

Posted 6/16/08

## WHY THE DROP?

*Crime has been falling. Does anyone know why?*

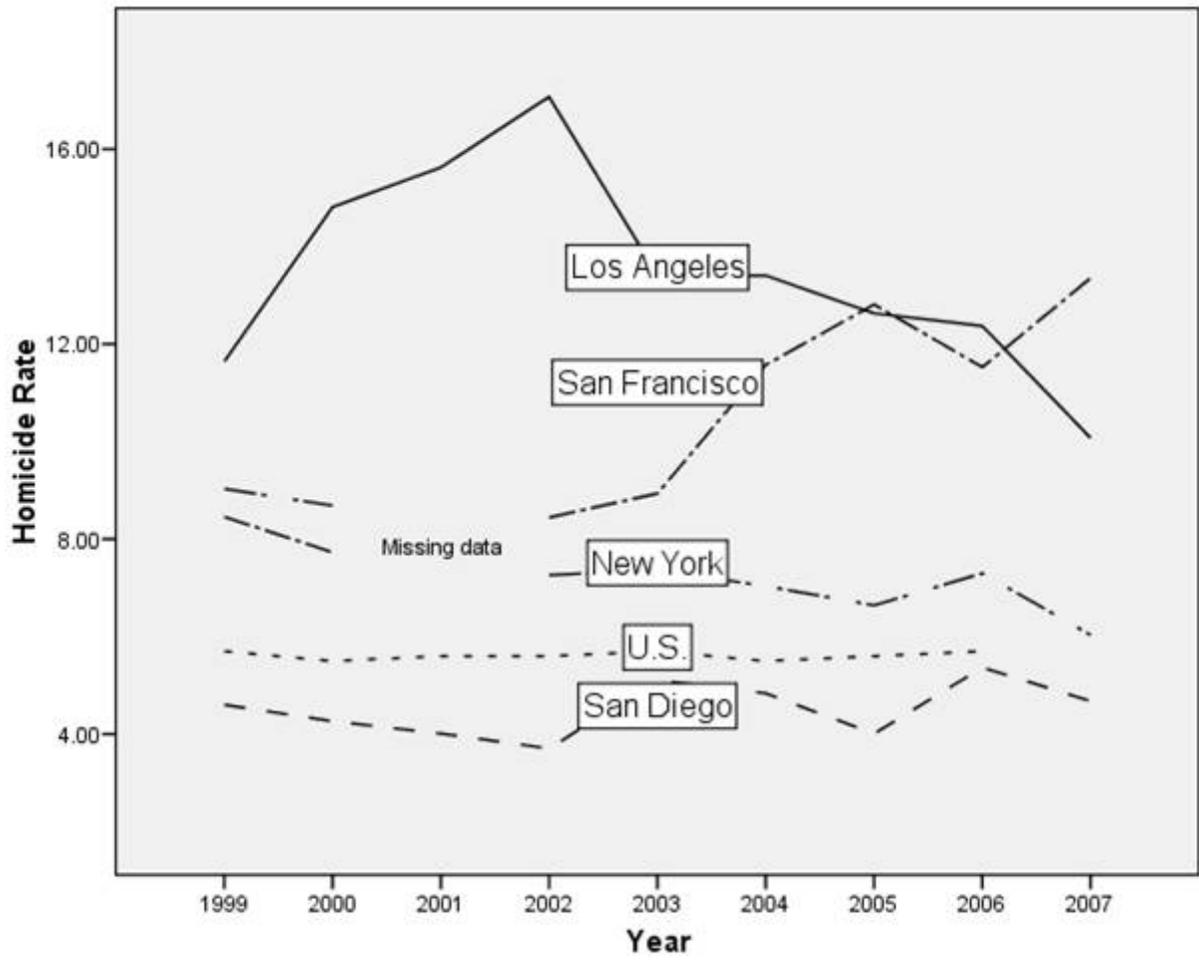
“...There will continue to be crimes of passion and anger. And it is important to note that crime in Los Angeles has dropped precipitously in the last decade. Even with the increase in homicides, management of violent crime is moving in the right direction...”

