

# Crack in Los Angeles: Crisis, Militarization, and Black Response to the Late Twentieth-Century War on Drugs

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In the winter of 1985 the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) unveiled a signature new weapon in the city's drug war. With Chief Daryl F. Gates copiloting, the Special Weapons and Tactics Team (SWAT) used a fourteen-foot battering ram attached to an "armored vehicle" to break into a house in Pacoima. After tearing a "gaping hole" in one of the outside walls of the house, police found two women and three children inside, eating ice cream. SWAT uncovered negligible quantities of illicit drugs, and the district attorney subsequently declined to prosecute. In the days following the raid, black clergy and the San Fernando Valley chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) organized a protest rally in a local church. "We don't need new weapons to be tried out on us," Rev. Jeffrey Joseph exclaimed. "Of all the methods that there are to arrest a person, they used a brand new toy." Not all members of the African American community agreed, however. City councilman David Cunningham, who represented South Los Angeles, praised Gates's actions. "Go right ahead, Chief. You do whatever you can to get rid of these rock houses. They're going to destroy the black community if you don't."<sup>1</sup>

These divergent responses embody the core contradiction produced by crack cocaine and the war on drugs for African American communities of Los Angeles in the 1980s. On the one hand, these locations faced an unprecedented scale in the militarization of policing, arrests, and incarceration, but on the other, many people—drawn especially from the ranks of the middle class—saw crack use, distribution, and intracommunity violence as comparable if not greater threats. To address this sense of urgency, the activist-scholar Clarence Lusane used the term *drug crisis* to differentiate it from the state-sponsored and moral panic-driven discourse of the "crack epidemic." Lusane's formulation is valuable not only for its discussion of crack's impact on communities of color in Los Angeles but also for assisting historians in excavating how the state mobilized and appropriated a

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<sup>1</sup> John Nielsen, "Police Using Battering Ram Seize Cocaine, 1 Suspect," *Los Angeles Times*, March 23, 1985, p. V-A9. Patricia Klein and Stephanie Chavez, "Pacoima Leaders Protest Police Use of Motorized Battering Ram," *ibid.*, Feb. 9, 1985, pp: V-A1, 9. Daryl F. Gates, *Chief: My Life in the LAPD* (New York, 1992), 279.

range of reactions—including fear, anger, and disorientation—in African American communities to justify repression and the increased militarization of law enforcement.<sup>2</sup>

A core challenge for scholarship on the national drug war is to disentangle the social history of drug use, informal economy, and poverty from law-and-order narratives rationalizing punitive campaigns. In hindsight, it is clear that the state appropriated real anxieties from black urban areas (such as Harlem and South Los Angeles) that were experiencing rapid economic decline and used these concerns to rationalize its war(s) on drugs. Not only did this strategy appeal to racial antipathies among white voters but it also hindered political opposition to the drug war by African Americans who were desperately seeking solutions to the public health and social crises facing their neighborhoods. This dynamic was certainly not unique to New York and Los Angeles. During the Reagan administration, Democrats and Republicans across the country strongly supported the war on drugs. Given the now-infamous racial impact of sentencing for crack cocaine possession, consumption, and distribution, black elected officials' near-unanimous support for Ronald Reagan's 1986 Anti-Drug Abuse Act reveals an important paradox. The progressive California congressman Ronald V. Dellums, along with fifteen other members of the Congressional Black Caucus, actually co-sponsored the bill, which resulted in the 100:1 disparity for crack versus powder cocaine in federal drug cases, resulting in the disproportionate incarceration of large numbers of African American offenders. While significant black support for the militarized war on drugs and gangs in the 1980s may seem surprising and counterintuitive, this article reflects on how deeply divisive punishment campaigns proved for African American populations. This conflict was nowhere more evident than in late twentieth-century Los Angeles—"the world's largest retail market for cocaine" and the epicenter of the U.S. crack economy. During the 1980s militarized campaigns against drugs and gangs resulted in new and brutal technologies of policing and criminalization focused on South Central Los Angeles. Despite these high-profile measures, surprisingly little opposition to these practices appeared initially, even from those who suffered their worst effects. Black Angelinos divided along lines of class, ideology, faith, and age in their attempts to address neighborhoods in crisis. However, by the early 1990s multiple sites of resistance began to emerge. Starting with the early efforts of the Coalition against Police Abuse (CAPA) through the work of the Community Coalition for Substance Abuse, Prevention, and Treatment, and the work of Mothers Reclaim Our Children (MROC), black residents in ever-larger numbers challenged hypermilitarized policing and the large-scale prison warehousing of youth of color.<sup>3</sup>

### Militarization of Policing and the War on Drugs

Heather Ann Thompson has argued that the history of mass incarceration remains largely unwritten, and this is nowhere more true than in the history of the U.S. war(s) on drugs. Despite growing visibility via public denunciations and proclamations of failure, the history of America's drug wars is largely unknown. This is surprising given the wars' catalytic role in one of the largest state-building enterprises of the late twentieth century: mass incarceration. Scholars have documented that between 1985 and 2000, drug

<sup>2</sup> Stuart Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (New York, 2013); Clarence Lusane, *Pipe Dream Blues: Racism and the War on Drugs* (Boston, 1991).

