

Crime Dynamics in Los Angeles

Christopher Warren

University of San Diego

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The United States experienced an unprecedented reduction in crime from the mid-1990s to 2010. The nation suffered from high crime rates in the 1980s through the early 1990s, and now some of our cities are as safe as they were in the early 1960s (Fritsvold, 2019). In 1992 Los Angeles logged a record high of 1094 homicides, and by 2010 that number decreased to 293 (FBI, 2019). In the same period, crime showed substantial crime reductions throughout the United States. Nationwide by 2007, rape, robbery, homicide, burglary larceny, and auto theft were down nearly 40 percent from the peak of the U.S. crime wave in 1991 (Barker, 2010, p. 490). The decline was unprecedented in U.S. history and received considerable attention from policymakers and police officials as to the cause (Barker, 2010, p. 490).

Prominent academics joined in the research and tried to solve the mystery of the crime drop (Barker, 2010, p. 490). Researchers have examined the efficacy of the criminal justice system, better policing, demographic shifts, abortion, improved economy, and the end of the crack epidemic for answers to the decline (Barker, 2010, pp. 491-492). Attention was also focused on incarceration rates that increased dramatically from 1991 to 1998; California increased its prison population 52 percent and subsequently experienced a 36 percent decline in crime (Fritsvold, 2019). Nonetheless, economist Steve Levitt in his study said that increased incarceration rates could only account for about 25 percent in the reduction of crime (Fritsvold, 2019). The report “Incarceration and Crime: A Complex Relationship” from the Sentencing Project attributed the improved economy and other factors to account for the remaining 75 percent decrease in crime nationally (Fritsvold, 2019).

Los Angeles congruently had a significant decrease in crime across all categories during this period. Concerning crime overall, Part I crimes reported in 1992 were 338,531 and by 2010

declined to 111,188, which is a decrease of 68 percent (FBI, 2019). Violent crime (murder, non-negligent manslaughter, rape, robbery, aggravated assault) decreased from a high of 88,919 incidents in 1992 to 21,484 in 2010; a 76 percent decline. Property crime (burglary, larceny, auto theft) declined from a high of 249,612 to 89,704 in 2010; a 64 percent drop. (FBI, 2019) These statistics are a significant reduction in crime and more substantial than the national decline.

One factor in Los Angeles that may have contributed to the diminution of crime was the change in racial demographics of South Los Angeles; which historically had the highest reported level of crime in the city (LAPD, 2017). The black population of South Los Angeles decreased by 16.4 percent from 1990 to 2009, while Hispanics increased 16.7 percent during the same period (Sanchez & Ito, 2011, p. 5). Correspondingly of significance is that 34 percent of the Hispanic population were immigrants from Mexico. Sanchez and Ito in their report “Changing Demographics of South LA” state that immigrants have had a significant and yet stable presence in the community (Sanchez & Ito, 2011, p. 25). One more reason to consider may be the policing style of the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) had changed. Los Angeles experienced the 1992 riots, and as a result, police-community relations were at an all-time low. Post-riots the LAPD made concerted efforts to improve the public-police partnership (Elinson, 2017).

An additional explanation for the substantial crime drop in Los Angeles may have been the increased incarceration rate in California. In 1980, California prisons housed 24,000 inmates, and by 2010 the number increased seven-fold to 165,000 inmates (U.S. DOJ, 2019). Steven Levitt attributes approximately a 25 percent decrease in crime due to the increased incarceration rate. Therefore, the 75 percent gap must be attributed to other reasons. One cause may include the fact that the young adult population of the United States declined dramatically as the post-war baby boom generation became older. According to the Bureau of Justice statistics, young adults and

teenagers are more likely to be involved in crime (Barker, 2010). Therefore, it stands to reason that Los Angeles experienced the same decline in youth cohorts during the 1990s. Los Angeles also experienced a demographic shift of African Americans moving out of South Los Angeles; which is a factor to consider because African American males are over-represented in the California State prison system. It is also noteworthy that Los Angeles County provided nearly 40 percent of the increase in the State prison population (Elinson, 2017). Supplementary issues may have been that the economy was strong in the 1990s, and there was a conclusion to the crack epidemic of the 1980s which contributed to higher crime rates (Elinson, 2017). The determinate sentencing law may have had an effect as well; passed in 1979 offenders were required to serve longer sentences, and parole revocation was used frequently to send people back to prison (Krisberg, 2016). Furthermore, in 1994, California voters enacted the Three Strikes Law that mandated 25 years to life of anyone convicted of three or more felonies, and it also doubled the sentence of people convicted of two felonies (Krisberg, 2016).

In conclusion, scholars have not found the magic bullet as to the reduction of crime in Los Angeles in the 1990s. As stated beforehand the following factors most likely contributed to the decline: A determinate sentencing law and the Three Strikes rule which increased incarceration rates (Krisberg, 2016). Demographic changes including a stabilizing immigrant influence, to include the 18-24-year-old population becoming smaller (Sanchez & Ito, 2011). Equally contributing were the winding down of the crack epidemic and an improved economy (Elinson, 2017). Better police effectiveness may be a factor, but that it is hard to quantify since arrests dropped from a high of 30,000 a year to 15,000 a year post-1992 riots on the LAPD (LAPD, 2011). What is apparent is that politicians and police chiefs cannot claim credit for the crime drop alone.

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