

Public Safety in Park Mesa Heights

Analysis of Survey Data

UCLA Urban Studies Research Group

This analytical brief is part of a series on the status of Park Mesa Heights, a neighborhood located in South Los Angeles, a 70 square block area anchored by Crenshaw Senior High School. The Los Angeles Urban League (LAUL) has established a 5-year strategic plan to improve the quality of life in this area through advocacy, leadership and neighborhood change. UCLA Department of Urban Planning, with support from UCLA's Center for Community Partnerships, provided technical support for this effort by assembling, analyzing and publishing information related to the state of housing, employment, education and public safety in the immediate neighborhood and surrounding areas. By using the most current and geographic detailed available data, UCLA assembled information that can help inform the 5-year plan by providing insights into the magnitude and nature of the challenges and issues facing Park Mesa Heights stakeholders. Moreover, UCLA's efforts includes preparing technical memos to provide guidance on how to access and analyze the data, so LAUL staff will have greater capacity to monitor changes and empirically evaluate progress.

BACKGROUND

One of the major goals of the Los Angeles Urban League (LAUL) is to address public safety concerns in the Park Mesa Heights (PMH) target area by mobilizing the community and improving police relations. To assist LAUL in better understand the nature and magnitude of the problem, the UCLA-LAUL project agreed to design and conduct a survey to collect opinions and perceptions of PMH stakeholders regarding public safety. The project team comprised of undergraduate UCLA student researchers from UCLA's Urban and Regional Studies program.* The questionnaire includes items covering the major problems facing the neighborhood, the area's major assets, the state of police-community relations and areas where respondents would avoid at night. Researchers completed 135 interviews over a five-week period. The interviews were conducted at various locations throughout the PMH area. The project also analyzed recent crime data available from the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD).

OVERALL LEVEL OF CRIME AND COMMUNITY CONCERNS

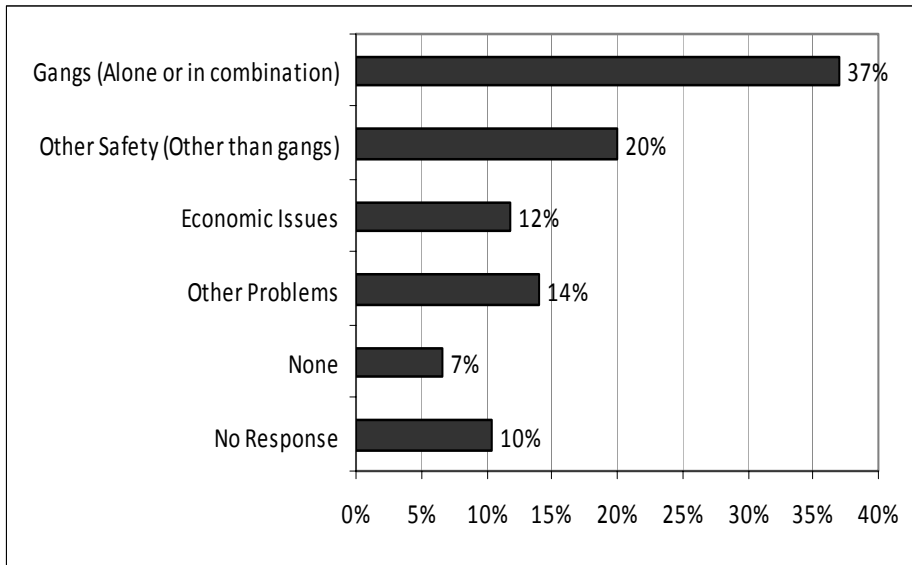
LAUL's focus on public safety is well founded because crime is more prevalent in Park Mesa Heights than in the City of Los Angeles as a whole. Data covering the period from 1998 to 2002 show that the crime rates per thousand persons in Park Mesa Heights is considerably higher than citywide rates, particularly in the area of violent arrests (37% percent higher), non-violent arrests (45% higher), and violent crimes (55% higher).¹ More recent data show that crime in PMH has fluctuated from year to year but remains high.

PMH stakeholders also share LAUL's concerns about public safety. A majority of the respondents to the survey identified gangs and other safety related concerns as a major problem in the neighborhood. Over a third of the 135 stakeholders surveyed (37%) stated that gangs (alone and in combination with other problems) constitute the biggest challenge facing Park Mesa Heights. Another fifth of the respondents (20%) identified other non-gang related safety issues (robberies, lack of security, loitering, etc.) as their second biggest concern. There are, of course, other concerns. An eighth (12%) of respondents identified a lack of business resources, opportunities, unemployment, underinvestment, and outside business ownership in Park Mesa Heights. Other problems include education, alcohol/drug abuse, as well as a need for affordable housing. However, what is obvious from the survey results is that public safety is the number concern among stakeholders.

