



Social Unrest

Key Points

- Social unrest includes civil disorders, acts of mass civil disobedience and strikes differ in their legality, morality and tactics (especially the use or avoidance of violence), but all are acts by groups of people that are intended to disrupt a community or organization.
- Civil disorder is a public disturbance by a group or groups of people involving acts of violence that cause immediate danger, damage or injury to others or their property. They are often but not always politically motivated. They are both illegal and violent.
- Civil disorders can be divided into two rough categories: those in which the perpetrators deliberately set out to harm others (e.g., a lynch mob) and those in which the perpetrators are focused more on crimes against property. Most of Seattle's disorders have been the later type.
- Civil disobedience is the nonviolent refusal to obey certain laws as an act of political protest. Civil disobedience has been associated with some of America's most admired figures, such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Even so, it is an effort to put pressure on a governmental body and often does so by disrupting the functioning of society. Civil disobedience is illegal but non-violent.
- Strikes are collective work stoppages by employees designed to force an employer to meet employee demands. Most strikes are legal and peaceful, but they can be both illegal and violent.
- The lines between civil disorder, civil disobedience and strikes are fuzzy. The World Trade Organization (WTO) protests began with acts of civil disobedience then spiraled into civil disorder.
- The World Trade Organization unrest was Seattle's most damaging disorder. For five days in late 1999 police battled protesters in downtown and Capitol Hill. There were no fatalities, but the economic disruption was significant and the unrest was a serious blow to the city's reputation.
- Disorders often occur in dense areas where people naturally gather and crossroads areas. In Seattle, downtown, Capitol Hill and the University District have seen the most frequent civil disorder.
- Looting and arson are the most common crimes in Seattle's civil disorders.
- Rock-throwing, sniping and other severe personal assaults have not been common in Seattle disorders, but they have occurred. They are not expected to be frequent threats in the future.
- Reputation damage has been a major impact to some areas hit by civil disorders, but Seattle has not seen major, lasting reputation damage.

Context

Social unrest includes a wide range of activities from violent to peaceful, legal to illegal, criminal to principled and highly planned to completely spontaneous. With such a diversity, it seems impossible to generalize about them as a class of activities. What they share is an effort by a group of people to disrupt the community. Sometimes violence against people and property is added. This section will concentrate on the aspects of



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community disruption. There is no intention of equating moral parity between mob violence and peaceful protest of the sort championed by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. It must be recognized, however, that even peaceful civil disobedience is the application of pressure.

Civil Disorder

Civil disorder has been an episodic presence in the United States since its founding. The most widely held theory of modern American civil disorder distinguishes between “communal” and “commodity” riots. Communal riots involve direct battles between two or more ethnic groups. They cause high casualties and usually occur on the border between the communities involved or at some contested public spot like a beach or playground. In the 20th century, they were most common from the turn of the century through the 1920s. Commodity riots start within the heart of a community instead of the fringe. The violence is generally aimed at symbols of the prevailing social structure, not at people. Because property is the most common target, casualties tend to be lower in commodity riots than communal riots. The majority riots during the 1960s were commodity riotsⁱ.

Disorders in Miami and Crown Heights, Brooklyn during the 1980s and 1990s were marked by inter-ethnic violence, suggesting a return to communal type disordersⁱⁱ. But the 1992 Los Angeles riots demonstrated that something more complex might be developing. They challenged the distinction between communal and commodity riots. In keeping with the theory of commodity riots, the main targets were stores and structures symbolic of authority, but the ethnic diversity of the arrested persons was something new. There seems to be a new element of interethnic and interclass conflict involved that makes recent disorders much more dangerous. These developments suggest that cities should monitor intergroup tensions seriously.

The 1992 LA riot challenged the established theory. It began not with an arrest, as many of the 1960s riots did, but with the announcement of a trial verdict. The difference is important because it began with an anticipated, yet unscheduled event (an announcement of a verdict) that allowed crowds to gather quickly. Unlike the 1960s, rioters used more firearms and assaulted fire department personnel more frequently. When it was over, 55 people died. Unlike riots in the 1960s where most of the fatalities resulted from National Guard and law enforcement fire, most fatalities in LA were caused by rioters or people defending themselves from themⁱⁱⁱ.

