

Policing Los Angeles Under a Consent Decree: The Dynamics of Change at the LAPD

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Executive Summary

The Los Angeles Police Department is today completing one of the most ambitious experiments in police reform ever attempted in an American city. After a decade of policing crises that began with the beating of Rodney King in 1991 and culminated in the Rampart police corruption scandal in 1999, the U.S. Department of Justice announced in May 2000 that it had accumulated enough evidence to sue the City of Los Angeles over a pattern-and-practice of police misconduct. Later that year, the city government entered a “consent decree” promising to adopt scores of reform measures under the supervision of the Federal Court.

The experiment in police reform in Los Angeles has two components: the consent decree produced by the Justice Department’s intervention, and the leadership of Chief William Bratton, who since 2002 has focused the Department’s attention simultaneously on reducing crime, improving morale, and complying fully with the consent decree. What has the experience in Los Angeles revealed about policing under a consent decree? Has the consent decree achieved its purpose? How is the Los Angeles Police Department controlling its use of force; what is the state of police-community relations; how rigorous is the governance and oversight of the LAPD; and how is the culture of the Department changing? Most important, as the LAPD has incorporated the policies and practices specified in the consent decree into its own operations and management, has the Department won the public’s trust and confidence while reducing crime and bringing offenders to justice?

To answer those questions, we examined the LAPD using multiple research methods. We undertook hundreds of hours of participant observation from patrol to the command staff; we analyzed administrative data on crime, arrests, stops, civilian complaints, police personnel, and the use of force. We compiled surveys conducted over the last decade of police officers and residents of Los Angeles, and then conducted three surveys of our own, one of residents, another of LAPD officers, and a third of detainees recently arrested by the LAPD. Finally, we conducted a series of formal focus groups and structured interviews with police officers, public officials, and residents of Los Angeles. While some questions remain unanswered, this ranks among the most comprehensive assessments ever conducted of a police department outside of a time of crisis.

We found the LAPD much changed from eight years ago, and even more so in the last four or five years. Public satisfaction is up, with 83 percent of residents saying the LAPD is doing a good or excellent job; the frequency of the use of serious force has fallen each year since 2004. Despite the views of some officers that the consent decree inhibits them, there is no objective sign of so-called “de-policing” since 2002; indeed, we found that both the quantity and quality of enforcement activity have risen substantially over that period. The greater *quantity* is evident in the doubling of both pedestrian stops and motor vehicle stops since 2002, and in the rise in arrests over that same period. The greater *quality of stops* is evident in the higher proportion resulting in an arrest, and the *quality of arrests* is evident in the higher proportion in which the District Attorney files felony charges.

Our analysis confirmed what others have previously reported: that serious crime is down substantially in Los Angeles over this same period. Indeed, recorded crime is down in every police division in the city. A majority of Los Angeles residents no longer rate crime as a big problem, substantially down from only four years ago, and that is true among Black and Hispanic as well as White and Asian residents.

We asked residents specifically if they think the LAPD could police effectively while also respecting people's rights and policing within the law. More than twice as many residents see improvement than see deterioration, and the vast majority of each racial and ethnic group is hopeful that this kind of policing will soon be routine.

Both the management and the governance of the LAPD have also changed for the better under the decree. The officer tracking system known as TEAMS II is forcing supervisors to pay attention to officers who attract more civilian complaints or more frequently use force than their peers; and the management tool known as CompStat has helped to transform the Department's captains into strategic commanders, accountable for reducing crime while maintaining integrity and building public trust in police, one of several initiatives that go well beyond what the consent decree requires. In terms of governance, the Police Commission and the Inspector General have, in particular, enhanced the scrutiny of the Department's use of force, and of its handling of civilian complaints.

We found persistent differences in the experience of policing among Hispanic residents of LA and more so for Black residents. More than two-thirds of Hispanic and Black residents think well of the job the LAPD is doing today, rating it as good or excellent; yet a substantial minority within each of these groups remains unsatisfied with the Department, and ten percent of Black residents report that almost none of the LAPD officers they encounter treat them and their friends and families with respect. We therefore found it encouraging that, when looking ahead to the next three years, Black residents of Los Angeles are among the most hopeful about the Department.

In sum, the evidence here shows that with both strong police leadership and strong police oversight, cities can enjoy both respectful and effective policing. The LAPD remains aggressive and is again proud, but community engagement and partnership is now part of the mainstream culture of the Department. The Department responds to crime and disorder with substantial force, but it is scrutinizing that force closely and it is accountable through many devices for its proper use. Will the management and oversight improvements persist if the consent decree ends? Better yet, will management and oversight become still stronger? While we cannot answer those questions in advance, the LAPD appears ready for that test.