* The course was taught during Spring 2008 by Professor Paul Ong, and the students included Cynthia Guzman (English Literature), Nathan Tinclair (Political Science), Justin Oh (Economics), Elizabeth Felter (Applied Mathematics), Sebastian Rodriguez (Geography), Jorge Gonzalez (Sociology), Irving Pham (Geography), Enedina Ruiz – Senior (International Development Studies), Alex Cavanaugh (History), Gal Spivak (Geography), and David Stearns (Political Science).

The authors are solely responsible for the content and interpretations in the brief. Organizational affiliations are listed only for informational purposes.

Figure 1. Major Problems Facing the Neighborhood, PMH (n=135)



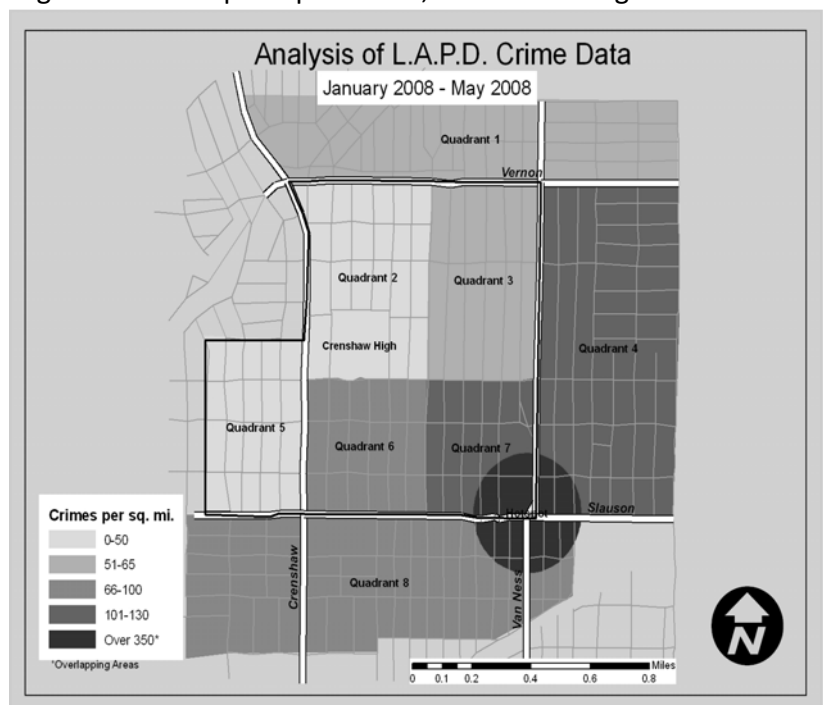
Source: Neighborhood Questionnaire 2008

VARIATIONS WITHIN PARK MESA HEIGHTS

Crime is not evenly distributed in PMH, and this can be seen in an analysis of LAPD crime data for the first five months of 2008.² Figure 2, which shows the relative number of crimes per square mile for subareas, reveals that the southeast corner of PMH and the area east of PMH have higher concentrations of crime. There is also an “hotspot” marked on the map in Figure 2. The density of crime in that “hotspot” is several times higher than the area east of PMH, and it centers approximately on the corner of Slauson Avenue and Van Ness, just southeast of Van Ness Park.

To gauge residential/stakeholder perceptions of unsafe areas in the neighborhood, the survey asked interviewees to shade the area of a map of Park Mesa Heights that they considered to “be unsafe at nighttime.” Figure 3 summarizes the results. The darker the shading, the more respondents reported an area as being unsafe. PMH residents and stakeholders identified the southern part of PMH between Crenshaw and Van Ness as being relatively unsafe. The area that is perceived as being most unsafe includes the blocks on and around Crenshaw and Slauson.

