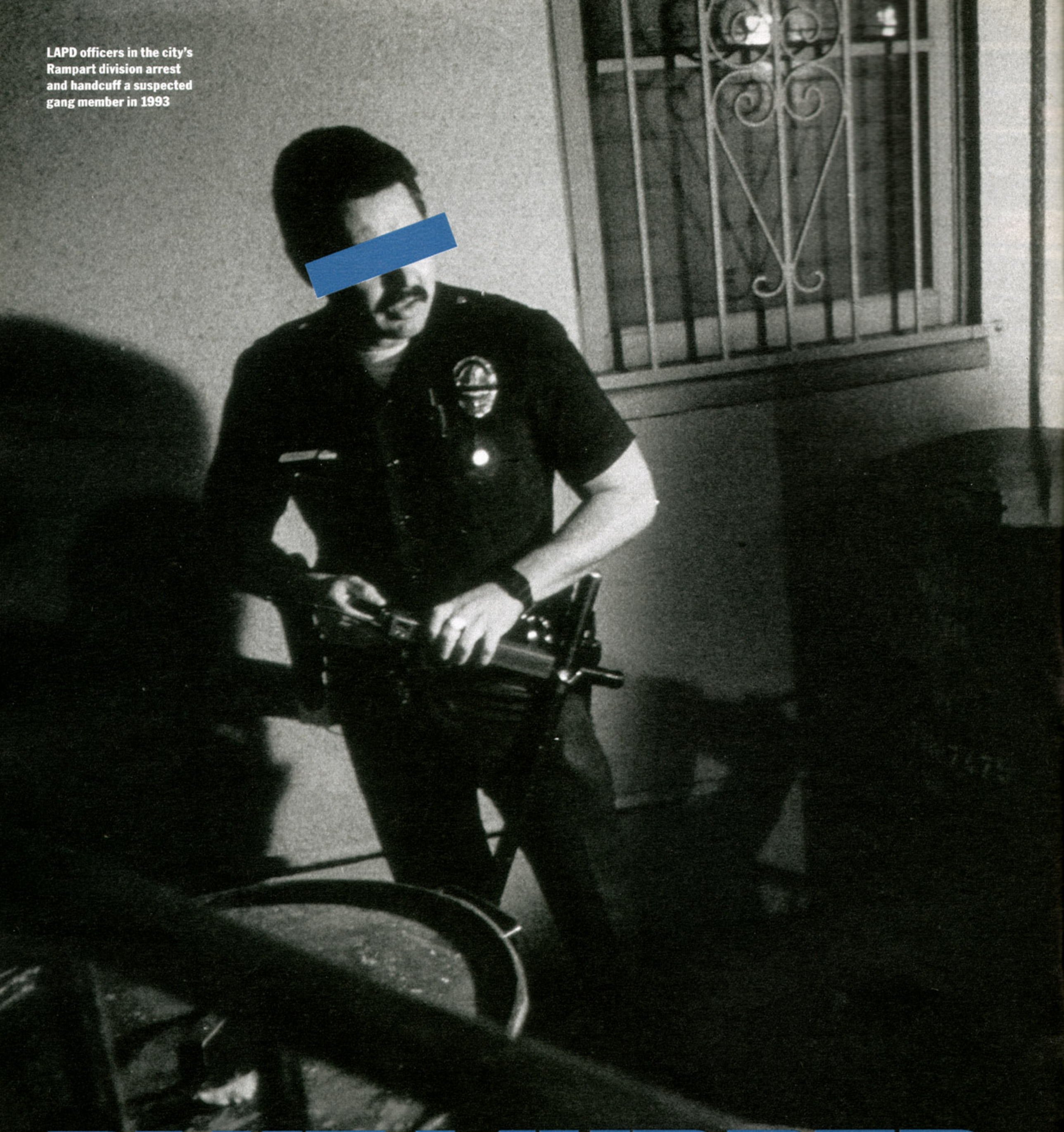


LAPD officers in the city's Rampart division arrest and handcuff a suspected gang member in 1993

BLUE MURDER

Violent, armed and dangerous – for years, the most feared gang on the streets of Los Angeles was a rogue band

of policemen. Now they are facing justice. Christine Toomey investigates. Photographs by Robert Gumpert

Westlake, Los Angeles, September 1996: it is after 9pm and Joey Tenorio is looking for somewhere to kill time. The 14-year-old has had enough of hanging out on street corners with other members of his gang. Entering a run-down apartment building on the corner of 11th and Lake streets, he slumps on the steps, tired and hungry.

