

Chapter 9

The Chickens Have Come Home to Roost

Police Violence and Urban Rebellion Redux

The Webster Commission was established to investigate the uprising that rocked Los Angeles for five days in April 1992 after the acquittal of four LAPD officers on trial for beating Rodney King. In testimony and community meetings before the commission, South Central residents described a long history of discriminatory criminal justice policies, police brutality, and lack of accountability. “We saw Don Jackson’s head smashed through a plate glass window by cops out in Long Beach. The cops were acquitted,” activist Tut Hayes proclaimed. “We saw on television Latasha Harlins shot in the back of the head and the Korean grocer that got no time, straight probation, and we saw what happened to Rodney King. We were informed, we were alert, we viewed all that, and nothing happened. But we responded.” Media outlets and lawmakers portrayed so-called rioters as criminals lacking legitimate grievances just as they did after Watts. But many participants had a clear political message for lawmakers and police officials. They explicitly rejected the intensified police authority, racist police practices, and punitive policies that had worked to keep them contained for the previous two and a half decades.¹

Video evidence of the King beating, the officers’ acquittal, and ensuing rebellion vindicated the claims of activists and residents of color who had struggled against a repressive police department and criminal justice system since the 1965 Watts uprising. In the wake of the 1992 rebellion, community organizations, activists, and residents once warned that a get-tough response would only perpetuate the crisis in impoverished neighborhoods and reinforce the city’s racial hierarchy. “Right now in L.A., making the right choice between the welfare state or the police state is critical; no amount of police can protect people from the spiraling social cost of poverty,” argued activists from the Labor/Community Strategy Center (LCSC), a progressive, multiracial organization that emerged from labor and economic justice struggles of the 1980s. “Hiring 1,000 police will overcrowd more schools and close a few health centers, but for the millions of poor Angelenos who live in fear, it will not buy safety. . . . The further transformation of the LAPD into an occupying force is the wrong solution.”² Nevertheless, police authorities and lawmakers responded with initiatives that reasserted state authority and police-oriented solutions to urban problems.

In contrast to the 1960s uprisings, the 1992 rebellion was multiracial, its context more punitive. Often referred to as a poverty or bread riot in response to the dire economic conditions and inequality faced by people of color in the city, the rebellion was also rooted in a rejection of the excessive police power and the LAPD's broad discretionary authority to criminalize, contain, and incarcerate those residents the police deemed a threat to the social order.³ As such, human relations programs or halfhearted community-based policing initiatives to incrementally reform the LAPD would not be enough. Substantive changes would be necessary.

Many residents had high hopes after the rebellion. Economic development and social programs developed by lawmakers, however, relied on a partnership with the criminal justice system. Operation Weed and Seed, in particular, paired federal funding for social services in impoverished and high-crime neighborhoods with increased resources for law enforcement to weed out criminals. But the police were not equipped to solve social problems that manifested through crime, drug use, and gang violence. As LCSC activists predicted during their campaign against Weed and Seed, programs aimed at solving socioeconomic inequality were linked with law enforcement, and the welfare state was absorbed by the carceral state.⁴

In the years after 1992, Los Angeles's first African American chief of police, Willie Williams, promoted community policing. An outsider who had come to Los Angeles after serving as chief of the Philadelphia police department, Williams faced stiff opposition from veteran LAPD officers and commanders. Yet hopes for reform and external oversight by the police commission were hampered by the election of law-and-order conservative Richard Riordan as mayor in 1993. The department capitalized on the city's continued need for law enforcement to address social problems to continue to consolidate its power and authority.

Policing and Excessive Force in the Multiracial Metropolis

By the 1990s, the city was no longer one the police knew. Police officers assigned to inner-city districts were rarely from the area and brought with them a hostile mentality toward the residents they served. A study by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) found that 83.1 percent of LAPD officers lived outside the city limits. Segregation exacerbated this geographic divide. Not only did officers live outside the city boundaries, they lived in areas much less ethnically and racially diverse than the neighborhoods they patrolled. "The most pronounced, consistent difference is that police enclave communities have extraordinarily small African-American populations," the ACLU explained, "making it more likely that officers and their families

have few social interactions with African-Americans outside the context of police work.”⁵

The combination of demographic changes between the 1970s and the 1990s, racial segregation, and officer residency patterns worsened the department’s “us versus them” attitude. Officers tasked with patrolling high-crime, violent neighborhoods felt vulnerable. Rarely viewing their role as ensuring public safety, they enforced order. “In response to the enormous influx of Mexicans and Central Americans, the police have come to feel like mercenaries fighting a war in a foreign land,” one observer suggested. “The result is what one officer calls ‘the John Wayne Syndrome—you and me, pardner, against the world. Who do we stop? The dummies. It’s us against the dummies.’”⁶ But for residents, the police were a force of outsiders. “There is a widespread belief,” the ACLU concluded, “that the Los Angeles Police Department . . . is a dominantly white force of suburban outsiders who function as a de facto army of occupation in the urban communities of Los Angeles.”⁷

Suppression and containment strategies associated with the wars on crime, drugs, and gangs of the 1980s and early 1990s amplified the divide between police and residents of color. The martial imperative increased the potential for police abuse and removed limitations on the excessive use of force. “The political rhetoric about a ‘war’ on drugs and a ‘war’ on crime has helped turn the police into soldiers,” the ACLU concluded in the wake of the King beating, “not civil servants or guardians of community order—making them sometimes more aggressive and forceful than they have a right to be in the pursuit of criminals and suspects.”⁸ Seeing themselves at war, the police used whatever means necessary to control the streets.