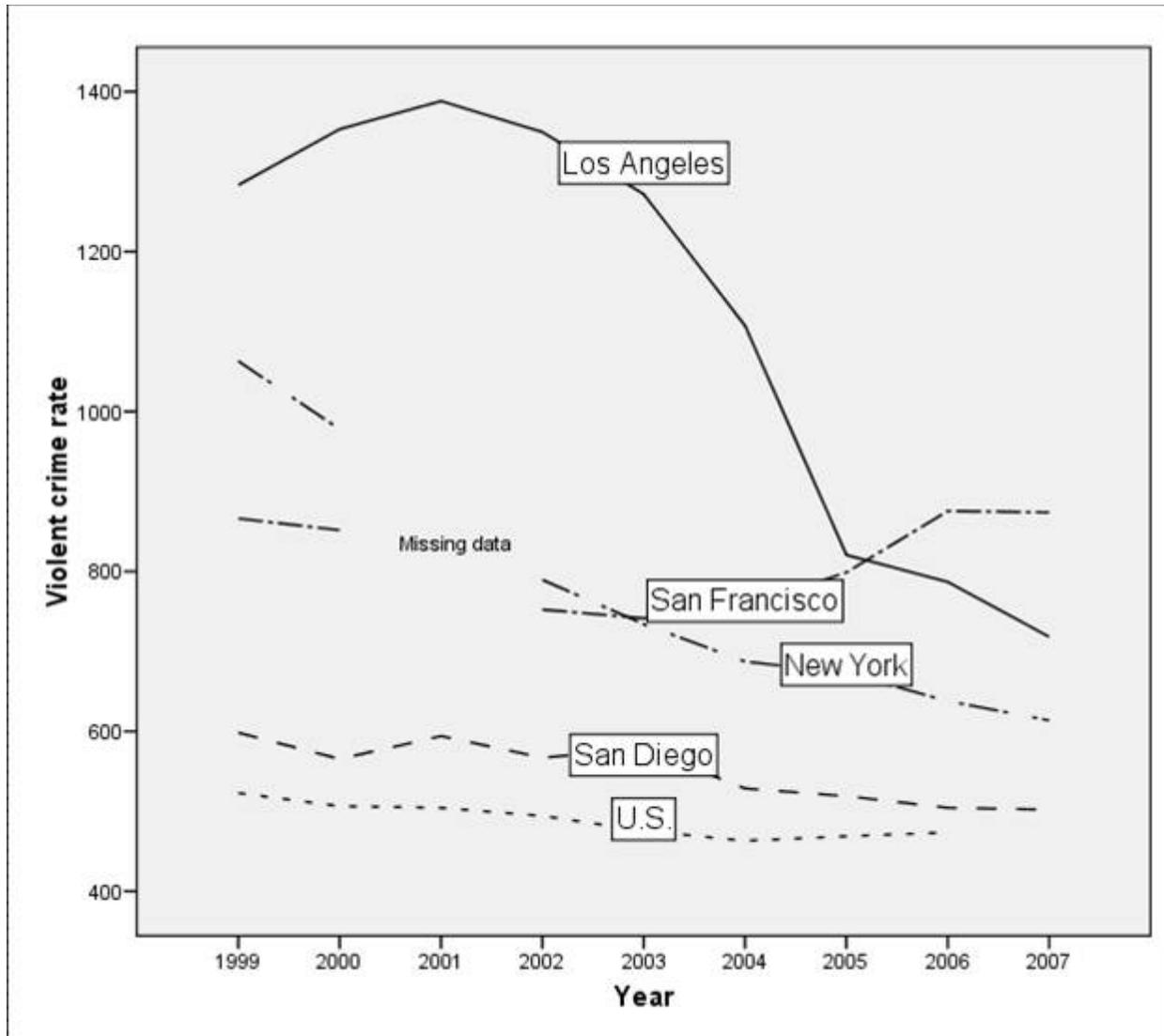
*By Julius (Jay) Wachtel.* Continuing its love-fest with LAPD Chief “Hollywood” Bill Bratton, that’s how the [L.A. Times](#) explained away the [murders](#) of eleven persons over a single weekend, with nine shot dead, at least six in gang-related incidents. And remember last month’s [six shootings in six hours](#)?