Westlake is a punishing place to grow up. Sandwiched between Hollywood to the west and downtown, with its high-rise banks and multinational corporations, to the east, this densely populated area contains some of the most violent and impoverished streets in the United States. Many who live here are recent arrivals from Central and South America. Within a few square miles more than 30 rival gangs, with names such as Crazyriders, Out for Action and South Side Killers, violently defend their turf.

Joey has joined a gang called 18th Street, the largest in the area, because, like many youths, he wants "to party and meet girls". Few will admit they also seek protection and a sense of belonging in a city that largely rejects them because of their poverty or the colour of their skin. On the face of it the neighbourhood does not look like a ghetto. Palm trees sway over detached clapboard houses, low-rise apartment blocks, neon-lit strip malls and liquor stores covered with wire netting. Night-blooming jasmine sweetens the polluted air. But nothing is what it seems in this city of illusions.

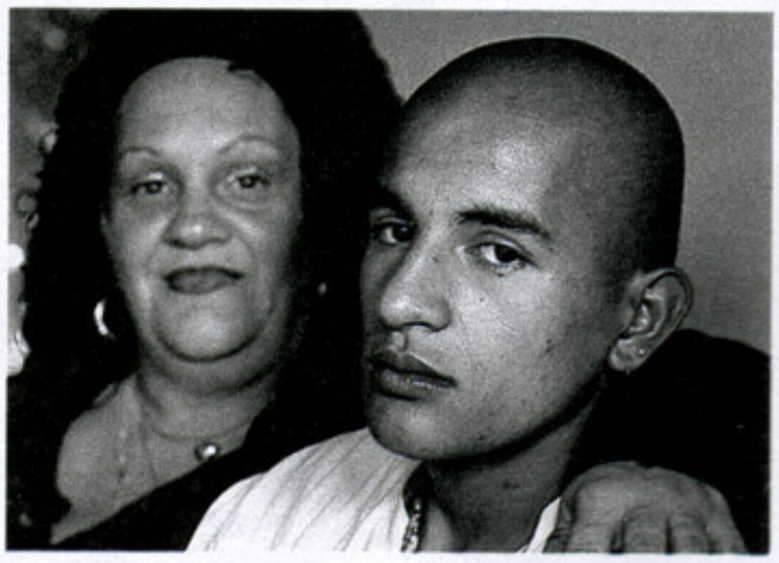
Here it is the police, once voted "the best-dressed cops in the world", who are the violent crooks. The homeboys, or "homies" – shaven heads, baggy trousers and tattoos – are the ones they beat, rob, intimidate, frame and kill. It is a reality Joey has quickly come to understand. He has grown up here, having left his birthplace, the Pacific island of Guam, as a young boy after his father died and his mother remarried.

As he steps out onto a fire escape for air this September night, he freezes. Standing on a balcony outside are two police officers he knows. Rafael Perez and Brian Hewitt stopped him on the street a few weeks before. Laughing and joking, Hewitt bet Perez a dollar that "gang-bangers [gang members] don't cry". He forced Joey to his knees and gouged his thumbs into pressure points on the boy's head and neck until he screamed in pain.

This night, they again force the boy down, jamming their guns into his neck, yelling at him: "Where's the gun? Where's the goddam gun?" The officers handcuff him to a metal railing in the stairwell and kick him repeatedly in the head and back.

Police later claimed a military arsenal had been broken into nearby and they were trying to recover stolen firearms. But that night the officers gave Joey no explanation. Hewitt took a pen from his pocket, scrawled a bull's-eye on the wall and warned Tenorio: "If you don't tell me where the gun is, this is where your head's gonna be." The boy, now a gangly, softly spoken 17-year-old, remembers: "They were real mad and I was real scared."

