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Final Report: Assessment of Interracial/Interethnic Conflict in Los Angeles

UCLA Center for Study and Resolution of Interracial/Interethnic Conflict

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Los Angeles has a history of considerable racial and ethnic conflict, ranging from the “zoot suit riots” of 1943 through the Watts riots of 1965 and the so-called “Rodney King” rioting in 1992. Politics in Los Angeles has often reflected this intergroup conflict, from Sam Yorty’s mayoralty campaign against the black Tom Bradley, that many observers felt was laced with quasi-racist appeals, through the high-intensity contentions over busing for school integration in the 1970's and over illegal immigration in the 1990's, to the ethnic rivalries that surfaced in the 2001 mayoralty race between James Hahn and Antonio Villaraigosa.

At the end of World War II Los Angeles County had an overwhelmingly white population. That has changed over time, most dramatically in the last two decades. Now there is no majority ethnic group in Los Angeles County. The largest consists of Latinos, with about 41% of the total population, according to the 2000 Census. Trailing well behind are non-Hispanic whites, at 32%. True “minority” groups include Asian Americans (12%) and African Americans (10%). This combination of a history of ethnic and racial conflict in the area, and the sharply changing demographics that are bound to alter the social dynamics of ethnic relations in Los Angeles, led us

to focus the 2001 Los Angeles County Social Survey on perceptions of and attitudes about ethnic and racial conflict.

Field work for the survey was carried out from mid-February through mid-May, 2001. Its sample of 866 respondents was drawn from the adult population of Los Angeles County. An oversample of black respondents yielded a total sample composition of approximately 26% white, 30% Hispanic, and 27% black. A Spanish-language version of the interview was used for 20% of the respondents, allowing for a reasonably representative Hispanic subsample. Given the recency of immigration and therefore lack of English fluency of many residents of Asian origins, and the multiplicity of Asian languages they use, it was not practical to develop Asian-language versions. As a result Asian Americans were under-sampled, and will not be discussed in the report of the findings that follows below.

The interviews themselves averaged about 30 minutes apiece. The content of the survey fell into several categories: (1) A “core” set of demographic and basic attitudinal items like that used in previous LACSS surveys; (2) items on intergroup conflict carried over from previous surveys, specifically on policies in areas especially relevant to ethnic minorities (e.g., affirmative action, immigration), attitudes toward other racial and ethnic groups, strength of subjective ethnic identity, and perceived ethnic conflict; and (3) a new set of items on perceptions and attitudes about ethnic conflict in Los Angeles.

The present report will describe some of the results from these latter two categories of items. The 2002 LACSS is currently underway, and repeats some of the measures in an effort to assess the effects of the September 11 terrorist attacks on interethnic harmony in Los Angeles. A

more extensive report on the two surveys will be prepared when those data have been fully gathered and analyzed.

Perceptions of the level of ethnic conflict

Table 1 displays the results for several items measuring perceptions of the level of ethnic conflict in Los Angeles. Most of these items have been used in annual surveys over the past decade. Table 1 shows the results from the 2001 LACSS, and Figures 1 to 3 display the trends in these perceptions over time.

The first item asked “are ethnic groups in Los Angeles in conflict or are ethnic groups getting along these days?” Respondents, regardless of ethnicity, split about evenly between these alternatives. A followup question asking them about the degree of conflict or harmony yielded largely symmetrical responses within each ethnic group, with 20% of the blacks saying that ethnic groups were in conflict “a lot,” and 16% of the whites agreeing. This, then, points to a substantial fraction of the adult population that perceives a fairly conflictual ethnic landscape.

Table 1

Perceptions of Ethnic Conflict in Los Angeles

	White	Hispanic	Black
Ethnic groups in L.A. (% “in conflict”)	55%	47%	49%
Ethnic relations over next 5-10 years (“improve – get worse”)	+26	+28	+28
Effect of variety of ethnic groups on LA quality of life (“% help – % hurt”)	+46	+56	+40

This apparently gloomy view is, however, accompanied by some more favorable signs. A large majority in each group feels that the diversity of ethnic groups in Los Angeles improves the quality of life, with only about one-quarter feeling that diversity hurts the quality of life. And in

both respects Angelenos, regardless of ethnicity, have been becoming more positive over the past few years. As can be seen in Figure 1, substantially fewer now perceive high levels of ethnic conflict than did so earlier in the decade. Figure 2 shows that the number of people in all groups that applaud the overall effects of diversity is continuing to increase.

