

From 1965 to 1992 and Beyond: The Context for Demographic Change in South Los Angeles

In attempting to make sense of the often tense relationships among Asians, Latinos, and blacks in South Los Angeles, the 1970's are best viewed as a watershed period. Massive international economic re-structuring, the aftermath of the civil rights movement, the Watts rebellion of 1965, immigration reform of the same year, and federal retrenchment from spending in urban areas all combined to create the complex and often depressing environment in which these three groups interact.

During the 1970's an estimated 75,000 heavy manufacturing jobs were lost in Los Angeles as large industrial plants closed and moved to foreign counties (Davis 1990, Johnson and Oliver 1989, Soja 1987). Blacks and Latinos in particular who had depended on these relatively good-paying union jobs suffered greatly as the majority of the plant closures were concentrated in the low income black and Latino communities (Johnson and Oliver 1989).

The flight of capital from South Los Angeles has not been confined to large industry. Smaller retail businesses have left as well. Gains from the civil rights movement made it possible for some black residents to open businesses elsewhere and to enter corporate America for the first time. As many blacks who owned businesses took advantage of this opportunity, white businesses were leaving the area as well. The Watts rebellion of 1965 precipitated this exodus. "One of the bad long-term consequences of the urban uprisings of the 1960's was that major retailers began to write off central cities, judging them too risky -- too much crime, too many high insurance bills" ("A Market

Looking for Legitimate Businesses” *Los Angeles Times* 29, November 1991, Editorial, p. B4).

The ultimate result of this economic dislocation was a relative vacuum of private investment in South Los Angeles that continues today. The de-industrialization impacting Los Angeles in the 1970’s occurred just as the city became one of the most favored destinations for a new wave of immigrants to the United States.

Two major factors account for the rise in immigration: amendments to the Immigration and Nationality Act in 1965 and the political and economic turmoil in Latin America and Asia in the 1980’s and 90’s. Changes in immigration law enacted in 1965 eliminated quotas that favored certain European immigrant groups and instead revised policy around the imperatives of family unification and labor needs. This change in policy coupled with later amendments allowing for long-term undocumented residents to obtain legal status and seek naturalization, resulted in significant increases in immigration.

In addition to immigration reform, economic globalization and political turmoil which took hold in the 1980’s were also responsible for the rise in immigration from Latin America and Asia. Begun in the late 1970’s, the process of integration into the increasingly global economy led to economic destabilization in many Latin American and Asian countries. As their populations struggled to cope with resulting economic turmoil, many chose to immigrate to the United States in search of a better life. At the same time, several Central American countries including Nicaragua, Guatemala and El Salvador were also experiencing political instability. Refugees from these nations likewise sought a better life through immigrating to the United States. The cumulative

effect of this economically and politically driven exodus was a further expansion of the Latino and Asian populations in the United States.

The economic status of most of these immigrants confined them to settling in low income areas like South Los Angeles and thus brought them into larger contact with blacks residing there. Between 1970 and 1990 the South LA area went from 80% black and 9% Latino to 50.3% black and 44% Latino (Grant et.al. 1996). This massive and rapid residential demographic change occurred as resources in the area were shrinking due to global economic restructuring described above and due to the federal government's decrease in funding of urban anti-poverty and jobs programs, and other vital social services like healthcare.

The socio-economic context described here increased the perception and the reality of competition amongst Asians, blacks, and Latinos in South LA. The results from the 2000 census which show continuing demographic change coupled with recent economic trends indicating a deterioration of conditions in South LA suggest that such competition will not soon ease.

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For additional information on demographic and economic change in South Los Angeles see:

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