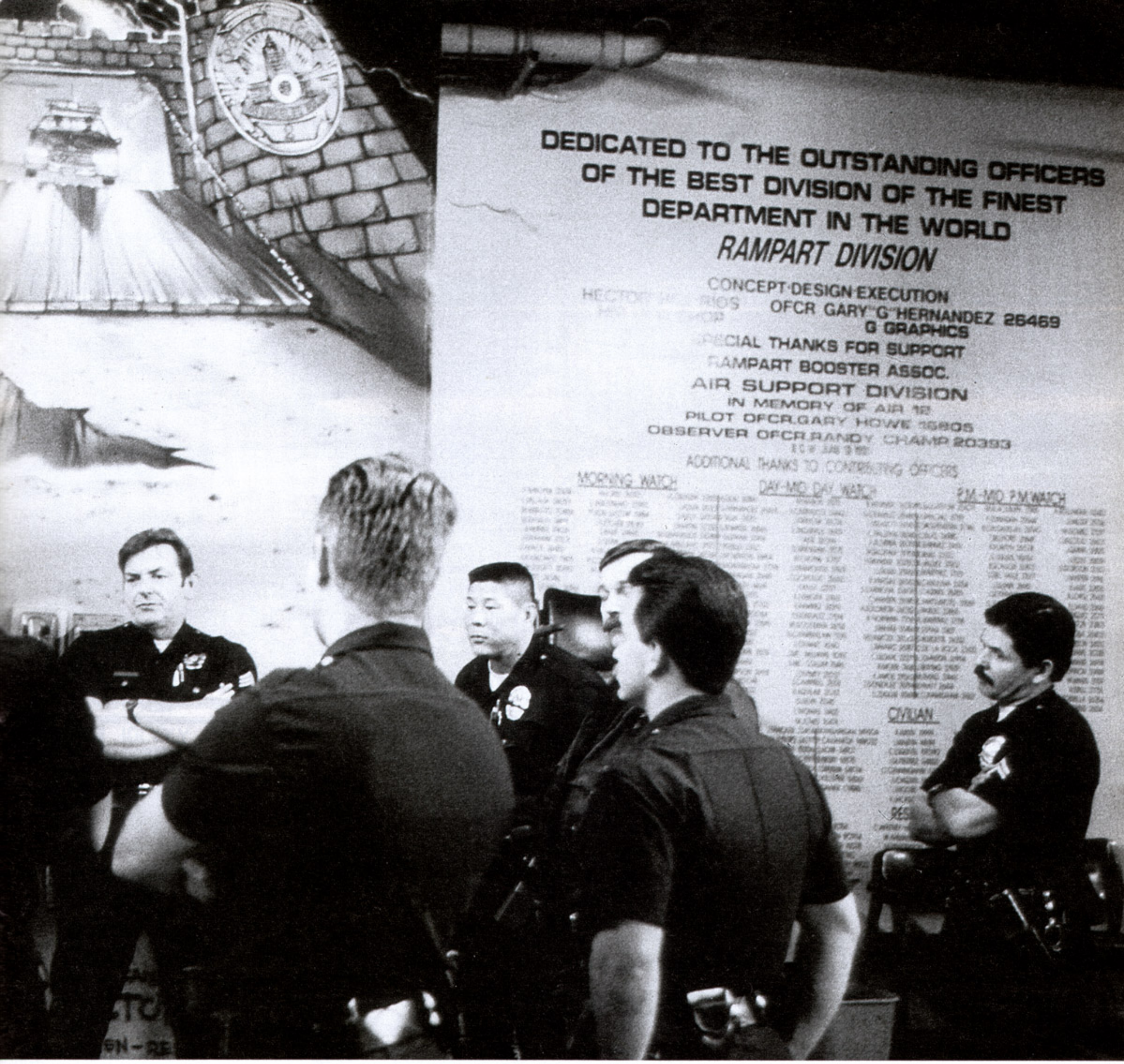
When he pleaded ignorance they picked him up by his arms and legs and started ramming his head against the



This page, top: José Rodriguez, 15, was charged with murdering a rival gang member and spent nine months in a juvenile detention centre before his case was dismissed. Centre left: his mother Estella. Centre right: Monique Valenzuela and her daughter Destiny, whose father – an innocent man – is confined to a wheelchair after being shot by police. Bottom: Joey Tenorio, 17, and his mother, Maria, who complained to the Rampart division after her son was tortured by officers. Main picture: beat officers in the Rampart division prepare to go on patrol in 1993

PHOTOGRAPHS: NETWORK

THE POLICE STARTED RAMMING HIS HEAD AGAINST THE WALL



wall. "Big chunks of plaster started falling off that wall... Plaster got stuck in my head," says Joey. "Then they dropped me, took off my shoes, threw them into the street and told me I had three minutes to run home."