Such attitudes had dire consequences for many black and Latino/a residents. In June of 1986, six officers from Community Resources against Street Hoodlums raided the home of Jessie Lárez in East Los Angeles in search of a murder weapon supposedly in the possession of one of Lárez’s sons. During the raid, the officers turned the home upside down and broke Jessie Lárez’s nose. As the U.S. Court of Appeals summarized, officers “hurled Jessie across the room, grabbed him by the hair, forced him to lie face down on the floor where one of the officers held Jessie down with his knee on Jessie’s neck and handcuffed him. . . . The officers laughed and sneered; they told him they had him where they wanted him. At one point Officer Holcomb pointed his service revolver at Jessie’s head and said to him, ‘I could blow your fucking head off right here and nobody can prove you did not try to do something.’ Officer Keller told Jessie, ‘we finally got you motherfucker.’”⁹ Officers failed to find any weapons and did not bring any charges against members of the Lárez family for gun possession. As was common when officers used improper force, they arrested Jessie Lárez for battery of a police officer.¹⁰

Lárez lodged a complaint and the Internal Affairs Division (IAD) assigned a Community Resources against Street Hoodlums officer to investigate. Unsurprisingly, none of the allegations of brutality, excessive use of force, or property destruction were sustained. In response, Lárez brought a lawsuit against Gates and the LAPD in federal court. Gates defended his officers, asking, “How much is a broken nose worth? . . . I don’t think it’s worth anything. [Lárez] is probably lucky that’s all he had broken.”¹¹ Although a federal judge found in favor of Lárez and ordered Gates to pay a \$170,000 fine, the city council and Bradley appropriated funds to pay the settlement, infuriating Latino/a residents and activists who viewed the action as a failure to hold the department accountable to civilian authority.¹² As the Latino Community Justice Center, an organization that worked on behalf of police abuse victims in the Latino/a community, explained, “Gang violence has been repeatedly used by Chief Gates to justify police harassment of Blacks and Latinos.”¹³

Routine police abuse had a significant impact on city resources. But skyrocketing expenditures from lawsuits and settlements had done little to change disciplinary practices within the LAPD. Between 1972 and 1990, individuals filed 15,054 complaints and 5,598 lawsuits against the LAPD, which resulted in the city paying out over \$43 million in claims to residents for the actions of LAPD officers.¹⁴ By the early 1990s, an observer of the Board of Police Commissioners explained that “multi-million dollar verdicts, if not exactly commonplace, were no longer extraordinary events.” In 1989 and 1990, for example, the city paid out over \$6 million and \$8 million in settlements, respectively. While using taxpayer resources to protect the police, the same observer found, the commission also recognized that the “specter of future litigation” and fiscal repercussions made them wary of aggressive investigations into the accusations of abuse or the department’s disciplinary permissiveness.¹⁵ As the board was caught between protecting the department and avoiding the financial strain of future judgments, the board’s oversight withered.

In the late 1980s and 1990s, Robert Talcott led the police commission in an effort to restore peace and harmony with the department. Talcott’s approach heralded back to an era when the mayor’s office attempted to create an amicable relationship with the police department in which the commission took a backseat to the prerogatives of the chief of police. After LAPD officers assaulted protestors involved in the Century City Justice for Janitors march in June 1990, for example, the Police Commission did not undertake an investigation until ordered to by Mayor Bradley. As former commissioner Reva Tooley told investigators tasked with probing the King beating, the LAPD was “so out of control in terms of oversight that they

only investigate what they want to.” The department was “getting away with murder.”¹⁶

Department officials routinely absolved officers charged with the use of excessive force. Deputy Chief Glenn Levant, who directed the war on gangs, believed that under Assistant Chief Robert Vernon, the department rarely sustained complaints of excessive force or abuse. Between 1986 and 1990, for example, IAD sustained only 19 percent of all citizen-generated complaints and officer discipline was lax. Out of 1,988 complaints of officer use of excessive force or improper tactics, only 7.9 percent were sustained. The IAD did not even review every complaint. The IAD investigated only sixty-six complaints of excessive force or improper tactics during the study period, leaving the remaining 1,922 complaints to be investigated by area commanders who were less likely to sustain complaints of excessive force. Indeed, Levant believed the complaint and discipline system had “gone to hell.”¹⁷

The accountability problem rested with department leadership. Supervisors often knew who the most problematic officers were and recommended disciplinary action. But when those recommendations for discipline reached Gates, who held ultimate disciplinary authority over officers, he routinely overturned punishments, especially for excessive use of force. In 1986, F. E. Piersol, commander of the Operations–South Bureau, wrote to the director of the Office of Operations, Assistant Chief Vernon, complaining that Gates overturned sustained complaints of officer misconduct for three officers who “had conducted themselves in a manner inconsistent with established Department standards.” In each case, the chief disregarded the recommended disciplinary action, which undermined the commander’s credibility with officers and weakened the ability of the oversight system to prevent misconduct. “The unfortunate by-product of these reversals was that the involved officers were led to believe that their conduct in these matters was acceptable although the Bureau deemed it inappropriate,” Piersol concluded. “Each of the three involved officers have subsequently become involved in similar, and in one case, almost identical, acts of misconduct.” What was needed was a loud and clear message that the department would not tolerate acts of misconduct. Such suggestions went unheeded.¹⁸

For Gates the department remained exemplary. In his annual self-evaluations and end-of-year messages to officers, Gates praised his department as respectful, communicative with residents, and innovative. The end-of-year message in 1989, for example, suggested that the LAPD had concluded another successful year and through “expansion and innovation” was a department “on the move.”¹⁹ Gates rarely, if ever, admitted the problems of excessive force and violations of civil liberties that accompanied the gang and drug war. In 1986, the same year officers beat Lárez without facing any

repercussion or disciplinary action, Gates rated the department “Outstanding” in every category, including Community Relations and Unit Management.²⁰ But Gates’s rosy vision was about to come crashing down.

