* (New Haven, 1989); George J. Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900–1945* (New York, 1993); David G. Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Ethnicity* (Berkeley, 1995).

⁹ Raul Morin, *Among the Valiant: Mexican-Americans in WWII and Korea* (Los Angeles, 1963); Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez, *Mexican Americans and World War II* (Austin, 2005).

¹⁰ On Mexican Americans' socioeconomic status in the postwar years, see Leo Grebler, Joan W. Moore, and Ralph G. Guzman, *The Mexican American People: The Nation's Second Largest Minority* (New York, 1970), esp. 13–35.

used the issue of police misconduct, and especially brutality, to organize the community for political action.

The case that created the greatest controversy in the Mexican American community during the immediate postwar era was the killing of seventeen-year-old Agustín Salcido by Officer William J. Keyes in March 1948. The Salcido killing angered Mexican Americans for many reasons: Keyes had a long history of violence against Mexican Americans—he had previously shot two other Mexican American teenage boys—and the shooting of Salcido more resembled an execution than an act meant to protect a fellow officer, as Keyes claimed. A coalition of groups that included the CSO and labor unions and that was led by the radical Civil Rights Congress organized town hall meetings and other community protests, while the Communist party's West Coast newspaper, the *People's World*, ran stories with graphic descriptions of the killing, bringing public attention to the LAPD's brutal methods.¹¹

These efforts resulted in the prosecution of Keyes for manslaughter, an extraordinary though limited success. On the one hand, the spectacle of a white police officer being brought to trial for shooting a Mexican American had no precedent in anyone's memory. The trial, on the other hand, was a mockery of justice, with the prosecution essentially throwing the case by refusing to introduce key evidence, such as Keyes's inquest testimony in which he admitted shooting the boy. The presiding judge found Keyes not guilty on the grounds that the prosecution "introduced absolutely no evidence" that Keyes had fired the shots that killed Salcido.¹²

The case and others like it nevertheless brought wide public attention to LAPD mistreatment of Mexican Americans and helped propel Mexican Americans into the political spotlight. The town hall meetings, the broad coalition of leftist groups, organized labor, and Mexican American organizations such as the CSO, and the constant reporting on the case all contributed to Keyes going to trial and, eventually, to banner headlines in mainstream newspapers. Police brutality had become associated with Mexican Americans and, as noted earlier, 44 percent of Mexican Americans associated the LAPD with brutality.¹³

Edward R. Roybal and the CSO

The Salcido case and others like it made police brutality a politically charged issue that embarrassed city officials and provided an opportunity for the CSO to push for an independent voice for Mexican Americans in city government. Nothing exemplified this phenomenon better than the election of Edward Roybal to the Los Angeles City Council in 1949, the first Mexican American since the 1880s to gain this post. In 1947 an alliance

¹¹ The bullets that killed Agustín Salcido entered the back or side of his head at close range. S. Guy Endore, *Justice for Salcido* (Los Angeles, 1948), 11–13; Los Angeles Civil Rights Congress, "Background in Augustino Salcido Shooting," March 24, 1948, typescript, folder 27, box 3, Los Angeles Civil Rights Congress Papers (Southern California Social Science Library, Los Angeles). Leonard Sherman and William Axelrod to Henry Duque, March 30, 1948, Los Angeles Board of Police Commissioners, Supplementary Files; Endore, *Justice for Salcido*; Los Angeles City Council, "Resolution on the Slaying of Augustino Salcido and Police Terrorism against Mexican-Americans," March 19, 1948, folder 29, box 3, Los Angeles Civil Rights Congress Papers. "Salcido's Killer Is Ordered to Stand Trial," *People's World*, April 14, 1948, p. 1; "Call to Arms' on Killer Cops," *ibid.*, July 20, 1948, p. 1.

¹² On the unprecedented nature of the prosecution, see Los Angeles Civil Rights Congress, "Background in Augustino Salcido Shooting." On the trial, see "Policeman Exonerated in Killing," *California Eagle*, July 14, 1948, p. 1; "Salcido Case Dismissed," *People's World*, July 13, 1948; and Endore, *Justice for Salcido*, 30.