<sup>3</sup> Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, H.R. 5484, 99th Cong. (1986). William D. Montalbano, "Latins Push Belated War on Cocaine," *Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 1, 1985, p. A1.

offenses were two-thirds of the increase in federal inmates and half of the increase in state prison populations.<sup>4</sup>

In 1971 President Richard M. Nixon coined the phrase *war on drugs*, but in reality the undertaking was neither a single coherent entity nor a true war but rather a succession of executive-sponsored domestic and transnational punitive campaigns spanning the postwar era through today. The declaration of war mandated increased resources to fight the “drug crisis” while also initiating a conflict without end. The criminologist Jerome H. Skolnick used the term *semi-martial state* to describe the effect of the drug war on the nation. At the federal, state, and local levels, such a punitive turn in government resulted in the criminalization of large segments of the U.S. population for illicit drug consumption, possession, and distribution. Although Skolnick’s analysis focused on the proposed multi-billion-dollar increase for federal enforcement and interdiction in 1989, during the decade preceding the appointment of William Bennett as “drug czar,” Los Angeles exemplified how the drug war intensified the militarization of domestic policing. The city’s multiple, overlapping wars against drugs, gangs, and crime reflected Skolnick’s semi-martial state in terms of fiscal expenditures and institutional practices of law enforcement, prisons, courts, and parole.<sup>5</sup>

Punitive campaigns against drugs and gangs in Los Angeles rationalized a new martial infrastructure. The state applied militarization unequally by focusing on historic African American and Latino neighborhoods in the south central part of the city. As in counter-insurgency strategy, the geographic application of force meant that particular populations were at high risk not only because of their age and race but also because of their location. Indeed, by 1992 city sheriffs listed nearly half of the African American men under age twenty-five in Los Angeles County as gang members. The ultimate carceral effects of this mass criminalization can hardly be overstated. The California Department of Corrections (CDC) prison population increased from 19,623 in 1977 to 162,000 in the year 2000 with over 40 percent drawn from Los Angeles and 70 percent from southern California. By 1990 drug offenses were 34.2 percent of new admissions to California prisons and 25 percent of detainees in the Los Angeles County Jail, which contained the world’s largest urban prison population. The carceral effects were not, however, equally distributed. Numerous studies show the extreme racial disparities of mass incarceration and the war on drugs, and California arguably led this national trend. By the year 2000 the combined numbers of blacks and Latinos were over 64 percent of the total population of the CDC. Furthermore, African Americans were roughly 7 percent of California’s general population but accounted for 31 percent of the state’s prisoners.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Heather Ann Thompson, “Why Mass Incarceration Matters: Rethinking Crisis, Decline, and Transformation in Postwar America,” *Journal of American History*, 97 (Dec. 2010), 703–35; Marc Mauer, *Race to Incarcerate* (New York, 1999), 33; Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York, 2010), 59; Dan Baum, *Smoke and Mirrors: The War on Drugs and the Politics of Failure* (New York, 1996), 259.

<sup>5</sup> On antidrug campaigns in the postwar era, see Baum, *Smoke and Mirrors*; Kathleen J. Frydl, *The Drug Wars in America, 1940–1973* (New York, 2013); and Julilly Kohler-Hausmann, “Forging a Punishing State: The Punitive Turn in U.S. Criminal and Social Policy, 1968–1980” (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois, 2010). On the declaration of war, see Susan Sontag, “Real Battles and Empty Metaphors,” *New York Times*, Sept. 10, 2002, <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/09/10/opinion/real-battles-and-empty-metaphors.html>. Jerome H. Skolnick, “A Critical Look at the National Drug Control Strategy,” *Yale Law and Policy Review*, 78 (no. 1, 1990), 75–116.

<sup>6</sup> On gang databases, see Max Felker-Kantor, “Managing Marginalization from Watts to Rodney King: The Struggle over Policing and Social Control in Los Angeles, 1965–1992” (Ph.D. diss., University of Southern California, 2014) 381–83; For statistics on nearly half of African American men in Los Angeles County under age twenty-five as gang members, see Nina Siegel, “Ganging Up on Civil Liberties,” *Progressive*, 61 (Oct. 1997), 28–31. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Los Angeles,

Major components of the militarized infrastructure of the LAPD, the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department (LASD), and the California Highway Patrol could be traced to law enforcement's hostile response to the civil unrest of the postwar years. In the aftermath of the 1965 Watts rebellions, the LAPD's use of military-grade hardware and elite tactical units originated in the department's counterinsurgency campaigns against the black power and brown power movements. Under the leadership of Chief William Parker (from 1950 to 1966), Chief Tom Reddin (from 1967 to 1969), and Chief Edward M. Davis (from 1969 to 1978) the LAPD developed signature policing strategies that became essential to the city's brutal prosecution of the wars on drugs and gangs two decades later. The department founded SWAT with a compact force of former military veterans in 1967. Subsequently, the LAPD deployed SWAT for the first time against the Southern California Black Panther party's office. The commando force used a tank on loan from the California National Guard and won U.S. Department of Justice authorization for a grenade launcher.<sup>7</sup>

