

The Safer Cities Initiative: A Failed Policy

Prepared by Lamp Community and the Los Angeles Community Action Network, September 2008

Background

In September 2006, the Los Angeles Police Department, Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, and City Attorney Rocky Delgadillo launched the Safer Cities Initiative (SCI) in Skid Row. Although SCI was promoted as a means to improve public safety and bring additional homeless services to the community, police enforcement has been the most significant and consistent element of the initiative.

At the SCI launch, 50 additional uniformed officers were deployed to a 50-square block area (0.85 square miles) – the equivalent of adding 470 new officers to the Rampart Division or 700 officers to the 77th Street Division in South Los Angeles¹. Dozens of undercover narcotics officers were deployed to the same area, resulting in an unprecedented concentration of police resources in a neighborhood with relatively low rates of serious and violent crime².

Skid Row is home to between 13,000 and 15,000 residents; 75 percent are African American, 95 percent are extremely low-income, and about 35 percent are currently homeless. For decades, Skid Row has seen the most extreme and concentrated poverty in Los Angeles, as well as steadily declining public and private investment needed to improve the community and provide economic opportunity to residents.



As the City's promotion of a "new downtown" began to take hold early in this decade and higher income residents began to live in and around Skid Row, homelessness in the community began to receive media and political attention. But instead of instituting policies and programs to end homelessness – most importantly increasing the affordable and supportive housing stock – almost 1,000 low-income housing units were lost in downtown Los Angeles between 2000 and 2003³, and a law enforcement strategy to attack the symptoms of extreme poverty was developed and implemented. This combination has resulted in an expensive and ineffective response to homelessness and poverty, as well as massive human rights violations against poor and mostly Black people.

Two Years of Devastation

- In the first year of SCI, LAPD issued about 12,000 citations, primarily for pedestrian violations. This is 48 to 69 times the rate of citations issued City-wide⁴. Citations given to homeless and other low-income people carry fines they cannot pay, and inevitably lead to arrest.
- Police officers have made about 750 arrests per month in Skid Row. The majority of arrests are drug related, and there have been obvious efforts by the police department to escalate possession charges to "possession with intent to sell," and to initiate undercover stings for sales of extremely small quantities of drugs. The intentional practice of

¹Blasi, Gary and the UCLA Fact Investigation Clinic. "Policing Our Way Out of Homelessness? The First Year of the Safer Cities Initiative on Skid Row" September 2007. (pg. 50)

²Id. (p. 41)

³City of Los Angeles. Ordinance No. 177577. Interim Control Ordinance temporarily prohibiting the Conversion or Demolition of Residential Hotels, citywide. May 2006.

⁴"Policing Our Way Out of Homelessness? The First Year of the Safer Cities Initiative on Skid Row" September 2007. (pg. 36)

escalating these charges results in incarceration of those struggling with the disease of addiction instead of the treatment required by Proposition 36 and supported by 61% of California voters.

- The human rights of poor people, African Americans, women, people with disabilities, and community organizers have been trampled upon, including numerous incidences of police abuse and brutality.
- State-level sentence enhancements⁵ and the District Attorney's "5th Street Corridor" policies⁶ have created a separate and unequal criminal "justice" system for the Skid Row community. Punishment is not determined by the type and severity of the crime, but rather solely by the neighborhood in which the arrest took place.

Costs

The City spends \$6 million annually for the 50 additional police officers in the 50 square blocks of Skid Row – about the same as it spends on homeless services for the entire 469 square miles of the City each year. That money could instead provide housing subsidies and services for 350 homeless people.

When you add undercover operations and court and incarceration fees, the cost of SCI far exceeds \$6 million per year. Because the District Attorney's office has refused to accept plea bargains on drug cases from Skid Row (a policy that raises serious constitutional questions), public defenders are left with no option but to take these cases to trial in an already overburdened court system.

The two-year, \$12 million-dollar-plus effort to increase enforcement in a 50-square block area has had little or no effect on serious or violent crime. The only documented reduction in serious crime during the two years of SCI was in the number of robberies. Thus, the City has spent \$117,000 for each robbery it prevented in Skid Row⁷, an area that already had fewer robberies than many other parts of the City before the initiative began!

While Mayor Villaraigosa and Chief Bratton were busy touting this incredibly expensive "reduction in crime," other important criminal justice needs were unmet, such as DNA testing of evidence from violent crime scenes⁸. The LAPD unit responsible for DNA testing is so understaffed that in August 2008 a careless mistake cost the city \$500,000 in federal funds that would have helped clear some of the backlog. Apparently, LAPD doesn't consider DNA testing a priority, despite the fact that it could exonerate innocent people and incarcerate the perpetrators of violent crimes; instead, pleasing downtown developers by arresting thousands of homeless people in a gentrifying downtown is more important.

Because of the SCI strategy to escalate charges, people will be ineligible for federally-funded housing and food stamps for many years, or in some cases for life, and most will be forced to live on the streets upon their release. The federal government has chastised Los Angeles for its punitive approach, and has repeatedly asked the City to invest its resources in housing and services instead. The City's minimal investment in housing and services led to a \$15 million loss in federal funding for homeless programs in 2007, while every other large city in the country got additional money.

Moving Forward

Before SCI enters its third year, we demand:

- The end of SCI enforcement strategies and the end to all additional uniformed and undercover LAPD deployment in Skid Row.
- The end of discriminatory charging and sentencing policies.
- Investment in real solutions. Build housing, not jails.
- The protection of human rights for all residents of Los Angeles.

⁵ State of California. S.B. 1318/Chapter 650, Statutes of 2006. Author: Senator Gil Cedillo. *Controlled Substances: Sales near drug treatment facility or homeless shelter*. September 2006.

⁶ Rubin, Anat. *Prosecutors Target Drugs on Skid Row*. Los Angeles Daily Journal, January 2007.

⁷ Blasi, Gary and Stuart, Forrest. UCLA. "Is the Safer Cities Initiative in Skid Row Reducing Serious Crime?" September 2008.

⁸ Rubin, Joel. *Mistake costs LAPD \$500,000 for DNA testing*. Los Angeles Times, August 2008