When Joey's mother saw her blood-soaked son stagger through the door later that night, she marched down to the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) headquarters on Rampart Boulevard to lodge a complaint. "They just laughed at me. So what's new?" says Maria, a formidable woman with fleshy, tattooed arms and a toothless grin.

Four years after the incident, nobody is laughing about Joey's mother's attempt to seek justice.

Last summer, Maria and her son were visited by two LAPD detectives investigating allegations of police misconduct. "Like all of a sudden they cared about what happened to my Joey," says Maria. "Why?" The reason: Perez was in jail. He had been caught stealing three brick-sized blocks of cocaine from an LAPD evidence locker to sell on the street. He faced a 14-year prison sentence. He wanted to make a deal. In return for reduced jail time, he told prosecutors he would tell them everything he knew about corruption, perjury and brutality within the LAPD.

The plea bargain was agreed, on one condition. If Perez failed to disclose any misconduct he was involved in, or knew of, which later came to light, he would not only serve his full sentence but additional time for withholding evidence. What he disclosed was explosive. It took 40 hours to relate, filled more than 2,000 pages of testimony and was considered so sensitive and inflammatory that the courts ruled that it remain sealed. His disclosures launched a series of investigations into the LAPD. So far, more than 30 police officers have either been relieved of duty, fired or suspended, and dozens more are being investigated. Five officers face criminal charges, and more are expected to be charged. Sixty-seven criminal convictions have been overturned, 693 more cases are under review, and public defenders predict as many as 4,000 cases could be tainted. As each conviction is quashed, prisoners are released and police officers charged, more and more details of Perez's testimony is revealed. It reads like lurid pulp fiction.

Joey Tenorio was lucky; he can still speak. Other victims of police brutality have died or been left crippled for life. One unarmed 21-year-old was shot in the back and left to bleed to death as officers stood around discussing a cover-up story. Another unarmed man found hiding in a closet was shot by a ⋙→

young officer whose supervisor then splattered tomato ketchup around the room, concocting a tale that the officer had thought it was blood and believed he was in imminent danger of being attacked. According to Perez, police officers awarded themselves gruesome plaques to celebrate such shootings; they used prostitutes to sell drugs for profit, robbed drug dealers and raped informants. Innocent men and women were sent to prison on trumped-up charges after being framed with planted drugs, weapons and false police testimonies. Illegal immigrants who complained of abuse were handed over to immigration authorities for deportation.

The result is the worst scandal in the history of the LAPD, a force whose motto is "To Protect and to Serve". Some put damages likely to be sought by victims at $500m. Others believe this estimate is conservative. Stephen Yagman, a lawyer representing some of the plaintiffs, predicts: "It will bankrupt the city." Los Angeles council is expecting to pay out at least $125m to investigate the misconduct and compensate those suing the police. Civil rights lawyers predict most lawsuits will be settled out of court to prevent the full truth from being made public. "If all the evidence comes out, this city will never recover," says Gregory Yates, a lawyer representing more than 40 victims of police abuse. "The public will never again have confidence in the police department or the system of justice."