SWAT marked a new era in Los Angeles law enforcement, defined by the steady expansion of the use of elite tactical units at the expense of rank-and-file patrol officers. With funding from the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, the department created Total Resources against Southeast Hoodlums (TRASH) five years later. Responding to community protest, the name was changed to Community Resources against Street Hoodlums (CRASH), and the organization went on to become the city's most notorious antigang unit in the 1980s, with the LASD's program Operation Safe Streets and the district attorney's Hardcore Drug Unit following in its wake. As this list of martial alphabet agencies implies, starting with the invention of SWAT, Los Angeles led the national militarization of policing—a subject yet to be comprehensively addressed by historians. One of the most urgent tasks is to document local law enforcement's nationwide effort to acquire weaponry during the earlier era of mass protest and to trace how this changed over time, particularly in the post-Cold War period of military surplus and during the counterterrorism push following the September 11, 2001, attacks.<sup>8</sup>

Another striking feature of departmental militarization, in addition to personnel restructuring that funneled more manpower and funding toward elite command units, was the LAPD's attempt to expunge all social service components from policing and to

2007), 108. For the statistic of 25% of detainees in the Los Angeles County Jail for drug possession in 1990, see Joe Domanick, *To Protect and to Serve: The LAPD's Century of War in the City of Dreams* (Los Angeles, 2003), 322; On Los Angeles as site of world's largest urban prison population, see John C. Quicker, Yvonne Nunley Galeai, and Akil Batani-Khalfani, "Bootstrap or Noose: Drugs in South Central Los Angeles" (unpublished manuscript in Donna Murch's possession); and Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (New York, 1989), 193. On the extreme racial disparities of mass incarceration and the war on drugs, see Michael Tonry, *Malign Neglect: Race, Crime, and Punishment in America* (New York, 1995); Marc Mauer and Ryan S. King, *A 25-Year Quagmire: The "War on Drugs" and Its Impact on American Society* (Washington, 2007). On the statistic that African Americans were roughly 7% of California's population but 31% of the state's prisoners, see Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*, 108, 110–11, 185; and "California 2000. Census 2000 Profile," Aug. 2002, *U.S. Census Bureau*, <http://www.census.gov/prod/2002pubs/c2kprof00-ca.pdf>. Thompson, "Why Mass Incarceration Matters"; Alexander, *New Jim Crow*; Baum, *Smoke and Mirrors*.

<sup>7</sup> Domanick, *To Protect and to Serve*, 11–12, 207–8. On the origins of the Los Angeles Special Weapons and Tactics Team (SWAT) and its use against the Southern California Black Panther party and the Symbionese Liberation Army, see Gates, *Chief*, 105–23, 131–39, 355. For official institutional histories of SWAT within the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD), see "S.W.A.T.," *LAPD: Official Site of the Los Angeles Police Department*, [http://www.lapdonline.org/inside\\_the\\_lapd/content\\_basic\\_view/848](http://www.lapdonline.org/inside_the_lapd/content_basic_view/848); "History of S.W.A.T.," *ibid.*, [http://www.lapdonline.org/metropolitan\\_division/content\\_basic\\_view/849](http://www.lapdonline.org/metropolitan_division/content_basic_view/849); and "History of the Metro Division," *ibid.*, [http://www.lapdonline.org/metropolitan\\_division/content\\_basic\\_view/6359](http://www.lapdonline.org/metropolitan_division/content_basic_view/6359).

<sup>8</sup> Felker-Kantor, "Managing Marginalization from Watts to Rodney King," 141, 368, 372, 377; Gates, *Chief*, 292.

focus exclusively on crime and territorial control. Geographic dispersion of the city and the establishment of the LAPD Air Support Division in 1974—which became the largest “airborne municipal law enforcement system in the world”—contributed to tactical surveillance of and distance from city residents. While Chief Parker’s vision of professionalization in the postwar years laid the foundation for this approach, under the auspices of the Reagan era’s intensified wars on crime, drugs, and gangs, the martial imperative grew stronger and received large increases in funding (especially through expanding asset forfeiture) and direct support from municipal, state, and federal governments. According to the Los Angeles American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), “the political rhetoric about a ‘war’ on drugs and a ‘war’ on crime . . . helped turn the police into soldiers—not civil servants or guardians of the community order—making them sometimes more aggressive and forceful than they have a right to be in pursuit of criminals and suspects.”<sup>9</sup>

Los Angeles’ high-profile war on drugs reflected the larger policies and strategic aims of Reagan’s national punishment campaign, including saturation policing, eradication of youth gangs, asset forfeiture, federalization of drug charges, and strict enforcement of mandatory minimum sentencing. At the street level, use of massive police sweeps with spectacular displays of overwhelming force embodied the city’s militarized vision of law enforcement, as did Chief Gates’s repeated calls to arms. Testifying on the one-year anniversary of the George H. W. Bush administration’s war on drugs, the LAPD chief told the Senate Judiciary Committee that “the casual drug user ought to be taken out and shot.” Behind his bombastic rhetoric lay a larger truth. In an era of deindustrialization and drastic reductions in social services, mass incarceration fueled by antidrug and antigang campaigns became de facto urban social policy for the residents of impoverished communities such as South Central Los Angeles and Pico Union. The prescription for widespread joblessness and the illicit economies that accompanied urban divestment was simply to remove a significant percentage of the population from the streets through prison warehousing. Tellingly, in 1980—prior to the advent of the alleged “crack epidemic” and Reagan’s declaration of a new war on drugs—Gates argued that the 0.1 percent incarceration rate for California’s population (26,000 people) was insufficient. To achieve greater public safety, he advocated that between 2 and 3 percent of California’s residents should be locked up.<sup>10</sup>

