

THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE

LA RIOTS: Unrest resonated in Inland region



Carol Park, 32, of Riverside presented a documentary on the L.A. Riots during a forum on race relations at UCR on Wednesday, April 25, 2012. Park was a child in Los Angeles during the riots twenty years ago, and her mother's business was looted. (DAVID BAUMAN/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER)

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Effects of the riots that engulfed parts of Los Angeles 20 years ago remain visible throughout the Inland region today.

Burned-out businesses relocated to the area, and LA residents numbed by the destruction and weary of racial tension found refuge in the Inland Empire.

One of those residents was just a girl when rioters looted her mother's store. As soon as she became an adult she headed to the Inland region. "The Inland Empire is very blessed," said Carol Park of Riverside. "We don't have segregated areas. We mingle and it doesn't matter. I feel less tension here."

Even Rodney King now lives in Rialto. The April 29, 1992, acquittal of four Los Angeles police officers in the beating of King sparked the riots.

The verdict also prompted changes in how the police in the Inland area and elsewhere relate to the communities they serve, and to reforms seen by anyone who has recently served on a jury.

As in Los Angeles, Inland police departments have forged closer links with their communities.

At least 53 people died, more than 2,000 were hurt and more than \$1 billion in property was destroyed or damaged in the riots.

BUSINESS DESTROYED

Alicia Thompson, 39, was at home in Moreno Valley on April 29, 1992, when she began receiving phone calls that the family-owned Long Beach hair salon where she was assistant manager was in flames.

“The whole building was destroyed,” Thompson said. “Nothing was salvaged.”

Even though the riot began after outrage over a verdict that many saw as yet another injustice toward African-Americans, many of the victims of the unrest were black.

Thompson said she understood where the rage was coming from.

“But they didn’t think before they did what they did,” she said. “It destroyed a lot of lives. It destroyed our business. They let their emotions get the best of them.”

The family rented space in Paramount — in Los Angeles County — for a new salon but didn’t own a shop again until Thompson’s mother, La Joyce Mosley, 74, opened La Joyce’s Coiffures in Riverside in 2007.

Several miles away from the salon, Roy Johnson’s Family Fish Market in South Central Los Angeles was heavily damaged in a blaze that began when a firebomb hit a nearby Korean-owned restaurant.

Johnson opened Louisiana Seafood in Moreno Valley as he waited for repairs at his market to finish.

When the King verdict was announced, Johnson knew trouble was ahead.

“It wasn’t just Rodney King but all the injustices before that,” Johnson said. “If a kid was walking down the street, they’d (the police) sometimes tell him to get stretched out on the ground. They weren’t treating people right. Everyone was a suspect.”

After frisking the young black men, police let them go if nothing was found on them, Johnson said.

“But the kid’s all messed up,” he said. “There’s no respect and he feels that.”

Johnson, 58, who lives in Moreno Valley, said many LAPD officers had good relations with the community, but those who didn’t stoked bitterness and anger.

The black community was also still reeling from the verdict only five months earlier in another trial, in which a Korean shopkeeper was given a light sentence in the murder of a 16-year-old black girl.

“Rodney King, that was just the match that lit the torch,” said Johnson, who opposed the violence.

KOREAN-AMERICAN

Long before there was a 9/11, there was a 4/29.

The numbers — Sa-I-Gu in Korean — stand for the devastation suffered by Korean-Americans during the riots.

About \$400 million of the more than \$1 billion in damage was to Korean-owned businesses, mostly in South Central and Koreatown, said Edward Chang, director of UC Riverside’s Young Oak Kim Center for Korean-American Studies. It was the most traumatic event in Korean-American history, Chang said.

“People’s dreams were shattered overnight,” Chang said. “It had a huge economic and psychological impact.”

Some of the tension between the black and Korean-American communities stemmed from cultural misunderstandings, Chang said. African-Americans were offended by what they didn’t realize were Korean cultural norms, such as avoiding eye contact and leaving change on the counter rather than handing it to customers, he said.