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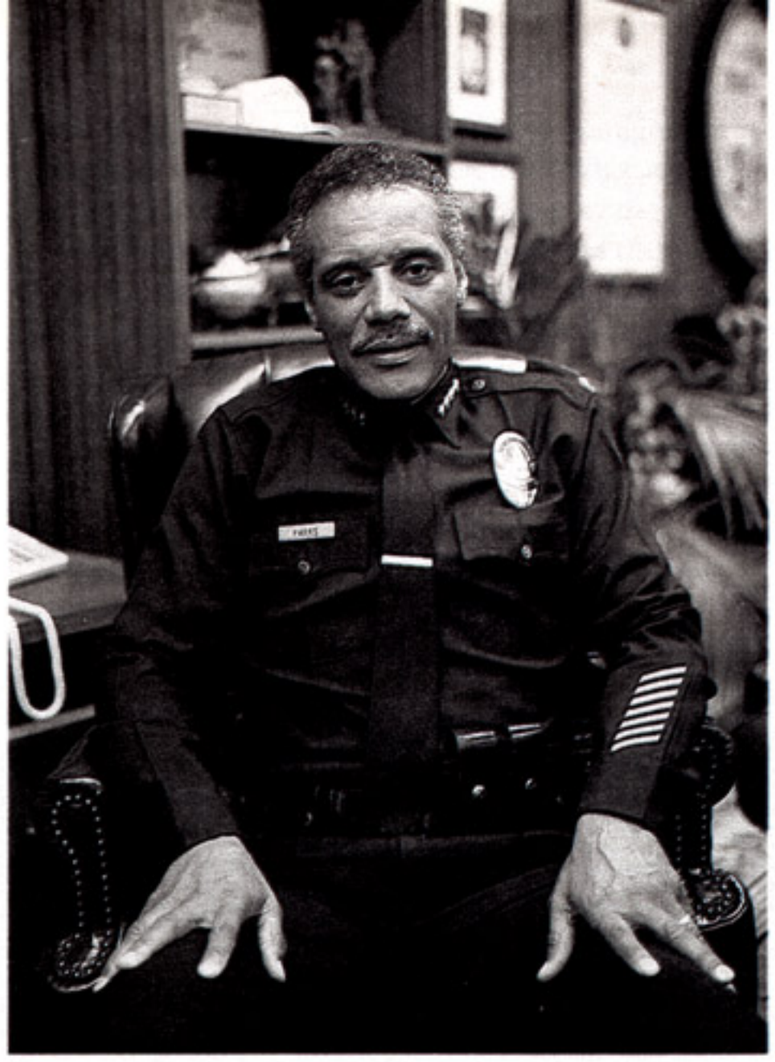
In James Ellroy's novel LA Confidential, about corruption in the LAPD in the late 1940s and early 50s, veteran officer Preston Exley asks his idealistic son Ed, an aspiring detective, if he would be willing "to plant corroborative evidence on a suspect to ensure an indictment... shoot hardened armed robbers in the back... beat confessions out of suspects... rig crime scene evidence?" When Ed answers, "No," his father warns him to "for God's sake stick to assignments where you won't have to make those choices".

Rafael Perez, 32, says he too joined the LAPD full of idealism. But, faced with the sort of assignments Exley advises his son to avoid, Perez claims he slowly became corrupted. Born in Puerto Rico, he moved with his family to the United States as a young boy and grew up in Philadelphia and later New Jersey. He was, he says, raised on a diet of popular police television shows such as Adam-12 and CHiPS and always wanted to be a cop.

After four years with the marine corps, Perez joined the LAPD. "He was a very popular officer, from what I hear, a leader," says Bob Hahnson, the new captain at Rampart station. Officers like Hahnson, however, are extremely guarded in what they say while investigations into misconduct continue. It is left to former LAPD staff to speak more frankly. They describe those on the force as falling into two categories: the "slugs", the time-servers; and the "gunslingers" – out for action and excitement. Perez was a gunslinger.

Gil Contreras knows the type. The craggy former police officer, who once hosted a radio talk show on the LAPD, now works as a private investigator. He was a gunslinger too. "This is Hollywood," he says, "we bought into the whole image." He gives a chilling description of how gunslingers put on police uniform: "You pin the badge on, put your gun belt on, tug on the gun, put your sunglasses on, black gloves in the back pocket... look at yourself in the mirror, tug on the gun again and think, 'Let's go to work, go whip somebody's ass.'"

Gunslingers look for tough assignments. In Los Angeles, this means postings to the city's divisions in South Central, Mid Central, 77th Street and Rampart. Perez applied to work at Rampart, initially with the narcotics unit, then on the station's anti-gang squad called Crash (community relations against street hoodlums). One of several such units in the city, Crash officers specialised in gathering intelligence on gangs and were given sweeping powers of arrest to curb their



Chief of police, Bernard Parks. The LAPD veteran is overseeing an internal inquiry into the Rampart scandal

activity. Exactly when and where Perez's career veered off the rails is unclear. All he says is: "The lines between right and wrong became fuzzy... The 'us against them' ethos of the overzealous cop began to consume me." Soon he was living beyond the means of a policeman's salary. On duty he would cruise the streets in his patrol car, puffing on a long cigar. Off duty he dressed in designer suits, went on cruises in the Caribbean and regular gambling sprees to Las Vegas. Perez was joined on these trips by his one-time partner on the narcotics squad, David Mack, with whom he remained friends after Mack transferred to another division. In November 1997 Mack held up a bank and stole more than $700,000 at gunpoint. Two days after the hold-up, Mack and Perez spent $20,000 gambling in Las Vegas. Fingering fat

'YOU THINK, "LET'S GO TO WORK AND WHIP SOMEBODY'S ASS"'

cigars, they posed for a souvenir photograph in front of Caesar's Palace casino. Mack was arrested shortly afterwards and is now serving a 14-year prison sentence for the robbery. He is also being investigated in connection with the murder of the rap singer Notorious B.I.G. Mack now claims his real allegiance was never to the LAPD, but to the Piru Bloods street gang.

