The 1992 L.A. Civil Unrest
The Asian American Education Project

Grade Level(s) 5-12

Lesson Overview
Breaking Through (1980s – 2010s). Sparked off by the acquittal of four officers in the Rodney King police brutality case, the 1992 Los Angeles Civil Unrest took place over several days and led to rioting and destruction of the city. The unrest represented a boiling point of underlying issues including systemic racism, police brutality, failure of the criminal justice system, economic disparities between communities of color, and racial tensions. The perceived racial tensions between Korean and Black Americans, further complicated by the shooting of Latasha Harlins by a Korean storeowner, led to some targeting of Korean American neighborhoods/businesses for violence and looting. Students will explore the history, conditions, and tensions that led to the 1992 civil unrest in L.A.

Lesson Objectives
• Students will investigate the root causes and factors that led to the 1992 L.A. Civil Unrest, such as the Rodney King case, which stem from systemic racism.
• Students will learn about what happened during the civil unrest, and how it affected Korean Americans and their relations with Black Americans.
• Students will research cases of police brutality and civil unrest that have occurred since the 1992 L.A. Civil Unrest.

Background Essay:
On April 29, 1992, a week-long period of rioting and chaos began to sweep through the South Central, Koreatown and other neighborhoods of Los Angeles, California. The initial civil unrest was sparked by the acquittal of four white police officers responsible for the beating of Rodney King, an African American man arrested for speeding. Other factors also contributed to the buildup of racial tensions.

During the 1980s and ‘90s, Koreans immigrated to the Los Angeles area to join their families. They opened groceries, liquor stores and other businesses in South Central—a predominately Black and Latinx neighborhood—because of low rents. The Black community there faced multiple obstacles including high unemployment brought on by factories’ closures, and denied bank loans to start their own business. According to some commentators Korean Americans operated 70 percent of businesses in South Central.

Due to cultural differences and a lack of historical knowledge/appreciation of past African American civil rights struggles by newly immigrated Koreans to the United States, resentment and fear began to grow within both communities. Many did not appreciate that it was only because of the Civil Rights Movement that the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 was later enacted and allowed for more Asians to immigrate to the country.

In 1991, the beating of Rodney King ignited protests against police brutality and systemic racism. Thirteen days later, tensions worsened when a Korean American convenience store owner, Soon Ja Du, shot and killed a Black teenage girl, Latasha Harlins, who was accused of shoplifting. Du was convicted of voluntary manslaughter and sentenced to probation and a $500 fine—an outcome that left many South Central residents angry and frustrated. Tensions however reached a tipping point in April 1992, when the officers in the Rodney King police brutality case were acquitted.

Over the next five days, angry rioters, including Black and Latinx people, looted stores and burned down buildings. The devastation spread from South Central to Koreatown and other areas, with Korean Americans reporting that police and firefighters failed to help protect their businesses.
Mainstream media coverage intensified the situation by focusing on racial tensions between Korean and Black Americans, dismissing the inequality that both communities faced. News stories instead focused on some Korean Americans—who served in the military back home—armed with guns defending their neighborhood from rooftops, and ignoring the fact that some Black and Latinx people were also helping defend Korean-owned businesses from looters.

By the end of the riots, over 2,000 businesses were destroyed, 63 people died, and over a billion dollars in property was lost. Days later, 30,000 people gathered together in solidarity for a multi-racial peace march, including those from the Korean and Black communities. The 1992 civil unrest became one of the biggest cases of civil unrest in U.S. history, and the largest in Los Angeles since the Watts Rebellion in 1965, also involving an African American man and police. As a result, many initiatives were started to address policing, economic disparities and interethnic tensions.

Works Cited

Vocabulary:
- Economic disparity/inequality: the unequal distribution of income and opportunity between different groups in society
- Marginalization: the act of treating someone or something as if they are not important
- Marginalized People: people who, for whatever reason, are denied involvement in mainstream economic, political, cultural and social activities
- Solidarity: awareness of shared or common interests, standards, and/or objectives that unites groups or classes
- Unrest: a troubled or rebellious state of discontent
Discussion Questions:
1. What are some causes of civil unrest? What causes contributed to the 1992 L.A. Civil Unrest?
2. How might civil unrest affect communities without access to financial or social support in particular?
3. How did mainstream media play a role in increasing tensions between Koreans and Black people?
4. What similarities do recent instances of civil unrest have with the 1992 L.A Civil Unrest?
5. Has the situation changed since 1992 between police and Black men? Why? What needs to be done?
6. Have the root causes changed?

Activity 1: Understanding the 1992 L.A. Civil Unrest
A. Research on root causes and factor
The 1992 civil unrest in Los Angeles was the culmination of a number of systemic and historic issues that students will look further into. Ask students to do research into the topics below. During their research, students should think about why these issues would have contributed to something like the L.A. Civil Unrest, as well as the 1965 Watts Rebellion which happened just 27 years earlier.

Root causes:
1. Systemic racism:
   b. Failure of the criminal justice system. High incarceration rate of Black men in the U.S. prison system.
   c. Economic inequality:
      • High unemployment rate among Black people and Latinx people.
      • Denial of bank loans to Black borrowers to start their own businesses.
   d. The history of racial segregation, including education and housing discrimination.

Factor:
2. Mainstream media coverage focusing on racial tensions between Korean Americans and Black Americans:

A visual resource: “Systemic Racism Cause Effect” fishbone diagram.

B. Discussion
1. During the 1990s, what was the economic situation like for Black people and Latinx people living in Los Angeles? What was Korean American community like at the time?
2. What events happened in Los Angeles in 1991 and 1992 that led up to the L.A. Civil Unrest?
3. How did the mainstream media frame the story of the L.A. unrest? Why did they do this?
4. What groups were affected by the L.A. unrest, and how were they affected?
5. What are the causes of the 1992 L.A. Civil Unrest and the 1965 Watts Rebellion?

Activity 2: Since the L.A. Civil Unrest
Research: Ask students to look up online two cases involving police brutality/misconduct and Black men.
In each case, have students write about the following:

1. Who is the victim? When and what happened?
2. What was the community’s reaction?
3. Was there any protest? What role can peaceful protest play?
4. What was the outcome for the police officers involved?
5. Were there any kinds of improvement made by the government to address what happened?
6. Examine each of the root causes from Activity 1, and discuss if they have gotten better or worse:
   b. Failure of the criminal justice system. High incarceration rate of Black men in the U.S. prison system.
   c. Economic inequality:
      • High unemployment rate among Black people and Latinx people.
      • Denial of bank loans to Black borrowers to start their own businesses.
   d. The history of racial segregation, including education and housing discrimination.
7. Have these root causes gotten better? If not, what do you think will happen?
8. If they have not gotten better, what do you think are some reasons? What should be done? Can you effect this change?

Further Information