



## A Chicano renaissance? A new Mexican-American generation embraces the term

"If you take pride in being Chicano, you stand up," said a young Mexican-American. "We're here."

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Colorful cultural celebrations found in San Diego's Chicano Park. James Cordero

SAN DIEGO — The signposts of a Chicano renaissance are everywhere. On streets and college campuses, in fashion and in art, there's renewed energy around a term associated with 1960s civil rights and farm worker activism.

"Being Chicana means you have a responsibility to your people," said Olivia Parraz, 22, as she strolled along [San Diego's Chicano Park](#) in a tank top emblazoned with the word "Chicana."

Chicano is a word popularized by an older Mexican American generation, but it has been experiencing a revival at a time when an expanding, young Latino population is asserting its place as the country wrestles over issues of race, rhetoric and identity.

"Here in Southern California we're having a cultural and political renaissance of the term," said Alexandro José Gradilla, associate professor of Chicana/o Studies and African American Studies at California State University, Fullerton.

The backdrop for the resurgence includes a Golden State where Latinos now are 39 percent of the population and represent California's largest racial or ethnic group. More than a third of them are age 20 or younger, according to the California Senate Office of Research.

The recharged movement is a metaphorical safe space for young Mexican-Americans and Latinos who feel battered not only by President Donald Trump's policies and rhetoric regarding south-of-the-border immigrants but also by a far right emboldened by his rhetoric. In San Diego's Chicano Park, [demonstrators twice stood up to far-right protesters who targeted the National Historic Landmark's flag](#), which includes a slogan, "This is my land."

The park, with its large collection of murals and its own Chicano activism roots, is in Logan Heights, San Diego's oldest Mexican-American neighborhood.

"The gloves are off with the alt-right," said University of San Diego ethnic studies professor [Alberto López Pulido](#), a longtime member of the [Chicano Park Steering Committee](#). He has volunteered as a community organizer in nearby Logan Heights for more than a decade.



A mural at Chicano Park, where demonstrators faced alt-right protestors with the slogan "This is my land."Dennis Romero / NBC News

"We're going to stand up to this," he said of the [far-right events that led to clashes in the park](#). "The park is definitely a sacred space."

William A. Nericcio, director of the Master of Arts in Liberal Arts and Sciences program at San Diego State University, described the recent renaissance as "neo-Chicanismo."

"Trump's actions, words, and tweets, have made Chicano-style activism more necessary," he said.

## THE ORIGINS OF CHICANO

The term Chicano first came into wide usage among Mexican-Americans in the late 1960s as young activists stood atop the shoulders of United Farm Workers organizers Dolores Huerta and Cesar Chavez, and other Mexican American leaders who [fought for an expansion of civil rights](#), focusing on wages, education and fair housing.

It was a time of vigorous activism in the Southwest. In 1967, Reies López Tijerina led an armed takeover of New Mexico's Rio Arriba County Courthouse [in a bid to reclaim the 600,000-acre Tierra Amarilla Land Grant](#), land that Mexican and Spanish families were supposed to be able to keep after the 1846-48 Mexican-American War, the first U.S. conflict on foreign soil.

The next year, students on Los Angeles's Eastside participated in "blowouts" by walking out of class to demand an end to unequal education. In 1970, the [National Chicano Moratorium](#), an anti-Vietnam War demonstration that drew hundreds of thousands and drew attention to Mexican-Americans' disproportionate service and deaths in the Vietnam War.

"I was part of the group of people who contributed to popularizing the term," said artist Harry Gamboa, a California Institute of the Arts professor who was an organizer of the blowouts.

"The notion of the Chicano at the beginning implicated that we were very much American. But it also refers to a population that has been here for thousands of years."

"We are the in-between people," said Phillip Rodriguez, the award-winning documentary filmmaker.

This third way became the path that best describes Chicano, a Mexican-American rooted in a tale of an American Southwest that once belonged to the Aztec people, but where historically Mexican-Americans have been relegated to second-class status and not seen as "American" as Anglos.

But while the term came to define how some Mexican-Americans felt — neither the U.S. nor Mexico fully accepted them — it alienated others in the community.



A painting of a "Chicana" in San Diego's Chicano Park. Dennis Romero / NBC News

The term and the movement seemed to hit a low point in the 1980s and '90s when assimilation and economic mobility became a goal for many middle-class Mexican-Americans. Many people with Mexican roots adopted the terms Hispanic and Latino, joining forces with Central Americans, Puerto Ricans, Cuban-Americans, Dominicans and South Americans.

