



PAT BROWN INSTITUTE OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS

## Improving Race Relations: What Have We Learned in the Past 15 Years?

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Do we ever learn from the past in shaping our future? Do we even know our past? I was reminded recently of an incident in Los Angeles in 1871. It was a horrific hate crime, but an event that is not known by very many in Los Angeles. Judge Michael Stern wrote in the Los Angeles Superior Court Judicial Magazine of court records of the 1871 prosecution in *People v. Ah Lun*, and other accounts of the late October events in Chinatown that year “illustrate the vulnerability of its inhabitants to extreme racial violence. The Chinatown of the era was located where the El Pueblo de Los Angeles State Historic Park stands today. A quarrel between Yo Hing and Sam Yuen on Oct. 23, 1871 caused the two to be arrested. They bailed out the next day, but their dispute continued when they returned to Chinatown. Hearing gunshots in that area, a police officer went to investigate and stem the feud. A private citizen came to his aid, but was shot and killed in the ensuing confusion.”

The record goes on to state “An angry mob of whites stormed Chinatown with a vengeance. They chased and cornered a number of Chinese in an adobe building and then besieged the structure from the roof and all sides.

The pistol happy vigilantes shot indiscriminately into the adobe, gunned down a Chinese man who attempted to flee, and torched the premises. The building was stormed and Chinese men were dragged out and hanged. By the time the violence ended, 19 Chinese had been murdered (including two young boys). Although there were some arrests of members of the white mob, few stood trial or served much jail time.

Accounts of the October massacre identify two motivations for the mob action beyond the immediate retribution for the killing of the bystander at the outset of the melee: intense racial hatred of Chinese and common crime. The criminal perpetrators shot and beat innocent people, cut the hands off victims to steal rings, ransacked and stole from the Chinese stores at will, and burned and pillaged property. Most of them got away without penalty for their crimes.

October 24, 1871, is still remembered as the worst instance of racial violence in the Chinese American community of Los Angeles.”

How many in Los Angeles know of this event? There are so many important events that shed light on race relations in our past. Yet, our schools, leaders, media and institutions often choose not to highlight them. Of course, positive events should be highlighted, but those that reveal our hatreds, the failures of our system of justice, and the

consequences of ignoring racial tensions have an important role. That role is learning. Learning lessons can be so helpful in preventing future violence that they simply cannot be ignored.

When I pose the question of improving race relations and what we've learned over the past 15 years, that was a somewhat arbitrary number. However, I do believe that it is instructive to see what has transpired in race relations since the 1992 Los Angeles riots.

One of the prominent developments in racial demography has been the continued diversification of our population. The U.S. Census Bureau shows that the 2005 California population has 15,828,690 (44%) whites; 12,722,962 (35%) Latino; 4,868,438 (13%) Asian; 2,690,805 (7%) African American; 696,633 (2%) American Indian; 256,917 (1%) Pacific Islander. Clearly, we live in a state without a racial majority group.

The demographic shifts in Los Angeles County are dramatic in that Latinos now outnumber whites. The census estimates for 2004 show 4,624,713 (47%) Latino; 3,072,021 (31%) white; 1,374,156 (14%) Asian; 1,032,227 (10%) African American; 153,539 (2%) American Indian; 54,331 (1%) Pacific Islander.

These population shifts will continue. By 2025 it is estimated that California will have 21,232,000 (43%) Latino; 16,626,000 (34%) white; 9,078,000 (18%) Asian; 3,426,000 (7%) African American; 393,000 (1%) American Indian.

Another development over the past 15 years has been the response of government to the issue of race relations. I was President of the Los Angeles City Human Relations Commission in 1988-89. At the time, the Commission had only one administrative staff. Our Commission members launched a two year campaign that eventually added one professional, our executive director, to the staff. Yes, we doubled the number, but that was the picture of the staff when the 1992 riots occurred. It was telling that it took us two years after the riots to significantly increase the staff.

Today, the Los Angeles City Human Relations Commission and the Los Angeles County Human Relations Commission have staffs of 16 and 23 respectively. They both have vital roles that they play in education, school programs, prevention and response to hate crimes and tensions, and coalition building with community organizations, businesses, and the media. The Ca. Attorney General has pushed state agencies to monitor hate crimes and has consistently reported on trends. The U.S. Community Relations Service has staff with significant experience.

