

Conflicts Between White Women and Black Women, and Their Employers, in the Wartime Industrial World

KAREN TUCKER ANDERSON

As a result of the increasing demand for workers in all categories of employment, and especially in the high-paying manufacturing sector, the full employment of World War II posed the most serious challenge in American history to the traditional management preference for white male labor in primary sector jobs. The war years were especially important for blacks, who benefited from a rapidly expanding labor force, changing racial values, a revitalized migration out of the rural South, and the attempted enforcement of equal employment opportunity under a presidential executive order. Although scholars have given some attention to the labor-force fortunes of blacks in the war economy, few have considered the impact of the wartime expansion on black women, who constituted 600,000 of the 1,000,000 blacks who entered paid employment during the war years. Those who have focused on black women have stressed the degree to which the war opened new job categories and fostered mobility. William Chafe, for example, contends that the opportunities generated by the wartime economy and the long-term changes they fostered constituted a "second emancipation" for black women. According to Dale L. Hiestand, occupational shifts by black women workers during the 1940s promoted substantial income improvement.

A careful examination of the labor-force status of black women during the 1940s brings into question such sanguine pronouncements. Focusing on the wartime experiences of black women provides insight into the nature of prejudice as manifested and experienced by women and into the sources and mechanisms of labor-force discrimination in a particular historical context. It also examines the relative importance of managerial intransigence and facilitates an examination of the perpetuating discriminatory employment practices. In addition, it gives an indication of the importance of tight labor markets in fostering economic mobility for minority group women.

Labor force statistics support the contention that the war marked an important break with the historic allocation of work by race and sex. Between 1940 and 1944 the proportion of employed black women engaged in domestic service and 1944 from 59.9 percent to 44.6 percent, although their share of jobs in this field increased because white women exited from private household work in even greater proportions. In addition, the percentage of the black female labor force in farm work was cut in half, as many from the rural South migrated to urban areas in response to the demand for war workers. The shift of large numbers of black women from work in farms and homes to work in factories resulted in the proportion of black females employed in industrial occupations rising from 6.5 percent to 18 percent during the war. A comparable expansion also occurred in personal service

From Karen Tucker Anderson, "Last Hired, First Fired: Black Women Workers During World War II," *Journal of American History* 69 (June 1982): 82-97.

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Labor force statistics support the contention that the war marked an important break with the historic allocation of work by race and sex. Between 1940 and 1944 the proportion of employed black women engaged in domestic service declined from 59.9 percent to 44.6 percent, although their share of jobs in this field increased because white women exited from private household work in even greater proportions. In addition, the percentage of the black female labor force in farm work was cut in half, as many from the rural South migrated to urban areas in response to the demand for war workers. The shift of large numbers of black women from work in farms and homes to work in factories resulted in the proportion of black females employed in industrial occupations rising from 6.5 percent to 18 percent during the war. A comparable expansion also occurred in personal service

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work outside of the private household, which claimed 17.9 percent of black women workers in 1944.

To stress only the improvement wrought during the war, however, is to understate the extent to which discrimination persisted and to ignore the fact that the assumptions of a historically balkanized labor force continued to determine the distribution of the benefits of a full employment economy. When faced with a shortage of white male workers, employers had various options. They could seek workers from other areas of the country, hoping that this would enable them to minimize the changes produced by the wartime expansion, or they could rely on underutilized elements of the local labor supply—workers in nonessential employment, women, blacks, and older and younger workers. If unable to secure large numbers of white male in-migrants and unwilling to modify hiring patterns too dramatically, they could limit production, sacrificing output to prejudice.

Those who decided to employ substantially increased numbers of women and/or minorities established a complex hierarchy of hiring preferences based on the composition of the local labor force and the nature of the work to be done. In light industries, women workers became the first recourse of employers unable to recruit large numbers of white males. In the airframe industry, for example, women constituted 40.6 percent of the employees by November 1943, while blacks claimed only 3.5 percent of airframe jobs. Employers in heavy industries, by contrast, sought minority males as a preferred source of labor, with the result that the level of utilization of women depended on the minority population of an area. In Baltimore, for example, blacks comprised up to 20 percent of the shipbuilding workers while women represented only 4 percent. Seattle, which had only a small black population, relied on women for 16 percent of its shipyard employees.

Whatever the hierarchy of preference, however, black women could always be found at the bottom. The dramatic expansion of jobs for women did not necessarily mean the opening up of new categories of employment for minority group women. A survey conducted by the United Auto Workers (UAW) in April 1943 found that only 74 out of 280 establishments that employed women in production work were willing to hire black women. Similarly, a 1943 study by the National Metal Trades Association revealed that only twenty-nine out of sixty-two plants that used women workers had black women in their employ. Moreover, most of them used black women only in janitorial positions. Even some employers willing to hire white women and black men in large numbers balked at including black women in their work forces. At the Wagner Electric Corporation in Saint Louis, for example, 64 percent of the employees were white women, 24 percent were black males, and 12 percent were white males. The company refused to hire black women throughout the war, even in the face of a January 1945 order from the President's Committee on Fair Employment Practice (FEPC) to cease all discrimination.