Moreover, most Angelenos of all ethnic backgrounds are optimistic about this favorable trend continuing. About half in each group expect intergroup relations to improve in the future, and less than a quarter believe it will worsen. This is shown in Table 1. And this optimism about the future is continuing to increase, as shown in Figure 3.

We start, then, by noting that a large number of people perceive considerable ethnic conflict in Los Angeles. However, diversity, they feel, on balance is a plus for the quality of life. And most are perceiving less conflict than was true a decade ago, and are quite optimistic about a less conflictual future. In all these respects there is not much differences in the perceptions of whites, Hispanics, and blacks: they largely perceive the same social universe. One might guess that perceptions of life in Los Angeles, and especially the role of ethnic conflict in it, have become more favorable as the recession of the early 1990's was replaced by the prosperity of the mid-to-late 1990's, and the memory of the 1992 rioting fades. But, given the large number of people concerned about ethnic conflict, we need to push ahead to a deeper understanding of their perceptions about it.

Orientations toward one's own ethnic group

As indicated at the outset, dramatic demographic changes in Los Angeles have left the County with no ethnic majority group. Nevertheless, the past casts a long shadow on the present. The traditional "minority groups," Latinos and blacks, have a considerably more powerful sense

of ethnic identity than do whites. As shown in Table 2, the great majority within each group, about two-thirds, feel that their ethnicity is “very important” to their own identity and that they “very often” think of themselves in terms of their own ethnicity. Whites are a marked contrast in both respects. Only about 10% express that level of self-conscious ethnic identity, and 37% say they think of themselves as “white” “not at all often.” In other words, blacks and Latinos walk around each day conscious of their own ethnicity; whites’ own ethnicity is largely invisible to them.

Table 2

Orientations Toward Own Group

		White	Hispanic	Black
Importance of ethnicity to identity (“very”)		13%	67%	72%
How often think of self as [ethnic](“very often”)	9	71	57	
Group experiences discrimination (“always/frequently”)	16	56	55	
America owes [ethnicity] better chance (“strongly agree”)		9	47	42
What happens to [ethnics] affects self (“a lot”)		15	21	42
Fewer problems if work/live with own (“agree”)	21	42	23	

One reason that minority groups have traditionally been conscious of their ethnicity is that they experience, and believe that others experience, discrimination on the basis of race and ethnicity. Table 2 shows that over half in each group feel that “other members of my ethnic group experience discrimination” either “always” (about 18%) or “frequently” (38%). Whites, though now outnumbered by Latinos, much more infrequently perceive discrimination against them (only 2% said “always”). Not surprisingly, then, almost half of the blacks and Latinos strongly agree that “American society owes people of my ethnic group a better chance in life than we currently

have.” The polarization between blacks and whites is especially noteworthy on this point: 78% of the blacks feel their group is owed a better chance, whereas only 22% of the whites feel that way about their own group.

For blacks, much more than for Latinos, this sense of their own group’s disadvantage translates into personal vulnerability as well. Almost half the blacks (42%) feel a marked sense of common fate with other blacks, feeling “a lot” that “what happens generally to other black people in this country will have something to do with what happens in your life.” Latinos are only about half as likely to feel this personal impact of the way the group as a whole is treated, and whites even less. This stronger sense of common fate among blacks than among other ethnic groups has been found elsewhere as well (e.g., Bobo & Johnson, 2001). We have interpreted it elsewhere as reflecting the relative impermeability of the “color line” that surrounds African Americans, in a theory of “black exceptionalism” (Sears et al., 1999).

The parallelism between blacks and Latinos breaks down in one further respect shown in Table 2. Latinos are distinctive in giving more support to the idea that “we would have less [sic] social problems if people of the same ethnic background lived and worked with people like themselves.” Almost half the Latinos (42%) agreed with this segregationist statement, whereas only 23% of the blacks, and 21% of the whites did. Incidentally this ethnic difference is not an accident of this one study; it has been obtained in earlier LACSS surveys as well (Sears et al., 1999). The most likely interpretations of the finding are twofold. Latinos have often been described as having a stronger sense of neighborhood community than blacks or whites. Indeed during controversies over court-ordered busing of school children in the 1970’s, Latinos were often described as much more opposed to it than were blacks, even at the cost of perpetuating

quite segregated neighborhood schools. Also, whites and blacks have grown up with the memory of the struggles over reversing the Jim Crow segregation system, which was often justified in exactly such cliches about people preferring to live with “their own kind.” It is therefore perhaps a more sensitive point than would be the case for the largely immigrant Latino population which has had little exposure to that aspect of American political history. These interpretations can be tested in further research.