One of the major challenges for historians seeking to write municipal and national histories of the U.S. war(s) on drugs is tracing their symbiosis with and prosecution through related punitive campaigns against gangs, crime, and—in later years—terrorism. In Los Angeles, for example, much of the carceral infrastructure for the city’s war on drugs relied on geographically targeted gang sweeps combined with antigang legislation and prosecution tools. Moreover, the conflation of drug crimes with street gang membership created a comprehensive net for the criminalization of nonwhite youth. The LAPD’s selective arrest and prosecution of youth of color meant that the category of “gang” became inherently

<sup>9</sup> On the LAPD Air Support Division as the world’s largest law enforcement system, see Domanick, *To Protect and to Serve*, 112; Eric Malnic, “Sky Patrol Arm of the Law Goes to New Heights through Helicopter Units in LAPD’s Air Support Division,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 3, 1988, [http://articles.latimes.com/1988-04-03/local/me-972\\_1\\_air-support-division](http://articles.latimes.com/1988-04-03/local/me-972_1_air-support-division); and “History of the Air Support Division,” *LAPD: Official Site of the Los Angeles Police Department*, [http://www.lapdonline.org/air\\_support\\_division/content\\_basic\\_view/1179](http://www.lapdonline.org/air_support_division/content_basic_view/1179). Felker-Kantor, “Managing Marginalization from Watts to Rodney King,” 421.

<sup>10</sup> Gates, *Chief*, 287; Ronald J. Ostrow, “Casual Drug Users Should Be Shot, Gates Says,” *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 6, 1990, p. A19. For Daryl F. Gates’s argument for greater incarceration rates, see Felker-Kantor, “Managing Marginalization from Watts to Rodney King,” 409–10.

racialized. Drawing on a repertoire of historical “demonologies” with specific prosecutorial regimes, the LAPD alternately viewed black and Latino gangs through the lens of organized crime or terrorism. “It’s probably a misnomer to call them street gangs,” argued an LAPD lieutenant member of CRASH. “What we are seeing is the first indication of black organized crime.” Far from unique, the slippage from street gangs to drug trafficking, organized crime, and terrorism represented the defining principle of the Reagan-Bush-era war on drugs. Its solution was total suppression and use of Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) Act prosecutions to remove as many alleged gang members from the streets as possible. Between 1984 and 1988 California passed over eighty separate antigang measures and developed powerful new legal tools, including the civil gang injunction and gang enhancements in sentencing. In December 1987, the Los Angeles city attorney and future mayor James Hahn pioneered the injunction’s use against the Playboy Gangster Crips from West Los Angeles. Gang injunctions permanently prohibited members from engaging in specified behaviors in a designated geographic area. The prosecuting agency sued a gang as an “unincorporated association,” to allow for the addition of new names to prosecutorial lists. The injunction’s civil nature also meant that the state was not required to provide a public defender.<sup>11</sup>

Defining the war on drugs as a war on gangs justified the criminalization of everyday life in black and brown Los Angeles. Modes of dress, movement, color of shoelaces, hand gestures, and mere association became defined as prosecutable offenses. Gang injunctions worked in tandem with municipal, state, and federal databases. In 1985 the LASD created a computerized list, Gang Reporting Evaluation and Tracking system (GREAT). Seven years later, the federal government’s General Accounting Office revealed that the city’s sheriffs listed 47 percent of all African American men in Los Angeles County between the ages of twenty-one and twenty-four as gang members. Racially targeted policing combined with the denial of legal representation made it virtually impossible for youth to have their names removed from GREAT. In this sense antigang injunctions also contained a brutal class component: their success hinged on their targets’ inability to hire lawyers.<sup>12</sup>

While antigang injunctions and databases provided mechanisms for surveillance, control, and the assumption of large numbers of minority youth into “the system” for minor offenses, gang enhancement legislation ultimately aided the process of mass incarceration. In 1988 the California legislature passed the Street Terrorism Enforcement and Prevention (STEP) Act, which mandated that convicted persons who have been designated as gang members face additional charges and sentencing. In the initial 1988 law, prosecutors could “enhance” gang members’ convictions with from one to five years of additional time in state prison per offense. Subsequently, California’s Proposition 21 amended the

<sup>11</sup> On racialization and gang arrest, see Domanick, *To Protect and to Serve*, 328–29. For the lieutenant’s thoughts on organized crime, see Quicker, Galeai, and Batani-Khalfani, *Bootstrap or Noose*, 30; Francisco Delgado, “The Drugs Connection: Cocaine Is Big Business on Southland’s Shady Sidewalks,” *Long Beach Press Telegram*, Dec. 16, 1986; and Felker-Kantor, “Managing Marginalization from Watts to Rodney King,” 369, 409, 412. On the move toward seeing gangs and drug trafficking as organized crime and terrorism, see *ibid.*, 378; Domanick, *To Protect and to Serve*; and Baum, *Smoke and Mirrors*, 141–42. Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) Act, 84 Stat. 941 (1970). Mike Davis, “Los Angeles: Civil Liberties between the Hammer and the Rock,” *New Left Review*, 1 (July–Aug. 1988), 44; Beth Caldwell, “Criminalizing Day-to-Day Life: A Socio-Legal Critique of Gang Injunctions,” *American Journal of Criminal Law*, 37 (Summer 2010), 245; Siegel, “Ganging Up on Civil Liberties.”