On March 3, 1991, California Highway Patrol officers pulled over Rodney King after a high-speed chase. Called in for support, LAPD officers confronted King, who was drunk and failed to respond to verbal commands. While some seventeen other officers stood by, three LAPD officers, under the direction of a sergeant, viciously beat King using aluminum batons and TASERs. Unbeknownst to the officers, a bystander filmed the beating and gave the tape to a local news station. The clip became an international news story, providing startling evidence of the LAPD’s excessive use of force.²¹

When residents and political leaders saw the video of the King beating, they reacted with disbelief. Mayor Bradley was “shocked and outraged.” Even Chief Gates appeared astonished, demonstrating his inability to accept that officers in his self-proclaimed model department would treat suspects with such force. “It was very, very extreme use of force—extreme for any police department in America,” Gates stated. “But for the LAPD, considered by many to be the finest, most professional police department in the world, it was more than extreme. It was impossible.” While Gates denied the beating reflected systemic problems in his department, calling it an aberration, residents and media outlets mocked Gates’s claims of a police department in tune with racial equality and civil rights through protests and political cartoons. For his part, Bradley pledged action. “This is something we cannot tolerate,” Bradley stated. “I assure you . . . appropriate action will be taken by the department and the Police Commission.”²²

The footage of the King beating exposed the failure of the department’s disciplinary system to keep officers in check. Officers ordinarily able to hide behind the code of silence, which informally forbade an officer from testifying against a fellow officer, were exposed on videotape. Gates attempted to head off criticism by announcing internal investigations by the IAD and Major Crimes Investigation section, calling his department a “model department” emulated by law enforcement agencies across the nation, and eventually issuing a half-hearted apology in which he emphasized King’s criminal past. “He’s on parole,” Gates stated. “He’s a convicted robber, I’d be glad to apologize.” Yet, Gates denied that the beating reflected a systemic problem in the department, concluding, “This [incident] is an aberration.”²³

But for many black and Latino/a residents, such episodes of abuse were hardly aberrations. A *Los Angeles Times* poll found that 92 percent of residents believed the police used excessive force against King and two-thirds thought police brutality was common. Another poll conducted for the mayor’s office

found that 78.1 percent of people believed blacks and Latinos/as were more likely to be victims of police brutality.²⁴ “There are so many incidents of police brutality in our community,” the ACLU’s Paul Hoffman stated, “that it has become part of the fabric of our daily lives, especially the lives of the African-Americans and Latinos in Los Angeles.”²⁵

Pressure for Reform

The King beating mobilized many residents to demand change. Over 10,000 people wrote to the ACLU demanding that Gates resign.²⁶ Hundreds of protestors, led by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Urban League, converged on the Parker Center to demand Gates’s resignation. Protestors chanted “Gates must go! Gates must go!” for over three hours. With support from Gates and Bradley, the district attorney indicted four officers. The FBI also investigated to determine if King’s civil rights were violated, and the Department of Justice closely monitored the outcome of the city’s handling of the situation.²⁷

Removing Gates was not an easy task. Gates flexed the LAPD’s political muscle after the Board of Police Commissioners decided to put him on inactive duty pending an investigation into the department. Infuriated, Gates refused to accept the order, appealing to the city council and suing the Board of Police Commissioners for illegally convening and overstepping their power to remove the chief. The city council reinstated Gates the following day. After a month, Bradley publicly demanded Gates’s resignation, something he had not previously done when episodes of abuse surfaced. To be sure, in the decades prior to 1991, Bradley had operated within the context of structural constraints of the city charter that gave the mayor only so much authority over the police department. But video evidence provided Bradley with the leverage he did not have before. Yet Gates remained steadfast in dismissing any call for his removal. “I will never leave when there is controversy,” Gates stated. “I will leave when I choose to leave.”²⁸

But Bradley took action. He appointed deputy secretary of state and former FBI director Warren Christopher, who had served on the McCone Commission, to lead an independent investigation of the policies, practices, and culture within the LAPD. The ten-member Independent Commission on the Los Angeles Police Department, known as the Christopher Commission, was intended to be “a comprehensive effort to deal with the entire problem of police brutality in Los Angeles.” With the cooperation of Gates, commissioners interviewed more than fifty experts, 150 community representatives, and 500 police officers in its review of LAPD policies, culture and attitudes, and supervision and management procedures.²⁹

The Christopher Commission's investigation exposed a systemic lack of accountability and failure of leadership that would ultimately force Gates out. Beyond general use-of-force disparities, the report exposed the LAPD's racial policing use of the department's K-9 Unit and a wide disparity in dog bites and attacks in black and Latino/a neighborhoods. Despite a lawsuit filed by the ACLU and a nationally televised CBS news airing of an LAPD-sanctioned video showing a dog attack on an unarmed suspect, Gates denied that the department trained dogs to bite people, that they only bite if attacked, and that the dogs were "the most gentle things you'll ever find in your life."³⁰

The release of the LAPD's Mobile Digital Terminal transcripts and interviews with officers compounded the damning evidence of a racist subculture in the department. One officer, for example, commented that he was "back over here in the projects, pissing off the natives," and that he "would love to drive down Slauson with a flamethrower. . . . We could have a barbecue." Although the most blatant racist selections represented a small percentage of the total number of transmissions, a survey of 650 officers found that nearly 25 percent of officers believed "racial bias (prejudice) on the part of officers toward minority citizens currently exists and contributes to a negative interaction between police and the community." A lack of management supervision contributed to the excessive use of force and an insular culture that operated to bury complaints of excessive force or punish officers who spoke out or criticized the department. More surprising, however, was that 4.9 percent of respondents believed that an officer was justified in administering physical punishment to a suspect who has committed a heinous crime, while 4.6 percent believed an officer was justified in using physical punishment with a suspect who had a bad or uncooperative attitude.³¹

Testimony also uncovered a failure of leadership and management to ensure accountability. While some officers, such as Assistant Chief Vernon, defended the department against criticism, others expressed concern with the way Gates had managed the department. Assistant Chief David Dotson was blunt. "Essentially," he explained, "we have not had, in my opinion, at the top, very effective leadership." To be sure, the department's policy manual had "high-sounding statements of purpose" about how officers should treat residents, but very little was translated into day-to-day operations. Rather, the department was stuck in a 1950s-era mentality that rewarded officers for "doing this hardnosed, aggressive, proactive police job." The perceived failures of the criminal justice system, Assistant Chief Brewer added, led officers to adopt tactics of street justice, the attitude that "perhaps maybe we should teach you that you shouldn't do these kinds of things [crime and violence]."³²