¹³ "Judge Rows with Lawyer at Courtroom Hearing," *Los Angeles Times*, April 13, 1948, p. 1; "Testigos de sorpresa en el caso del oficial Keyes" (Surprise witness in the case of the official Keyes), *La Opinión*, July 12, 1948.

of Mexican American union members, veterans, professionals, and other community leaders had come together to form the CSO with Roybal as president. With support from the noncommunist community activist Saul Alinsky and his Industrial Areas Foundation, the CSO's membership undertook a massive voter registration drive that registered seventeen thousand new voters for the 1949 election.¹⁴

While the symbolic significance for the CSO of getting a Mexican American elected to office cannot be overstated, CSO members understood the practical importance of an independent Mexican American voice in city government to compel a broad array of municipal agencies to improve their services in their neighborhoods. Central to the CSO in this regard was the issue of police brutality. CSO members were active in the Salcido case, and Roybal made police misconduct in Mexican American communities one of the pillars of his campaign. He repeatedly raised the issue on the campaign trail, calling for the creation of a civilian review board to investigate and establish culpability regarding allegations of police brutality.¹⁵

The event that best demonstrates the centrality of the police brutality issue for the CSO and the Roybal campaign was a meeting between the CSO and Los Angeles mayor Fletcher Bowron days after the April 1949 City Council primary where Roybal won a plurality of the votes. While the CSO had a broad array of issues it regularly addressed, at its one and only meeting with the mayor the group focused on police brutality, saying that the worst offenders were members of the LAPD. The mayor responded that he did not believe there was much of a problem. "I'm sure you will find," he asserted, "these [instances of brutality] are limited to the actions of a few officers who tend to become a little, well, shall we say, over exuberant . . . in trying to keep the hoodlum element in line." Before Bowron had even finished speaking, CSO member Henry Nava laid before him photos of Mexican Americans with blackened eyes, stitched lips, and swollen jaws, and asked sarcastically, "is this the sort of thing you mean by over-exuberance?" The focus of the CSO members' greatest ire, however, was on the officers involved in the Salcido killing. CSO members complained bitterly that the "trigger-happy cops" who "put three bullets into [the boy's] head—at point blank range . . . are still on the force, still walking the East Side streets with the same guns they killed Salcido with!" They also complained that both LAPD chief Clemence Horrall and the mayor's office either ignored or passed the buck when the CSO sent formal complaints. They concluded by telling the mayor that the necessary first step was firing Chief Horrall and creating a citizens committee to investigate police brutality complaints. If Bowron could not reform the LAPD, they warned, they would vote for someone else.¹⁶

In the May runoff election, Roybal won an overwhelming victory. While Roybal enjoyed broad multiracial support, the bulk of his votes came from the Mexican American neighborhood of Boyle Heights, where the grievances against the LAPD were most intense. Roybal won with approximately 64 percent of the vote, receiving more votes from Boyle Heights alone than his opponent received from the entire district. The CSO estimated

¹⁴ George J. Sanchez, "Edward R. Roybal and the Politics of Multiracialism," *Southern California Quarterly*, 92 (Spring 2010), 51–73, esp. 56; Katherine Underwood, "Pioneering Minority Representation: Edward Roybal and the Los Angeles City Council, 1949–1962," *Pacific Historical Review*, 66 (Aug. 1997), 399–425.

¹⁵ On Edward R. Roybal's campaign promises to end police misconduct, see Edward R. Roybal interview by Edward J. Escobar, Jan. 5, 1988, audiotape (in Edward J. Escobar's possession), side 2, tape 1. On calls for a civilian review board, see Underwood, "Pioneering Minority Representation," 409. See also Kenneth C. Burt, "Latino Empowerment in Los Angeles: Postwar Dreams and Cold War Fears, 1948–1952," *Labor's Heritage*, 8 (Summer 1996), 4–25.