<sup>12</sup> On the Gang Reporting Evaluation and Tracking system (GREAT) and other gang databases, see Felker-Kantor, “Managing Marginalization from Watts to Rodney King,” 381–83. On the overrepresentation of black youth in GREAT, see *ibid.*, 404–5; Davis, “Los Angeles”; and Siegel, “Ganging Up on Civil Liberties.” On gang injunctions and on the inability to hire lawyers, see Caldwell, “Criminalizing Day-to-Day Life,” 241–90.

STEP Act in 2000 by increasing gang enhancements to sixteen months to five years for nonviolent offenses and to ten, fifteen, twenty, and twenty-five years to life for violent offenses. Moreover, in first-degree murder cases with special circumstances, Proposition 21 mandated the death penalty or life imprisonment without the possibility of parole. The dense layering of the Step Act and its subsequent revisions, including added prison time for gun charges and for crimes committed within one thousand yards of a school, meant that it was not uncommon for very young offenders to receive multiple consecutive life sentences.<sup>13</sup>

Los Angeles' repressive legal regime worked in tandem with law enforcement's spectacular shows of force, mass arrests, and saturation policing. After the 1988 murder of the suburban teenager Karen Toshima, the LAPD proclaimed 1988 the "year of the gang enforcement." "This is war," declared Chief Gates. "We want to get the message out to the cowards out there . . . that we're going to come and get them." With this battle cry, the department sent over one thousand officers into South Los Angeles in conjunction with Operation Hammer. On April 9, 1988, the police set up an impromptu holding facility in the parking lot of the Los Angeles Coliseum and proceeded to arrest over 1,400 people—including more African American youth than in any other single incident since the Watts rebellions twenty-three years earlier. Over the course of the next six months, law enforcement jailed over eighteen thousand people, declaring over half of the arrests as "gang related." The price in human and financial terms was considerable; journalists estimated that Operation Hammer cost up to \$150,000 per day. Significantly, the prosecutors charged only a handful of people with actual crimes.<sup>14</sup>

### The Crack Crisis and Black Response to the War on Drugs

Historians have yet to write the top-down institutional history of municipal, state, and federal antidrug and antigang campaigns since the Reagan era, but even more neglected are broad questions about framing that link the crack crisis to the militarization of the drug wars. Integral to this silence is the lack of research into how communities of color responded to this punishment regime across region and time. Social scientists have debated black support for Nixon-era law-and-order campaigns, however, historians have yet to explore how African American and Latino populations across the country understood, experienced, and reacted to the war(s) on drugs and gangs in the era of mass incarceration since the late 1970s. The history of black Los Angeles offers some compelling insights into this largely uncharted territory and raises a number of issues that warrant further study and exploration. The first is the conceptual question of framing. During the 1980s much of the discourse from black politicians and the press centered on the crack crisis rather than on the repressive apparatus of the war(s) on drugs and gangs. In Los Angeles,

<sup>13</sup> California Street Terrorism Enforcement and Prevention Act of 1988, Cal. Pen. Code 186.20. On the California Street Terrorism Enforcement and Prevention Act and its revisions in 2007 and 2013, see Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*, 108; Sara Lynn Hofwegen, "Unjust and Ineffective: A Critical Look at California's STEP Act," *Southern California Interdisciplinary Law Journal*, 18 (Spring 2009), 679–701; Alex Alonso telephone conversation with Donna Murch, May 8, 2014 (unarchived); "California Criminal Street Gang Offenses and Enhancements," n.d., *First District Appellate Project*, [http://wiki.fdap.org/main\\_page/gangs](http://wiki.fdap.org/main_page/gangs); and "Juvenile Crime. Initiative Statute: Text of Proposition 21," *Vote 2000*, <http://primary2000.sos.ca.gov/VoterGuide/Propositions/21text.htm>.

<sup>14</sup> Baum, *Smoke and Mirrors*, 250. On the mass arrests of April 9, 1988, see Gates, *Chief*, 293; Davis, "Los Angeles," 37; and Felker-Kantor, "Managing Marginalization from Watts to Rodney King," 400–403. On the costs of "Operation Hammer," see Robert Welkos, "700 Seized in Gang Sweeps," *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 19, 1988, p. B21. Quicker, Galeai, and Batani-Khalfani, *Bootstrap or Noose*, 16.

at the epicenter of crack use and distribution, the scale of panic can hardly be overestimated. In 1989 California representative Maxine Waters declared, “The most urgent problem facing ghettoized African Americans today is the lethal infestation of drugs in our communities.” Although the solutions that Waters sought emphasized social welfare and public health for troubled neighborhoods reeling from Reagan-era divestment, the lens of crisis unwittingly strengthened law enforcement’s justification for the semimartial state of the drug war and provided it with a thin humanitarian veil.<sup>15</sup>

In many respects, the timing of the drug war in Los Angeles could not have been worse. For years the local African American community had been fighting to rein in the LAPD. On the eve of Reagan’s war on drugs, the Coalition against Police Abuse scored a decisive victory against the LAPD in 1978, leading to the dissolution of the department’s Public Disorder Intelligence Division. The former Black Panther Michael Zinzun had founded CAPA in 1976, and it became one of the most sustained grassroots efforts to stop police violence in Los Angeles. Tragically, just as the courts mandated that the LAPD implement these reforms, the state launched a new phase in the war on drugs. The professed exigencies of this militarized campaign reversed many activists’ earlier gains while simultaneously narrowing the horizon of public debate to punishment-based solutions.<sup>16</sup>