The philosophy of managing rather than preventing crime isolated the police from the people they were supposed to serve and made the use of force much more likely. “This police department is aggressive,” Gates admitted. “We’re going to use all the means at our disposal that we can to bring down the crime and violence.”³³ Officers and representatives of the Los Angeles Police Protective League, however, testified that the department’s emphasis on statistics as the sign of good police work—arrests as an indicator of productivity and means of promotion—and response time to emergency calls reduced incentives for officers to cooperate with residents or adopt community-oriented policing practices. The result, the commission concluded, was a “siege mentality” that “alienates the officer from the community.”³⁴

The commission’s report identified and criticized the LAPD’s policies and practices in a way that only anti-police abuse activists had done in the past. It condemned the department’s discriminatory practices, such as the “pretty routine” use of the prone-out tactic and stops of black and Latino/a youth without “probable cause” or “reasonable suspicion” in neighborhoods of color, and revealed a racist culture that influenced the use of excessive force in black and Latino/a communities. “The problem of excessive force,” the commission concluded, “is aggravated by racism and bias within the LAPD.” The central recommendations reflected the liberal law-and-order emphasis on procedural oversight and responsiveness to all residents, including Gates’s retirement, the adoption of community policing, new training and supervisory procedures, and policies to make the department more accountable to the mayor and Board of Police Commissioners.³⁵

The Christopher Report proposed 130 specific changes to departmental operations and made thirty-six major recommendations in need of immediate redress. The most far reaching aimed to overhaul departmental culture starting with top leadership, the elimination of discriminatory practices, a return to the philosophy of community-based policing, transparency in disciplinary and complaint proceedings, a greater oversight role for the police commission, and limits on the tenure of the chief.³⁶ Praising the report, Bradley called for implementation of the most pressing recommendations. “I say to those who would block the road to change: stand aside or we will leave you behind,” Bradley said. “We cannot, we will not, rest until the Christopher Commission has changed the way we police our city.”³⁷

Gates “strongly opposed” all recommendations limiting the power or autonomy of the department. He rejected proposals that would remove the chief’s civil service protection, change the selection process of the chief curbing preferences for internal candidates, increase mayoral power to appoint the chief, provide greater authority for the Police Commission to remove the chief, and limit the chief’s tenure to two five-year terms. He also hesitated

when it came to changes limiting officer discretion, such as the recommendation to end use of the prone-out tactic. Gates ordered further study of the practice and defended the gradual approach by claiming, “This research is necessary because a delicate balance must be reached. Crime prevention, officer safety, community perceptions, employee relations concerns and ‘Service Excellence’ all must be taken into account.”³⁸

Gates did eventually announce a plan to retire in April 1992, and begrudgingly accepted the recommendation that the department expand community-based policing strategies. Beginning in January 1992, the department implemented pilot community-based policing initiatives in divisions around the city. Gates promoted community-based policing as “an attitude, not a program,” and as a philosophy of cooperation with residents to solve long-term community problems. The department’s adoption of community-based policing as a “value-laden philosophy of policing that consists of an open-ended dynamic process emphasizing partnerships and problem solving to provide service excellence” reflected the potential for a transformation of policing in the city. But it required a reorientation in departmental culture that was rigidly hierarchical and committed to aggressive tactics based on the “us versus them” attitude.³⁹

Progress was slow, and convincing officers to buy in required work. Supervisors from the Southeast and Southwest areas, responding to widespread criticism of the department after the King beating and pressure from the department brass to implement new initiatives, supported community-based policing and recognized that they “must listen and respond to community desires.” Supervisors emphasized the desire to “instill the service mentality into the troops; citizens want to be treated well.” Within Operations–South Bureau, Chief Hunt promoted implementation of community-based policing philosophies and challenged officers to act in ways that would “prove the greatness” and restore the faith, credibility, and image of the LAPD as a model department. But supervisors also noted a “need to get officers on board; present in positive manner,” which in practice often meant subordinating community desires for control to police objectives and interests.⁴⁰

A more fundamental change came when residents overwhelmingly passed Charter Amendment F in June of 1992. Coming on the heels of the 1992 Los Angeles rebellion, discussed below, Charter Amendment F gained support from blacks, Latinos/as, and white liberals, Jews in particular. Opposition was centered in the San Fernando Valley, but even there, voters approved the measure with just over 50 percent of the vote.⁴¹ Charter reform altered the process of hiring the chief of police, limited the chief’s tenure to two five-year terms, provided the mayor and police commission greater power to fire the chief, and appointed a civilian member to departmental disciplinary panels

to promote greater accountability in complaint and disciplinary proceedings. Such reforms would provide the foundation for a transformation in the relationship between the police and civilian oversight that LAPD officials had opposed for half a century.⁴² Unsurprisingly, Gates and the Police Protective League opposed the measure. Gates argued the amendment was a “power play—it will politicize the Police Department right down to the man on the street,” while Police Protective League president Bill Violante called it “a sham, a bunch of garbage.” Public support for charter reform, however, was a clear rejection of Gates and his style of policing. Groups such as the Urban League believed that it represented a “new climate” and “sends out the message to officers on the street that says, ‘Hey, this is a new day, you can’t brutalize people anymore.’”⁴³

Yet activists would point out that the reforms were limited in scope. As LCSC activists argued, the charter amendment narrowly focused on the power of the chief, failed to address systemic problems of racism and excessive violence in the LAPD, and aimed at pacifying community outrage through the appearance of significant change. Instead, the Coalition against Police Abuse, as it had done for nearly two decades, suggested a fundamental reordering of police power through proposals for social and economic investment in communities, an independent review board, and community control of the police. In demanding investment in the welfare state instead of the police state, LCSC activists warned that surface-level reforms to the LAPD would enable the further transformation of the department into an occupying force.⁴⁴

But the police department did not change overnight. Cosmetic changes, such as setting up a toll-free hotline to receive complaints and creating more easily accessible and bilingual complaint forms, as activists suggested, did not overturn the prevailing power structure of the department.⁴⁵ Early audits, in fact, found significant noncompliance with the changes in complaint procedures and limited implementation of community policing. In 1992 an ACLU study concluded, “More than a year after the beating of motorist Rodney King focused attention on the LAPD’s handling of incidents of severe police misconduct, meaningful reform of citizen complaint operations remains woefully incomplete.”⁴⁶ As public outcry and pressure led to the indictment of four LAPD officers involved in the King beating, the outcome of the trial would test the city’s commitment to justice and equality.

