Campus Rioting at Iowa State and Across the Nation

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Selected Sources


April 17-18, 2004, riot chronology

11:20 p.m.: Ames police receive complaint of party on Hunt Street

11:45 p.m.-12:10 a.m.: Police arrest apartment occupant for bootlegging. Two officers arrested intoxicated individual, who fell or was pushed to the ground. Officers were targeted by rocks, bottles and cans. Decision was made to close party. Police wearing face shields and helmets arrived at the scene. Police asked party-goers to leave if they weren’t residents.

12:30 a.m.: A large crowd of people dispersing from Hunt Street merged with a crowd already on Welch. Several instances of violence took place: windows were broken; a fire was started in a trash can; one person was struck with a ketchup bottle, resulting in a fight between the victim and thrower. Police asked people to leave the intersection and sprayed pepper spray on people who didn’t comply.

1:00 a.m.: Rioters regrouped and returned to Welch just south of the clock tower. They broke windows, threw rocks, pushed over portable toilets. They attempted to flip a police car. Police organized in the Welch Avenue fire station and put on full protective equipment ("riot gear").

1:00-4:30 a.m.: Most riot activity occurred along Lincoln Way between Welch and Sheldon. Police made repeat trips from the Welch Avenue fire station, attempting to disperse the crowd. Approximately 2,000 people were in the street and in front of Friley. Officers from the Ames Police, ISU Police, Story County Sheriff’s office, Iowa State Police Division and Iowa State Highway Troopers were on the scene. By 4:30 a.m. the crowd had dispersed.
Iowa State Campus Disturbances

1985: During VEISHEA weekend’s “Ash Bash,” cars were overturned and burned.

1988: Disturbances took place on three consecutive VEISHEA weekend nights. During the Sunday morning riot, people in a crowd of approximately 5,000 threw bottles, bricks and rocks and made a bonfire from furniture. Of the 45 people arrested, 25 were ISU students.

1992: During VEISHEA weekend, people in a large crowd (est. 8,000) threw rocks, cans and bottles at police. Twenty-seven rioters were arrested and 47 were treated for injuries.

1994: During VEISHEA weekend, people in a large crowd threw cans, bottles and rocks at police. A total of 20 people were arrested, 11 of whom were students.

1998: Prior to VEISHEA, students in a crowd of approximately 300 chanted profanities, set off fireworks, and attempted to tear down a light pole in the Towers Residence Hall courtyard before being dispersed by police. The event was viewed as a protest against the first “Dry VEISHEA.”

1999: During a planned event three weeks before the second “Dry VEISHEA” and near the anniversary of the previous Towers Residence Hall disturbance, students committed acts of vandalism and chanted profanity in a crowd that moved from the Towers to The Knoll and then to Jack Trice Stadium, stopping at various points on campus in between to rally loudly.

2000: Following an NCAA basketball victory, participants damaged cars, pulled down light poles, marched to The Knoll and then to Jack Trice Stadium, where they tried to pull a goal post down. They then tore down pieces of fence and threw them in Lake Laverne.

2004: Rioters in a crowd of approximately 2,000 destroyed property in Campustown and threw objects at police. Police arrested 37 individuals, including 22 Iowa State University students and three recent alumni.
Campus unrest in U.S. History
(selected examples)

• Students protested in favor of the U.S. Revolution

• Late 18th Century: Harvard students rioted against bad food

• 19th Century: Riots against *in loco parentis* and other institutional policies; land-grant students protested against mandatory military training

• 1960s-70s: Widespread protest regarding the Vietnam War and civil rights

• 1990s-2000: Riots unrelated to protest (or at least not arising from a protest event) become common.

These have been called “celebratory riots” and “mixed-issue campus disturbances.”
Campus Riots Not Arising from Protest Event
(McCarthy, Martin, McPhail and Cress 2002)
Questions about campus riots

Trend/wave level

Why has this form of collective action become more prevalent over the past two decades?

What local factors predispose a campus/community to rioting during this wave?

Event/gathering level

What factors may contribute to the beginning of a riot?

How do these riots begin?

How do these riots develop?

How do these riots end?

Collective behavior/individual behavior level

What individual characteristics may predispose people to rioting?

What do people do during these riots?

What are people’s purposes for their actions during these riots?
Trend/wave level

Why has this form of collective action become more prevalent over the past two decades?

Unknown, but repertoires of collective action vary historically and geographical. Collective action often happens in waves (e.g., other forms of rioting, protest strategies, fads).

Buettner suggests the wave is related to the rise in legal drinking age.

What local factors predispose a campus/community to rioting during this wave?

Unknown. A study comparing rioting/non-rioting campuses has not been conducted.

Research on urban rioting casts doubt on “community strain” arguments.
Event/gathering level

What factors may contribute to the beginning of a riot?

Research on other forms of collective action suggests the importance of access to the riot area and temporal availability. Large university campuses are thus conducive to rioting.

Precipitation/cold weather probably decreases the chances of a riot.

Social cues may alert people to the possibility of a riot, possibly making it more likely.

How do these riots begin?

Some follow sporting events. Others start with an encounter between students and police.

“Entrepreneurs” may play a role in starting violence.

Gatherings from which riots develop are similar to many other gatherings which remain peaceful.

How do these riots develop?

“Entrepreneurs” may play a role in precipitating and organizing violence.

Interaction between rioters and police is probably important for understanding the course of a riot.

How do these riots end?

At least some, including the April 18 riot, end when rioters decide to go home.

There is no proven set of police practices for dispersing these riots.
Collective behavior/individual behavior level

What individual characteristics predispose people to rioting?

Previous rioting research was not successful in identifying these characteristics.

Deprivation-frustration-aggression theory is unsupported.

“Madding crowd” explanations are unsupported.

Campus riot “entrepreneurs” tend to be young white males.

What do people do during these riots?

Riots are marked by alternating and varying, individual and collective, violent and nonviolent action. (Modal behavior at April 18 riot was “standing around.”)

Most violence is committed by individuals or small groups.
Collective behavior/individual behavior level

What are people’s purposes for their actions during these riots?

Nonviolent purposes include: observing, helping injured, urging nonviolence. Some people are present for reasons unrelated to the riot.

McPhail suggests two types of violence: intended violence, which results from inherently violent purposes, and outcome violence, which results from interaction between people with nonviolent purposes and authorities.

Intended violence

“A majority of this violence [at the April 18 riot] was committed because it was fun for both the actors and their audience…. [This riot] appears to have had the character of a game or adventure for many of its participants.” (VEISHEA riot task force report)

Soc 134 survey (Fall 2004):

“I would like to participate in a riot during my college years.” 23.8% of males and 10.5% of females agreed

“I would like to watch a riot during my college years.” 48.9% of males and 27.6% of females agreed

Rioting has become a VEISHEA tradition (along side two other traditions: “official VEISHEA” and tradition of partying/drinking).
Collective behavior/individual behavior level

What are people’s purposes for their actions during these riots?

Outcome violence related to alcohol enforcement

Restrictions on alcohol may create encounters between partiers and police attempting to enforce restrictions and respond to problems.

Restrictions may drive drinking to large off-campus parties.

“Dry VEISHEA” policies, enacted following the 1997 murder, clash with the tradition of VEISHEA as a time to party.

Outcome violence related to law enforcement

Onlookers/passersby may increase involvement after being affected by police tactics.

It is difficult for police to distinguish between rioters and onlookers/passersby.