The moral panic over crack, like the concern about PCP (Phencyclidine, known popularly in Los Angeles as “Sherm”) in years prior, obscured the militarization of law enforcement and its geopolitical context. One difficult task for historians is to disaggregate the genuine concerns and problems of African American neighborhoods during this period from state and mainstream media portrayals of the “crack epidemic.” The Reagan administration invoked African American suffering—with the “crack baby” as its most potent trope—to rationalize a new and vastly intensified carceral regime. Too often, state- and media-driven narratives of the Reagan era have saturated the popular imagination while, in fact, the social history of black urban communities in the 1980s and 1990s remains largely undocumented. In contrast to sensationalized portrayals, the themes of social-service retrenchment, deindustrialization, intensification of poverty, and structural isolation are as foundational to the period as drug consumption, illicit economies, and the restructuring of the traditional nuclear family. Demystifying the racial myths of the crack era also requires careful, nuanced exploration of the complex interplay of race and class because African American politicians and elite service providers also participated in the drug war’s pervasive rhetoric of crisis.<sup>17</sup>

Black class politics in the post-civil rights era proved integral to community approaches to the drug wars. Historically, black Angelinos had the largest intraracial income gap nationally, and economic disparity shaped how different strata understood the war on drugs. In the early 1980s white-led middle-class reformist organizations sponsored popular marches calling attention to the plight of neighborhoods in South Central Los Angeles and East Los Angeles. In July 1985, shortly after the ACLU won an injunction against the

<sup>15</sup> For an exception to the lack of work on responses by communities of color to changing punishment regimes, see Max Felker-Kantor, “Managing Marginalization from Watts to Rodney King.” For competing views on how African American and Latino populations experienced the war(s) on drugs, see Vesla M. Weaver, “Frontlash: Race and the Development of Punitive Crime Policy,” *Studies in American Political Development*, 21 (Fall 2007), 230–65; and Michael Javen Fortner, “The Carceral State and the Crucible of Black Politics: An Urban History of the Rockefeller Drug Laws,” *ibid.*, 27 (April 2013), 14–35. Maxine Waters, “Drugs, Democrats and Priorities,” *Nation*, July 24, 1989, p. 141.

<sup>16</sup> João H. Costa Vargas, *Catching Hell in the City of Angels: Life and Meanings of Blackness in South Central Los Angeles* (Minneapolis, 2006), 119–21.

<sup>17</sup> For a theorization of the concepts of crisis and moral panic, see Hall, *Policing the Crisis*.

use of the LAPD's battering ram, nearly ten thousand residents gathered on the downtown campus of St. Mary's College for an anticrime rally. The Southern California Organizing Committee (SCOC) and the United Neighborhoods Organization (UNO) of East Los Angeles cosponsored the protest. Formed in 1982 by a network of churches, SCOC mixed law-and-order politics with maternalist advocacy for social welfare and youth programs. Given historical fights for adequate policing and higher rates of violent crime in South Los Angeles—Africans Americans were six times more likely than whites to be killed by homicide—their concerns were not surprising. Nevertheless, the hallmarks of militarized law enforcement remained unmistakable in the organizations' punitive visions of reform. SCOC and UNO advocated establishing "combat zone" teams drawn from multiple law enforcement agencies to target "gangs" and "drug traffickers" in high-crime areas; higher taxes on liquor to pay for more police; increases in federal drug agents in Los Angeles, and, perhaps most importantly, building a black and brown coalition to force local officials to provide more police protection. "We come here to make a choice today," argued Father Luis Olivares of La Placita Church. "We can fight those who stuff drugs into our children, or we can just sit on our butts and wish that it weren't so."<sup>18</sup>

As this rhetoric shows, the crack crisis proved deeply divisive and helped fracture African American and Latino communities internally along lines of age, class, and faith. In the context of massive cuts to American cities under the Reagan administration, carceral solutions to problems of impoverished communities had much greater efficacy than redistributive liberalism. Rather than approaching the problem via public health or structural inequality (deindustrialization, outsourcing, capital flight), these early reformers looked to the problems and contradictions inside impoverished neighborhoods. Christian churches, in particular, played an important role in advocating for more punitive, self-help approaches. How welfare retrenchment and militarized law enforcement with its crisis-driven rationale fostered an increasingly conservative grassroots "politics of personal responsibility" is an understudied theme in the history of Los Angeles and throughout black America in the era of mass incarceration and the war(s) on drugs. Paradoxically, while some of the residents of South Los Angeles initially supported the drug wars in hopes of protecting their children from the perceived scourge of crack, it soon became apparent that these very youth were being subjected to militarized police sweeps, gang injunctions and enhancements, and mandatory sentencing laws. For many, the punishment infrastructure driving mass incarceration proved more destructive than the original problems of drug addiction, use, and sale.