Park, a research assistant for Chang, couldn’t wait to leave Los Angeles County after the riots.

She was 12 when her mother’s Compton gas station was looted during the unrest. When Park arrived as a student at UCR at age 18, she never moved back, despite her mother’s urgings.

“I wanted to get as far away as I could from my mom’s gas station, from the racism, from the riots, from the fighting, from the tension, from everything I grew up watching,” said Park, a freelance writer whose work has appeared in *The Press-Enterprise*.

“I thought, if I went to the Inland region where I felt there was no color line, where the (Korean-American) community was still young and growing, it wouldn’t be so bad,” she said.

When Park was a girl working for her mother as a cashier before the riots, customers regularly called her anti-Asian racial slurs — although others got along well with Park and her mom.

Seo Wang You understood that African-Americans saw the Rodney King verdict as an injustice. But as he saw businesses in his neighborhood near Koreatown smoldering from rioting while returning home from work during the riots, he became angry.

“The Korean people were not involved, and Korean people were becoming a target of the riot,” said You, who now lives in Corona and runs a car-smog-check shop in Riverside.

CHANGES IN POLICING

During the unrest, Riverside Police Chief Sergio Diaz was a lieutenant for LAPD, covering an area in and around Watts.

Diaz said LAPD — and other police departments — did not do enough to build relationships with the community.

“There was this feeling, probably on both sides, that the LAPD was an occupying army and that we were people from the outside imposing order, and with the only mission of imposing order,” he said.

The riots and their aftermath caused changes in LAPD and departments across the country.

“It caused us to examine ourselves, and when I say us, the LAPD in particular, but the police service as a whole,” he said. “It caused us to examine ourselves in ways that we hadn’t. And that examination, it dragged us, it was a transformation we underwent probably kicking and screaming. But it’s important in so many ways. We had to go through that transformation.”

Diaz brought the lessons learned from the riots with him to Riverside, where community policing had already begun. Police have learned that community policing, in which police work closely with the people they serve and see them as allies rather than enemies, reduces crime, he said.

Residents are more likely to report crime, identify criminals and testify in court if they like and trust police, he said.

Dell Roberts, a longtime Riverside African-American activist and a police advisory board member, lauded the changes at the Police Department. He said the shift toward community policing in Riverside occurred not after the riots, but after the outcry over the 1998 killing of 19-year-old Tyisha Miller by Riverside police.

In San Bernardino, several community activists said more needs to be done there.

The Rev. Raymond Turner, pastor of Temple Missionary Baptist Church, one of the Inland area’s largest predominantly black congregations, said San Bernardino police haven’t done enough to overcome what he called a “them versus us” attitude. The San Bernardino County sheriff’s office has made more strides, he said.

San Bernardino city police Capt. Gwendolyn Waters said building strong community relations is a priority for the department, and a community-affairs unit with several sworn and civilian employees was formed a few years ago.

SOME TENSIONS REMAIN

The changes, especially in police departments, make riots less likely today than in 1992, said Karthick Ramakrishnan, an associate professor of political science at UCR.

“You have all these underlying factors that still exist,” Ramakrishnan said, referring to economic and other disparities. “But the key to the LA riots was a sense of disempowerment in terms of the legal system and the criminal justice system.”

In the Inland area, racially fueled fights between blacks and Latinos have broken out at several high schools in recent years.

Emilio Amaya, executive director of the San Bernardino Community Service Center, said that tells him that larger racial unrest could occur in the Inland area.

He said young people’s biases often come from their parents, and the parents’ bigotry typically is based more on economic desperation and competition for jobs than true hatred toward people of other ethnicities.

“There’s so much we need to do to work together,” Amaya said, “to say we’re not enemies, but that we’re facing the same problems, the same poverty, the same lack of resources.”

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