The loci of ethnic conflict

Respondents were asked both about what group was in most conflict with their group, and also about the areas of life that produced the most ethnic conflict. The results are shown in Table 3. The results from the two sets of questions are obviously linked and tell us much about where the respondents perceive ethnic conflict as taking place.

Most obviously, of these choices, whites perceive blacks as being the group “most in conflict with” their group by quite a large margin: 60% perceive the most conflict with blacks, 33% with Hispanics, and only 3% with Asians. This is somewhat surprising since the number of blacks is actually quite small in Los Angeles County, far smaller than the number of Latinos who have become numerically dominant in many areas of life. There are even fewer blacks than Asians now, and the Asians are competing increasingly successfully with whites for such desired resources as admissions to elite universities.

Table 3

Attitudes About Other Groups

	White	Hispanic	Black
What group is most in conflict with [own ethnic group]?			
White	0%	14%	27%
Asian	3	7	7
Hispanic	33	10	54
Black	60	66	5
Other	<u>4</u> 100%	<u>2</u> 101%	<u>7</u> 100%

Whites' perceptions of conflict with blacks is clarified by examining their perceptions of "why ethnic groups are in conflict in the Los Angeles area." Respondents were asked to evaluate how much group differences in four areas of life contributed to such conflicts. "Differences in danger from gangs and other kinds of crime" dominate by far as a "big cause" (as opposed to "moderate," "small," or "not a source at all"), as shown in Table 4. In addition, about half of the whites say that the problem of "random street violence" is "very serious," although whites are much less likely to be the victims of it, directly or indirectly, than blacks and Hispanics are. This sustains the academic observation that "law and order" is a key pivot point for bringing race and ethnicity into whites' political attitudes (e.g., Mendelberg, 2001). It also sustains the political judgment about the same point, as reflected in the decisions made by successful white Los Angeles mayoralty candidates Sam Yorty in 1969, Richard Riordan in 1993, and James Hahn in 2001 to emphasize law and order issues when addressing the white electorate.

Table 4

Explanations for Ethnic Conflict

	White	Hispanic	Black
Group differences in:			
Danger from gangs and crime (“big cause”)	60%	76%	58%
Jobs and income (“big cause”)	41	48	64
Access to higher education (“big cause”)	21	39	43
Access to health care (“big cause”)	23	24	26
Random street violence (“very serious”)	48	62	66

However, this concern about crime, and especially gang violence, is not limited to whites. It is regarded as a “big” cause of ethnic conflict by the vast majority of Hispanics (76%) and a considerably majority of blacks (58%). Large majorities in both groups regard random street violence as a “very serious” problem (62% and 66%, respectively). As a result it emerges as the single most important cause of ethnic conflict in the sample as a whole.

Still, the issue of crime stands out in bold relief among whites. They more rarely mentioned issues of jobs and income, and still less, differences in access to health care or access to “public colleges and universities.” Presumably the passage of Proposition 209 in 1996, which ended affirmative action programs in public higher education, helped to reduce that concern. But it does not explain why whites seem to be unresponsive to the strenuous competition between white and Asian children for access to the student bodies of California’s public colleges and universities. Indeed only 3% of the whites say they are most in conflict with Asians; the many (33%) who point to Hispanics may also be thinking mainly of gangs and crime. This is an hypothesis that can be pursued at the next stage of this research.

Blacks, in contrast, overwhelmingly point to Hispanics as the group with which they are in most conflict. The most obvious hypothesis is that they are thinking more of economic conflict; indeed when blacks think about ethnic conflict, they are most likely to explain it as due to “differences in the kinds of jobs and income people can get.” This is mirrored by Hispanics’ views: they too point to black-Hispanic conflict as the most serious. However, they like whites point not to economic competition but to crime. In a way this is more to be expected than whites’ focus on crime because blacks and whites are residentially quite integrated in various parts of the region, whereas whites and blacks are highly segregated from one another.