¹⁶ Fred Ross, unpublished manuscript, 1985, pp. 18–25, folder 13, box 20, Fred Ross Papers (Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Stanford University, Stanford, Calif.).

that 87 percent of the new voters it had registered since 1947 turned out on election day. Roybal assumed office on July 1, 1949, with a mandate to address the CSO's concerns regarding police brutality. While Roybal's was often a lonely voice in an otherwise all-white pro-police city council and many of the reforms he advocated never came to pass, during his fourteen years in office, he remained a strong and independent force for Mexican Americans with which the LAPD had to contend.¹⁷

Police Professionalism

A little over a year after Roybal took his seat on the city council, William H. Parker was sworn in as the LAPD's new chief and brought with him a new model of law enforcement: police professionalism. Parker's model promised to make urban police more effective guardians of public order by removing police from the control of politicians and making police administrators the sole authority regarding the standards for entrance into the profession, proper conduct, promotion, and what actions necessitated disciplinary action. With such autonomy, Parker promised, he could create a more efficient organizational structure, implement a better rationalization of resources, recruit and retain better officers, and generally control crime more effectively. Crucial to the LAPD's relationship with Mexican Americans was the War on Crime orientation that structured the model of police professionalism. This model called for police to ascertain the causes of criminality, identify the "criminal elements" in society, and develop strategies for controlling those elements. But, when combined with the presumed linkage between race and criminality, this war-on-crime orientation focused the police department's attention on minority populations.¹⁸

Parker succeeded in institutionalizing the professionalism model in Los Angeles largely by tapping into the growing white anxieties regarding crime. Specifically, he developed the idea of the "thin blue line" as the guiding metaphor for the LAPD. The essence of Parker's idea was that only the police stood between "civilized" society and anarchy. Parker saw society as two competing forces. On one side were law-abiding, white, middle- and working-class Americans who longed for security and who supported, and even appreciated, strong law enforcement. In opposition were the forces of chaos and iniquity. Here, Parker lumped together not only organized crime but also racial minority groups, dissidents, especially communists, and anyone who criticized the police. The concept of the thin blue line helped create a vast constituency for the LAPD among people who feared and felt threatened by the rapidly changing nature of American society. For white Angelinos (about 80 percent of the population) already inured to the link between race and criminality, the idea that they must support the LAPD—which, after all, was the only entity that protected them from the growing brown and black populations—must have been particularly persuasive.¹⁹

¹⁷ On Roybal's 1949 electoral victory, see Burt, "Latino Empowerment in Los Angeles"; Kenneth C. Burt, "The Power of a Mobilized Citizenry and Coalition Politics: The 1949 Election of Edward R. Roybal to the Los Angeles City Council," *Southern California Quarterly*, 85 (Winter 2003), 413–38; and Underwood, "Pioneering Minority Representation." On Roybal's tenure on the City Council, see Sanchez, "Edward R. Roybal and the Politics of Multiracialism."

¹⁸ Edward J. Escobar, "Bloody Christmas and the Irony of Police Professionalism: The Los Angeles Police Department, Mexican Americans, and Police Reform in the 1950s," *Pacific Historical Review*, 72 (May 2003), 171–99. On police professionalism, see Robert M. Fogelson, *Big-City Police* (Cambridge, Mass., 1977).

¹⁹ On the development and impact of the thin blue line metaphor, see Escobar, "Bloody Christmas and the Irony of Police Professionalism," 171–99. On William H. Parker's philosophy of policing, see William H. Parker, "Invasion from Within," in *Parker on Police*, ed. O. W. Wilson (Springfield, 1957), 49–65. For the long-term effect of Parker's philosophy, see Daryl F. Gates, *Chief: My Life in the LAPD* (New York, 1992).

The department's continued belief in the criminality of Mexican American youth was exacerbated by the juvenile delinquency scare of the 1950s. During that decade a great fear swept over the country that American youth were engaged in an orgy of senseless violence and depravity. In Los Angeles both the police and the press focused on Mexican American youth and especially Mexican American youth gangs. To a certain extent, this attention was warranted. Since the zoot suit era many of the loose and relatively peaceful gatherings of adolescent boys had turned into self-perpetuating violent criminal youth gangs. While most of the violence occurred between rival gangs, the local press published sensationalized stories that the city was at mercy of "rat packs," Mexican American juveniles roving the streets, attacking innocent (white) passersby and causing mayhem.²⁰