Figure 2. Crimes per Square Mile, Park Mesa Heights



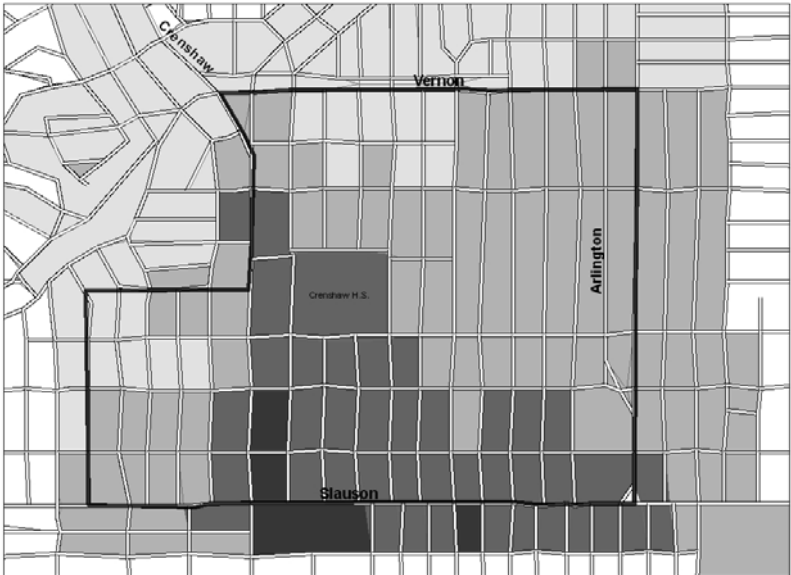
Source: LAPD Compstat 2008

There is some overlap between residents’ perception of unsafe areas and the areas of high crime density for 2008 reported in this brief and for 2007 reported in another brief on public safety.⁵ However, it is important to note that what people may consider “unsafe” is not necessarily the same as crime areas. A resident may have many reasons for avoiding a certain area at night that were beyond the scope of the survey. Both crime statistics and perceptions are meaningful to understanding safety issues and concerns in Park Mesa Heights.

POLICE-COMMUNITY RELATIONS

Addressing public safety concerns requires having good police-community relations. Stakeholders should have faith and trust in LAPD to serve and protect the community’s interest. To gauge the current situation, respondents were asked to rate the relationship between Park Mesa Heights and the Los Angeles Police Department. The rating system consisted of “Very Good,” “Good,” “Fair,” “Poor” and “Very Poor” categories. Surprisingly, the results indicate that views are not extreme. See Figure 4. Most were in the middle, with 53 of the 117 who provided a ranking choosing the intermediate category “Fair”. The remaining respondents were divided between giving positive and negative responses, with slightly more having a negative view of relationship with police. Statistically, there is no difference in perception between PMH residents and other PMH stakeholders. Overall, the results indicate that while police-community relationship is not bad, there is room for improvement.

Figure 3. Residents’ Perception of Safety, Park Mesa Heights

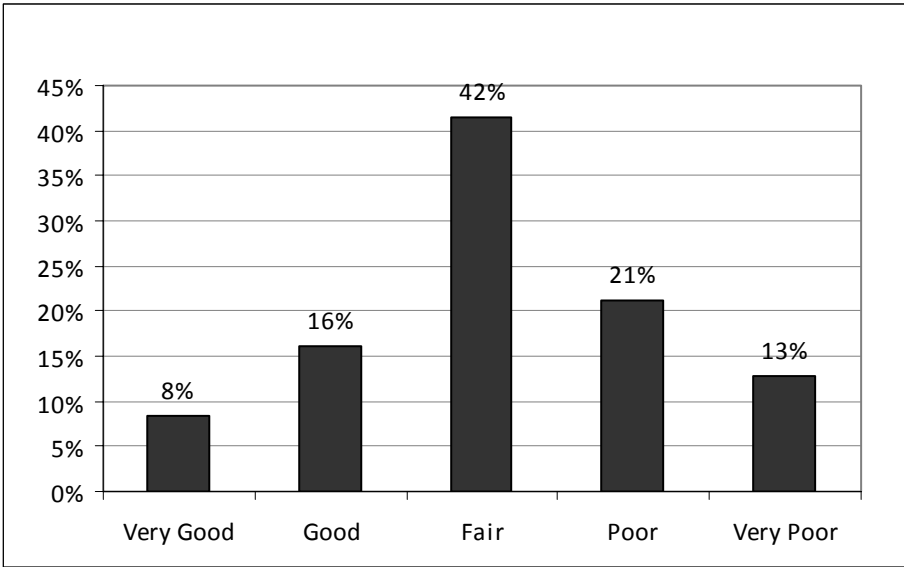


Source: Neighborhood Questionnaire 2008

The safety strategy will be executed in partnership with the Los Angeles Police Department and will focus on three levels: engaging the community in the safety solution, addressing gangs, and re-integrating ex-offenders.