Recent events aside, homicide does seem to be on a downward trajectory. Preliminary FBI data indicates that in 2007 Los Angeles had 390 murders, a 19 percent reduction from 2006 when 480 were recorded. If this figure holds up there were 40 percent fewer murders in 2007 than in 2000, when killings reached a decade-high peak of 654 (statistics derived from [UCR Table 8](#).)

And wait, there’s more! Between 1999 and 2007, a period when L.A.’s population increased by more than two-hundred thousand, the number of violent crimes fell by 41 percent, from 46840 to 27801. Using the 2001 peak of 52243 as a base, that works out to a stunning reduction of 47 percent.

Now if only we knew *why*. The following charts compare changes in homicide and violent crime rates per 100,000 population for the three largest California cities -- Los Angeles, San Diego and San Francisco -- with rates in New York City and the U.S. as a whole.





As America's gang capital, L.A.'s been beset by criminality, but in the last decade its murder and violent crime rates have plunged, actually landing below San Francisco's. What's the reason? The *Times* knows: it's that we're doing a better job "managing" crime. Unfortunately their explanation stops there, but it's safe to say that the miracle is largely attributed to Chief Bratton, and particularly his much-ballyhooed Compstat program, a computerized pin-map that uses current data to alert commanders to crime trends and hot spots.

Bratton was appointed in October 2002, replacing Bernard Parks, a man who was viewed as so heavy-handed in administering discipline that many officers reportedly gave up interacting with thugs for fear of being punished. A cop's cop, the new chief is far more popular among the rank and file. Could it be that a renewed sense of mission invigorated officers and got them working again?

It's an appealing thought. But while the fall in murder coincided with the change in leadership, the violent crime rate was already going down when Bratton came on the job. In truth, L.A. may simply have too few cops to proactively battle violence. As these pages have [reported](#), compared to New York, the city is dramatically under-policed, with half the ratio of officers to population and, given the much higher population density in the Big Apple, a far smaller visible presence.

Other than Compstat and better leadership, what else could account for L.A.'s "success"?

- Crime's been on a prolonged downtrend in most areas, with a recent moderate leveling. Check out New York, whose overall drop in violent crime is nearly the same as L.A.'s, though perhaps not as dramatic.
- Although there is controversy about the long-range benefits of harsh sentencing, there's no question but that California's mandatory minimums and three-strikes laws have incapacitated offenders for longer periods. If that was the main reason for the disparity, though, we would expect drops in San Diego and San Francisco as well.
- During the past decades the racial composition of South Los Angeles has dramatically changed, from predominantly African-American to mostly Hispanic. It's reported that many Black gang members have moved to Antelope Valley and parts East (Riverside, San Bernardino). If it's true, as some claim, that they are the more violent, their absence may account for some of the drop.
- FBI and DEA have been applying racketeering statutes against L.A. gangs, sending many top "shot-callers" to long stays in the Federal big house. But without conducting a study, whether that's had an effect on homicides and violence is impossible to say.
- National crime stats come from the police, the same agencies whose effectiveness the data supposedly measures. Many reporting problems have surfaced over the years. Bookkeeping errors (unsurprisingly, usually leading to undercounts), differences in categorization, even purposeful jiggling -- they've all taken place. Suffice it to say that cooking the books is eminently possible, and no one's watching.

Do you have any ideas? Please pass them on!