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THE MORE THINGS CHANGE...

Twenty years after the L.A. Riots, are things really better?

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. In 1990, when Los Angeles marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Watts Riot, the worst civil disturbance in modern American history, most experts agreed that despite all the studies and reports [improvements had been few and little of significance had changed](#). Regrettably, their depressing assessment was confirmed only two years later when Angelenos suffered through a second conflagration.

Now, as weary Southlanders mark the twentieth anniversary of the so-called “Rodney King” riots, named after the black parolee who was beaten senseless during an encounter with police, the rush is on to demonstrate that this time we really did “get” it. At a recent event sponsored by the *Los Angeles Times*, civil rights leader Connie Rice and former D.A. Gil Garcetti [pointed to the 1992 riots as a transformative event](#) that changed the LAPD from an occupation force to a progressive “majority minority” department far more sensitive and responsive to citizen needs.

There’s no doubt that the LAPD *looks* different. By most accounts, it also seems to *act* differently. According to a columnist’s glowing report, [the “siege mentality” is gone](#). A favored explanation is that the shift to community policing instilled a new culture. Cops began treating everyone with dignity and respect, defusing decades of hostility and reducing the likelihood that history would repeat itself.

If nothing else, the 1992 riots set off a game of musical chiefs. Best known for warning officers that differences in physiognomy made it unwise to place blacks in choke holds, nasty old Daryl F. Gates was quickly replaced by an outsider, former Philadelphia police commissioner Willie Williams. He left at the end of an undistinguished five-year term that was marked, among other embarrassments, by an inability to pass the California POST exam. As his replacement the city chose Bernard Parks, a brilliant but embittered LAPD insider whose discipline-intensive response to the Rampart corruption scandal would make him wildly unpopular with the troops.

Like Williams, Parks was denied a second term. He was succeeded in 2002 by William Bratton, a savvy New Yorker who cozied up to civic leaders and politicians. An experienced top cop, Bratton relaxed Parks’ reign of terror while retaining a firm grip on the ranks. When he left in 2009 to return to consulting work, it was again time to draw from within the ranks. Charlie Beck, a consummate LAPD insider, was appointed chief. Less wedded to arrest and crime statistics than the numbers-obsessed Bratton, he’s also proven less of a disciplinarian, with a track record of letting officers off the hook [that’s upset police commissioners](#).

As to one thing there’s no doubt: the streets are indeed far more peaceful. LAPD’s 77th. Street Division, in the heart of south Los Angeles, recorded 32 killings in 2011, nearly 80 percent fewer than the 143 murders in 1992. [A knowledgeable cop explained](#) that arresting gang members and a decline in the crack trade led to “less bad guys on the block” and a more tranquil atmosphere.

As we mentioned in “[Reform and Blowback](#),” mass incarceration may be responsible for a big chunk of the “Great Crime Drop” of the 1990s. Between 1990 and 2006 the imprisonment rate climbed from 447 to 503 per 100,000, while time served increased 29 percent for property crimes and 39 percent for violent crimes. So it’s hardly surprising that crime plunged by about a third. But the funding to support stiff sentencing has evaporated, and prison budgets are being slashed everywhere. Police layoffs, once unthinkable, are now commonplace. And there are ominous signs that the crime curve is flattening out. Despite a shrinking population, [homicides increased in Detroit](#) from 308 to 344 last year, while [armed robbery is on the upswing](#) in Washington D.C., New York City and Philadelphia.

[Economic conditions in south L.A. have also worsened](#). Median income is lower than in 1992, and unemployment in two districts approaches a catastrophic rate of one in four. When so many lack a job, that’s a lot of fuel for the fire. Meanwhile demographic shifts have turned large chunks of the inner city into mostly Hispanic, freezing out blacks who aren’t part of the personal networks that are key to landing lower-end jobs.

In tough times one looks to the government. But the City of Angels has its own problems, in the nature of a \$220-million tax shortfall, leading Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa [to warn of impending layoffs](#). With fewer public-sector jobs and less government aid, prospects for the unemployed, undereducated and those with criminal records are bleaker than they’ve been in decades.

Do ordinary people think that things are getting better or worse? One week ago your blogger listened in as journalist and radio host Patt Morrison posed that question to a gathering at USC. In no particular order, here is what some audience members had to say (not verbatim, but fairly close):

Black female, middle-aged, south L.A. resident then and now: Things have not changed. In the neighborhood there is still the same status quo. There is definitely a division [between affluent and others].

White ex-activist: LAPD officers are much more involved and have a better relationship with citizens.

White male: Racism hasn’t changed much.

Journalist who covered the 1992 riots: All that has changed is the LAPD, for the better.

White male educator: Public education is worse than twenty years ago.

Voice in the crowd: Riots can start again unless there is socioeconomic change. Have not addressed the major economic difference.

White male: Gap between haves and have-nots has increased.

Older white woman: Community policing is becoming more effective. Improvement since Darryl Gates left.

Rodney King, the guest speaker, showed up late. Here are a few of his exchanges with Ms. Morrison (not verbatim, but fairly close.)

Q. Have the city and the police changed?

A. Yes. It's a slow process. The City of L.A. has worked on race relations and [established] commissions.

Q. Has LAPD changed?

A. Has changed a lot. Changing chiefs around.

Q. Are people getting along better?

A. Better. We have come a little ways, we have a long ways to go. It has to be in each of our hearts, [it's] up to each one of us as individuals each day.

Overall, Rodney King conveyed a far more hopeful message than the mostly bleak prognostications offered by his audience. Of course, he was there to sell a book. It's "[The Riot Within: My Journey from Rebellion to Redemption](#)," written with Lawrence J. Spagnola.

Untangling cause and effect is difficult. Even so, your blogger guesses that the new, improved LAPD that Rodney King and others spoke of didn't originate from a chief's directive but is the byproduct of a kinder and gentler environment. Using the [UCR report building tool](#) revealed that in 1992 Los Angeles had 1,094 murders (pop. adjusted rate 30.3), 39,508 robberies (rate 1,093) and 46,445 aggravated assaults (rate 1,285). In 2010 there were 293 murders (rate 7.7), 10,924 robberies (rate 288) and 9,344 aggravated assaults (rate 246).

Case closed? Maybe not. Perhaps the LAPD really has become so adept that no matter socioeconomic conditions, crime will keep going down, and that no matter how poorly citizens behave, officers will never again spark off a riot. Yet, as [a couple of tense officer-hooligan confrontations](#) witnessed by an *L.A. Times* columnist suggest, the goodwill generated by the department's ostensibly new approach may not have percolated to society's fringes, where poverty and hopelessness furnish abundant kindling.

Hopefully, we're wrong.