

Miles to go for L.A. justice

Policing is improved; now let's focus on the root causes of crime.

By Joe Domanick

July 6, 2008

Over the last few decades, it's been easy to blame the leadership of the Los Angeles Police Department, the L.A. County Sheriff's Department and the district attorney's office for the catastrophic failures of L.A.'s criminal justice system. These failures, as most Angelenos know, have led to a dangerously overcrowded, racially explosive county jail system; a violent gang problem that continues unabated after 10,000 deaths over 25 years, and generation after generation of young black and brown men ceaselessly shuttled off to state prisons at a rate of more than 22,000 a year -- as many as 70% of whom, once released, will recycle back within three years.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the LAPD and the Sheriff's Department epitomized the problems with the criminal justice system: Leadership was calcified and visionless, disdainful of social science and innovative policing reforms, tolerant of brutal and abusive officers, unaccountable to civilian control and perennially at war with the African American community. Under LAPD chiefs Ed Davis and Daryl F. Gates and Sheriff Sherman Block, these departments generated scandal after scandal, culminating in 1992 in one of the worst riots in U.S. history.

For their part, Ira Reiner (1984-1992) and Gil Garcetti (1992-2000), as district attorneys, spent their time sniffing the political winds and playing to the worst instincts of voters. Reiner reacted to gang violence by calling for the "writing off" and imprisoning of the 70,000 young residents who had, often inaccurately, been identified as gang members. And Garcetti opportunistically prosecuted the pettiest of offenses as third-strike, 25-years-to-life crimes (even after having lobbied against the politically popular law in Sacramento).

Today, despite some notorious incidents, such as the 2007 May Day MacArthur Park police riot, and some ongoing disgraces such as the dangerous and inhuman conditions in our county jails, we're better served by our law enforcement leaders. They've lowered the crime rate while largely making peace with the leaders of L.A.'s African American and Latino communities.

Chief William J. Bratton has accelerated the transformation of the LAPD into a much more accountable organization. Sheriff Lee Baca has worked to transform the paramilitary culture of his department, and he has sought a comprehensive approach to public safety that includes better schools, healthcare and social services. For his part, Dist. Atty. Steve Cooley has eschewed headline-grabbing, get-tough answers to complex questions.

Unfortunately, they've been busy retooling the engine to run more efficiently instead of

giving it the drastic overhaul it desperately needs. Even though this new generation of leaders has supported long-term crime prevention strategies, they have been unwilling to commit significant money or political capital to the process, focusing, for example, on immediate reductions in gang crime while remaining unwilling to fight for the money and make the psychological shift necessary to end the gang culture at the heart of the problem. Their primary focus has remained on crime suppression (or crisis management in the jails). Consequently, L.A.'s criminal justice system still operates as a zero-sum exercise in locking up the same people from the same neighborhoods generation after generation, without an end game in sight.

Why, if they recognize the need for the shift, have they failed to accomplish it? One reason why is that it's extremely difficult. Baca and Cooley's surrogates have been meeting for almost two years with the L.A. Public Defender's Office, the Probation Department, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation and with L.A. Superior Court Judge Michael Tynan to develop rehabilitative prisoner reentry strategies. Yet only a few small, experimental pilot programs have been established.

Law enforcement agencies are not used to working together for the common goal of long-term crime prevention. Common goals, a common vision and even a common language have to be developed, and everybody needs to sign off before there's any movement. Community service organizations, drug treatment facilities and other such groups all have to be brought into the fold. A jurisdictional tangle of state, county and city laws must also be dealt with before much progress can be made.

Much of the problem lies with L.A.'s politicians. With a few exceptions (such as state Sen. Gloria Romero, City Comptroller Laura Chick and Councilwoman Janice Hahn), city leaders as well as our representatives in Sacramento have been unwilling to lead on these issues. Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa has coordinated all the city's gang programs under one entity in the Office of Gang Reduction and Youth Development for the first time -- in effect laying down the path and officially recognizing for the first time that the city has to have a holistic approach to eradicating gang crime and youth violence. He should be commended. But the money he's allocated to the agency is a relative pittance. He's putting his real political muscle behind a sales tax for mass transit, not public safety.

Organizations like the notoriously anti-reform California Correctional Peace Officers Assn. -- the prison guards union -- and the California District Attorneys Assn. are also a big part of the problem. The latter has successfully fought attempts to reform mandatory minimum-sentencing laws such as three strikes, nearly drumming Cooley out of the organization a year or so ago when he sought to soften some of the most unjust provisions of the law.

And Mike Jimenez, president of the guards union, has declared that he has "never met an inmate that could be rehabilitated." By bullying or buying off governors and legislators with big campaign dollars, and fear-mongering with the help of victims rights groups, the union (which has donated \$12 million to state campaigns over five years) has been astoundingly successful in thwarting change. They, along with the conservative

legislators who demand near Old Testament punishment for drug offenses and other nonviolent crimes, have stuffed our prisons to almost 200% capacity and left us no money for alternatives to incarceration.

Meanwhile, the public remains profoundly ignorant or deeply misinformed about how the system really works. Some of the fault for this lies with the broadcast media. Talk radio drove the hysteria that led to California's three-strikes law in 1994. Now, cable television has become part of the lynch-mob media. Led by CNN's Nancy Grace, cable shows make it appear that criminals are constantly getting off scot-free. In fact, America's (and L.A.'s) crime rates are at record lows -- yet the U.S. prison population has risen every year for 30 years.

Networks such as MSNBC, meanwhile, feature endless prison documentaries that give the impression that every one of the millions of Americans in prison -- half of whom are incarcerated for nonviolent crimes -- is a psychotic ax-murderer. Local TV news, with its love of violence, cheap melodrama and good guys-versus-bad guys simplicity, also promotes a ceaseless message: Be afraid, be very afraid.

Then there are the cop melodramas that -- with the astounding exception of HBO's "The Wire" -- almost never look at criminal justice as a system that is dramatically failing large segments of black, Latino and poor white Americans. Nor do these shows make the connections between crime and bad schools, shoddy healthcare, bad jobs and a history of racial disenfranchisement. They don't discuss the connection between the historic racial, class and economic disenfranchisement of black Americans and the entrenched criminal culture that has emerged in many of our worst urban ghettos and barrios. Instead, they present shows like "CSI" and "Law and Order" as dramas where good police in a just system triumph over bad criminals. Everything is clear-cut good guys vs. bad guys, just like in real life -- right?

Last among the culprits are those white liberals and black leaders barring the door to open, honest public discourse about black crime in America because, as the Rev. Al Sharpton recently pointed out, they don't want to "air their dirty laundry in public." But everybody knows that crime and violence in our nation's poor, black ghettos has been pandemic for decades. This must be talked about and examined.

Young black men in ghettos across America are trapped in a hedonistic, values-warped subculture of narcissistic flash, violence, gangs, immediate self-gratification and self-destruction -- unable to pass through a revolving door of gangs, drop-out education, unemployment, incarceration, release and re-imprisonment. Nor is the problem limited to black communities. Latinos now make up the largest group of inmates in state prisons.

Law-and-order conservatives, meanwhile, have offered nothing but more of the same -- more prisons and bigger platitudes.

We can't deal with the root causes, and begin the long task of fashioning a solution, until we acknowledge the dreadful dysfunction of this criminal-prone subculture.

And we will never have a criminal justice system that works for all Americans until we start to hold accountable those who are responsible.

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