The LAPD responded to the perceived gang problem by sharply increasing surveillance in Mexican American neighborhoods. The department increased officer deployment and stop-and-frisk activities and developed a special "gang squad" composed primarily of Mexican American and Spanish-speaking officers. The squad's chief duty was to gather intelligence on the gangs to aid in making arrests. It gathered information from field interrogations conducted by general patrol officers, sporadic enforcement of curfew laws, and through the "constant surveillance" of playgrounds and other hangouts where gang members gathered. The LAPD accumulated files on approximately seven hundred alleged gang members (and their girlfriends) and close to sixty gangs operating in the city. While Parker touted the gang squad and the high level of surveillance as the way the department was able to control the Mexican American gangs, the greatest impact of those strategies was the alienation of a generation of Mexican American youth. Gang members and non-gang members alike feared and resented the LAPD's intrusive and often-brutal tactics and the idea that they could not go out on the street without being stopped and harassed by police officers. Fifteen-year-old William Alvarado voiced fear that the police would arrest him for violating the curfew law if he was on the street after 9:00 pm on a Friday night. Similarly, a former gang member remembered officers beating him over the head with a large flashlight for laughing when he saw the officers get into a traffic accident.²¹

The LAPD and the Chicano Movement

The resentment felt by many Mexican Americans helped fuel what became known as the Chicano movement. Starting in 1967, the demographic foundation of Mexican American political activism shifted from World War II veterans to a younger generation of high school and college-age youths who called themselves Chicanos. They mounted a contentious social movement to overcome what they saw as pervasive racial discrimination. The main issues of the Chicano movement were educational inequality, Mexican American casualties in the Vietnam War, and the harassment of youths by local law enforcement.

²⁰ James Burkhart Gilbert, *A Cycle of Outrage: America's Reaction to the Juvenile Delinquent in the 1950s* (New York, 1986), 14–23, 63–108. For press treatment of Mexican Americans, see Bob Will, "5000 L.A. Hoodlums Belong to Violence-Dealing Gangs," Dec. 17, 1953, p. 2; and "Rat Pack in 2 New Outrages," *Los Angeles Herald and Express*, Jan. 2, 1954.

²¹ Los Angeles Police Department, "Gang Activities Section," Sept. 11, 1959, box 35324, Chief of Police, General Files (Los Angeles City Records Center). On the "constant surveillance," see William Parker to H. P. Gleason, Dec. 6, 1955, box 53288, Chief of Police, General Files. Parker, *Parker on Police*, ed. Wilson; William Alvarado to Los Angeles City Councilman, Feb. 23, 1953, *ibid.*; James Diego Vigil, *Barrio Gangs: Street Life and Identity in Southern California* (Austin, 1988), 141–46.

Like other movement participants of the era, Chicanos used disruptive and militant tactics and provocative rhetoric to voice their protest.²²

Throughout the country in the 1960s, law enforcement was hostile to social movements and used its expanding surveillance capabilities and its monopoly on the legal use of force to attempt to undermine and destroy the movements. Social movements by their very nature are contentious and disruptive in making demands of the state for social change. In the 1950s and 1960s context of an assumed Cold War consensus and a socially sanctioned—and in places legally enforced—racial hierarchy, law enforcement responded with hostility and violence to the movements that worked to disrupt the racial order. LAPD chief Parker believed that the civil rights movement would lead to anarchy and that police, as the “thin blue line,” needed to protect white middle-class Americans from the radicals attempting to overturn the social order. Subsequent chiefs (Parker died in 1966) developed a counterintelligence program through which they sent agents into Chicana/o organizations to gather intelligence, sow suspicion and discontent, and disrupt movement organizations. In addition, because the LAPD regarded all large demonstrations as potential sources of riots, the department used intimidation and violence to suppress protest. To prevent demonstrations from turning into urban riots, Parker’s successor, Chief Thomas Reddin, declared that police should engage in “overkill—kill the butterfly with a sledge hammer.”²³