Most of the municipalities that suffered severe disorders were reluctant to activate their disaster plans and sought to downplay the events until it was too late^{iv}. The official studies of the mid-1960s riots, the LA riots, and the Crown Heights riots all noted this tendency. It seems harder for local government to admit that damage caused by citizens has gotten out of their control than if the damage had been caused by natural forces.

Protest and Civil Disobedience

Organized protest has long been a cherished right of Americans and a hallmark of the right to freedom of speech. The vast majority of protest is peaceful. For local governments, the right of citizens to protest must be balanced against the rights of non-protesting citizens to conduct their own business. Typically, this is accomplished by rules designed to permit non-protesting citizens to move freely and to respect private property. Use of the street requires a street use permit because it closes the street to other users for the duration of the demonstration. When conflict arises between demonstrators and law enforcement, it is frequently centered on the use of streets and private property.

Civil disobedience also has a long history in the U.S. It is the peaceful refusal by a group of people to obey laws or pay taxes that they regard as unjust and as a means to persuade the government to change them. Sometimes there is not a direct connection between the law broken (e.g., trespass) and the issue being protested, as when demonstrators blockade a private business to protest what the business is doing.



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Despite the peaceful nature of most protest and civil disobedience, they are disruptive and have the potential to degenerate into violence. The 1968 Democratic Convention is the archetype of this type of disorder. Most planned events involve a protest rally or march. Protest leaders and law enforcement can meet before the event to develop mutual understanding. Sometimes, this pre-planning does not work because one or both sides will not or cannot control its people on the street.

Strikes

Strikes are the organized stoppage or slowdown of work in order to force an employer to grant concessions. Today many strikes are legally protected. Some critically important workers do not have the right to strike. The vast majority of strikes are legal and peaceful. They are disruptive to the businesses or organizations involved, but they have limited impact on the whole community. Examples of strikes that affect the whole community have become rare and are often illegal. The air traffic controllers' strike of 1981 was one example.

A general strike is a work stoppage by a critical mass of workers in a location. There has not been a general strike in the United States since the Great Depression. They are very hard to organize and maintain.

History

Seattle has experienced periodic civil disorder, large scale, disruptive protest and strikes throughout its history. The issues have been different in each case. The tactics used in the disruptions have also evolved.

1886 Anti-Chinese Mob

Seattle's first large civil disturbance occurred in 1886 when a mob attempted to evict Chinese residents from the city. The mayor called out the militia to prevent the expulsion. The mob resisted. Fighting erupted and the troops fired on the crowd, killing two people^v.

1919 The Seattle General Strike

The next wave of civil disorder centered on the labor movement. There were disturbances from 1900 to 1919, but there was no large-scale violence in Seattle itself as there was in other parts of the state. The biggest event was the general strike of 1919 that lasted for three days and passed without violent incident. After 1919, the labor unrest declined.

The 1960s

After 1919, there were no large incidents of civil disorder until the 1960s. During those upheavals, Seattle remained a secondary site for national trends. As with the rest of the nation, Seattle experienced strife connected with racial tensions, the Vietnam War and the youth movement.

1967 Post MLK Assassination Disorders.

The late 60s were a period high racial tension nationally. During the summer of 1967, disorder broke out in many cities. The unrest spread here, but it was minor compared to other trouble spots^{vi}. Even though Seattle avoided additional large scale incidents, tensions remained high and resulted in several police officer shootings during the late 1960s and early 1970s.



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1969 University District Parties.

The social changes involving young people also led to trouble. In 1969, youths and police confronted each other in the University District over two nights. The flashpoint was the attempt to shut down parties.

1969 – 1973 Vietnam

Seattle saw several large marches against the Vietnam War, but these were mostly peaceful. Most of these happened from 1969 to 1973. In the last large protest, a crowd closed I-5.

1992 Rodney King Verdict

Following the early 1970s, there were no major incidents of civil disorder until the Rodney King verdict and the disturbances that ensued. The night of the verdict, small groups of people roamed the downtown streets smashing windows, lighting dumpster fires and overturning cars. The next day, there was a rally at the Federal Building. Many residents and workers feared more violence and avoided downtown. After the rally broke up, some groups moved around downtown as they did the night before. Others went to Capitol Hill where they set fires and attacked the East Precinct Police Headquarters. The fires provoked a citywide crisis. Suburban fire trucks were called in to help as the city exhausted all of its mutual aid. Another protest occurred in the University District. That protest was largely peaceful, but protesters did occupy I-5 for a while, shutting down traffic^{vii}.