So far, Perez has not been linked to the robbery or the Bloods. But from what he has disclosed, it now seems that Rampart's Crash officers operated as a rival gang, adopting many of the traits and rituals of the gangs they set out to police. They had their own tattoos: a grinning skull with demonic eyes superimposed on four playing cards, aces and eights, the so-called dead man's hand. They initiated officers joining the unit with a typical gang ceremony known as "jumping in" – a savage beating. They adopted their own slang, referring to planting evidence as "throwing down" and describing themselves as "joining the liars' club".

Perez tells how on one occasion a Crash officer marched back and forth in front of a line-up of suspects, instructing officers which false charges to press against whom. He talks of random shootings, of how on one New Year's Eve police took pot shots at revellers and called the incident "hunting". He describes how officers celebrated such shootings at a late-night drinking hole on Sunset Boulevard called the Short Stop Bar, where they awarded each other macabre commemorative plaques made up of playing cards. "If a guy dies, the card is a black number two. If he stays alive, it's a red number two," Perez told investigators, explaining that a black card was considered more prestigious.

"Time and again I stepped over the line," Perez admitted in a long, tearful soliloquy as he stood in court in February, chained at the waist. He was sentenced to five years in prison on charges of stealing cocaine. (He could be released in as little as 16 months.) "My job became an intoxicant that I lusted after," he said. "I succumbed to the seductress of power... Whoever chases monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster himself." His self-serving *mea culpa* is dismissed by his superiors. "It was greed, pure greed," says Commander David Kalish, an LAPD spokesman.

While Kalish concedes that pressure on police was particularly intense in the 1980s and early 90s, when drug-related crime and gang violence soared, he stresses that the majority of officers did not succumb to temptation. But others argue that, because the emphasis was on putting the maximum number of criminals behind bars and seizing their assets, "the ends came to justify any means". Perez, when asked why nobody higher up in the police hierarchy cracked down on abuses, said: "All they cared about... at the end of the month was... how much total narcotics was brought in, how much money and how many bodies. That's all, really. That was the only concern." Other former officers confirm this: "Because of the war on drugs you could do almost anything as long as it led to arrests," said one. "Pretty soon you start thinking there is nothing you can't do and come out on top... That is a very dangerous attitude."

This points to a problem far deeper than a few dozen "rogue cops". It suggests a fundamentally twisted ethos in the LAPD, where the crimes Perez has exposed were, at best, ignored and, at worst, condoned by his superiors. Gil Contreras, for instance, believes that police are encouraged from the start to develop a killer instinct. The day he graduated from the academy, his supervisor told a group of rookie officers: "The first in the class to kill someone in the line of duty, call me, and I will take him out for a steak dinner," he remembers. "We were like, 'Yeh, cool.'" Brian Bentley, a former South Central division policeman, says LAPD officers regard themselves as celebrities and sports stars: "Every time you are involved in a use-of-force incident, everyone pats you on the back, it gets mentioned at roll call. It is the atmosphere of a football team." But Bentley says that as time went on he had more reason to fear his fellow officers than gang members: one of his partners was convicted of raping prostitutes, another of having sex with a minor, two more were arrested for stealing cars, and another for shooting a highway patrol officer while drunk.

There are historical reasons why the LAPD developed into what some call a "paramilitary-style" organisation. During Prohibition in the 1920s and 30s, police in the city were notoriously corrupt – routinely accepting bribes of French champagne from madams and cash from bootleggers and gamblers. In the 1940s and early 50s the LAPD's renowned Hat Squad (detectives in fedoras) developed a reputation for brutal and unorthodox techniques. When William Parker took over as police chief in 1950, with a brief to clean up the LAPD, ⟶

he drew on skills from his military background to transform policing in the city. Parker began a tradition of recruiting officers from the armed forces. He developed a strong chain-of-command structure, insisted on the latest weaponry and set the LAPD on a course of strong-arm policing from which it has rarely diverted.

