

by Susan_Estrich

Why is crime down in Los Angeles?

Violent crime is down by about 5 percent from last year at this time, which was down from the year before.

Unemployment is at 12 percent.

If you follow the theories of most fancy criminologists, larger social forces, like the economy and demographics, determine crime rates. According to all of those theories, a city like Los Angeles, which has been hit especially hard economically and has a growing population of what we call at-risk youth, should be seeing significant increases in crime. But it isn't. Both violent and property crime rates are down.

A lot of people are doing their best to fight crime in this city: parents, teachers, clergy, community leaders and even a few politicians. But the people whose job puts them on the line against crime every day are almost certainly deserving of a major share of the credit, and so is their leader, Police Chief Bill Bratton.

Back in the 1980s, colleagues from the Kennedy School at Harvard and I got funding from the Justice Department to convene a series of executive sessions on policing. We had everyone from then-Attorney General Ed Meese, who loved policing issues, to the police chiefs of New York, Chicago and Los Angeles, to the young hotshot who was running the Transit Police in Boston.

One of the things we talked most about was community policing. George Kelling, one of the conveners, had just written his now-famous article with James Q. Wilson about "broken windows." An abandoned car can sit on the street for weeks untouched. But once the first window is broken, it will be demolished in hours. Disorder breeds more disorder. The police have to get out of their cars, literally, stop worrying about how quickly they respond to calls about crimes long over when the report comes in, and get into the communities they are supposed to be protecting.

Think the Petraeus strategy in Iraq. You don't get security by sitting on the outside watching people trying to survive in a jungle, and waiting to see who shoots at you. In those circumstances, almost anyone will. You get out of the bunker, go protect the vast majority of people who want to live without fear, co-opt whoever you can to help you, and come down hard on the dwindling minority who are trying to undermine the peace. You go from being villains to heroes, or at least from being "bad guys" to being on the same team.

It wasn't an easy journey in Los Angeles. This is the city that went up in flames in 1992 because of the acquittal of the white police officers who were videotaped beating Rodney King, a time when the city's mayor and police chief were not on speaking terms. Send them a message, the late Johnny Cochran told a Los Angeles jury in the trial of O.J. Simpson, and they did. "Them" was the Los Angeles Police Department.

The hotshot head of the Transit Police in Boston went on to become chief in New York before arriving in Los Angeles. He is now in his second term. Problems have hardly disappeared: Today's paper carries a motley set of LAPD headlines, including a woman cop who got millions for a harassment claim and a former cop who torched his own car, faked an attack on himself and has, of course, been fired.

But the police now go where the crimes are, using the most sophisticated technology. If that means it takes longer for someone to respond to a burglary report in a wealthier neighborhood, so be it. They have forged strong relationships with the communities they are protecting. More and more police officers come from those communities. LAPD is no longer perceived as a white invading army. "Cops matter. Police count," Bratton said, explaining the numbers. That's what he always says.

Bratton's two predecessors were black. It was felt by many in this town, at that time, that given its history and reputation, LAPD had to be led by a black chief to achieve acceptance. Not so, as it turned out. It just had to be headed by someone really, really good.

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