

## Research Report

### Has the Safer Cities Initiative in Skid Row Reduced Serious Crime?

September 15, 2008

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#### Abstract

The “Safer Cities Initiative” launched in Los Angeles’ Skid Row in September, 2006, represents one of the most intense concentrations of police resources anywhere, anytime. Although the initiative evolved from earlier plans targeting the homeless population in Skid Row, at its launch and thereafter the Safer Cities Initiative (“SCI”) was publicized as a highly successful crime reduction effort, one relying on the “broken windows” thesis. According to this theory, a crackdown on less serious violations (as in the 1,000 citations per month being written in Skid Row for littering, crosswalk violations, etc.) will lead to a reduction in more serious crime. And, indeed, crime has fallen in Skid Row. An earlier report documented the history and results of the Initiative, but raised questions about whether the observed reduction in crime was in fact the result of the SCI. Only limited data were considered, however. In order to address this question more fully, we obtained the crime report data for every serious or violent crime reported to LAPD as having occurred in LAPD’s Central Area (which includes Skid Row), between January 1, 2005 and May 21, 2008. In order to simplify statistical analysis and avoid the effects of seasonal variations in crime, we examined in detail the data regarding crimes in the year prior to the launch of SCI (September 26, 2006) and the year after. We compared the data on crimes occurring in Skid Row with those occurring in the remainder of Central Area. We found that, as to overall serious or violent crime, the reduction in crime in the SCI deployment area was *not* statistically significant from the reduction in the non-SCI area. When we analyzed the data for each category of crime, we found only one area of significant difference: the reduction in robberies was slightly lower in Skid Row. The size of the effect, however, was not impressive: a reduction of about 1 robbery per year for each of the 50 officers assigned to the SCI. Reducing the number of robberies by any number is a positive development. However, given that that Central Area as a whole accounts for less than 5% of the robberies in the City, and that even before SCI, Skid Row accounted for only a fraction of the robberies in Central Area, we question whether the costs of this extended deployment of officers in a 50 square block area justify the results.

#### Introduction.

The “Safer Cities Initiative” (SCI) came to Skid Row in September, 2006. The result since then has been perhaps the highest sustained concentration of police officers anywhere in the world outside of Baghdad. According to Mayor Villaraigosa’s

announcement of the program, the SCI was promised to have two components: enforcement and enhancement. The enforcement component was swiftly delivered, with an additional 50 patrol officers being assigned to the 50 square blocks of Skid Row, along with an additional 25-30 additional narcotics officers and mounted police officers. Much of police activity was concentrated in about 20 square blocks of the City. As we documented in our 2007 study, *Policing Our Way Out of Homelessness?*,<sup>1</sup> the core of promised “enhancement” – more shelter, drug treatment, and services for the mentally ill homeless – essentially never came. To go along with about \$6 million worth of additional police resources, the City Attorney contributed \$100,000 of his own funds to create a “Streets or Services” (SOS) program. During the same time period in which LAPD made 7,428 arrests, 34 people completed the SOS program.<sup>2</sup> While people were being cited for littering (including such offenses as dropping a cigarette ash) in areas with no trash cans, the City’s “enhancement” team struggled, but failed, to find the resources for eleven (11) trash cans for the area.

If the “enhancement” or services side of the Safer Cities Initiative never really materialized, the enforcement side never stopped. In the first year of the program, LAPD made about 9,000 arrests and issued about 12,000 citations (primarily for crosswalk violations). LAPD and the City claimed a victory over serious crime in Skid Row as a result.<sup>3</sup> In this study, we examine the data underlying those claims and come to a somewhat different conclusion.

Contrary to perceptions, the Central Area of LAPD, including Skid Row, had never had the level of serious, violent crime (homicide, rape, robbery, aggravated assault) found in other LAPD areas like Rampart, Newton, Hollenbeck, or 77<sup>th</sup>.<sup>4</sup> As we noted in our 2007 report, however, during the first year of SCI there was a laudable, significant decrease in serious crime in Skid Row. We also noted that it was by no means clear that this was necessarily the *result* of SCI, given that other portions of Central Area – where no additional officers were deployed – had experienced similar declines, and given that very few (less than 1 percent) of the arrests made by the officers assigned to SCI were for serious, violent crimes.<sup>5</sup>

One response to this observation from Chief Bratton and others has been that the officers assigned to the SCI were never intended to focus on serious or violent crime. Rather, the SCI was intended to be an application of the “broken windows” theory of

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<sup>1</sup> Gary Blasi and the UCLA School of Law Fact Investigation Clinic, *POLICING OUR WAY OUT OF HOMELESSNESS?*, (hereafter, “*Policing Our Way*”), available at [http://college.usc.edu/geography/ESPE/publications/policing\\_homelessness.html](http://college.usc.edu/geography/ESPE/publications/policing_homelessness.html)

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*, at 41.