Because of the mobilization of large numbers of young men by the military, the availability of white women for aircraft and munitions work, the nature of the jobs being created during the war, and the depth of the prejudice against black women, the male labor force proved to be more racially flexible than the female labor force. While the number of all blacks employed in manufacturing increased 135 percent between April 1940 and January 1946, the number of black women in such work rose only 59 percent. Blacks made their greatest wartime gains in heavily

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male-employing industrial fields; by January 1945 they constituted 25 percent of the labor force in foundries, 11.7 percent in shipbuilding, and 11.8 percent in blast furnaces and steel mills. By contrast, nonwhites accounted for only 5.8 percent of employees in aircraft and 2.7 percent of those in electrical equipment production. In the traditional female fields of clerical and sales, the gains of black women were negligible—their share of female clerical jobs rose from 0.7 percent to 1.6 percent while their proportion in the female sales force declined from 1.2 percent to 1.1 percent.

One of the most important and obdurate of the industries that fought the employment of black women during the war was the auto industry. Led by the negative example of the Ford Motor Company, which refused to hire nonwhite women in any but token numbers, the auto companies persisted in rejecting trained black female applicants or in limiting their employment to a few work categories until very late in the war. When referred to the automakers by the United States Employment Service (USES) in response to calls for women workers, black women found that the white women accompanying them would be hired immediately while they would be told to await a later call, a call that would never come. When Samella Banks, along with five white women, applied to Cadillac Motor Company in November 1942, she was told that there might be a janitress opening in a day or two while they were hired as welder trainees. As a result, much of the expansion of the female labor force in industrial work occurred before economic or political pressures necessitated the hiring of black women. By February 1943 nonwhite women had claimed only 1,000 of the 96,000 jobs held by women in major war industries in Detroit. Consequently, most nonwhite females were confined to work in low-paying service and other unskilled categories, and those who landed industrial jobs had so little seniority that their postwar fate was guaranteed.

As was generally the case with wartime racial discrimination in employment, the most frequent employer rationale for excluding nonwhite women was the fear that white opposition to the change might cause work slowdowns or strikes. An examination of the nature and goals of coworker prejudice during the war years provides some possible answers to the question of whether such prejudice is rooted in an aversion to social contact in a context of equality or is primarily a calculated attempt on the part of whites to maintain an exploitative economic advantage. When the former issue is the basic concern, it is manifested in a desire to exclude blacks altogether or to segregate them on the job. When the latter is the wellspring of white workplace prejudice, it is evidenced, not in a wish to segregate black workers, but in an attempt to prevent the hiring of blacks or to limit them to particular low-paying job categories.

During the war years, white male hostility to expanded job opportunities for black men focused primarily on the issue of promotion rather than on hiring or segregation. Although some strikes occurred when black men were admitted to entry-level jobs or over the issue of integrating the workplace, most white-male hate strikes took place when black male workers were promoted into jobs at higher skill and pay levels. This was a product of the fact that black men had been employed as janitors and unskilled laborers in many defense industries prior to the war and sought promotions as opportunities expanded. White males thus seemed to be concerned primarily with maintaining their advantaged economic position. Moreover, their resistance to the elimination of discrimination was more tenacious and more

effective than was the opposition of white women to the opening of opportunities for black women. Control over labor unions, whose opposition to black entry into previously white jobs proved an effective barrier to change in many cases, gave white males more power to translate prejudice into employer discrimination.

For women workers, on the other hand, the desire to maintain social distance, rather than a wish to safeguard economic prerogatives, seemed to be the dominant motivation in many cases. White female workers frequently objected to working closely with black women or sharing facilities with them because they feared that blacks were dirty or diseased. Work stoppages occurred in several places after the introduction of black women into the female work force. More than 2,000 white women employed at the U.S. Rubber plant in Detroit walked off the job in March 1943, demanding separate bathroom facilities. A similar walkout occurred at the Western Electric plant in Baltimore in summer 1943. In both cases management refused to segregate the facilities and appealed to patriotic and egalitarian values to persuade the striking workers to return to their jobs. Significantly, the one hate strike by white women workers that focused on upgrading as well as integration, the Dan River strike in 1944, was in a traditional female-employing industry. . . .

As a result of the idiosyncratic nature of employer practices during the war, some areas and some employers offered greater employment opportunities for black women than others. Aircraft plants in the Los Angeles area, for example, began hiring black women for production work relatively early by comparison with similar operations in other areas of the country. As a result, by 1945 black women could be found doing industrial work in all Los Angeles aircraft plants; 2,000 were employed by North American Aviation alone. Among the automakers, the Briggs plant in Detroit deviated from industry patterns and hired substantial numbers of black women. In Saint Louis, where defense industry discrimination against black women was the general rule, the Curtiss-Wright Company and the U.S. Cartridge Company eased the situation somewhat by providing industrial jobs for hundreds of nonwhite women. These examples, however, were not typical of employer response; restrictive hiring and segregation remained the rule, even in industries faced with severe labor shortages. Nowhere was this truer than in the South, where traditional practices remained virtually unchanged.

