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The worst slur for Mexican-Americans is still a mystery for some

The word has popped up recently, amid a rise in hate crimes against Latinos.
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Many people of Mexican descent can vividly describe the moment they heard the epithet "beaner." As a child or a young adult, it stung. To them, it said: "You're not American, and you never will be."

While its use seemed to have been waning, the word has popped up in the news recently.

Last spring, Google searches for the term spiked when a Latino man revealed that a Starbucks barista in Southern California had written "beaner" on two cups he ordered, as a way of identifying him. The incident, which Starbucks said it would investigate and prevent in the future, occurred shortly before the coffee chain closed its locations for a day of anti-bias training.

Then, on Jan. 1, The New York Times used "beaner" as an answer in its crossword puzzle. (The clue referred to baseball: "Pitch to the head, informally.") The Times apologized.

Such uses of "beaner" are particularly troubling at a moment when hate crimes against Latinos have been rising. According to the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism at California State University, San Bernardino, anti-Latino hate crime increased 176 percent in major U.S. cities in the three weeks after the 2016 presidential election.

"In the period around election time, the group that saw the highest percentage increase of attacks were Latinos," said Brian Levin, director of the center, who has not researched the use of "beaner" specifically.

While the Times was criticized for using "beaner" in its crossword, the initial apology from crossword co-editor Will Shortz received almost as much heat.

Referring to co-editor Joel Fagliano, Shortz said: "Neither Joel nor I had ever heard the slur before — and I don't know anyone who would use it. Maybe we live in rarefied circles."

After a social media uproar, Shortz issued another apology, saying on NPR: "It was a mistake to include that answer. It is, indeed, offensive. And I personally apologize."

Still, some found Shortz's original explanation wanting: Critics said editors at one of the nation's pre-eminent newspapers should have been familiar with the word's history as an ethnic insult.

"It stands as one of the strangest apologies in the history of apologies," said William A. Nericcio, director of the Master of Arts in Liberal Arts and Sciences program at San Diego State University and author of "Tex[t]-Mex: Seductive Hallucinations of the 'Mexican' in America."

"It's not like Mexicans aren't in New York City," said Alexandro José Gradilla, a Chicana/o studies professor at Cal State Fullerton. "What level of social strata do you live in where you don't come in contact with Mexicans?"

Mexican-Americans compose nearly two-thirds of the largest minority group in the nation, Latinos, and "beaner" is by far the most prominent anti-Mexican slur, academics say.

Chon Noriega, director of UCLA's Chicano Studies Research Center, added, "It's probably more widely known as a derogatory term for Mexicans than for being hit in the head with a baseball."

It's also been associated with deadly crimes. In 2008, in Suffolk County on Long Island, New York, an Ecuadorian immigrant, Marcelo Lucero, 37, was fatally stabbed in what prosecutors said was a rampage by a gang of white teens who described their actions as "beaner-hopping."

The word harkens to a staple of both the Pre-Colombian and contemporary Mexican diet. Its use follows a pattern of epithets for other minorities in the United States that often focus on food or manner of dress.

Before World War II, a predominant anti-Mexican epithet was "greaser," which can be traced to the 19th century. Theories of its origins include the shiny, slick hair worn by migrant workers in the Southwest and miners in Mexico, though it could also refer to lard-enhanced food or even the act of greasing the axles of wagon wheels, experts say.

It's not entirely clear when "beaner" first came into use as a epithet. Some academics believe it's been around since at least the end of the World War II. In 2017, journalist and author Gustavo Arellano tracked its first publication as a derogatory term for Mexicans and Mexican-Americans to the Dictionary of American Regional English.

In it, three young Californians copped to knowing the word in 1969 and 1970 after they were asked about "names and nicknames around here for people of foreign background."

"I didn't hear it until I came out to California from Texas in the '70s," said Maria Herrera-Sobek, associate vice chancellor for diversity equity and academic policy at the University of California, Santa Barbara. "In the '40s and '50s 'greaser' was a more common ethnic slur."

The term was common, in the Southwest at least, for the rest of the 1970s, and it appeared in "Cheech & Chong's Next Movie" in 1980, in a scene in which Cheech Marin is riffing on his guitar: "Mexican Americans / love education / so they go to night school / and take Spanish / and get a B."

Tommy Chong responds with his own song: "Beaners! Beaners!"

"Yeah," Marin says, "that's heavy man."

The word has also been used for laughs this century by the Mexican-American comedians George Lopez and Carlos Mencia. But, like epithets applied to other minority groups, its impact depends on whether it's coming from inside or outside the Mexican-American cohort.

"It can be a way for people within a marginal group to kind of take back a story about a word or take away the pain and hurt by using it themselves," said Carmen Fought, an associate professor of linguistics at Pitzer College in Claremont, California. "But it's never appropriate for an outside group to do that."

Gradilla, from Cal State Fullerton, says the word needs more careful consideration from Americans of all stripes.

"We can't act like 'beaner' is a term from the '70s, and it's gone away," he said. "I think in the 21st century, the term has a much more national weight to it."