The state effectively co-opted much of the anger and disorientation created by the Reagan-era urban crisis into an anticrime framework that blamed the pathological culture of black and brown youth for the problems of poverty and urban divestment. Los Angeles' sharp intraracial class divide exacerbated this tendency to target the poorest and most vulnerable members of the community. Therefore, elected officials, the clergy, and traditional civil rights leadership cannot be used as the *sine qua non* of black popular opinion. Indeed, writing about the wars on drugs and gangs in the late twentieth century provides a window onto black class polarities and antagonisms in the post-civil rights era. Sectors of black elites—from the administration of Los Angeles mayor Tom Bradley to SCOC—supported Los Angeles' war on drugs and gangs, but the responses of the majority of low-

<sup>18</sup> Felker-Kantor, "Managing Marginalization from Watts to Rodney King," 357–58, 365, 389–96; Darnell Hunt, *Black Los Angeles: American Dreams and Racial Realities* (New York, 2010); Edward J. Boyer, "Dual Goal Told at Rally: Strike at Crime, Win Olympic Funds," *Los Angeles Times*, July 15, 1985, p. B1.

income residents in South Los Angeles remain harder to discern through traditional historical sources. More social research into how the intraracial factors of class, homeownership, and neighborhood geography affected law-and-order attitudes within communities of color is desperately needed. For scholars attempting to recover this history, the techniques of ethnography and oral history are essential. Too often, African American elites, who by definition have left stronger archival traces, have been treated as representative of the black community as a whole. The history of the Coalition against Police Abuse offers an intriguing example of how we might differentiate black poor and working-class “drug war politics” from the politics of their wealthier counterparts.

In the early 1990s a palpable shift took place as a variety of African American–led organizations proposed alternate frameworks to the semimartial state of the Los Angeles drug and gang wars. The cumulative effects of mass criminalization, mandatory minimum sentencing, disparate crack prosecution, and the expansive municipal, state, and federal apparatus created to criminalize drug use, distribution, and alleged gang participation resulted in an explosion of the population in jails and prisons. As residents watched this expansion, a commitment to developing less punitive approaches emerged. Redefining the crack crisis in terms of public health, structural economic decline, and as a product of Reagan-era anticommunist foreign policy was a powerful tool for mobilizing anti–drug war sentiment in the African American community of Los Angeles. This shift took place, however, within the confines of fiscal and political restraints. As historians document resistance to the carceral state and the war on drugs, exploring how social service retrenchment, neoliberal restructuring, and promarket governance influenced African American and Latino modes of protest is crucial background. In contrast to the era of the Great Society and the long black freedom movement, by the early 1990s not-for-profit organizations and community development corporations competed with grassroots social movements as the legitimate medium for organized dissent.<sup>19</sup>

In 1990 future California representative Karen Bass sponsored an inaugural conference, “Crack: Crisis in the African American Community,” to help launch the Community Coalition for Substance Abuse, Prevention, and Treatment. The new organization countered the rationale for militarized law enforcement by redefining crack addiction more broadly as a public “health crisis.” Having worked as a physician’s assistant at the Los Angeles County–University of Southern California Medical Center emergency room, Bass had witnessed the devastating effects of addiction. “I just really became obsessed with how the drug problem, specifically the crack epidemic, was impacting the community,” she later explained. The Community Coalition advocated mandatory school counseling, drug and gang diversion programs, and utilizing “forfeiture-seizure” monies to finance drug treatment. “Our mission, essentially, is to address the drug and alcohol problems of the community,” Bass explained. “We don’t do that by providing direct services such as treatment or counseling, but we do that by organizing and empowering community residents to change the environment that creates drug and alcohol problems in the first place.” The Community Coalition’s most sustained activism centered on preventing liquor stores from reopening after the 1992 Los Angeles rebellions. Modeling its efforts on homeowner associations, the coalition organized residents to clean up the streets. By eliminating the environment that fostered crime and addiction, including liquor stores,

<sup>19</sup> Felker-Kantor, “Managing Marginalization from Watts to Rodney King,” 397, 388. For a contrasting take on intraracial class divisions during New York’s drug war under Gov. Nelson A. Rockefeller, see Fortner, “Carceral State and the Crucible of Black Politics.”

transient hotels, and open-air sex and drug markets, the coalition sought to transform the “hopelessness and despair” of South Central Los Angeles.<sup>20</sup>

In the penumbra of Los Angeles’ 1992 rebellions, other black voices emerged, directly critiquing state violence, police militarization, and U.S. foreign policy. Foremost among these was CAPA, with roots predating the Reagan era and stretching deep into the Los Angeles black power movement. At the height of the city’s militarized war on drugs, CAPA’s small cadre of activists taught community members how to document police abuses, utilize media, and wage legal campaigns. Michael Zinzun’s successful lawsuits against the LAPD and the Pasadena police and his critique of state violence and mass incarceration, combined with his nurturance of younger activists, helped forge an inter-generational channel for radical activism. CAPA’s motto, “We will work with you not for you,” reflected its preference for egalitarian, decentralized modes of organizing. Nevertheless, during the 1980s the group struggled to attract a broader base and often found itself overshadowed by more mainstream, punitive efforts. In the early 1990s, however, CAPA gained greater visibility as the carceral effects of a decade-long war on black and brown youth became visible in the vast increase in the incarceration of youth of color. From 1982 to 1995 the numbers of African Americans in the California Department of Corrections increased from 12,470 to 42,296, while Latino incarceration grew from 9,006 to 46,080.<sup>21</sup>