Even when defense employers broke with tradition and hired nonwhite women, they generally segregated them from other women workers and employed them only for certain kinds of work, usually that which was arduous, dirty, hot, or otherwise disagreeable. A cursory study of black women workers done by the Women's Bureau of the United States Department of Labor in 1945 revealed that in many cases nonwhite women were disproportionately represented among women employed in outside labor gangs, in foundries, and in industrial service work. On the ore docks of the Great Lakes, for example, the survey found women, predominantly black, shoveling the leavings of ore from the bottoms of ships onto hoists. According to the USES, the meat-packing industry in Detroit resorted to black women in large numbers during the war years to take jobs others had spurned. On the railroads minority group women found employment in substantial numbers as laborers, loaders, car cleaners, and waitresses. The city of Baltimore first broke with its policy of hiring only whites for street-cleaning work in the immediate prewar period when it began hiring black males; by 1943, when the black male labor force was

completely exhausted, the city turned to the only labor reserve left—the large numbers of unemployed and underemployed black females.

The insistence by some employers on segregated work arrangements and facilities served as a rationale for excluding black women altogether or limiting their numbers to conform to physical plant requirements. The Glenn Martin Aircraft Company, for example, hired the same proportion of nonwhite women for its integrated plant in Omaha, where the black population was quite small, as it did for its Baltimore operations, where black women constituted a substantial proportion of the local labor supply. In Baltimore, however, their numbers were limited because they had to be assigned only to a small separate subassembly plant. A small aircraft parts firm in Los Angeles asserted that it could not hire black women because it separated workers by sex as well as by race and could not further complicate its managerial and supervisory difficulties. At the Norfolk Navy Yard, management excluded black women from most production jobs on the grounds that women workers had to be segregated by race, although the racial integration of male workers was an accomplished fact. As a result, black men worked in a wide variety of jobs at all skill levels in the yard while the jobs assigned to women were virtually monopolized by whites. . . .

The major agency charged with enforcing equal opportunity in employment regardless of race, religion, or national origin was the FEPC, an agency created in 1941 by executive order of President Franklin D. Roosevelt in response to a threatened march on Washington by civil rights groups protesting discriminatory policies by war contractors. Although the FEPC could theoretically recommend the removal of war contracts from those who continued to discriminate and the WMC [War Manpower Commission] could restrict work permits to enforce federal hiring policies, the federal government was not inclined to hamper the production of essential war materials in order to foster racial equity. As a result, the agency had to rely on behind-the-scenes negotiations and the possibility of adverse publicity generated by public hearings. Although effective in some cases, such tools proved ineffectual against recalcitrant violators, whose ranks included some major war industries. The large volume of complaints and the bureaucratic delays inherent in the situation facilitated evasion, even on the part of blatant violators officially ordered to cease restrictive hiring practices. Moreover, the reliance on individual, documented complaints rather than on employer hiring patterns as the basis for action hampered effective enforcement.

The decision by Roosevelt to place the FEPC under the jurisdiction of the WMC in July 1942 also handicapped the agency in its efforts to end employment discrimination. WMC head Paul McNutt, never enthusiastic regarding the FEPC's goals and afraid that they were incompatible with his agency's responsibility for allocating scarce manpower within war industries, canceled scheduled FEPC hearings on discrimination by the railroads and generally made racial equity a low priority within WMC. Even after the FEPC was removed from the WMC in May 1943, it was hampered in its efforts to enforce the law by the unwillingness of southern representatives of the WMC and the USES to cooperate in reporting and seeking to change discriminatory practices. Although the USES had agreed in September 1943 to refuse to fill employer requests for workers when they included racial restrictions, its agents in the South frequently disregarded this directive.

Thus, when blacks with defense training applied for appropriate work, they were often referred to jobs outside the area. The persistence of discrimination, despite a federal commitment to eliminate it, hampered the ability of all blacks, male and female, to find industrial employment in the region that still claimed a majority of the black population.

In its official policies the FEPC treated discrimination against black women as seriously as discrimination against black males, although its rate of success in enforcing compliance in women's cases lagged somewhat behind the rate for men. After its 1944 hearings in Saint Louis, the FEPC ruled that a company that hired black males while discriminating against black women was still in violation of the executive order, noting that "partial compliance is partial violation." Despite pressure from civil rights groups on behalf of black women workers and occasional threats of strikes by black male workers, the equal opportunity machinery of the government proved unable to aid minority women in any substantial way. By the time the agency had investigated, negotiated, or held hearings, much valuable time had been lost. For women, this could be especially damaging because it meant that anything beyond token conformity could be jeopardized by employer unwillingness to expand the female work force late in the war.

