

**Newsweek**

# Straight Into Compton

**How the country's murder capital got its groove back.**

**Jessica Bennett**

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For nearly a decade, the entrance to the city of Compton, Calif., just off the 91 Freeway, was a huge, vacant lot, overgrown by weeds. Surrounded by an eight-foot steel gate, the once-bustling auto dealership had become a haven for the homeless; a place where people dumped trash, loitered, caused trouble. Lampposts that once illuminated new cars and sale signs stood darkened, some tagged with gang graffiti. It was prime real estate—except that, well, it wasn't.

By the 1990s, the mere mention of the name Compton had become so toxic that the nearby southern California suburbs had the city of 100,000 erased from their maps. Its schools were crumbling. Drugs were rampant, and street-gang tensions had escalated into what historian Josh Sides describes as "a brutal guerilla war." The city became the U.S. murder capital, per capita, surpassing Washington with one homicide for every 1,000 residents—and the details were numbing. In 1989, a 2-year-old was gunned down in a drive-by as he wandered his front yard; a 16-year-old was shot with a semiautomatic weapon as he rode his bike. The image of Compton as a defiantly violent ghetto was crystallized by the rap group N.W.A., whose 1988 album, "Straight Outta Compton," went multiplatinum, even though it was banned by many radio stations; the record even attracted the attention of the FBI, which felt the group was inciting violence with its song, "F--- tha Police."

Two decades later, Compton has a new lease on life. The community is still poor, and unemployment is more than twice the national average. But the number of homicides is at a 25-year low, slashed in half from 2005. There are fewer gunshots and more places for kids to go after school. Alongside the liquor stores and check-cashing stands are signs of middle-class aspiration: a T.G.I. Fridays, an outbreak of Starbucks and a natural-food store. Along the way, blacks became a minority in Compton, which is 60 percent Latino today.

The change, say community members, is palpable. Residents walk dogs; they go out at night. Graduation rates are higher, and a recent canvassing effort counted more than 25 nonprofits targeted specifically toward youth, where a decade ago, there were few to none.

And that vacant lot off the freeway? Thanks in part to Compton's designation as an enterprise zone in 2006, it's been replaced by a \$65 million suburban strip mall, whose palm trees and flower beds give it a look more reminiscent of Orange County than South Central. "Compton is a fundamentally different place," says Stanford University historian Albert Camarillo, a Compton native who is working on an oral history of his hometown. "It's one of these communities that's really in the throes of change."

The story of Compton is not just what's changed, but *how* it's changed; community policing opened a door, and community activists were well positioned to walk through it. It's a tale of larger cultural trends, like the death of crack, and distinctly local initiatives, like gun buyback programs in grocery store parking lots. And it involves excesses of violence so dramatic that the gang leaders themselves recoiled, and worked to calm things down.

It's also a story of good, hardworking people, hungry to restore a sense of pride in their city. But those residents know all too well that their hard-won gains could prove to be fleeting, given the howling winds of economic distress at the door. And so Compton's leaders are pushing hard to

stay one step ahead of forces they know could prove their undoing. "Ninety-five percent of the people in Compton want to do the right thing," Compton's mayor, Eric J. Perrodin, tells NEWSWEEK. "But of course, if people can't eat, they're going to do what they need to survive. And that usually means crime." In other words, "Straight Outta Compton" is an album no one here seems all that eager to play again.

Kelvin Filer, a Compton Superior Court judge, grew up in the city, and remembers what it was like before the downhill slide. In the 1950s and early 1960s, the community was a magnet for migrants seeking suburban tranquility and blue-collar jobs. Trouble brewing in nearby Watts helped spur the settlement of middle-class blacks in Compton—which became known as "Hub City" because of its central location (today it sits amid five freeways and two ports). George and Barbara Bush lived here for a brief time—in 1949, while the senior future President Bush was working as an oil-field-supply salesman.

In 1952, Compton received the National Civic League's "All American Cities" honor, and by 1960, the city's median income was almost twice that of Watts, with an unemployment rate of less than a third, according to Sides, a professor at Cal State Northridge, whose research on Compton was published in the 2004 book, "LA City Limits." In 1963, the city elected its first black politician, Douglas Dollarhide, who would later become the state's first black mayor. "I have wonderful memories of growing up here," says Filer. "The street that I was raised on was straight out of 'Leave It to Beaver,' with African-Americans. We played Little League, we were in the Cub Scouts, we all went to the same church."

But the Watts riots of 1965 shattered that calm; white business owners fled so fast, as Filer's father, a longtime city councilman, once put it, "they were leaving their doors open." In their wake were deserted storefronts and boarded-up homes. The black middle-class population also bolted. Unemployment shot up, along with the crime rate. The Crips were founded in South Central in 1969; the Bloods followed, on Piru Street in Compton, adopting the red color of their local high school, Centennial.