Waves of Spanish-speaking immigrants in the 1980s, '90s and 2000s upended the assimilation strategy. Waves of newcomers expanded and diversified the population — although the Latino population remains 63 percent. For some, even Latino did not capture their identity and their children didn't find it a good fit either.

Even without the future president [calling Mexicans criminals and rapists](#), Chicanismo has been on its way back. New Chicanos are nonetheless less militant and less nationalistic than their '60s forebears.

## **A NEW CHICANO GENERATION**

Nowadays, Chicanismo is mostly about ethnic pride, cultural expression and the defense of immigrants.

Professor June Pedraza, chair of the [National Association for Chicano and Chicana Studies](#), says Mexican-Americans in their teens are showing up at her classes at Northwest Vista College in San Antonio eager to study the roots of the Chicano movement. "There is more of a demand for it now," she said.

Today's Chicanos are trying to protect immigrants and Dreamers, the term used to describe immigrants who were brought to the U.S. illegally as children. They're just as likely to fight for access to higher education as for better K-12 schools, and they're [battling against gentrification](#) in traditionally Mexican-American communities such as Los Angeles's Boyle Heights.

And they're much more likely to defend the rights of women and LGBTQ Latinos, almost unheard in the 1960s use of Chicano, not unlike much of the general population.

At the eight-acre Chicano Park in San Diego, amid food stands, T-shirt stalls and gleaming low riders, Sarina Sanchez, 29, was volunteering at an information tent for Border Angels, a

nonprofit that organizes pro-immigrant demonstrations and leaves bottles of water in the desert for undocumented travelers.

Chicano “isn’t just a look,” she said. “We have to know how to fight back.”

Sanchez majored in Chicano studies at UCLA and said she identifies with the gender- and sexual-orientation neutral term Chicanx. “The ‘x’ is a reclamation of my indigenous heritage and my feminism,” she said.

Peter Ortiz, 28, is a tech industry worker in Silicon Valley who in 2016 founded the San José Brown Berets, which pays homage to the militant group of the 1960s.

“There was a lot of toxic masculinity” in the movement’s past,” he said. “We’re not down with that.”

Social media and easily accessed history mean that young Mexican-Americans can quickly grasp the issues and contextualize them without having to be heavily involved in a movement.

“I think the students today know the issues better than they did in the 1960s,” said Chicano studies pioneer [Rodolfo Acuña](#), of California State University, Northridge. “Today the millennials see the injustice to themselves.”

Earlier this year, students participating in the March for Our Lives gun-control demonstration in Los Angeles said they were also paying homage to the 50th anniversary of the “East L.A. blowouts.”

Chon A. Noriega, director of [UCLA’s Chicano Studies Research Center](#), said the market for Chicano studies classes “has been growing pretty strong over the last decade for good reason — there are more of these students in the pipeline.”

Latinos make up more than half of public school students in California, according to the state Department of Education. Noriega pointed out that the current defense-of-immigrants rallying cry was born under President Barack Obama, whose administration deported more than 2.5 million people.



One of many t-shirts celebrating the Chicano experience at Chicano Park. Dennis Romero / NBC News



Oregon State University student Angel Mandujano-Guevara, 21, is an organizer for MEChA (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán), the Chicano movement's original campus cavalry. He said the typical member is someone who was exposed to MEChA in high school but didn't sign up: "They say, 'I was never involved and now I want to get involved here. How can I join?'"

## **IT'S A LOOK, TOO**

Chicanismo is having its day in the sun perhaps most luminously through youth culture, art and fashion.

Los Angeles indie band Chicano Batman is exposing masses to the movement through a current national tour. It reached the heights of the Coachella Valley Music & Arts Festival in 2015.

"Chicano Batman has put the word out there is something that's not only political but something that's hip and edgy," Cal State Fullerton's Gradilla said.

Last year, Vogue magazine [declared that the return of Chicano fashion](#) was "an assertion of pride" and an "act of hope."

At Chicano Park, the clothing brand Pipiripau showed off its T-shirt and tank-top designs, which mix the gothic moods of Dia de los Muertos with the infantile playfulness of the manga comics of Japan. The clothing epitomizes the modern Chicano — global but immediately recognizable as Mexican-American.

It's "part of the story of the Chicano experience," said Rolando Rubalcava, 36, who co-founded the brand in Ventura, California.

At the park, Marc Gonzales, 22, said you can't just wear Chicanismo on your sleeve. It comes with a call to intellectual arms.

"If you take pride in being Chicano, you stand up," he said. "We're here."



A t-shirt from the clothing line Pipiripau on display at Chicano Park, in San Diego. Dennis Romero, NBC News