No Justice, No Peace

The trial of the LAPD officers for beating King became a judgment on the police, racism, and justice in the city. Four months later, the California Court

of Appeals changed the venue of trial from downtown Los Angeles to the remote, nearly all-white suburban enclave of Simi Valley thirty-five miles to the northwest. The jury, composed of ten whites, one Latina, and one Filipino-American, included no African Americans. To the shock of many Angelinos, on April 29, 1992, the jury acquitted the officers. In the hours and days that followed, thousands of residents took to the streets, many yelling, “No justice, no peace,” in what quickly became the largest urban uprising in American history.⁴⁷

The trial followed a series of new injustices and abuses of police power. The most recent affront for many African Americans occurred after Judge Joyce Karlin handed down a light sentence of probation and community service for Korean merchant Sun Ja Du after the murder of Latasha Harlins, an African American teenager. Karlin’s leniency combined with the acquittal of the four officers in the King trial and the longer history of police abuse in the city symbolized a racist and unequal criminal justice system. As one Inglewood Blood told Mike Davis: “Rodney King? Shit, my homies be beat like dogs by the police every day. This riot is all about the homeboys murdered by the police, about the little sister killed by the Koreans, about twenty-seven years of oppression. Rodney King just the trigger.” When the jury handed down its acquittal, hip-hop artist Chuck D of Public Enemy summarized the reaction: it “was like throwing a match in a pool of gasoline.”⁴⁸

Peaceful protestors gathered in front of Parker Center, while other marched in the streets holding signs condemning chief Gates, racism in the LAPD, and police practices that gave officers a “license to kill.” As protest grew, it evolved into sporadic episodes of violence city-wide. City officials and LAPD commanders were unprepared, even though Gates had written the Model Riot Control Plan after Watts, telling interviewers, “No one knows how to handle a riot better than I do.” Even after the sporadic violence broke out, Gates attended a fundraiser with opponents of Charter Amendment F in the posh West Side neighborhood of Brentwood rather than organize his department’s response.⁴⁹

Looting and burning spread to vast swaths of the city, reaching Koreatown, Hollywood, and parts of the San Fernando Valley. An unorganized and uncoordinated LAPD command responded slowly, without any clear directive. Outnumbered and ill-equipped, officers retreated from the scene at the corner of Florence and Normandie in South Central while the city watched on television as white truck driver Reginald Denny was brutally attacked. The department’s command structure broke down during the initial hours of the rebellion, and the nation’s top police department—unwilling to ask for help unless forced to do so—looked on helplessly as the violence quickly spun out of control.⁵⁰



Protesting the LAPD during the 1992 Los Angeles rebellion. Protestors march in the streets and hold up signs condemning the racism at the core of the LAPD and demanding the firing of Chief of Police Daryl Gates. The acquittal of the four officers on trial for the beating of Rodney King sparked and fueled the rebellion, which quickly became the largest episode of civil unrest in American history. Photographer: Gary Leonard; Gary Leonard Collection, Los Angeles Public Library.

Law enforcement officials believed that gangs were organizing the violence and that counterinsurgency tactics of mass arrest, occupation, and containment would be necessary to restore law and order. Mayor Bradley declared a state of emergency, called on the State of California to send troops, and instituted a citywide sunset-to-sunrise curfew.⁵¹ After assuring the nation that he would “use whatever force is necessary to restore order,” President George H. W. Bush provided federal law enforcement officers with the authority to act as peace officers and to enforce state laws.⁵² Over 7,000 National Guardsmen and more than 3,500 federal troops from a variety of agencies such as the FBI; SWAT Teams; special riot control units from the U.S. Marshals Service; Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS); Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms; and the Bureau of Prisons mobilized to aid local law enforcement. It took over 20,000 law enforcement and military forces to stop the unrest, which ended after five days, 16,291 arrests, 2,383 injuries, at least fifty-two deaths, 700 businesses burned, and nearly \$1 billion in damage. Cooperation between local and federal law enforcement agencies resulted in mass arrests and criminalization of the city’s black and brown residents.⁵³

Local officials and the Bush administration blamed the violence on gang members and criminals. In a public address to the nation, President Bush declared the violence was “not about civil rights” or a “message of protest,” but “the brutality of a mob, pure and simple.”⁵⁴ Deputy City Attorney John Wilson claimed that background checks on the arrestees revealed that 40 percent had criminal records. “This was not an instantaneous ‘good guy rage’ kind of thing,” Wilson suggested. “This was a ‘bad guy’ taking advantage of a situation out of control.” City officials brushed off charges of civil liberties violations by portraying much of involvement in the violence as the work of hardened criminals. “The public defenders have made a point of saying we’ve caught up people who were homeless. (And) yes, we have seen some of those,” said Deputy City Attorney Dennis Jensen. “But there was a criminal element out there.”⁵⁵

Mass arrests targeted areas that had been punitively policed since the 1970s. Emphasizing the high proportion of criminal records among those arrested ignored how the war on drugs and gangs had produced higher rates of arrest among blacks and Latinos/as. Indeed, between 1987 and 1992, California expanded criminal justice spending by 70 percent, and at least 25 percent of black youth in South Central had some sort of criminal record. By framing the uprising as an episode of lawlessness, criminality, and illegality, officials justified punitive responses of aggressive policing, mass arrest, and incarceration.⁵⁶