The police

Los Angeles has been the focal point of much tension between the police and minority communities, especially the black community, over the past several decades. The Watts riot in 1965 was triggered by a clash between police and blacks, and the rioting in 1992 was triggered by the acquittal of police involved in the beating of the black man, Rodney King (see Baldassare, 1994; Sears, 1994; Sears & McConahay, 1973). Many other smaller incidents have occurred as well.

As can be seen in Table 5, a majority of blacks (55%) say that the police “very often” “overstep their authority and abuse the rights of citizens,” a quite serious claim. By contrast, only 18% of the whites do. This is one of the largest instances of racial polarization in this survey. Blacks and whites live in different worlds when it comes to appraising the police. Blacks are much more likely to disapprove of the job being done by either the LAPD (City of Los Angeles) or the LA Sheriff’s Department (much of the rest of LA County) than are whites -- indeed, almost twice as likely. Blacks are also united in believing that “the police should not be allowed to

violate civil rights in order to control gangs” -- though as seen before, blacks are very concerned about gang violence, 66% regarding it as “very serious” and 58% seeing crime and gangs as a major cause of intergroup conflict. Despite their concerns about the police, though, relatively few are personally afraid of them: among blacks, 6% say they are “very much afraid,” and 18%, “somewhat afraid.”

Table 5

Attitudes toward the Police

	White	Hispanic	Black
Police overstep authority (“very often”)	18%	37%	55%
Police should not violate civil rights to control gangs (agree)	58	34	72
Job of LAPD (“disapprove”)	25	17	40
Job of LASD (“disapprove”)	14	15	34
Afraid of police (“very much/somewhat”)	23	20	25

Hispanics are just as worried about gang violence as blacks; they often live in the same neighborhoods and have the same experiences. But Hispanics are more tolerant of the police, approving of the job they do at almost the same rate as whites, less likely to see them as overstepping their authority, and more willing to tolerate infringements on civil liberties in the interest of reducing violence. Indeed 56% of the Hispanics say they are “very unafraid” of the police, whereas only 37% of the blacks will go that far.

The contrasting view of blacks and Latinos about the police are interesting. Both experience much of the same kind of life, and surely Latinos as a group have much experience with police abuse in Los Angeles. But most Latinos are natives of Mexico, and so they have, as a

group, far less of the long history of tense relations that have existed between the black community and the LAPD. Also, the police generally may be less careful about civil liberties in Mexico, and so Latinos in Los Angeles may be more accepting of the inevitability of such police behavior.

Reducing conflict

Generally speaking, few people view ethnic conflict as inevitable. As shown in Table 6, fewer than 20% in each group believe that ethnic conflict is “just part of life and not much can be done about it.” Rather, large majorities believe that “most of the conflict between ethnic and racial groups is unnecessary and we should do everything we can to eliminate it.” Though there are only small differences among ethnic groups, surprisingly enough the ethnic minorities are least inclined to view it as inevitable. The linkages between these views, and perceptions about the intensity of ethnic conflict, will be explored in further analyses.

Table 6

Institutions That Help Reduce Ethnic Conflict

	White	Hispanic	Black
Most intergroup conflict is unnecessary (% “agree”)	82%	88%	87%
% “Improve” relations between groups – % “worsen” relations:			
Churches	+67	+68	+63
Public schools	+40	+49	+24
Local government	+18	+39	+9
Private business	+18	+23	+1

What institutions are seen as most effective in dealing with ethnic conflict? Respondents were asked, “various groups and organizations try to deal with the conflicts between different

groups in Los Angeles....do they help to improve relations between ethnic groups, make no real differences, or make relations....worse?" Of those groups mentioned to the respondents, churches were almost universally viewed as the one that has the most salutary effect in terms of helping to improve relations among groups, as shown in Table 6. This might seem odd in view of the fact that churches tend to be the institutions that most segregate one ethnic group from another. Also, religions associated with particular ethnic groups have historically been at the forefront of communal violence, in nations such as India or the former Yugoslavia or Israel. Yet the perceptions of residents of Los Angeles are quite to the opposite.