1999 WTO Protests

From November 29 to December 3, 1999, Seattle hosted the World Trade Organization (WTO) conference. Despite several months of preparation, protests quickly got out of control. During the first day of the conference, a large confrontation lasted all day in the area near the convention center. This confrontation quickly turned ugly. Some of the protesters threw rocks and bottles. The police responded with tear gas, pepper spray, and blunt impact projectiles (bean-bag, cork, and rubber). Over 500 people were arrested. There were no deaths; 89 people were treated at local hospitals. The Mayor responded by declaring a state of emergency that established a limited curfew in the area surrounding the conference site and hotels. The Washington State National Guard was mobilized. The next day saw a smaller downtown protest, but the night saw a police action on Capitol Hill.

The number of protesters (over 30,000), their tactics and their organization overwhelmed the approximately 400 police officers securing the conference venues. The protest was a loosely affiliated federation of activist groups. The protest organizers divided downtown into thirteen wedges. Each group was given one wedge. Their use of the Internet, cell phones, radios and other technologies combined with a very loosely structured organizational structure and more provocative tactics was unprecedented in Seattle. Many groups were non-violent but seemed determined to provoke an active police response. A small group of protesters was violent. They were joined by non-politically motivated individuals in committing acts of vandalism, smashing windows, spray painting buildings and setting fires. Both the protest groups and the police seemed to get better at isolating these people and avoiding violent confrontation as the week continued.

2001. Mardi Gras

In February 2001, chaos erupted for two nights in a row during Mardi Gras. A crowd between 5,000 and 7,000 began to fight and vandalize property. Police officers were withdrawn from the crowd over concerns for officer safety and to avoid inciting the crowd. One person was killed in the melee. Damage was estimated between \$100,000 and \$200,000. This was a pure riot. There was no element of protest involved. An after action review recommended intervening to disperse the crowd sooner.



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Likelihood of Future Occurrence

Disruptive social activity has regularly occurred in Seattle and will definitely happen again, yet the form that future events will take cannot be reliably predicted. Each of the major historical events revolved around different issues and took a different form. The most significant events seem to occur when Seattle is the primary focus of a conflict rather than a secondary site. This helps explain why the WTO event was larger than the Rodney King Incident. It suggests that the next large incident will be centered on an event happening in Seattle. Seattle's emergence as a leading cultural and economic center increases the chance that controversial events like WTO will occur here in the future.

Vulnerability

Seattle is the social hub of the Puget Sound region. This fact means that it is both more likely to experience large scale social disruptions and to be more severely impacted by them. Most of these events are planned and target community vulnerabilities, places, or systems where pressure will be most easily felt.

Most disorders in Seattle occur in locations that already have a lot of public assemblies (Downtown, Capitol Hill, and the University District), around large public institutions (the Federal Building, the University of Washington, Seattle Central Community College and the King County Jail), and occasionally on major transportation routes like I-5.

Large-scale incidents require large numbers of police officers. Mutual aid is a critical component of a successful response. Bringing in officers from neighboring jurisdictions is a common occurrence, but it is also a vulnerability because it requires extra time and planning. During WTO, law enforcement personnel were understaffed. This was one reason the situation escalated.

Transportation routes are vulnerable to disruption. Seattle lacks significant reserve capacity in its road network. I-5 is by far the most heavily used corridor in Seattle. Because of its significance, demonstrations have targeted it. The only mitigating factor is that traffic is so frequently bad that many drivers are used to slowdowns.

Many businesses are vulnerable to civil disorder. Downtown is a frequent site of demonstrations. The WTO protests closed large parts of downtown at the start of the holiday season. Some businesses are direct targets of property crime. Others suffer indirectly due a lack of business. The holiday season is an especially vulnerable time for retail businesses.

On several occasions ethnic, racial, religious and political groups have been targets of mob violence. Most of the examples from Seattle's history are long in the past. The Jewish Federation shooting, although it was not mob violence, provides evidence that the sentiments that lead to mob violence are still with us. Groups or communities that are perceived to be connected with hot button topics are especially vulnerable.