Yet unlike the uprisings of the 1960s, this was a multiracial and multiethnic rebellion. Studies found that 50.6 percent of those arrested were Latino/a and 36.2 percent were African American. Many of the targets of violence were Latino/a immigrants—or perceived immigrants—and Korean shopkeepers. Predominantly immigrant neighborhoods of Pico-Union and Koreatown became focal points of the unrest. As immigrants transformed American cities between 1965 and the 1990s, many blamed urban problems on immigrants themselves. In this case, many observers placed responsibility for the violence on the city’s immigrant populations, especially the undocumented. The cooperation of the INS and police in response to the unrest reflected both a broader anti-immigrant nativism and the expansion of police authority to criminalize and contain immigrants.⁵⁷

Federal law enforcement agencies helped restore order, but the cooperation between INS agents and the police led to mass criminalization and violations of civil liberties of the city’s immigrant population. Nearly 400 Border Patrol and INS agents aided local law enforcement during the rebellion, which provided cover for operations targeting immigrants. When the police responded to calls for service in the predominantly immigrant areas of Pico-

Union and the Alvarado corridor, they often arrived with INS officers who conducted dragnet sweeps to arrest undocumented immigrants. INS officials denied they conducted mass sweeps but went where they were directed by commanders. INS officers also went to the county jail to interview arrestees to identify undocumented immigrants and to initiate the deportation process. “We should be seeking to restore peace and calm in this city,” City Councilman Mike Hernandez stated. “It is intolerable to have INS engaging in border patrol type immigration sweeps.”⁵⁸

The arrest and deportation of many undocumented immigrants revealed the extension of police power and violations of the LAPD’s Special Order 40. Of the 16,291 arrests, some estimated that 1,240 of them were undocumented immigrants, many of whom were handed over to the INS for immediate deportation. Statistics revealed that of the 1,240 alien arrests, 1,105 were deportable and 1,064 were removed from the country.⁵⁹ The Central American Refugee Center documented widespread violations of the civil and human rights of Latino/a residents living in the central Pico-Union district in the weeks following the riots. The Central American Refugee Center found at least 452 persons were stopped for no reason by the LAPD, interrogated as to their immigration status, and summarily handed over to the INS, with no criminal charges ever brought against them. Such practices were in direct violation of city law and policy regarding intervention into immigration matters. The official investigation into the rebellion, however, exonerated the LAPD and INS from any wrongdoing.⁶⁰ “We are becoming the guinea pigs, the Jews,” the Central American Refugee Center’s Roberto Lovato stated, “in the militarized laboratory where George Bush is inventing his new urban order.”⁶¹

When the violence ended, Mayor Bradley appointed former CIA and FBI director William Webster to lead yet another commission on civil unrest. Although this commission acknowledged increased levels of poverty, demographic changes, and tense relations between residents and the police, the bulk of the investigation focused on the LAPD’s lack of preparation, poor intelligence gathering prior to the verdict, and inability to control the unrest. It avoided an in-depth investigation of community grievances or police brutality. Finding new ways to mobilize overwhelming police power and new tactics for “rapid containment” took precedence over identifying the roots of the rebellion in police-community conflict.⁶²

The failure of the criminal justice system to treat African Americans or Latinos/as fairly had come home to roost. At community meetings, commissioners stressed their desire to hear opinions about “the LAPD’s response to the civil unrest, what worked and what didn’t work, and how the LAPD

should prepare for the future to respond to any future emergencies that might come up.” Residents responded by reciting a long history of racist law enforcement practices and criminal justice policies that were at the root of the violence. “Our policemen have been trained from infancy to see people of color as people who are substandard, less than equal,” one testified. As another resident commented, “I see police and they’re like strangers in a foreign land. You know, you drive through—they can drive through south central and it’s like, you know—but all they know is they’re going in there to deter crime. That’s fine, but you got to know—there’s a community in there also. It’s not Vietnam. It’s not just a war going on.”⁶³

After 160 days of investigation, neighborhood meetings, and interviews with police officers, the commission released its report, *The City in Crisis*, on October 21, 1992. The report revealed the utter lack of preparation by the city and the police for the King verdict and the failure of the LAPD leadership to respond to the warnings of division officials and officers of the growing tension between the police and residents. A failure in political leadership was also cited as a fundamental problem. In fact, Bradley and Gates had barely spoken to one another for nearly thirteen months. The report contributed to the framing of the rebellion as acts carried out by “criminals” and thugs” by emphasizing the impact of rising drug and gang activity. Yet the report did not interrogate the impact of the aggressive and punitive policies of the LAPD’s war on drugs and gangs. The war on drugs had not only failed to stem the flow of drugs to American cities but, as one observer wrote, “helped ignite the recent riots.”⁶⁴

The Webster Report, *The City in Crisis*, provided the opportunity to produce a new approach to the city’s problems. In its recommendations, the Webster Commission reemphasized calls for community-oriented policing and a shift in the LAPD’s orientation from crime fighting to prevention and problem solving through community control of the police. Instead of interrogating the systemic practices of policing and criminal justice in the city that led to criminalization, containment, and incarceration, *The City in Crisis* focused on the ways law enforcement could control future disorder and civil unrest.⁶⁵

The narrow scope led to criticism from activists from the LCSC and the Coalition against Police Abuse. They issued their own reports and recommendations, such as the LCSC’s *Reconstructing Los Angeles from the Bottom Up*, that assailed the LAPD’s practices as racist. A more systemic investigation of policing practices, activists argued, would require rethinking the reliance on the police power to solve problems rooted in social and economic crises and implementation of community control of the police. As activists pointed out, the singular focus of the Webster Commission on better preparing the police to handle unrest opened the door to new avenues of police

power, which led to greater police integration into the social life of residents of color.⁶⁶

