

LAPD working to change image, nix crime

By Betty Pleasant
Special to Sentinel-Voice
Long awaited, crime statistics in Los Angeles are reportedly — and surprisingly — falling fast under the current police department administration in Los Angeles.

In this two-part series, Part I looked at the numbers. Part II is a look inside the ways the administration, community members and law enforcement officers worked together for crime reduction and better policing.

PART II

LOS ANGELES (NNPA) — In recent years, the trend of increased crime and troubled police-community relations, has apparently taken a turn for the better, according to statistics compiled by Det. Jeff Godown, Los Angeles Police Department representative.

How that change was brought about is analyzed by those inside the department and others in the South Los Angeles community that is, perhaps, affected most favorably.

The citywide homicide rate has dropped 35 percent. Statistics show that half the city's homicides routinely occur in South Los Angeles. And if the numbers hold steady through the year's end, homicides in South L.A. this year will be the lowest anyone has seen in 30 years, dropping to around 400, as opposed to previous levels of about 1,000 a year.

Citywide, other crime statistics are greatly diminished.

Officials say crime in

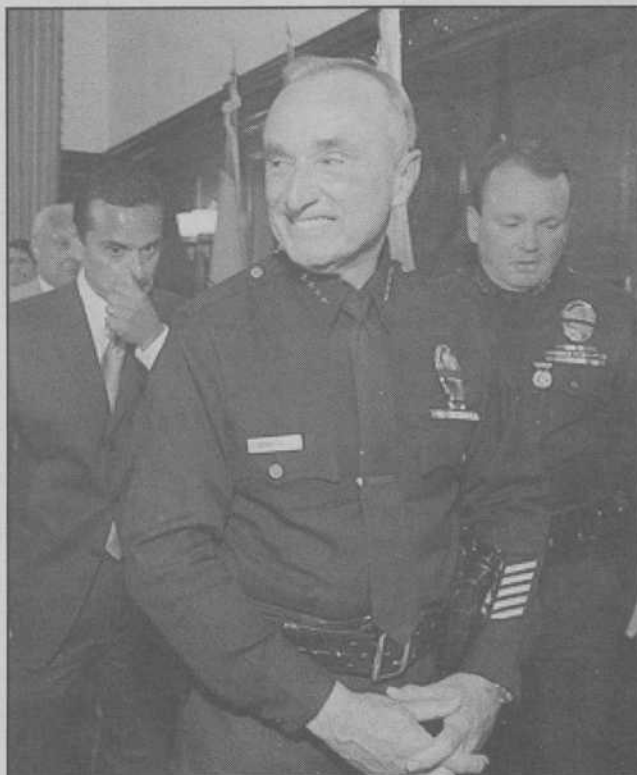
South Los Angeles has dropped to the lowest levels in recorded LAPD history: aggravated assaults down 34.9 percent; attacks on police officers, 54.8 percent; rape, 35.5 percent; robbery, 5.9 percent, and criminal threats, 19.5 percent, among other notable reductions.

Cmdr. Patrick M. Gannon, head of South Bureau Operations and the man in charge of homicides and gangs and all that "scary stuff" in "scary stuff-rich" South L.A., recently accounted for these statistics from his perspective and assessment. Gannon has been an LAPD officer for 30 years and who was captain of the 77th Street Station for two years before being promoted to commander. He credits one factor and person: "Bratton."

The change agent here, according to Gannon and others, is Police Chief William J. Bratton, who says: "We're just getting started."

"If the boss is looking at a particular part of your operation, then that's what you concentrate on," Gannon said. "Bratton came in and said, 'Reducing crime is my number one priority.' He made it simple for us. He's very specific about what he wants us to concentrate our time on, with crime being number one. So, when you have a boss who's constantly, every day, asking you questions about crime and expecting you to be impacting it, you do it."

"Bratton came in and said,



William Bratton is credited with making Los Angeles safer.

'Here's what I want you to do and here's how I want you to make Los Angeles a safer place,' which we never had before," Gannon continued.

"He gave us goals. He said 'I want a 10 percent reduction. I think it's possible.' So we worked to achieve it. Then one year, he said, 'I want a 20 percent reduction.' To be honest with you, we thought he was nuts!" Gannon said. "Are you kidding me? 20 percent!? But you know what? It was really a stretch and we didn't make 20 percent, but we did lower crime that year by 16 to 17 percent."

Bratton cranked up the pressure," Gannon said.

"Which is not to say that under [former police chief

Bernard] Parks crime was not a priority, but there is just a different way of looking at it now by setting goals and working really hard to try to achieve those goals."

Gannon said the LAPD has a homicide clearance rate that fluctuates between 70 and 74 percent, which is well above the state average of 55 percent, and is a bit above the national average that hovers around 70 percent. "Today, we in the South Bureau are solving 74 percent of murders committed in our area. As head of homicide, I always felt I could solve more murders if I had more men. But now I've come to realize I can solve more if my detectives had more time to work on them. And I've found that as the number of

new killings drop, my detectives have more time to work on solving the ones that have already occurred.