<sup>3</sup> Office of the Mayor of Los Angeles, “City Launches Initiative to Reduce Crime on Skid Row; 50 More Police Officers Deployed to Area,” (press release, September 24, 2006)

<sup>4</sup> *Policing Our Way* at 41.

<sup>5</sup> *Id.* at 43. Only 13 of a sample of 2,901 arrests (0.7%) were for the violent crimes of murder, rape, robbery or aggravated assault.

policing.<sup>6</sup> The basic premise of the “broken windows” theory is that “one unprepared broken window is a signal that no one cares, and so breaking more windows costs nothing.”<sup>7</sup> More broadly, if the theory is true, then a crackdown on highly visible but minor offenses (littering, loitering, sleeping on the sidewalk) should not only improve the “quality of life” (at least for some) but should also lead to a decline in more serious crimes. Indeed, George Kelling, a Professor at Rutgers, Senior Fellow at the very conservative Manhattan Institute, and one of the co-inventors of the theory, was paid about a half million dollars to help design the Safer Cities Initiative.<sup>8</sup>

As a general matter, the evidence supporting the “broken windows” theory as a matter of serious social sciences is mixed at best. Indeed, much of the evidence supporting the theory has come from Professor Kelling himself, while other analysts of the same data have found results contradicting Professor Kelling’s claims for the theory.<sup>9</sup> Professor Wilson has been more circumspect than Kelling, for years urging “policymakers to design tests of community policing to see whether it does, in fact, produce the results that he argued it would.”<sup>10</sup> Moreover, quite sophisticated experiments suggest that the very perception of “disorder” is both subjective and racialized, with subjects of all races tending to see more disorder when the concentration of Blacks and other disadvantaged groups increases, with Whites having a lower threshold for what constitutes “disorder.”<sup>11</sup>

### Methodology.

Whatever its merits as a social policy responding either to crime or to homelessness, the SCI provides an opportunity to test the “broken windows” theory on the ground, as to a program ostensibly designed according to its principles. Moreover, the

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<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., Chief William Bratton, “What Skid Row Offensive?” in the LAPD “blog” available at [http://lapdblog.typepad.com/lapd\\_blog/2006/week33/index.html](http://lapdblog.typepad.com/lapd_blog/2006/week33/index.html) (describing SCI in Skid Row as “using the *broken windows* approach to develop creative solutions.”) Emphasis in original.

<sup>7</sup> George L. Kelling and James Q. Wilson, *Atlantic Monthly*, March, 1982, available at <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/198203/broken-windows>

<sup>8</sup> *Policing Our Way*, at 25. The money was paid to Professor Kelling’s Hanover Justice Group, LLC.

<sup>9</sup> The fullest exposition of the thesis is probably in George L. Kelling & Catherine M. Coles., *FIXING BROKEN WINDOWS* (1996). But the validity of the thesis is hotly contested. For empirical studies questioning the validity the “broken windows” theory, see Bernard Harcourt and Jens Ludwig, “Broken Windows: New Evidence From New York City and a Five-City Social Experiment,” 73 *University of Chicago Law Review* 271, 272, note 3, citing New York City Police Department, *Police Strategy No 5: Reclaiming the Public Spaces of New York 6* (1994). Bernard Harcourt, *THE ILLUSION OF ORDER: THE FALSE PROMISE OF BROKEN WINDOWS POLICING* (2001), Ralph Taylor, *BREAKING AWAY FROM BROKEN WINDOWS* (2001); ANDREW KARMEN, *New York Murder Mystery: The True Story Behind the Crime Crash of the 1990’s* (2001). For studies providing some support of the hypothesis, see Wesley G. Skogan, *DISORDER AND DECLINE: CRIME AND THE SPIRAL OF DECAY IN AMERICAN NEIGHBORHOODS* 188-190 (University of California Press 1992) (1990); Hope Corman & Nai Mocan, “Carrots, Sticks, and Broken Windows,” 48 *J. Law & Econ.* 235 (2005); Yili Xu, et al., “Discovering the Impact of Community Policing: The Broken Windows Thesis, Collective Efficacy, and Citizen’s Judgment,” 42 *J. Res. Crime & Delinquency* 147 (2005). This is by no means an exhaustive review of the literature on the broken windows thesis,

<sup>10</sup> Jim Newton, “James Q. Wilson: The Power of His Written Word,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 3, 2007.

<sup>11</sup> Robert J. Sampson and Stephen W. Raudenbush, “Seeing Disorder: Neighborhood Stigma and the Social Construction of Broken Windows,” 67 *SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY QUARTERLY* 319-342 (2004).

admirably complete data system used by LAPD planners and command staff provides the data necessary to examine crime patterns over time and down to the street address level. If the "broken windows" theory is correct, or if the promise of SCI to reduce crime is being fulfilled through some other mechanism in Skid Row, then we should see less crime in the areas of the SCI deployment, compared to other areas.