We have also seen the development of new trends, both locally and nationally that have impacted race relations. To mention a few of these developments, we see that while general crime rates have fallen, gang and racialized gang violence has increased. We see that the national debate on immigration has been accompanied by both more immigrant organizing and scapegoating. Acts of hate and discrimination against immigrants are on the rise. Post 9/11/01, one of the unfortunate responses was the wave of hate crimes against Arab Americans, Americans from South Asia, and people

identified as Muslims. Finally, we have seen that the gap between the wealthy and the poor continue to grow. Los Angeles has drop out rates hovering around 50% for African American and Latino youth. The county is the homeless capital of the country with over 90,000 homeless people. The middle class is shrinking as jobs have less security and benefits while housing and health costs have risen astronomically.

Sadly, old trends persist as African Americans are the most targeted racial group for hate motivated violence. Attacks against gays and lesbians have also increased. Hate crimes have trended down a year after 9/11/01, but in 2004, attacks in the state against African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans jumped up again. Numbers go up and down, but we are constantly reminded that there are too many hate crimes in our state and county.

What recommendations can I give to improve our race relations?

First, government at all levels should continue to increase resources for human relations agencies and to speak out against hate incidents. The City of Los Angeles should continue bolstering its staff so that they can play a greater role in bringing mediation and other solutions to middle schools. The County of Los Angeles should strengthen efforts of its Human Relations Commission to foster partnerships with community organizations that reduce hate crimes and assist victims.

The Mayor of Los Angeles, Antonio Villaraigosa, spoke eloquently at last year's commemoration of the death of Joseph Iletto, a Filipino American U.S. postal carrier, who was gunned down by a white supremacist in 1999. Public officials should continue to speak out against hate and for tolerance and understanding.

Our systems of law enforcement and criminal justice need to continually be monitored to ensure fairness and connection with communities. The appointment of John Mack, the former leader of the Los Angeles Urban League, to head the Los Angeles Police Commission was an important step to ensure community oversight over the Los Angeles Police Department.

Our public and private schools can do much more to increase understanding and knowledge about our diverse population. From diverse history lessons to increasing the access to different languages in the schools, these institutions can make a tremendous contribution to improved race relations. This learning fosters educational achievement and should not be seen as a diversion from reading and doing math.

Second, the private sector, including nonprofit organizations, businesses, unions, and churches must step up in their role to provide education, training and joint action on race relations. Unfortunately, groups like the NCCJ (National Conference for Communities and Justice) closed its Los Angeles office a couple of years ago. The Multicultural Collaborative, which played an important role after the 1992 riots in bringing groups together and suggesting the strengthening of the human relations infrastructure like the commissions, is in the process of dissolving. Yet, it is now that community based organizations need to step up their activities in improving human

relations and developing coalitions to advance equality for all of our children and residents. This is perhaps the most important recommendation of this time period.

The nonprofit sector has a very important role in training and skills building so that community residents have the tools to cross boundaries of race and other differences so that communication, conflict resolution, coalition building, and understanding can be strengthened. In a publication and study by the Asian Pacific American Legal Center entitled "Crossing Boundaries: An Exploration of Effective Leadership Development in Communities," we found that there are significant programs in Los Angeles but they were only able to reach 850 residents and students each year. Their capacity would have to be significantly increased to reach the thousands and tens of thousands who desperately need such training.

Programs are necessary, but so are actions that speak to improving race relations. Unite Here has an initiative that encourages the hiring of more African Americans in the hotel industry to counter what advocates say is a preferential hiring of immigrants. The Beverly Hilton recently signed a three-year contract which includes a provision to hire more African Americans. In Orange County, the Asian Pacific American Legal Center and 10 other Asian American and Vietnamese organizations and leaders denounced the action of a Vietnamese American Congressional candidate for a campaign of intimidation against Latino voters.

Third, networks of leaders and residents need to proactively come together to discuss tough issues and to find common ground. The segregation of our residential living patterns call for aggressive measures to communicate, meet, dialogue and work across different boundaries. The potential of neighborhood councils, groups like the Civic Alliance and other informal networks are important to foster unity. That unity should be a goal of such groups.

Finally, intense public action is needed to expand opportunities for our residents and to lessen the disparities that plague our communities. Action on employment, education, public safety, etc. is needed. Wherever possible, coalitions across racial lines should come together to improve communities. The Los Angeles Urban League, Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund and the Asian Pacific American Legal Center agreed last year on a 5 year project to jointly develop youth and parent leadership and to work with parent organizations across the county to build an independent parents network that would strive to improve the educational outcomes for all of our students.

Improving race relations is a science. There is no road map especially for California, but we can learn from the past to secure a brighter future for our residents and our children. I welcome the opportunity to coalesce and to work with you to do just that.