

Police Improve Community Relations in Los Angeles

From VOA Learning English, welcome to This Is America in Special English. I'm Kelly Jean Kelly.

And I'm Jim Tedder.

Today we take you to Los Angeles, California.

We talk about improvements in race relations between the police and community groups since the riots more than 10 years ago.

Then we look at the popularity of environmentally friendly cars in the region.

And finally we hear an attempt to define Los Angeles in a song.

Los Angeles Riots

In 1992, Los Angeles suffered riots after a jury found four white police officers not guilty in the beating of a black man, Rodney King. The beating took place after a high-speed car chase. The incident was videotaped by someone nearby and shown on television. It increased racial tensions in areas of the city.

The riots were the worst in modern American history. Over 50 people died and many others were injured. National Guard troops had to help stop the violence. Police Captain Phillip Tingirides says community relations were hard for a long time after the LA riots.

“The everyday community folks were angry. There was some hatred towards us, for how LAPD had treated the community over a number of years prior.”

The LAPD — the Los Angeles Police Department — has been working to improve community relations. For instance, Captain Tingirides says the police have programs like reading to children in school and coaching sports teams. Police officers hold holiday parties in housing projects and give away small gifts.

Captain Tingirides says one goal of community policing is to build relations before problems develop.

“So that when you have a problem, you know who you can go and talk to. You have already some sort of connection with that person. And that's what's making the big difference.”

Jerome Bynum has been to jail several times over the years. He says police behavior toward the criminal suspects they arrest is different from the past.

“They used to beat you up, then take you to jail, but I think they're getting better as far as how they treat the people in the street.”

A longtime critic of the LAPD agrees that relations with the police have improved since the riots. Najee Ali of Project Islamic Hope believes the situation will keep getting better.

"I think we now see a genuine partnership that's authentic, and more importantly, crime has dropped because we now see community policing in our neighborhoods throughout South LA and the city. So I'm very optimistic that things will continue in the future to improve."

Murder and most other serious crimes have decreased in Los Angeles over the last ten years. Crime has also fallen in other cities in the United States. In 2012, Police Chief Charlie Beck called Los Angeles "the safest big city in America."

Los Angeles Drives

Los Angeles is the second biggest city in America, after New York. Almost four million people live there. That means a lot of traffic on the roads.

The city's relationship with cars makes it a good place to market new vehicles, including electric cars. The Tesla company makes electric cars. A company spokesman, Jeremy Snyder, says Tesla sells most of its vehicles to people in California.

"The state attracts people that are dreamers and big thinkers and ideators, and people that don't want to go with the societal norms, but they really want to create the new societal norms."

Ed Zaelke is a good example. He just ordered a Tesla Model S.

"I believe that global warming is real, and I think that electric cars are one of the many things we have to do to look for a solution to that. And so I think I need to be a part of the solution."

Last year, Toyota introduced its electric RAV4 EV only in California. And, at the Los Angeles Auto Show, BMW, Chevrolet and Fiat all presented new electric vehicles.

Electric cars may be popular in part because of the way California lawmakers support buying vehicles that are less harmful to the environment. Brendan Flynn is a spokesman for the L.A. Auto Show.

"They've given better incentives, so the rebate you get in California when you buy an electric vehicle is better."

Shaun Halladay received \$10,000 in state and federal rebates for his car, an all-electric Nissan Leaf.

"Maybe if I was in a different state [and] that incentive wasn't there, I probably wouldn't have been able to do it."

Mr. Halladay says he also loves not having to pay for gasoline. But he wishes there were more stations where he could recharge his electric car.

"Even today I'm having a hard time finding a charger. So, I must find one in order to get home."

Finding a charger in Southern California should not seem that hard. Jordan Ramer works for a company that he says has installed more than 1,000 charging stations for electric cars around the country.

“Half to two-thirds of what we’ve deployed is in the state of California, and probably a good portion of that is in Southern California.”

Even with the savings on fuel, electric cars can be quite expensive. The Tesla Model S costs between \$60,000 and \$80,000.

Los Angeles Sings

Many big cities are celebrated in songs. Here is Liza Minnelli singing about New York.

"Start spreading the news
I'm leaving today
I want to be a part of it
New York, New York.
These vagabond shoes
Are longing to stray
And step around the heart of it
New York, New York.
I want to wake up in the city that doesn't sleep,
To find I'm king of the hill,
Top of the heap..."

Or, you might have heard Frank Sinatra sing about Chicago:

“Chicago, Chicago,
That toddlin’ town,
Chicago, Chicago,
I will show you around.
I love it.
Bet your bottom dollar
You’ll lose the blues
In Chicago, Chicago...”

Scott McKenzie sings about San Francisco, in northern California.

“If you're going to San Francisco
Be sure to wear some flowers in your hair
If you're going to San Francisco
You're gonna meet some gentle people there.”

Here is another famous song about San Francisco, sung by Tony Bennett:

“I'm going home to my city by the Bay
I left my heart in San Francisco...”

Yet, for such a big city, Los Angeles does not have a song that really defines it.

In 1983, Randy Newman released "I Love L.A." But some people think his song criticizes Los Angeles – or at least makes fun of it. The song includes these lines:

"Look at that mountain
Look at those trees
Look at that bum over there, man
He's down on his knees."

So in 2012, a musician who was born in Los Angeles wrote a love song to his city.

Justin Chart called it "Los Angeles the Song." He thinks Los Angeles is the most beautiful city in the world. He wanted people to know what was good about his hometown.

He asked his musician friends to record the song with him. Then he posted a request online for a videographer to record the city in action.

Justin Chart placed four versions of the song and video on YouTube. One version is for dancing. Another version is in Spanish for the big Latino population in Los Angeles.

The songs have had several million views on YouTube.

“Downtown to Malibu
The Hollywood Hills
It’s all here for you.
From all around the world
We each bring our trust
To Los Angeles.
Los Angeles.
Los Angeles...”

Justin Chart says comments on YouTube show that people see what is positive and good in Los Angeles.

Still, maybe the city is just too big for one song. Steve Lopez writes a newspaper column for the Los Angeles Times. He recently urged people to try to write a better song for the city.

Our program was written by Kim Varzi and Onka Dekker. I’m Kelly Jean Kelly.

And I’m Jim Tedder. For more stories for people learning English, go to our website, learningenglish.voanews.com, where you can read and listen to our programs.

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