It was in Los Angeles that Swat (special weapons and tactics) teams were developed and helicopter street surveillance first adopted. But the changes did not stop scandal. The 1991 beating of the black motorist Rodney King and the acquittal of officers caught on film assaulting him led to some of the worst urban rioting in American history, leaving 53 dead. While most acknowledge that the current crisis outstrips the King incident in terms of the number of officers and victims involved and the many years over which abuses occurred, the public reaction, so far, has been much more subdued.

The Latino community, which has born the brunt of the abuses, is regarded as less organised and "more submissive" than the city's black population. Many are recent arrivals from countries wracked by civil war. Some are illegal immigrants. They are afraid. "If you are in the lower classes here, you live in a police state that is every bit as bad as what they have down in Central America," says Greg Smith, Tenorio's lawyer. "What is the difference between a death squad in Central America and a squad of LAPD officers who ambush an unarmed, innocent person, shoot him in the head and then lie and cover it up?"

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Estella Rodriguez knows about death squads. The plump mother of six left El Salvador for Los Angeles in the early 1980s, when first the army and then left-wing guerrillas threatened to kill her. "We thought life would be safer here," she says, wiping away tears. Her husband took work as a labourer and she opened a small restaurant and raised a family – four sons and two daughters. As her sons grew older they were sucked into street gangs. The two eldest boys joined 18th Street. Her younger son, José, was 13 when he joined a gang called Mara Salvatrucha, or MS, made up principally of Salvadoran youths. "I was being bullied at school and had problems at home. I wanted a place where I could release my anger," says José, who now lives with his older sister in a tiny shack in central Los Angeles. He says he believed joining MS was "a sign of Salvadoran strength". Estella knew better: "In the beginning, gang members treat the young boys well. They make them feel important. Later they send them out to rob and deal drugs."

But after a year, José had had enough. "I was shot at by other gangs, beaten up by the police." Once the police dropped him off in the neighbourhood of a rival gang, challenging him to escape unharmed – a tactic favoured by Rampart Crash officers, made sometimes more perverse by stripping the gang member first. Early last year José joined Homies Unidos, a voluntary group working to end gang violence. Members are regularly harassed by the police, who believe "there is no such thing as an ex-gang-banger". On the night of August 12, José became their target. As he was leaving a meeting at the Emmanuel Presbyterian church on Wilshire Boulevard, he was stopped by police, taken to Rampart station and charged with murdering a rival gang member. Although an autopsy stated the killing had taken place while José was at the meeting, he was imprisoned in a juvenile detention centre pending trial. When another member of Homies Unidos testified that the youth had been at the meeting, the man was handed over to immigration authorities for deportation. José felt lost: "Who was the court going to believe, an ex-gang member or the cops?"

Many in his position plead guilty to crimes they have not committed, resigned to being convicted regardless of their innocence and after being promised that a guilty plea will gain them a reduced sentence. Few can afford a good lawyer, but Estella sold her restaurant to pay for a professional to defend her son. The family was financially ruined, but the case against José was dismissed. He had spent nine months in juvenile detention.

Others have lost more. Monique Valenzuela, 20, sits on the sofa in her mother's house, clutching her two-year-old daughter, Destiny, as she remembers events on the night of October 12, 1996. She and her boyfriend Javier Ovando, a recent arrival from Honduras, were visiting a friend at the run-down Westlake Apartments. Monique went to the corner shop and when she returned the friend was standing outside on the pavement. He told her Javier was upstairs being questioned by police. "Then I heard gunshots," says Monique. "Right away I felt scared. I ran around the corner to find my mother. When I got back they were carrying someone out on a stretcher."

Monique was not permitted to visit Javier in hospital for two weeks. During that time, police told her friends "she had better light a candle for her boyfriend". "When I saw him I told him I was pregnant. He was happy, but he was in bad shape," says Monique. Ovando had been paralysed from the waist down and suffered brain damage. He had been shot in the back and head by two Rampart Crash officers, Rafael Perez and his partner at that time, Nino Durden. When it was clear Ovando would survive, he was charged with attempting to murder the officers. He was wheeled into the courtroom on a stretcher and listened to the officers tell how they had been forced to shoot him after he burst in on them brandishing a semiautomatic rifle with a banana clip. Ovando was found guilty and sentenced to 23 years in jail by a judge who lectured him for showing no remorse.