The LAPD put this repressive strategy into practice in March 1968, when approximately ten thousand East Los Angeles Chicano students walked out of their predominantly Mexican American high schools to protest the inferior education they received. Organized by a militant group called the Brown Berets, college students, and other activists, the high school students demanded the same facilities, textbooks, and supplies as white students; curriculum changes to include Chicano history and culture; and more Mexican American teachers, counselors, and administrators. Caught off guard, law enforcement initially kept a relatively low profile, but within days, police responded with force and intimidation. On March 5, LAPD squad cars massed around Roosevelt High School. When students climbed over the fences that surrounded the campus, police began beating them and arresting anyone who came to their aid. A newspaper that developed from the walkouts, *Chicano Student News*, described how two Chicano teenagers were “jumped by four full grown armed policemen, beaten to the ground and held with a club to the neck.” After the walkouts law enforcement officials escalated their harassment. *Inside Eastside*, another Chicano newspaper, reported that in the month after the student protests police arrested sixty-five Brown Berets “on trumped-up charges, anything to get them off the street.”²⁴

The walkouts dramatically altered the relationship between Chicanos and the LAPD. The department increased its surveillance of Mexican American neighborhoods, and the level of violent contacts between Chicanos and officers rose. Chicanos charged that the increase in violence resulted from police attempts to intimidate movement activists, while police officials argued that the movement caused Chicanos to be more combative in their interactions with police officers. In response, Chicano groups organized protest pickets

²² Edward J. Escobar, “The Dialectics of Repression: The Los Angeles Police Department and the Chicano Movement, 1968–1971,” *Journal of American History*, 79 (March 1993), 1491–93.

²³ On social movements, see Tarrow, *Power in Movement*. On law enforcement antagonism to protest, see Kenneth O’Reilly, *Racial Matters: The FBI’s Secret File on Black America, 1960–1972* (New York, 1989). On Parker, see Escobar, “Dialectics of Repression,” 1493–95. Thomas Reddin quoted *ibid.*, 1495.

²⁴ Escobar, “Dialectics of Repression,” 1494–95, 1496, 1497.

around the LAPD's Hollenbeck Division headquarters "to increase the awareness of the Community to the vicious and systematic harassment of the people simply because they are Chicanos, and to show the people how the Community can fight back."²⁵

The LAPD then turned its intelligence apparatus against Chicano activists by planting police officers and civilian agents within Chicano organizations. In addition to gathering information on organizations' membership, activities, and finances, the agents sowed mistrust, instigated, and even engaged in illegal activity in their roles as informers. LAPD officer Fernando Sumaya, for example, infiltrated the Brown Berets and later gave testimony that members Carlos Montes and Ralph Ramírez started fires at the Biltmore Hotel during a speech by California governor Ronald Reagan in 1969. The Brown Berets' defense attorneys, however, provided evidence and testimony that Sumaya started the fires, and juries eventually acquitted Montes and Ramírez.²⁶

These repressive police tactics increased tensions that culminated with the August 29, 1970, National Chicano Moratorium demonstration and subsequent riot. While the purpose of the demonstration was to protest the large number of Mexican American casualties in the Vietnam War, tensions between police and Chicanas/os were running high because of ongoing altercations. When, at the end of the march, teenagers stole drinks from a nearby liquor store and ran into the crowd attending a subsequent rally, Los Angeles County Sheriff's deputies proclaimed the gathering an illegal assembly and waded into the crowd, swinging their batons and shooting tear gas. Instead of dispersing, the crowd attacked the deputies and spilled into the nearby shopping district, setting several buildings on fire. At the end of the day, two people lay dead, including the respected journalist Ruben Salazar, who had given voice to Chicano militants' claims of police brutality and repression through his columns in the *Los Angeles Times* and as the new director for KMEX, the Los Angeles Spanish-language television station. A sheriff's deputy shot a tear gas projectile through an open door that penetrated Salazar's skull. Despite an inquest jury's finding that a criminal investigation was warranted, District Attorney Evelle J. Younger refused to proceed with an inquiry.²⁷

Chicanos responded with anger and indignity to the events of August 29. Activists of various political persuasions, from the traditionally moderate League of United Latin American Citizens to radical Chicano militants, accused the Sheriff's Department of assassinating Salazar for airing militants' complaints. Over the next five months Chicanos held three more major demonstrations, culminating on January 31, 1971, in a protest that ended with one demonstrator killed and thirty-five wounded. Law enforcement's massive use of force—killing the butterflies with sledgehammers—convinced demonstration organizers that ending public protests was the only responsible course of action.²⁸