The Carter Carburetor Company in Saint Louis, for example, managed a minimal compliance with an FEPC order to cease discriminating when it came to black men, but refused in April 1944 to hire any black women on the grounds that it had no intention of hiring any more women. Although the government continued to pressure the company, it stood by its policies. The Allied Tent Manufacturing Company in New Orleans claimed to have instituted a nondiscriminatory policy regarding women workers when it announced its intention in June 1945 to replace all its women machine operators with men (white and black), having decided that women workers had proved themselves "unsatisfactory." Federal enforcement officials thus found that labor-market forces late in the war provided a rationale and a means for continued resistance by those employers intent on circumventing federal hiring policies regarding black women.

The organization that was most cognizant of persisting discrimination against black women and most active in fighting against it was the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). As early as August 1942, Detroit NAACP officer Gloster Current wrote to McNutt of the WMC, complaining that the Ford Motor Company was discriminating against black females as it hired thousands of whites for work at the Willow Run Bomber Plant. In March 1943 the Detroit NAACP cooperated with the United Auto Workers Inter-Racial Committee in staging a large rally to protest continued discrimination against black women in hiring and black men in promotion on the part of Detroit's war industries. Thereafter both groups continued to pressure employers and government officials at all levels on the issue. In a statement prepared for presentation to the House manpower committee, the NAACP evinced its awareness that the situation was not unique to Detroit but was a national problem resulting in the serious underutilization of black womanpower. . . .

Job retention was a serious issue for those women who landed industrial work during the war. The persistence of discrimination and the late entry of black women into production work, rather than their on-the-job conduct, meant that nonwhite

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females were more likely than others to experience layoffs resulting from contract completions or seasonal cutbacks. Once fired, they faced great difficulties in finding comparable work. According to an official of the Baltimore Urban League, white women there with industrial experience were easily reabsorbed by war industries while black women were being referred by the USES to work as maids, counter girls, and laundry pressers. As would be the case for all unemployed women after the war, those who turned down such jobs faced the possibility of losing their unemployment benefits for refusing suitable work. Black women thus experienced a much greater degree of job discontinuity than others during the war, hampering their ability to accumulate seniority.

Once the war was over and American industry began its postwar contraction, those black women who had held industrial jobs during the war found that their concentration in contracting industries, their low seniority, and their sex contributed to employment difficulties in the postwar period. American women, black and white, were overrepresented among those experiencing layoffs in durable good industries. When management began rehiring workers in the reconversion period, it reinstituted most prewar discriminatory policies regarding working women, even to the point of disregarding their seniority rights, a practice facilitated by union acquiescence. USES officials reinforced employer policies by denying unemployment benefits to those women who refused referrals to jobs in traditional female-employing fields. To a greater extent than white women, black women were victimized by the postwar eviction of women from jobs in durable goods industries. . . .

In other work categories black women fared somewhat better in the postwar years. Although some apparently lost employment in service, sales, and clerical work as a result of competition from displaced white women, most managed to maintain their hold on lower-level jobs in the female work force. Despite attempts by USES officials in some local offices to force black women to return to domestic service work by threatening to withhold unemployment compensation benefits, enough job opportunities in other categories remained available to prevent a massive return to household work. Even so, domestic service remained the primary occupation of black women, providing employment to 782,520 in 1950, 40 percent of the black female work force.

As a result of the wartime experience, black women made substantial progress in the operatives occupational category, although their position in this area deteriorated somewhat in the late 1940s. One of the most important areas of expansion for nonwhite women was the apparel industry, which witnessed a 350 percent increase in black female employment during the 1940s. By 1950, it offered employment to 56,910 black women and ranked second in the operatives category behind laundry and dry cleaning establishments, where 105,000 black females were employed. Other major sources of industrial work for women, including textiles, remained virtually closed to blacks during the 1940s. In the durable goods industries, which had experienced the greatest wartime expansion, black women were a rarity in the postwar period. In 1950, only 60 black women held jobs as operatives in aircraft plants, while 2,730 claimed similar positions in the auto industry.

In the long run, the greatest benefit of the wartime experience for black women workers derived from their movement in large numbers out of the poverty of the rural South to the possibilities provided by an urban, industrialized economy. The extent

to which those possibilities were realized in the decade of the 1940s can be overstated, however. Both during and after the war, black women entered the urban female labor force in large numbers only to occupy its lowest rungs. Largely excluded from clerical and sales work, the growth sectors of the female work force, black women found work primarily in service jobs outside the household and in unskilled blue-collar categories. Although many experienced some upward mobility during the war, their relative position within the American economy remained the same.

Wartime circumstances illustrate the extent to which an economic system that had historically allocated work according to race and sex could tolerate a high level of unemployment and underemployment even in a time of labor shortage in order to minimize the amount of change generated by temporary and aberrant conditions. By stressing the modification of traditional patterns fostered by rapid economic growth, scholars ignore the degree to which prejudices inhibited change and constrained the rate of economic expansion even in the face of strong patriotic, political, and economic incentives favoring expanded output at all cost. For black women, especially, what is significant about the war experience is the extent to which barriers remained intact.