Confidence in government and community reputation are two factors that are especially vulnerable to these types of events. They are a direct challenge to law enforcement and the political authorities. While the response to any disaster is very important, it is especially critical when people are directly challenging the authorities. Besides the loss of faith in the authorities, a community's reputation and confidence in itself are sensitive to conflict.



Consequences

Because the pace of social change is orders of magnitude greater than the physical forces that cause floods or earthquakes, it is impossible to talk about “100-year civil disorders” the way we talk about “100 year floods.” Still, the framework of examining a most likely scenario and a maximum credible scenario remain.

Every several decades, Seattle seems to go through spasms related to a hot button social issue. In the late 19th century it was immigration, in the early 20th, it was labor unrest; in the 1960s, it was a lot of things, Vietnam, intergenerational conflict, and race; in the 1990s, race again and globalization. The Mardi Gras incident was similar to the 1969 University District troubles but had more conflict between people in the crowd with alcohol, crowding, and racial tensions as contributing factors.

Seattle will surely face incidents similar to past disorders and protests that have either stemmed mostly from local causes (Mardi Gras) or featured Seattle as a secondary site to events spread across the country (Vietnam Protests). These incidents have been smaller, but as the Mardi Gras incident shows, they can be violent.

Most of these incidents are confined to one neighborhood. They feature widespread minor property damage and injuries due to the dispersal of crowds or fighting between members of the crowd. Usually they are limited to one or two nights of intense activity, although sometimes they are followed by a longer period of tension and low-level conflict.

Public Safety

Public safety is always the number one concern during socially disruptive events. Any event that involves heated confrontation between groups can degenerate into violence, even if the original event was supposed to be non-violent. Nationally, many civil disorders have resulted in fatalities. Until 2001, Seattle was very lucky and had not suffered loss of life through many demonstrations, protests and large confrontations. That changed in 2001 when Kris Kime was struck in the head and killed during the 2001 Mardi Gras riots.

While injuries have been more common lately, we do not know how many have occurred. Many injuries resulted from the WTO protests, but the total is not known. The examples given in the press include bruises, sprains and some broken bones. Several police officers were injured as well.

It is probable that future disorders will again be directed mostly against property. Furthermore, the destruction of property has been selective and will probably be selective in the future. Most of it is aimed at government facilities and establishments that are perceived to be at the root of whatever controversy that sparked the disorder. So far, the damage has been limited to vandalism and, less commonly, arson.

One of the most insidious impacts of civil disorder is psychological. Following a civil disturbance, most people in a community feel violated regardless of their opinion on the issues at hand. The amount of live media coverage today magnifies these feelings. People watching events on their television sets or connected through real-time electronic communications feel personally connected to what they are witnessing. This mood of mass victimization is the most widespread effect of a civil disturbance. These effects can last for years.

Indirect effects can have a large effect. Cities often worry about being stigmatized and losing investment and tourism as a result. This concern appears justified when the violence has been highly visible. The Los Angeles Times reported that commercial real estate investment and tourism slowed down after the L.A. riots, in some areas for years. Seattle’s disorders have never been as scrutinized as those in other locations. If Seattle’s disorders continue to be secondary events to larger disturbances elsewhere, it is unlikely the city will suffer any economic backlash.



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While it is impossible to know what groups or issues could be involved in a future conflict, the worst type of incident Seattle could face would feature a large, violent crowd, an overwhelmed police force, and some kind of conflict between groups. It could be a large, more violent WTO-type protest or large-scale violence directed at a minority group. Such situations are very unlikely but not implausible.

These incidents would be spread over several neighborhoods and a longer duration of time. They might involve large groups of people organizing to harm other groups of people. Property damage would be more severe. Given that Seattle’s biggest incidents have occurred when Seattle is the focal point for a large international or national issue, there would probably be people from outside the area coming to participate. The reputation of the community and government would probably be severely tarnished.

Most Likely Scenario

A riot occurs after a well-attended, evening football game at Husky Stadium. Fueled by alcohol, the crowd of mostly college students, turns over cars, sets fires, and engages in a pitched battle with the outnumbered law enforcement officers. The crowd, estimated at 25,000, moves onto campus where dormitory and Greek Row residents join the rioters. Several people are injured and two are killed.