Conditions spiraled downward; a 1982 Rand study declared the city "a disaster area." And that was before crack came to town. Between 1984 and 1991, gang violence in L.A. County increased by 200 percent, with half of all black males between 21 and 24 said to be affiliated, according to a 1992 report by the district attorney's office. By 1991, Compton had its highest number of homicides on record, with 87—or three times the per capita murder rate of the city of Los Angeles. The days of "Leave It to Beaver" were long gone.

The tension culminated with the Rodney King riots of 1992, in which more than 50 people were killed. But then the fever broke. Amid the bloodshed, the Bloods and Crips agreed to a truce, and the violence began to subside, slowly but surely. Crime in Los Angeles began declining in 1995 in most major areas; in 1997, the Los Angeles Times reported that, in Watts, gang-on-gang slayings over turf or gang clothing had "virtually disappeared." By 1998, despite having one of the densest gang populations in the country—there are an estimated 65 gangs and 10,000 gang members packed into Compton's 10 square miles—the city's murder rate was its lowest in more than a decade, with 48.

The drop in killing was due in large part to the decline of crack, hastened by harsh sentencing laws that put many people away for minimal possession. But there are other factors that may have contributed, as well: California's semiautomatic-weapons ban, which took effect in mid-1989, and, arguably, Proposition 184, or the three-strikes law, which has put away 3,186 offenders in L.A. County since it took effect in 1994, according to the California Department of Corrections.

Many gang members who managed to avoid prison, meanwhile, skipped town, migrating to surrounding communities where they would be beyond the reach of the massive gang intelligence efforts trained on Compton. "They knew we knew how to get 'em, and the heat was on too high here, so many, if they had a brother or a cousin in a city where the cops weren't so knowledgeable about gangs, they'd go there," says Perrodin, the city's mayor, a prosecutor and former gang cop who was elected in 2001. The violence drove out families as well; between 1997-98, the city's population dropped by close to 6,000, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics.

These days, Perrodin hopes to woo folks back. In 2007, he launched a major PR campaign—the

slogan is "Birthing a New Compton"—which he believes will bring the public perception of Compton in line with the changed reality. "Self-esteem," he tells NEWSWEEK, "is one of the biggest issues for people here. When you hear [people talk unfavorably about your city] over and over again, it weighs on you. You start believing it too. So my role as mayor has been to let people know that this is not the old Compton."

He's had help from the sheriff's department, which took over policing from Compton's own police force nine years ago, amid a political battle between the police chief and former mayor Omar Bradley, who would later be convicted on felony corruption charges. The city now pays about \$18 million for 79 deputies and a 38-man gang force; the precinct's strategy is to target the toughest gangs but devote significant effort to community policing. The policy has paid off: from 1985 to 2000, Compton averaged 66 murders a year. In the early part of this decade, that figure had dropped to 44. Last year, there were 28 murders.

Community activists say relations between cops and residents are much improved, and the department works closely with neighborhood crime watches, church leaders and gun buyback programs, which collected 1,269 guns in exchange for \$100 supermarket cards last year—the most successful exchange in Compton to date. Every few weeks, the sheriff's captain hosts a public get-together to discuss local issues; last month, "Coffee With the Captain" took place at a local Starbucks, over home-cooked rice, beans and barbecue chicken. "What I'm trying to do is implement very aggressive enforcement toward the gang-related crimes, but also open up the lines of communication with the community, to enhance the level of trust," says Sheriff's Capt. Bill Ryan, who took over the station in late 2006.

Will the relative calm last? It's a question that haunts Ryan, Perrodin, and others who have helped bring Compton to a new plateau. Gangs remain a fact of life here, after all, and there are still myriad single-parent homes and teen parents. Property crime, which includes burglary, larceny, theft and robbery, was up 13 percent last year, a statistic community leaders see as an ominous portent. "Typically, when the economy takes a downward turn, the communities that are hardest hit are those that are already struggling," says Ryan. "And I think that's true to a great extent in Compton."

For solace, they look to the seeds of their salvation thus far. Folks like the Rev. Ricky Hammond, who operates the nonprofit Another Chance Outreach Ministry in a small, barren office on Compton Boulevard. Hammond spent a decade in prison and now works to rehabilitate gang members and drug addicts. And Michael Freeman, a mentor who, on a recent weekday, works with local high-school students who are writing essays for a citywide "I Love Compton" campaign he helped organize. Even N.W.A.'s offspring have gotten in on the act. The 24-year-old son of Eazy-E, one of the group's founding members, has helped set up a recording studio at the Salvation Army, which has become a hot spot for local youth. "Growing up in Compton, it was tough," says Wright, a rapper and former gangbanger like his father, who goes by the name Lil Eazy-E. "But kids today, they have a lot more options." Options, and a new dose of hope.

*With Jennifer Molina*

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