Wartime Conflicts Between Sailors, Chicano Youths, and the Police in Los Angeles

EDWARD J. ESCOBAR

Between 3 and 10 June 1943 the city of Los Angeles was rocked by the worst rioting it had seen to that point in the twentieth century. For eight days scores of American servicemen, sometimes joined by civilians and even police officers, roamed the streets of the city in search of Mexican American youths wearing a distinctive style of dress called a zoot suit. When they found the zoot-suiters, the servicemen attacked and beat them, tearing off their clothes and leaving them naked and bleeding in gutters. As the riots progressed, the level of violence escalated, with servicemen entering bars, theaters, dance halls, restaurants, and even private homes in search of victims. Toward the end of the rioting, the servicemen expanded their attacks to include all Mexican Americans, whether they wore zoot suits or not, as well as African Americans. The rioting did not subside until the War Department made Los Angeles out of bounds to military personnel.

An illuminating aspect of the riots was the role of the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD). Rather than enforcing the law impartially, police officers handled the rioting in a biased manner. They allowed the servicemen to beat and strip the zoot-suiters, and after the servicemen had left the scene, they moved in and arrested the Mexican American youths for disturbing the peace. Police, in fact, detained

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only a handful of servicemen but arrested over six hundred Mexican Americans during the riots.

... Police, along with local civic leaders, believed that Mexican American youths, especially young males, were inclined toward violent crime and constituted a severe social problem. ...

... [B]efore World War II the LAPD, like other big city police departments, had not yet linked race and crime in any systematic manner. ... The zoot suit riots and the anti-Mexican hysteria that preceded them changed all that, convincing the LAPD that Mexican Americans constituted a serious crime problem and that the department needed to develop training, deployment, and general policing strategies for dealing with Mexican American crime. ... [T]he assumptions reached and the strategies developed by the LAPD regarding the inherent criminality of racial minorities would have profound consequences for policing during the second half of the twentieth century.

A variety of factors during the war years contributed to the conclusion that Mexican American youths were criminally inclined and that stern measures had to be taken to control them. These included the misinterpretation of arrest statistics; the LAPD's adoption of the police professionalism model; general wartime anxieties; and the sensational press coverage of Mexican American crime that led to public hysteria over an alleged Mexican-American crime wave. More important, however, were the rise of the zoot suit fad among Mexican American youth and a corresponding belief among local civic leaders that the zoot suit represented a severe social problem and even reflected criminality within the Mexican American community.

... Since the mid-1920s the LAPD had kept detailed statistics on arrests, cross-referenced by charge and race. These statistics show that the LAPD consistently arrested Mexican Americans at a rate higher than the best estimates of their representation within the general population. During the war years, however, the LAPD began arresting significantly higher numbers of Mexican Americans, especially youths, and the department claimed that these increased arrests demonstrated that Mexican American crime was getting out of control and that Mexican Americans were criminally inclined.

By equating arrests with the actual rate of crime, however, police officials misinterpreted their own statistics. Reported crime, which is a more accurate measure of the crime rate, actually fell during 1942 and 1943, the years of the alleged crime wave. The increases in arrests resulted more from changes in the law and in police practices than from changes in Mexican Americans' behavior. Specifically, the enactment and enforcement of new statutes, such as immigration and draft laws for adults and curfew ordinances for juveniles, created new classes of laws that Mexican Americans violated, thus swelling the arrest statistics. ... Although arrests of Mexican Americans rose, only a fraction of them resulted in criminal prosecutions.

To a great extent the LAPD's excessive arrests of Mexican American youths resulted from the "war on crime" orientation that was part of the professional reform model the LAPD began adopting in 1938. An unforeseen but significant outcome of professionalism was a different relationship between the police and the community, as police changed from a responsive to a preventive force. ...

Probably the most important factor in the growing popular fear of Mexican Americans was the development of a decidedly rebellious and potentially hostile Mexican American youth culture. The symbols of this youthful rebellion were the zoot suits worn by many Mexican American youths, the distinctive argot they spoke, and a general attitude of both hostility and scorn toward white society. Whites, however, interpreted this rebelliousness not merely as a sign of youthful rambunctiousness but as evidence of the inherently pathological, antisocial, and even criminal nature of Mexican Americans.

The zoot suit phenomenon resulted primarily from the racism, discrimination, and extreme poverty that people of Mexican descent faced in the United States. Economic and social indicators confirmed that Mexican Americans constituted the most destitute racial group in the Los Angeles area during the early 1940s. Because of discrimination by employers and unions, they found employment only in the lowest-paying, most menial jobs. Thus in 1941 Mexican Americans had a yearly median family income of only \$790, or more than 29 percent below "the minimum required for decent food and housing for the average family of five persons." . . .

Mexican American youth suffered from blatant educational discrimination. Los Angeles city school officials placed Mexican American children into segregated "Mexican schools." In addition, whether in the Mexican schools or in mainstream schools, these children had to endure the racist attitudes and actions of school officials, from superintendents to classroom teachers. One school official, for example, stated that Mexican Americans were "lazy, have no ambition and won't take advantage of opportunities offered them." . . .

Such attitudes led directly to the undereducating of Mexican American children. . . . The head of a high-school business department, for example, stated: "I have no problems with the Mexicans. I take care that the first few days' work is so difficult and involved that they become discouraged and quit."