Private business is viewed as the least likely to contribute to improving relations between ethnic groups. This might not seem surprising since businessmen would generally prioritize market considerations over intergroup relations. Yet it is also true that true intergroup integration is probably considerably greater in the workplace and in the commercial marketplace than it is in public schools, churches, or residential areas.

Finally blacks seem to be the least positive about the abilities of public schools, local government, and private businesses to ameliorate intergroup relations. As the historically most discriminated-against group in all three sites, one might find their baleful views not unrealistic. At the next stage of the research it will be possible to tie their perceptions of being discriminated against to such beliefs in order to test this hypothesis.

Reparations

Finally, a related question involves the granting of reparations to disadvantaged groups as one way to reduce continuing racial and ethnic conflict. To test for the acceptability of reparations we conducted a split-sample experiment. One group, randomly selected, was asked about support for reparations to the Japanese Americans who were interned in camps during World War II. Such reparations were in fact granted not long ago. Two other groups were asked about reparations for blacks, the group that arguably has been mistreated the most throughout American history (perhaps along with native Americans), either about reparations for a history of discrimination or for slavery.

As can be seen in Table 7, whites are extraordinarily strongly opposed to “the federal government paying compensation to African Americas for slavery against them”: only 16% approved of that. A slightly larger minority, but a minority still, approved of reparations for “discrimination against them.” The difference between the two is inconsistent with the presumed greater severity of slavery. But it could be that whites believe the 100-year span between the ending of slavery and the ending for the formal discrimination embodied in the Jim Crow system eliminates much remaining need for compensation for such long-ago events.

Table 7

Percent Approving Reparations as a Solution for Intergroup Conflict

	White	Hispanic	Black
Gov’t compensation to Japanese-Americans	58%	56%	49%
Gov’t compensation to blacks for discrimination	40	81	
Gov’t compensation to blacks for slavery	16	37	85

By contrast, a healthy majority of whites (58%) supported “the federal government paying compensation to Japanese Americans for being taken from their homes and sent to relocation camps during World War II.” This contrast between preferred treatment of blacks and Japanese Americans is consistent with the historic animosity that whites have for African Americans, an hypothesis that can be tested in later research. It may also be that the campaign for reparations for Japanese Americans has successfully linked it with the shipment of European Jews to concentration camps, and the identification of the internment camps as “concentration camps.” Hispanics share the same views as whites, by and large, although not the great aversion that whites have to compensation to blacks for slavery.

Blacks, interestingly enough, show about the same level of support for reparations for Japanese Americans as did other groups. But they show far more, and indeed almost universal (over 80%), approval for reparations for blacks, and even slightly more for the ancient crime of slavery than for the more recent, and even contemporary, crime of discrimination.

Summary

The 2001 LACSS, focused especially on the topic of ethnic conflict, yields a number of interesting findings in this first, rather descriptive pass:

1. Much ethnic conflict is perceived as taking place in Los Angeles County; about half believe that ethnic groups are in conflict rather than getting along.
2. However, the overwhelming majority feel that ethnic diversity improves the quality of life; ethnic conflict is perceived as declining; and most believe it will continue to decline.
3. There are few ethnic differences in these perceptions of the degree of ethnic conflict. But that consensus ends with such perceptions, to wit:

4. Ethnic “minorities” (blacks and Hispanics) have a much stronger sense of ethnic identity, common fate with other group members, and perceptions of discrimination against their group than do whites. Blacks in particular have this sense of common fate, presumably because of “the color line.”
5. Whites believe they are most in conflict with blacks, and that the most important source of interethnic conflict is crime, especially gang-related crime.
6. Although blacks also think random street violence is a very serious problem, and that gang-related crime is a primary source of ethnic conflict, they continue to show unusual disapproval of and suspicion about the police, especially the LAPD.
7. Another important source of conflict is between blacks and Hispanics over jobs and income; this source of conflict seems to be symmetrical and mutually perceived.
8. All groups are united, again, in believing that interethnic conflict is not inevitable, and that steps need to be taken to try to reduce it.
9. Churches are widely perceived as one institution that is effective in reducing conflict. Blacks are the least optimistic about the efforts of public institutions such as the schools and local government.
10. All ethnic groups are united in supporting reparations to Japanese Americans who were relocated to camps during World War II. Blacks strongly support reparations for both slavery and past discrimination; whites strongly oppose the former, and both Hispanics and whites give little support to the latter.

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