Together with Mothers Reclaim Our Children and the California Gang Truce, CAPA and its network of grassroots radicals embodied a foundational historical shift as poor and working-class populations of color who suffered the worst effects of Los Angeles’ militarized drug wars began mobilizing against gang suppression and mass incarceration. Far to the left of black elected officials, the local clergy, and traditional civil rights activists, these new political formations raise a number of compelling issues for future scholarship on the war on drugs. The first is the need for more social history of poor and working-class “drug war politics,” ranging from formal organizations in cities across the United States to everyday infrapolitics of resistance. Second, scholars must carefully parse the chronology and periodization of black and brown opposition to the carceral state. As is clear in the history of Los Angeles’ militarized wars on drugs and gangs, a significant shift occurred over a two-decade period, and this same attention to change over time must inform research on punishment campaigns from the initial passage of the Rockefeller Drug Laws in 1973 through today.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Karen Bass, “Alcohol’s Relationship to Urban Violence: When Free Enterprise Threatens Community Welfare,” in *Black-Korean Encounter: Toward Understanding and Alliance*, ed. Eui-Young Yu (Los Angeles, 1994), 5, 6, 70–72; Angela Hill, “California Lawmaker Works to Improve Her Community,” *Crisis*, 112 (March–April 2005), 8. On the use of forfeiture-seizure money to finance drug treatment, see Karen Bass, “Application for Crack Cocaine Conference,” Fall 1989, folder 6, box 35, Liberty Hill Foundation Records (Southern California Library, Los Angeles). On the mission of the Community Coalition for Substance Abuse, Prevention, and Treatment, see Bass, “Alcohol’s Relationship to Urban Violence,” 6. Kyeoung Park, “The Morality of a Commodity: A Case of ‘Rebuilding L.A. without Liquor Stores,’” *Amerasia Journal*, 21 (Winter 1995–1996), 1–24. Bass, “Application for Crack Cocaine Conference.”

<sup>21</sup> On the motto of the Coalition against Police Abuse, see Mary Pauline Roche, “Unfinished Business: The Production of Resistance to State Violence in London and Derry” (Ph.D. diss., University of Southern California, 2004), 154; and Vargas, *Catching Hell in the City of Angels*, 109–40. On the increases in numbers of African Americans and Latinos in the California Department of Corrections, see Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*, 111, table 4.

<sup>22</sup> Vargas, *Catching Hell in the City of Angels*, 109–40, 177–213; Fortner, “Carceral State and the Crucible of Black Politics.” Julilly Kohler-Hausmann, “‘The Attila the Hun Law’: New York’s Rockefeller Drug Laws and the Making of a Punitive State,” *Journal of Social History*, 44 (Fall 2010), 71–96.

When viewed in hindsight, the racial intent and effects of the late twentieth-century wars on drugs and gangs in Los Angeles are very clear. By 1995, after thirteen years of the Reagan-Bush war on drugs, California incarcerated African Americans at rates nearly five times their percentage of the general population. The extreme militarization of policing focused on the criminalization, control, and prison warehousing of an entire generation of black and brown youth. Los Angeles' development of the first SWAT in the nation anticipated and arguably led the martial turn a decade before the rise of mass incarceration rates. During the Reagan era, however, the new powers, funding, and ideological mandate bestowed on police and prosecutors vastly intensified warfare on drugs and gangs in which the line between the police and the military became more permeable. Yet many within in the African American community in Los Angeles and elsewhere initially found mobilizing against this semi-martial regime difficult. Black residents, and homeowners in particular, understood the crisis within their own neighborhoods of spiraling poverty, crack use and sale, and intraracial violence as equally perilous. The extreme polarization of wealth among black Angelinos exacerbated this tendency and created fault lines of social class and incarceration status. While the LAPD, SWAT, CRASH, and Operation Safe Streets besieged neighborhoods such as South Central, Watts, and Pico-Union, wealthy enclaves such as Baldwin and Windsor Hills remained largely insulated from domestic warfare against the poor and most vulnerable.<sup>23</sup>

Los Angeles was certainly not unique. Many black politicians and other prominent leaders supported drastic carceral policies in hopes of staunching the crack crisis facing black communities across the country. While Councilman David Cunningham's support for Chief Gates's use of the battering ram represented the far right wing of Los Angeles' African American elected officials, Rep. Charles Rangel of New York emerged as a vocal antidrug warrior and advocate for the expansion of police and prosecutorial powers. However, in Los Angeles this dynamic changed significantly as the carceral effects of the race to punishment became fully visible. A new generation of organizers, nurtured by longtime activists such as Michael Zinzun, centered in the communities of Watts and South Central Los Angeles, redefined the solutions to neighborhoods in crisis. The formerly incarcerated and their families, gang members, veteran organizers, and other vulnerable segments of the population caught in the crosshairs of the militarized drug war articulated a new form of poor and working-class "drug war politics" that emphasized structural police violence, the development of grassroots, indigenous solutions rather than state punishment, and the role of U.S. foreign policy in creating the crack crisis. As the first generation of carceral state historiography is written, Los Angeles' war on drugs is instructive. The city embodied many of the war's worst aspects, and despite this history—or perhaps because of it—produced some of its most compelling opposition.

<sup>23</sup> On the rates of African American incarceration in 1995, see Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*, 110–11; and "California 2000."