These practices proved disastrous for Mexican American children. . . . Many others, frustrated and angry, simply dropped out before finishing their education.

Mexican American youths also suffered from other forms of discrimination, especially in public places. Local officials, for example, prohibited them from using particular parks and public pools except for certain days of the week or month. . . . Some theaters seated Mexican Americans only in certain sections, and some restaurants, dance halls, and other amusements refused them admittance.

Even social service agencies designed to help citizens and promote the war effort discriminated against Mexican Americans. According to War Manpower Commission representative Guy Nunn, the activities of the Civilian Defense, the Red Cross, the War Bonds program, the Office of Price Administration Consumer Division, and the Office of Defense Health and Welfare Service "have persistently been characterized by discrimination and neglect in Spanish-speaking districts." . . .

Although these forms of public humiliation served to remind Mexican American youths of their inferior position in American society and to embitter many, perhaps no other form of discrimination created more anger in the community than the mistreatment they received from police. Probably the most common type of police misconduct was verbal abuse, in particular racial slurs. Former congressman Edward R. Roybal, who grew up in East Los Angeles, states that police officers regularly referred to Mexican Americans as "dirty Mexicans" or "cholos."

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Sexual harassment occurred as male officers hand-searched women's bodies, allegedly looking for weapons or drugs. The LAPD had such a bad reputation regarding treatment of young women that Mexican American parents told their daughters that if stranded or in trouble they should walk home rather than seek assistance from a police officer.

The practice of arbitrary "field interrogations" of Mexican Americans also angered the community. In a typical field interrogation officers would stop a car with Mexican American passengers, order everyone out, then search the car and the people for contraband. Anyone of Mexican descent was subject to these searches, but the police seem to have focused on youths. . . .

The police practice that most angered the Mexican American community was the excessive use of force or police brutality. Typically, if police officers felt young men failed to show proper deference and respect for authority, they could expect a violent reaction; but just about any response, from a look to a question, could be interpreted as lack of respect and result in a beating. . . .

The extreme poverty, the pervasive discrimination, and the constant police abuse and brutality led to rebellion and to alienation from American society by a significant segment of Mexican American youths. This rebellion generally did not manifest itself through direct challenges to constituted authority, however. Rather, Mexican American youth engaged in what sociologist Joan Moore calls a "symbolic challenge to the world" through the zoot-suiter.

The zoot suit or "drapes" represented an exercise in excess. It consisted of very baggy pants that fit high on the waist (in extreme cases all the way to the armpits), deep "reet" pleats, and narrow pegged cuffs. The coat had wide lapels and shoulder pads that resembled epaulets; it was sometimes so long that it extended to the knees. Accessories included a broad-brimmed "pancake" hat, long watch chain, and thick-soled shoes. The female equivalent of the zoot-suiter, the "cholata," also wore distinctive clothes, if not as outlandish. Her outfit, which many found sexually provocative, consisted of either a flared or a tight short skirt, tight sweater, and distinctive earrings and makeup. Boys wore long hair combed in a ducktail, while girls stacked their hair high on their heads in a pompadour. In addition to the way they dressed, some Mexican American youths spoke a special argot called Caló. The use of Caló, a derivative of a fifteenth-century Iberian Gypsy dialect, made them incomprehensible to Spanish-speaking elders and to white English-speaking authority figures, and it intensified their sense of uniqueness and generational solidarity. The youths who most completely adopted the zoot suit lifestyle were called pachucos.

With the zoot suit, Mexican American youths reciprocated the rejection they experienced from white society. . . .

Zoot-suiters flaunted their outlandish clothes, and both boys and girls gained a measure of satisfaction and a sense of unity from the looks of ridicule and disgust they received from "squares" when they walked down the street. United Farm Workers leader César Chávez remembers that as a teenager he wore a zoot suit and that he and others "needed a lot of guts to wear those pants, and we had to be rebellious to do it, because the police and a few of the older people would harass us." While only a handful were hard-core pachucos, as many as two-thirds of all Mexican American youths in Los Angeles judged wearing some version of the zoot suit

worth the harassment, for it gave them a sense of belonging to at least one group in a society from which they generally felt alienated. . . .

. . . In fact these youths took special pride in their Mexican heritage and rejected any thought of assimilation into American culture. . . .

The extreme alienation of some zoot-suiters went beyond symbolic rebellion and led them into much more aggressive and often even violent behavior. These youths, however, directed much of their hostility inward within the Mexican American community. Almost all the violence the press reported with such great alarm during the war years consisted of Mexican American youths fighting and often killing other Mexican American youths. . . .

Finally, although zoot-suiters never developed a political movement, at least some pachucos had a political consciousness. On at least two occasions during the war years Mexican American youths burned the American flag and tore down posters promoting the war effort. The vice principal of Garfield high school accused Mexican American students who formed their own organization of having "pro-Nazi designs," and police officials became extremely alarmed when a convicted German spy waiting to be transferred to a federal penitentiary began telling his Mexican American jail mates that they were victims of racial discrimination. In fact, during the war years Los Angeles community leaders, both white and Mexican American, believed the pachuco fad was a scheme of an extreme right-wing and possibly pro-Axis Mexican movement known as the Sinarquistas that allegedly hoped to disrupt the war effort by sowing disunity between Mexican Americans and Anglo-Americans.