In a sworn statement, Perez has now admitted that Javier Ovando was framed. He says the Honduran was unarmed, that a gun was planted on him and that the teenager was shot repeatedly after he had been handcuffed. No explanation has been given for the shooting. Some reports claim Ovando stumbled across the officers stealing drugs from dealers. He was recently released from jail. All charges against him have been dropped. Confined to a wheelchair, he is now getting to know his daughter, who was born while he was in jail. His relationship with Monique, who is suing the LAPD on behalf of their daughter, did not survive the ordeal.

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Sitting ramrod-straight in a tall leather chair with rows of framed commendations, certificates and photographs of himself on the wall behind him, LA's chief of police, Bernard Parks, is on the defensive. He describes the scandal as a "life-altering experience" for the LAPD. "It has tarnished the badge and violated everything that law enforcement is supposed to be... It is sickening," he says.

Parks has overseen an internal board of inquiry into what is officially known as the "Rampart corruption incident". He has drawn up proposals for ensuring such abuses do not happen in the future. These include closer monitoring of complaints against officers, checks into their financial affairs and, most controversially, the use of random stings on officers to ensure, for instance, that all drug seizures are declared. All Crash units have been disbanded and replaced by "special enforcement units" where officers will serve limited assignments.

Parks's own family fell victim to gang violence last month when his 20-year-old granddaughter was killed by a suspected gang member apparently intending to shoot the male friend who was a passenger in the car she was driving. Parks balks at the suggestion that a "blue wall of silence" exists within his department. Although former LAPD officers admit to promising each other when they enlist "to take to the box [coffin]" what they know about the working of the department, Parks dismisses this as "an unfair slogan". "What industry comes out and takes any of their colleagues to task?" he says. "When we break the code of silence in human nature we will break it in every industry." It is not a promising stance for the man who argues that the LAPD is capable of carrying out its own investigation into the problems.

Despite Parks's protestations, independent probes are being carried out by the offices of the district attorney, the US attorney, the FBI and the Department of Justice. Investigators have begun to look beyond Rampart to at least three other divisions in the city: 77th Street, Central and Southeast. Some former officers say that the abuses at Rampart are just the tip of the iceberg.

Parks has been criticised for trying to conclude the LAPD's internal investigation too hastily. Public confidence has also been undermined by a simmering feud between the police chief and the district attorney, Gil Garcetti. Garcetti, a prosecutor in the city for more than 30 years, criticises the police for failing to fully disclose information needed to bring charges against individual officers. Parks accuses Garcetti of deliberately delaying prosecutions as part of a "political strategy". Garcetti is standing for re-election in November and is already trailing in the polls. He has gone on the record saying he has "never seen this kind of destruction by cops who are evil, greedy, mentally sick individuals". But he knows his office does not come out of it looking good. Prosecutors are reported to have been warned about certain police officers providing unreliable testimony. They appear to have pressed ahead with cases anyway, suggesting a tacit agreement between both departments to secure convictions.

The city's mayor, Richard Riordan, dismisses the feud, saying both men are "perfectionists" trying to do their best. He describes Parks as "the best police chief in the world" and has come up with a neat solution to foot the enormous cost of the Rampart scandal. He suggests using the multi-million dollars in damages due from tobacco firms in compensation for the cost to the city of health care for residents with smoking-related illnesses.

Looking out over the shimmering streets of Beverly Hills from the drawing room of his private club, Riordan boasts that Los Angeles is still "the most successful city in the United States" and defends its tough policing: "Without a strong rule of law, eventually things go into anarchy, communism, or Nazism or something or other." Riordan appears to reflect the view of the majority of Angelenos. Even as the sordid details of the Rampart scandal have emerged, opinion polls suggest 70% of the population think the LAPD is doing a good job. Change may be a long time coming. "Remember this is LA," says the civil rights lawyer Stephen Yagman. "It's La La Land."

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One sign that police have not taken too much criticism to heart is a giant mural on a wall in the car park of Rampart station, where officers gather at the start and finish of their shifts, and which nobody has seen fit to erase or amend. Painted in garish colours, it shows an LAPD patrol car crashing through the walls of a fortress in the sky and descending to the streets of Los Angeles. Beside it, a dedication reads: "to the outstanding officers of the best division of the finest department in the world – Rampart division" ■

THE CITY'S MAYOR DEFENDS THE TOUGH POLICING OF LA