Law enforcement's repressive tactics had mixed consequences. On the one hand, LAPD infiltrators destroyed some organizations, and police violence helped end Chicano protest demonstrations. On the other hand, the LAPD's activities made law enforcement an issue around which Chicano activists rallied grassroots support for movement goals and activities. In addition, the police tactics led Chicanos to turn to deliberate forms of violence to demonstrate their anger and disillusionment with American society. Throughout most of 1971 a series of bombings (one of which led to the death of an innocent bystander)

²⁵ *Chicano Student News* and *Inside Eastside* quoted *ibid.*, 1496.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 1497–98.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 1483–85, 1500–1504.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 1503–6.

and arson attacks rocked Los Angeles. A group calling itself the Chicano Liberation Front (CLF) claimed responsibility for the attacks. In a “declaration” distributed in August 1971 the CLF argued that Chicanos had attempted to bring about change through peaceful means but had been met only with rejection from politicians and violence from police. The declaration stated that the CLF thus had no choice but to adopt “the liberating force of revolution” and take the offensive against “the Fascist system that dares to control our lives.” The CLF thus embodied the radical, violent, and revolutionary traits that the LAPD had feared the most.²⁹

More importantly, LAPD repressive tactics contributed to the politicization of the larger Mexican American population by convincing many that they were the targets of police abuse. A study conducted by the social scientist Armando Morales in the wake of the protest activity demonstrated that a majority of Mexican Americans believed that police used insulting language, engaged in unnecessary stop-and-search tactics, and exercised excessive force during arrests, when holding people in custody, and while policing riots. The belief that police engaged in misconduct toward Mexican Americans cut across age, class, and gender lines and was shared by those who refused to accept the political designation of “Chicano.”³⁰

Finally, the Chicano response to police repression altered how Mexican Americans viewed their place in American society. The work of the political scientists Biliana Ambrecht and Harry Pachón showed that many Mexican Americans came to support the goals and activities of the Chicano movement. While only a tiny minority of Mexican Americans actually took part in protests, a large majority came to regard Chicano demonstrations “as a ‘general expression of frustration of the Mexican people’ and as a strategy to ‘obtain denied opportunities and equal rights.’” Despite the massive violence and great trauma of the National Chicano Moratorium demonstration and riot, 44 percent judged the protests to have been for “the good of the community.” Mexican Americans sympathized with and supported Chicano activists in their conflict with police. Ultimately, the authors found that as a result of the movement’s emphasis on racial oppression, Mexican Americans had come to see themselves “as a subordinate exploited group in American society, thus sharing many of the problems faced by Black Americans.”³¹

The overall sense of exploitation and the sympathy and support for the Chicano movement contributed to the emergence of what Ambrecht and Pachón call an “ethnic political mobilization.” As a result of movement activities, Mexican Americans became more inclined to use their ethnicity as the primary value upon which they made their political choices and to engage in political activity in support of that value. The conflict between Chicanos and the LAPD thus helped Mexican Americans develop a new political consciousness—one that eventually led to a higher level of political involvement. In subsequent decades Mexican Americans elected Mexican American public officials, including two mayors, founded civic organizations to press their interests on both government officials and business groups, organized labor unions to represent Latino janitors and hotel workers, and, after a prolonged struggle, helped reform the LAPD to make it more accountable to the citizens it serves. This, too, was a consequence of the carceral state.³²

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 1506–8, esp. 1508.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 1508–11. Armando Morales, “A Study of Mexican American Perceptions of Law Enforcement Policies and Practices in East Los Angeles” (Ph.D. diss., University of Southern California, 1972), 188–248.

³¹ Biliana C. S. Ambrecht and Harry P. Pachón, “Ethnic Political Mobilization in a Mexican American Community: An Exploratory Study of East Los Angeles, 1965–1972,” *Western Political Quarterly*, 27 (Sept. 1974), 500–519. Quoted in Escobar, “Dialectics of Repression,” 1511, 1510.

³² Ambrecht and Pachón, “Ethnic Mobilization in a Mexican American Community,” 505.