We should remember, however, that although most Mexican American youths wore some part of the zoot suit costume, the overwhelming majority did not engage in illegal acts, politically motivated or otherwise. . . .

. . . [I]t seems that above all the zoot-suiters wanted respect. Despite their outlandish clothes and sometimes outlandish behavior, what the pachucos really wanted—indeed what they demanded—was to be treated like all other members of their age group. They wanted to get the same kinds of jobs, to be treated fairly in school, to frequent the same entertainment spots, to be treated fairly by the police, and above all, they wanted in all these interactions to be treated with respect.

White society, however, was unwilling to respect Mexican Americans, especially zoot-suiters. Whites were repelled by the zoot suit precisely because of what it represented: rebellion against traditional forms of discrimination and subordination. Mexicans were not supposed to have as good jobs as whites, they were not supposed to get an equal education, they were not supposed to go to the same dances or sit in the same section of theaters—and the role of the police was to keep them in their place. Moreover, Mexicans were supposed to be humble and meek and generally invisible, and youths were supposed to obey authority figures. That Mexican American youth chose to attack these norms of behavior not directly through political action, but symbolically through actions that showed their defiance and hostility toward white society made it easier for whites to dismiss their protests and label them as deviant, criminal, and even pathological. . . .

To a certain extent, a popular belief that Mexican American juvenile delinquency was sweeping Los Angeles was an outgrowth of wartime. Los Angeles became the West Coast center for war-related production, which resulted in rapid

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population increases and concomitant social dislocations. In addition, public offi-
cials across the nation expected a significant rise in juvenile delinquency once the
United States entered the war. Such an increase had occurred in the United States
during World War I and in Great Britain earlier in the current war.

The United States' actual entry into the war raised fears of internal enemy con-
spiracies and demands for total conformity. Even before the United States entered
the war, the Los Angeles Police Commission recommended that the City Council
pass an ordinance ordering all noncitizens to register with the chief of police. Once
the war started, the expulsion of Japanese nationals and Japanese Americans from
the West Coast and their "internment" in concentration camps was the most ob-
vious consequence of this paranoia and demand for conformity. After the removal
of the Japanese, municipal officials, the press, and much of the public transferred
their anxiety to the city's largest minority group, Mexican Americans. That fear
eventually led to public hysteria over an alleged Mexican American crime wave.

Los Angeles newspapers helped create the hysteria with a campaign of sen-
sational headlines and lurid news stories depicting the latest depredations of so-
called Mexican American youth gangs. Beginning in the spring of 1942, six
months after Pearl Harbor and only weeks after the internment of the Japanese and
Japanese Americans, newspapers featured stories on Mexican American juvenile
delinquency. These stories continued through the summer, growing in intensity and
reaching a peak in August 1942. Because of protests from the federal government
that the stories hurt the war effort, newspapers cut back on their sensational cover-
age for a time. They resumed in early 1943, however, and continued throughout the
spring until they peaked again in May. The coverage of Mexican American crime
and the frenzy it created culminated with the zoot suit riots of 3-10 June 1943. . . .

From mid-1942 onward, the theme that dominated the Los Angeles press's
treatment of Mexican American youth was that of the gang, and local newspapers
consistently assumed that any Mexican who committed a crime must belong to
a gang. . . .

The incident that fixed the public's attention on Mexican American crime was
the infamous Sleepy Lagoon case. . . . On the morning of Sunday, 2 August 1942,
José Díaz was found severely injured next to a dirt road close to a gravel pit called
Sleepy Lagoon. He was taken to a local hospital, where he died of head injuries later
that day. The next day Los Angeles newspapers attributed his death to "Mexican
Boy Gangs," and over the next several weeks and months the local press repeatedly
charged that a "Boy Gang Terror Wave" was sweeping the city. . . .

. . . There was no proof that anyone actually killed Díaz. Nevertheless, prosecu-
tors filed first-degree murder charges against twenty-two Mexican American boys
from the Thirty-eighth Street neighborhood on the grounds that they had been in a
fight at a party that Díaz also attended.

The trial was a mockery of justice and demonstrated the prevailing attitudes of
government officials and the press toward Mexican American youths. . . . [T]he jury
found the defendants guilty of charges ranging from assault to first-degree murder.
Thanks to the efforts of a citizens' group called the Sleepy Lagoon Defense Com-
mittee, however, the verdicts were overturned on appeal.

The LAPD used the death of José Díaz and the fears it raised as an excuse to
repress the growing rebelliousness of Mexican American youth. On the weekend

following Díaz's death, police conducted a massive three-day sweep of the barrios, apprehending over six hundred youths. . . . [P]olice arrested anyone who looked as if he or she could have committed a crime sometime in the past. Police charged the youths with "suspicion," usually of robbery or assault with a deadly weapon. . . .