Integrating the Police into Social-Welfare Institutions

Bradley recognized that poverty, unemployment, and economic inequality fueled the unrest. Yet instead of promoting public investment and funding jobs programs as LCSC activists suggested, Bradley sought to empower the private sector to rebuild Los Angeles. Bradley organized not a government agency but a nonprofit corporation called Rebuild L.A., which would facilitate private investment and development. Led by Peter Ueberroth—who had organized the 1984 Olympics—Rebuild L.A. intended to attract investment to the “neglected areas” of the city, but ultimately delivered very little. Promises of corporations willing to build new stores and reinvest in South Central quickly faded. Vons opened a supermarket in 1994 which closed a mere six years later.⁶⁷

Meanwhile, city and police officials vied for federal grants linking social spending with law enforcement measures to rebuild Los Angeles. President George H. W. Bush responded by fast-tracking funds from a national crime prevention program called Operation Weed and Seed.⁶⁸ Weed and Seed first provided funding for law enforcement to “weed” out criminals through community-based policing, then “seeded” the target area with social service funding to prevent future crime.⁶⁹ “The philosophy that underlies the program,” Attorney General William Barr admitted, “is that social programs must be closely coordinated and integrated with law enforcement efforts.”⁷⁰ Out of \$19 million in federal Weed and Seed funds for Los Angeles, according to Bradley aide Wendy Greuel, \$1 million would go toward law enforcement programs, and the other \$18 million would be used for education, job training, housing and urban development, and health and human services. Of the funds directed toward law enforcement, city officials claimed they would not be used for “aggressive law enforcement tactics” but for community-based policing.⁷¹ Weed and Seed revealed how liberal law and order empowered police discretion to sort the criminals from the law-abiding residents by integrating the police into service-providing institutions.

Officials targeted areas within South Central and Pico-Union for Weed and Seed funding. Although many residents welcomed efforts at community policing, they feared that the Weed portion of the program would undermine efforts to achieve greater police accountability and community control by funneling more resources to the police under the direction of the Department of Justice. Residents and activists wanted to address problems of crime and violence but not at the expense of continued police abuse, repression, and

discrimination. “No one in these communities is denying that widescale crime exists, or that the LAPD has not been helpful in policing them,” City Councilman Mark Ridley-Thomas suggested. “But that does not wipe away sentiments of unfair and abusive treatment by the LAPD.”⁷²

The image produced by the term “Weed” to characterize their neighborhoods and youth who were often targets of law enforcement proved especially frustrating to residents and activists. After a series of hearings with residents and LCSC activists, for example, Ridley-Thomas and Councilwoman Rita Walters submitted a motion asking for the rejection of the program because the “Weed portion of this program has been imposed on communities of color with the purpose of incarceration and not rehabilitation. The people of South Central and Pico Union are not ‘weeds’ to be pulled out of their communities and put into jail.”⁷³ Representatives of community organizations echoed the warning by arguing that treating social and economic problems as an issue of crime control contributed to violent conflict. “Coding serious urban social problems as crime issues serves to perpetuate alienation, hopelessness and police abuse in the inner city,” the executive director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference explained. “These are the very conditions that generated the rebellion in the first place.”⁷⁴

LCSC activists led the opposition to Weed and Seed. They saw the program as a means of using community-based policing to criminalize black and Latino/a youth and not a substantive solution to inner-city problems or police reform.⁷⁵ It reflected the smoke-and-mirrors operation of community-based policing that promised a lot but delivered very little in the way of empowering residents to make decisions. “The way the Weed & Seed Proposal was developed is indicative of how community and community-based policing is viewed,” the LCSC explained. “LAPD’s orientation is to develop the program without community participation, assign the community a role, then get [the] community to sign off on [a] program under the guise of Community-Based Policing.”⁷⁶ Coming within the context of a militarized war on drugs, LCSC activists were wary of federal law enforcement programs that integrated criminal justice, social services, and enterprise zones. Operation Weed and Seed, the LCSC summarized, “imposes a federal police presence in inner city.” Social service programs, they argued, would be placed under the authority of the Department of Justice, the FBI, and the INS, which was “a move towards the imposition of a police state on the public life of low-income, communities of color.”⁷⁷ By linking social-service programs to law enforcement, Weed and Seed was a “‘warfare’ approach to urban problems.”⁷⁸

The struggle over Weed and Seed produced a compromise between community organizations, city officials, and the police department. Chief of Police Williams and council members Mike Hernandez and Mark Ridley-Thomas

agreed to seek community input to “determine how best to use the federal funds to implement community-based policing programs.” The Department of Justice also agreed to change the name of the Los Angeles portion of the federal Weed and Seed program to “Community Projects for Restoration.” Further compromise allowed the social-service component to move forward while requiring the law enforcement section to include community input and approval. Officials hoped that the new name would reflect an emphasis on community building and cooperation rather than on policing.⁷⁹

Although unsuccessful at stopping Weed and Seed funds, the work of activists from the LCSC highlighted the concern that social problems should not be treated as crime problems and that an authentic commitment to community control of the police, civilian oversight, and a renewed progressive approach to poverty would be necessary. “The system has no intention of dealing with poverty and racism but it *will* hire a few more cops,” the LCSC’s Eric Mann observed. “The crime is real *now*, a policeman can answer my phone call *now*, and any new war on poverty is pie in the sky.” But hiring a handful of new officers did little to ensure the city could address the need for public safety for the entire city. Despite a proposal from the LCSC to reconstruct Los Angeles from the bottom up, most funding went to public safety to support strategies of arrest and incarceration. This commitment to incapacitation meant that as the California prison population grew to over 135,000 prisoners in 1995, 40 percent came from Los Angeles County.⁸⁰ Weed and Seed ultimately enhanced police power by integrating the police into service-providing institutions.