"I'm not happy with 74 percent," Gannon continued. "I get calls from victims' mothers and they are very vocal about us finding the people who killed their children and I take that very seriously, so I want to see how much we can improve on solving those homicides." Gannon said the South Bureau has 1,000 unsolved homicides dating back to 1978, "and we have a whole squad working on them."

Gannon said the biggest change that has occurred on the force since Bratton's appointment has been in how the officers are asked to tackle problems. "We have a lot of responsibilities and freedom to try new things and think new thoughts," the commander said.

He related how, when he was the 77th Station's captain, a crisis arose when a total of 20 shootings suddenly erupted in his area between noon and 4 p.m. in which eight people were shot.

"I knew what to do from the suppression side. I knew I could flood the area with police officers and I could make it safe, but I also knew I couldn't sustain that and the shootings would erupt when the officers left," Gannon said.

So he tried something new: He sought out the gang intervention people working in his area to help solve that crisis, and, over a series of

meetings, formed a relationship of mutual trust, cooperation and communication between those gang workers and his police.

"From that, I began to ask for help in dealing with problems in the area. Up until then, the police did not have a relationship with gang intervention workers," Gannon added. "Actually, we didn't have a relationship with anyone. One of the worst things the LAPD did back in the day was that we did not play well in the sandbox with others. We always operated on our own and thought that if the LAPD can't solve the problem, then the problem couldn't be solved. That was a stupid [way] to think."

Gannon found this new relationship with the gang intervention workers so fruitful, that he brought captains from other stations round the 77th to his meetings and into the fold — captains from Southwest, Southeast, Wilshire and even the Pacific Division that handles gang-troubled Venice.

"I began to bring them together to talk about our issues and how we can work better as a group." Now, whenever there's a shooting or any gang-related incident in South Bureau territory, the watch commanders are required to call the local gang intervention workers so they can get on it.

Both Gannon and Bratton are particularly impressed by the work Cmdr. Rick Jacobs did when he was captain of the Southeast area two years

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Disparity

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monic new substance," said Craig Reinerman, a sociology and legal-studies professor at the University of California at Santa Cruz who edited the 1997 book "Crack in America: Demon Drugs and Social Justice" about the rise of crack in the 1980s.

When crack first became popular, there was an increase in murders and other crimes associated with the drug.

But the bloodshed was not necessarily the result of something inherent in crack.

Instead, most of that violence was typical for what happens when any illegal drug is introduced and drug dealers with guns compete for new markets, said Dr. Alfred Blumstein, a professor of urban systems and operations research at Carnegie-Mellon University.

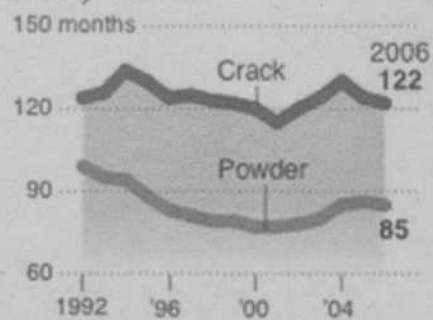
Although there was already a great deal of concern about crack by 1986, the death of basketball star Len Bias in June of that year is seen as the pivotal event that spurred Congress to enact the much tougher sentences for crack offenses.

Bias was a star at the University of Maryland and had just been drafted by the Boston

Cocaine sentences

The average prison sentence was more than three years longer for crack cocaine offenders than for powder cocaine.

Average prison sentence, fiscal year



SOURCE: U.S. Sentencing Commission AP

Celtics when he died.

Initial news reports incorrectly said Bias died after using crack. It wasn't until months later that one of Bias' teammates testified that

he had actually snorted cocaine the night he died.

By that time, the harsh penalties for crack crimes had already been passed by Congress, with a push from House Speaker Tip O'Neill of Massachusetts, whose Celtic-fan constituents were up in arms about Bias' death.

"Len Bias' death symbolized just how terrible this drug was," said Marc Mauer, executive director of The Sentencing Project, a criminal justice research and advocacy group based in Washington. "Here you had this promising young man on the verge of a very great basketball career and his life is taken away by the evils of crack cocaine."

The crack scare was also fueled by medical professionals who worried that pregnant women who used the drug would give birth to a generation of babies with severe neurological damage. But the "crack babies" theory has been largely debunked.

Dr. Harolyn Belcher, an associate professor of pediatrics at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, said there is no evidence that crack is biologically more harmful than powdered cocaine to the fetus or developing child.

"If I had a well-to-do family whose wife was at home snorting coke versus someone who is a mother who is out on the street using crack, the babies would look very similar," Belcher said.

Belcher said children who were exposed to crack or powdered cocaine in the uterus may be at slightly higher risks for language delays and attention deficits, but she said recent studies have shown that alcohol is far more devastating to the fetus.

John Steer, a member of the U.S. Sentencing Commission, said the commission first said in 1995 that the disparate punishments for crack and powdered cocaine defendants were not justified.

"The bottom-line conclusion is that for punishment purposes, they should be treated much more similarly than they are now. That's based upon the fact that in the real world, they are not as different overall as was initially thought," Steer said.

The reductions in the recommended sentences for crack offenses went into effect Nov. 1, but the guidelines do not affect the minimum mandatory sentences, which only Congress can change.