- LAUL

Figure 4. Relationship between LAPD and Residents, PMH (n=117)



Source: Neighborhood Questionnaire 2008

RECOMMENDATIONS

Along with improving community-police relationship, it may be useful for LAUL and LAPD to continue to monitor crime activities as close as possible to “real time” for subareas of PMH. Resources should be allocated to address “hotspots”, and to the degree this is currently being done by LAPD, it is important that the community knows that the department is being responsive to problems. LAUL and LAPD should also address the areas identified by stakeholders as being unsafe. Another idea is to continue to mobilize stakeholders to be engaged activities to promote public safety. LAUL has held events such as “Hands Around Crenshaw High,” and the survey indicates that many stakeholders are vested in their community. When asked what is the strongest asset in PMH, over half of those giving a response identified some aspect of the community, including its people, diversity, culture and community organizations. This is a solid foundation to build on.

TECHNICAL NOTES

1 The data were provided by Professor Leah Brooks, Economics, McGill University. PMH is comprised of reporting districts 392 and 1211.

2 Weekly crime data come from the L.A.P.D. Crime Maps website (<http://www.lapdcrimemaps.org/>), and the downloaded information cover the period from January 2008 to early May 2008. The data were extracted for the one-mile radius around 3100 West 52nd St, which is roughly in the middle of the PMH target area and includes both the Park Mesa Heights area and adjacent. The weekly data were aggregated into quadrants for violent crime (robbery, aggravated assault, rape, homicide) and nonviolent crime (burglary, grand theft auto, theft from vehicle, personal/other theft). Crime densities per square mile were calculated by tabulating the number of crimes in each quadrant, then dividing this amount by the area of each quadrant. The map is based on averaging the two categories of crime. The "hotspot" analysis is based on identifying the circular area (about 1/3 mile in diameter) with the highest crime density.

3 Of the 135 interviewed, 17 did not provide any information on this item, 11 stated that all areas are unsafe and 8 stated that no area is unsafe. Because many respondents were not precise in shading the maps, deciding which blocks should be counted required some subjective judgment. To minimize the any bias by coders, each map was coded separately by four individuals, and an average was taken. If a respondent identified a corridor, then the blocks facing the marked streets were counted.

4 See Helt, Deborah, Milka, Katie, and Steven Simon (July 2008). Public Safety in Park Mesa Heights - Analysis of LAPD Data. UCLA-LAUL Park Mesa Heights Project.

PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS

The Los Angeles Urban League (LAUL) traces its roots to 1921 when the Tuskegee Industrial Welfare League merged with the National Urban League, with Katherine Barr as the first LAUL President. Today, the LAUL has a staff of over 300 and a budget in excess of \$26 million, making the 86-year-old Los Angeles Urban League is one of America's largest civil rights entities. Its current mission is to enable African Americans and other minorities to secure economic self-reliance, parity, power and civil rights through advocacy activities and the provision of programs and services in our uniquely diversified city and region. The effort in Park Mesa Heights (an area roughly bounded by the W. Vernon Avenue on the north, S. Van Ness Avenue on the east, W. Slauson Blvd. on the south, and Hillcrest Drive and Crenshaw Blvd. on the west) utilizes a strategy of concentrating efforts on a selected neighborhood to develop and refine approaches that maximizes the chances for success in the area of public safety, employment, education, housing, and health. Charles Boyd, Deputy Neighborhood Officer for Safety and Systems, served as the main liaison for the UCLA-LAUL collaboration.

Established in 1969, **UCLA's Department of Urban Planning** has consistently been ranked among the nation's top programs in the field of urban planning. It contains one of the largest clusters of policy specialists on campus, and faculty research has had a major impact on planning and public policy on every level, from local community development to the problems of rural development and environmental degradation in the Third World. The Department's faculty and alumni are recognized intellectual and professional leaders in the provision of public services, transportation, housing and community development, environmental regulation and resource management, and regional and international development.

The UCLA Center for Community Partnerships works to nurture and develop partnerships between community groups and UCLA in order to improve the quality of life for area residents. The Center provides funding to partnerships between UCLA and the community; supports research to help tackle regional and local issues; sponsors forums and events; and convenes meetings of forward thinkers and practitioners. Dr. Franklin D. Gilliam, Jr. is the Associate Vice Chancellor for Community Partnerships, and Margaret Leal-Sotelo is the Director of the Center for Community Partnerships.

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