The More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same

Although the changes brought about in response to the King beating and the 1992 rebellion represented victories for reformers, the LAPD maintained its autonomy and resisted fundamental changes. The unwillingness, and inability, of department commanders to crack down on problem officers or to rein in a gunslinger style of policing aimed at winning the battle for the streets continued to characterize the department’s approach. Bradley’s announcement that he would not run for a sixth term in 1993 set the city up for one of its most important mayoral elections in two decades. Conservative Richard Riorden, whose campaign slogan was “Tough enough to turn Los Angeles around,” triumphed over the progressive, pro-police reform city councilman Michael Woo in 1993, stalling the reform effort. Woo attempted to maintain Bradley’s multiracial coalition, but his broad support in immigrant neighborhoods did not translate to votes. Despite broad support for Charter Amendment F just a year earlier, most residents rejected the blatant racism of the

LAPD but not the need for more police, enabling Riorden to capitalize on white fears of rising crime and violence. Chief Williams's hopes for community policing faced immediate resistance from Riorden. As the economy emerged from a recession and budgets recovered, Riorden made good on campaign promises of expanding the police force, which grew to 9,192 active-duty officers by 2000, and supporting tough-on-crime measures. During Riorden's two terms, the Christopher Commission recommendations were not high priorities.⁸¹

When Willie Williams was appointed the first African American chief of the LAPD, he told residents, "You should expect change today; you should expect change tomorrow. . . . But change unfortunately comes very slow."⁸² Critical observers continued to be skeptical. "As far as Los Angeles' business and political elites are concerned, police reform is now finished business," Mike Davis observed. "Focusing on the 'managerial crisis' in Parker Center (the police headquarters), the commissioners have substituted a superficial administrative overhaul, symbolized by the appointment of Williams, for substantive institutional change."⁸³

Williams was an outsider from the start. He did little to win over sergeants and patrol officers, nor did he address their questions and concerns about the direction of the department. In his second-year review, the Board of Police Commissioners opened the door to criticism. "Consistently," the commission wrote, "you seem to lack focus and discernible purpose in managing the Department. It is often unclear throughout the ranks exactly who is in charge and who is making decisions affecting the operations and direction of the LAPD. Often, you seem unable to move the Department, to have your decisions understood and followed in a timely matter, if at all." Appointing a chief from outside the department had done little to alter or influence the insular culture of career officers.⁸⁴

Progress on Christopher Commission reforms remained halting. Williams was successful in implementing elements of community policing and voters agreed in 1995 to create a new Office of Inspector General to review IAD findings on behalf of the police commission. Katherine Mader, the first inspector general, however, quickly criticized Williams's lack of leadership in disciplining officers and the limited effort to fundamentally reshape the culture of the department. "The department has not undergone reform to the extent that was possible or required," the special counsel to the Police Commission reported in 1996. "We have seen no evidence of a meaningful, institutionalized effort by the Department to do work history reviews for officers generating an unusually high number of uses of force or force-related complaints." Problem officers continued to plague the department, and Williams

had not sent a strong signal to supervisors that they would be held accountable for actions of subordinates.⁸⁵

Opposition from rank-and-file officers and a lack of progress on reforms ultimately proved Williams's undoing. A series of personal scandals involving comped rooms at Las Vegas casinos added fuel to the fire, and on March 10, 1997, the Police Commission refused to reappoint Williams for a second term. His successor, Bernard Parks, was a career LAPD officer who began as a traffic officer, rose to the rank of commander by 1980, and was second-in-command of the department under Williams. As chief, Parks vehemently opposed external control of the department. While supported by the African American community—he would be elected to the city council representing the predominantly African American District 8 in 2003—Parks disregarded recommendations from the Police Commission for a new disciplinary policy, instituting his own guidelines. Parks sent a message that his department would not be controlled by the Police Commission, nor by the inspector general established on the Christopher Commission's recommendation. Parks worked to limit the ability of the inspector general to initiate investigations, and eventually forced inspector general Mader, to resign, which left the LAPD to once again police itself.⁸⁶

The 1992 uprising was a referendum on the coalition of lawmakers and law enforcement officials' nearly thirty-year-long faith in police power and an expanded criminal justice system to protect the city's law-abiding residents from the harmful ones. But an empowered LAPD had operated less to protect and to serve all residents than as a police force bent on holding up the city's hierarchical racial order. The rebellion was an explicit rejection of repressive police power and administrative reforms that failed to control police abuse. For participants, the explosion of anger and discontent was the logical outcome of three decades of policies privileging get-tough policing at the expense of addressing unequal social and economic conditions. In contrast to the views of local and national political officials and law enforcement agents, the rebellion was not an apolitical expression of criminality or evidence of failed social welfare programs. Rather, it exposed how the reliance on punitive policies criminalized the poor, resulted in hostility between the police and residents of color, and fueled mass incarceration.

In the rebellion's aftermath, however, the use of the police to manage unequal socioeconomic conditions and enforce a hierarchical racial order remained a cornerstone of city and federal policy. Reforms such as Weed and Seed and community-based policing may have been well intentioned, but

they appeared more focused on changing the image of the police as equitable enforcers of the law than on transforming the actions or attitudes of officers on the streets. The police continued to operate with impunity, especially in neighborhoods of color. By responding to fear of crime and urban uprisings with calls for more efficient policing, Bradley and city officials had created a program of police reform that enabled aggressive enforcement of the law. Charter Amendment F represented a significant change in the city's political structure, but neither charter reform nor the removal of Gates led to greater accountability. Politicians still relied on law enforcement to address social problems, and the structure of the department and its position within city politics enabled it to resist changes aimed at reducing its authority.

The 1992 uprising had presented a moment of possibility for alternative visions of the city's future. Residents and activists proposed solutions based on achieving justice through community control of the police and nonpunitive approaches to addressing urban social problems and inequality. These movements built on and extended the anti-police brutality organizing of the 1970s and 1980s. Activists continued to challenge the politics of law and order and get-tough solutions to urban problems in the wake of the rebellion. Even if they were unsuccessful in altering city or law enforcement policy, they continued to engage the struggle to move urban policy away from a punitive, get-tough framework. Nevertheless, the intensified, military-style policing continued to define Los Angeles as a carceral city.