In the midst of this crisis atmosphere, the Los Angeles County Grand Jury initiated hearings into the extent, nature, and causes of Mexican American juvenile delinquency. The hearings and the debate they sparked among government officials and community leaders were the clearest articulation ever of law enforcement's attitude toward the Mexican American community. . . . [T]hey agreed that the zoot-suiters and the pachuco lifestyle represented a grave social ill that must be repressed. . . .

The testimony that caused the most controversy and most closely reflected the thinking of the Los Angeles law enforcement community came from the Sheriff Department's Captain Ayres. Although he acknowledged that discrimination was a factor, Ayres believed the main cause for Mexican American criminality was biological. He attributed this "biological basis" to the Los Angeles Mexican Americans' descent from the inherently violent Indians of Mexico. After all, the Aztecs were known for sacrificing 30,000 Indians in one day, he maintained, and "this total disregard for human life has always been universal throughout the Americas among the Indian population, which of course is well known to everyone." . . . To dramatize the difference between whites and Mexican Americans, Ayres used the analogy of a house cat and a wild cat. A house cat could be domesticated and treated leniently; a wild cat, Ayres argued, would always be wild and must therefore be caged. . . .

Ayres and the other officers who testified before the grand jury thus developed a broad strategy for dealing with Mexican American youth. They recommended prosecuting all juveniles suspected of lawbreaking or simply belonging to a gang and called for filing charges of contributing to the delinquency of a minor against any adult gang members. Another part of the law enforcement plan called for an increase in arrests and "field investigations" of Mexican American youth and the creation of a central juvenile delinquency file of information on all potential juvenile delinquents—that is, anyone who was arrested and put on probation as well as students who got into trouble in school.

Police officials thus saw Mexican American youths as a criminal and dangerous element within society that must be suppressed even at the cost of violating their civil liberties. . . .

. . . Since the function of the police was to fight crime and since Mexican Americans were either biologically or environmentally inclined toward criminality, the police had to do everything in their power to suppress this evident social danger. Anything else would have been an unprofessional dereliction of duty.

In the short term, however, despite the consensus regarding the seriousness of "the Mexican problem," law enforcement could not implement the most repressive aspects of its proposed campaign against Mexican American youth. After the initial police actions in the wake of Sleepy Lagoon, the need for the United States to maintain good relations with its Latin American allies and the effectiveness of German propaganda in that part of the world precluded any more mass arrests or other wholesale repression. For the duration of the war, at least, the LAPD would have to

the three-day sweep of the barrios, arrested anyone who looked as if he had been in the past. Police charged the suspect with a deadly weapon. . . . The Los Angeles County Grand Jury indicted a number of Mexican American juveniles for their participation in the 1942 riot. . . . The fact that the riot was linked among government officials with the participation of law enforcement officials. . . . [T]hey agreed that the riot represented a grave social ill that must be dealt with.

The riot and most closely reflected the attitudes of the community came from the Sheriff's Office. . . . It was acknowledged that discrimination was a factor in Mexican American criminality was "not" to the Los Angeles Mexican American community. After all, the riot was in one day, he maintained, and it had been universal throughout the city. Of course is well known to everyone that whites and Mexican Americans, both are cats. A house cat could be domesticated, would always be wild and

more the grand jury thus developed a plan to deal with Mexican youth. They recommended that if a youth was simply belonging to a gang or was involved in the delinquency of a minor against the law, a police enforcement plan called for an arrest of the Mexican American youth and the youth would be put on probation as well as

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the consensus regarding the seriousness of the riot was not to implement the most repressive measures against Mexican American youth. After the initial riot, the need for the United States to maintain law and order and the effectiveness of German propaganda in any more mass arrests or other measures. At least, the LAPD would have to

satisfy itself with piecemeal responses to pachuco rebelliousness and to passing along to the newspapers information about the latest instance of Mexican American juvenile delinquency. Officers' complicity during the zoot suit riots shows the frustration they must have felt over their inability to take more vigorous action.

In the long term, the consensus regarding Mexican American criminality changed the way the LAPD policed the Mexican American community. It . . . began training officers, both formally and informally, to expect more crime from Mexican Americans than from the white population. In addition, since theories of scientific management and other aspects of police professionalism directed that police be aggressively deployed in high-crime areas, the concentration of officers became much greater in the Mexican American community than in other areas of the city. The combination of these two factors and the department's more aggressive posture toward fighting crime resulted in chronic overarresting of Mexicans in Los Angeles. Since the police used arrest statistics to determine the crime rate within a given population, the idea that Mexican Americans were criminally inclined became a self-fulfilling prophecy. . . .

The war years thus saw the LAPD adopt a theory of criminality that linked crime with race. After the war that theory was increasingly institutionalized in police policies and practices. Moreover, the LAPD transferred both the theory and the policies and practices regarding Mexican American criminality to African Americans when that community began to grow in Los Angeles after the war. Aggressive police tactics against the black and Chicano communities continued and intensified, and so did allegations of police abuse from minorities.



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