

# Los Angeles Times

## LAPD's Crime Offensive on Skid Row Is Slipping

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The Los Angeles Police Department's much-heralded crackdown on crime on downtown Los Angeles' skid row is showing signs of faltering, with arrests plummeting and a new police survey showing a threefold increase in the number of homeless encampments in the district.

Top LAPD officials acknowledged Wednesday that their campaign has slowed, saying officers have been stymied by a lack of staffing and by an American Civil Liberties Union lawsuit that severely limits their ability to arrest people for sleeping on the street.

"The officers are not only handcuffed, they are hobbled," said Police Chief William J. Bratton.

Officers have also halted "catch and release" practices, in which they arrest people on the street for minor offenses and order them to court instead of sending them to jail. The LAPD ceased such actions because the city attorney's office said prosecutors had trouble filing charges against the defendants.

The Police Department promised last fall that it would add 50 officers to the Central Division's 318 sworn personnel downtown. But the officers' arrival has been delayed repeatedly as officials squabbled over how they would be used.

On Wednesday, Bratton said he hasn't assigned the 50 officers yet in part because it is not clear that they would make a difference in fighting crime with the ACLU lawsuit unresolved. Torie Osborn, the mayor's point person on homelessness, said she expects the officers to arrive in September and stay in the district four months.

Another issue stirring concerns about the cleanup effort is an LAPD census of the homeless population completed last week that found 539 tents on the streets of the district. That's an increase from the 187 found in February. The census also concludes that skid row's homeless population has risen about 10%.

Bratton is a longtime advocate of the "broken windows" method of policing and said last year that he planned to employ the strategy – aggressively focusing on smaller crimes such as prostitution and drug possession to prevent larger crimes – on skid row.

Usually, that would mean more arrests.

But LAPD data suggest that is not what's happening. The Central Division has made about 7,000 arrests so far this year. During the same period in 2005 and 2004, there were more than 9,000, the department reported. That 23% drop comes at a time when arrests in the city as a whole are flat.

The biggest decline in skid row arrests has been for misdemeanor offenses such as trespassing and possession of small quantities of drugs – the very “quality of life” crimes Bratton vowed to focus on.

Crime has dropped 16% so far this year in the Central Division, which covers most of downtown as well as Chinatown. But both Bratton and Central Division Capt. Andrew Smith said they believe violent crime actually has risen slightly this year on skid row.

Increasingly concerned by what they consider the slow pace of promised improvements for the district, a group of downtown business leaders, residents and at least one service provider met recently with Villaraigosa to discuss the situation.

Police officials explained the decline in arrests as the consequence of a series of events that have unfolded in the last few months.

In April, a decision by the U.S. 9th Circuit Court of Appeals blocked the department from arresting people for sitting, sleeping or lying on public sidewalks. (The LAPD had allowed such activity at night as long as people were packed up by morning.) The ACLU, which brought the suit, argued that police were criminalizing homeless people simply for being homeless.

The department said the decision took away the most effective weapon it had for ridding sidewalks of tents and other dwellings, which officials said often hide drug use and sales from plain view. Smith said that since the ruling, officers have seen more militant homeless activity, with people waving the newspaper stories and leaflets on the decision in their faces.

But Ramona Ripston, executive director of the ACLU of Southern California, said the LAPD is scapegoating her organization for problems the department is having with policing skid row.

“If they are handcuffed and hobbled,” it isn’t because of the decision, said Ripston, who was appointed by the mayor to the joint city-county Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority. There is nothing in the decision “stopping them from arresting people for criminal activity

The ACLU is now in court-ordered mediation with the city over how to resolve the case, and Ripston said she remains optimistic that the parties can reach a compromise.

Another factor driving down the arrest numbers involves the city attorney’s office, which has raised concerns about arresting and immediately releasing suspects. Spokesman Jonathan Diamond said that too often in catch-and-release arrests, defendants failed to appear in court.

“It was an issue of inadequate identification,” he said. If they are booked at the police station, he said, fingerprints and other data can be collected more effectively.

An increased number of protests around City Hall and the rest of downtown this year has forced Central to stretch its personnel to become a crowd control division, Smith said. Protests over everything from immigration policy to the Iraq war have “meant fewer patrols and ultimately less arrests,” he said.

In recent months, the LAPD has focused more attention on large drug rings operating on skid row rather than small-time offenders.

Some downtown watchers said those changes have affected city streets –either exacerbating the problem or preventing it from improving.

“What isn’t getting addressed are the folks shooting up heroin at the end of the block, the transvestite prostitutes on the corner, the young runaways selling their bodies for drugs, the guys wandering through the middle of the street all coked up,” said Estela Lopez, head of the Central City East Assn, which represents businesses in an area of downtown that includes skid row.

“The tipping point has not only been reached, it has been breached,” she said. “It has completely overwhelmed the law enforcement resources to address it.”

But Casey Horan, executive director of Lamp Community, a downtown mental health services provider, said a too-narrow focus on aggressive misdemeanor arrests fails to address the area’s deep-seated problems. She worries that the mayor’s skid row plan, due to be unveiled next month, will center too much on misdemeanors.

If it does, she said, “they are wasting resources. It will clog the courts and have no impact on reducing crime

Despite the setbacks, city officials remain optimistic that Los Angeles is making progress on skid row.

Osborn, the mayor’s homelessness czar, said that since last fall, there has been a particular focus on the area and how to fix its problems. She noted that policing is only one part of the strategy, which also involves efforts to improve services for the homeless and add more affordable housing around the city.

“I think there are people who think that public safety is the answer to poverty and homelessness. I don’t think it is, and the mayor doesn’t think it is,” she said.

“You can’t ask the police to transform an entrenched community of homelessness and alienation,” she added. “You need medical treatment, addiction treatment, recovery beds and, most of all, supportive housing.”