Category	Impacts 1 = low 5 = high	Narrative
Frequency	5	Seattle has experienced civil disorder in every decade since the 1960's. Seattle has not experienced major sports violence, but many cities, including Vancouver have.
Geographic Scope	3	This riot affects the University District.
Duration	1	The worst rioting happens on one night. Some participants return the following night, but the second night does not have the same intensity.
Health Effects, Deaths and Injuries	2	Two people are killed. One is murdered in a fight and another falls off a roof. 45 people suffer injuries requiring medical attention.
Displaced Households and Suffering	4	Apartment and university dorm residents leave the area and seek shelter during the riot. 1 apartment building burns. Its 124 residents need longer term shelter.
Economy	1	Stores on the Ave have broken windows and five stores are looted.
Environment	1	The riot does not affect the environment.
Structures	2	Rioters loot five stores and set dumpster fires. One of them spreads to an older commercial building on the Ave. Fire crews are unable to reach it before it becomes fully involved.
Transportation	2	The incident closes streets in the U-District. Small groups are caught dropping objects onto I-5.
Critical Services and Utilities	1	Critical services and utilities are maintained throughout the city except in areas directly affected by the riot.
Confidence in Government	3	Some members of the public think that the authorities should have anticipated the potential for violence and done more to prepare.
Cascading Effects	2	The rioters cause major fire that burns commercial buildings and an apartment complex.



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Maximum Credible Scenario

Unforeseen political or social conflict raises tensions between social groups to an unprecedented level. An event triggers a flood of anger directed at one of these groups. The larger groups attack the smaller groups in a deliberate manner to terrorize them and drive them out of the area. Government intervenes to prevent widespread violence. Houses, businesses and gathering places are firebombed. Casualties are high due to the deliberate and premeditated targeting of people. There is no evidence to suggest any specific groups that would be party to this scenario and it does not speculate.

Category	Impacts 1 = low 5 = high	Narrative
Frequency	2	The type of disorder in which one social group attacks another in a semi-organized fashion is rarer than attacks against property or symbols of authority. In Seattle, this type of disorder has only happened once and that was in the 19th century. While contemporary culture seems more enlightened, history can always repeat itself..
Geographic Scope	5	The social conflicts imagined in this scenario are felt throughout the region, but especially strongly in Seattle. Flash points emerge in multiple locations.
Duration	3	The most serious part of the incident lasts for five days. The conflict builds over two days. The most serious rioting happens on the third day. The following two days, law enforcement contains further violence.
Health Effects, Deaths and Injuries	3	19 people are killed when they are attacked in the street or in their homes. 245 people are injured enough to require medical attention.
Displaced Households and Suffering	5	The attacks terrorize a community causing hundreds of households to seek safety.
Economy	3	Businesses in affected neighborhoods have to close during the incident. 5 businesses are destroyed. Afterwards, people are afraid to return to areas that experienced conflict and investors are reluctant to put their money into the areas.
Environment	1	There are no major environmental problems that arise from this incident.
Structures	3	34 buildings are destroyed and 75 are damaged.
Transportation	2	Transportation in and through affected neighborhoods stops. Law enforcement maintains a strong presence in many parts of the city which impedes traffic flow. There is no structural damage to the transportation system.
Critical Services and Utilities	2	Fire and emergency medical services cannot be delivered in affected areas. Power outages occur due to fires and deliberate sabotage.
Confidence in Government	5	Some members of the public think that the authorities should have anticipated the potential for violence and done more to prepare.
Cascading Effects	2	The civil disorder is an ugly event. Many people are upset it occurred and think that the government should have been able to prevent it. Victims blame the government for allowing them to be attacked. Perpetrators and their sympathizers resent law enforcement for stopping them from doing more damage.



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Conclusion

With the very notable exception of the WTO disturbances, Seattle has only seen civil disorder that echoed events focused in other locations. Because we have been a secondary site, the disorders have not been as big. Probably that trend will continue. The exception, WTO, was sparked by an international conference and not social conditions that are endemic to our community. Most of the violence has been looting, vandalism and street fires. The most dangerous kind of disorder happens spontaneously in multiple locations hampering law enforcement's efforts to contain it.

ⁱ Janowitz, 1969

ⁱⁱ Porter and Dunn 1984, Girgenti, 1993

ⁱⁱⁱ LA Times, 1992

^{iv} Webster, 1992; Girgenti, 1993

^v Sale, 1976.

^{vi} Kerner, 1968.

^{vii} Inside the LA Riots, 1992.