The customary way to assess the effect of any intervention or treatment is to measure the results as against a "control" group or area that does not receive the intervention or treatment. Because of the unique history of Skid Row, there is no area of the City that is truly comparable in relevant respects other than policing. While not a perfect control area, we selected as a control area that portion of LAPD's Central Area outside Skid Row. We hypothesized that the parts of Central Area that were "treated" with the SCI deployment would experience a reduced level of serious crime, compared to the areas of Central Area that did not receive the same deployment of additional officers.<sup>12</sup> In order to test the hypothesis, we obtained from LAPD those portions of LAPD's massive COMPSTAT database the data on all serious crimes (So-called "Part I crimes"<sup>13</sup>) reported in LAPD's Central Area between January 1, 2005 and May 21, 2008. Among other data reported as to such crimes is the address or nearest street intersection and the Reporting Districts. We separated crimes occurring in Skid Row from those occurring outside Skid Row but in Central Area. We defined Skid Row according to the usual local convention – 3<sup>rd</sup> Street to 7<sup>th</sup> Street, Main Street to Alameda.<sup>14</sup>

## Results

Like other jurisdictions, Los Angeles reports crime statistics to the FBI, which compiles the data in a uniform format under the Uniform Crime Reports system. Crimes are aggregated separately. So-called "Part I" crimes are serious or violent crimes, more likely to be reported directly to the police, and which are also known to be more frequently reported. So-called "Part II" crimes are less serious crimes, also known to be less reliably reported.<sup>15</sup> By way of background, in the two year period of interest, between September 26, 2005 and September 26, 2007, LAPD Central division reported

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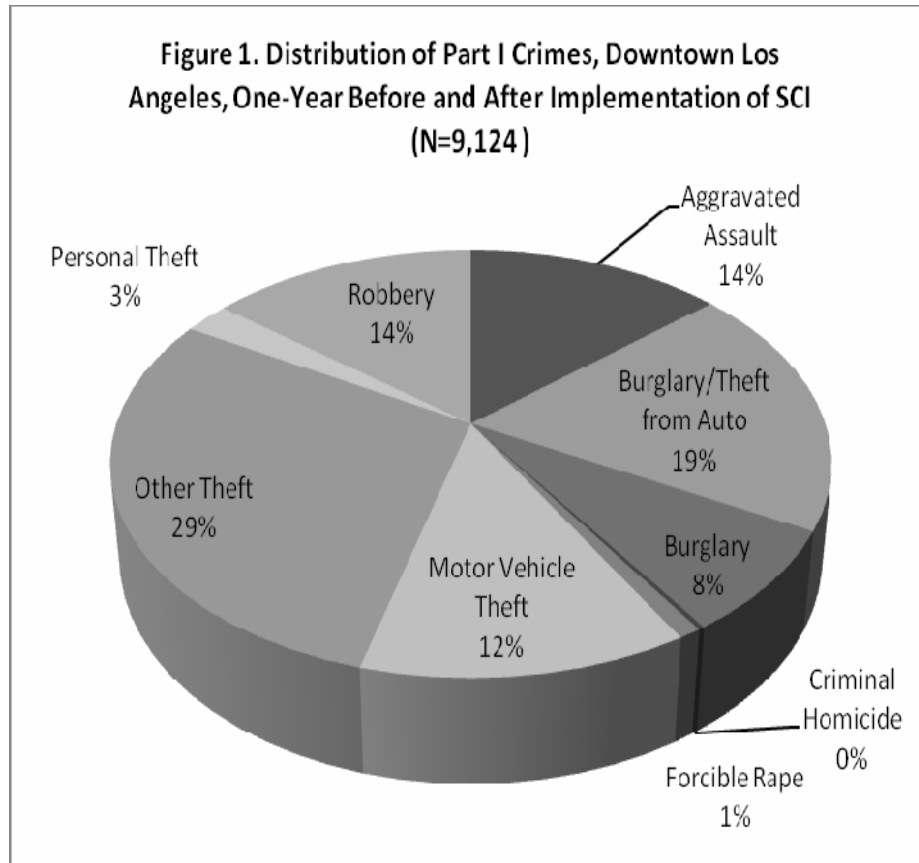
<sup>12</sup> We also compared the data on crimes committed within 19 Reporting Districts that defined the SCI deployment area with data on crimes committed in the remaining 35 Reporting Districts in Central Area, per the LAPD Central Area Order launching the initiative, *LAPD Central Area, Area Order 3, September 27, 2006* (Andrew J. Smith, Commanding Officer). On mapping the data, however, it became apparent that those 19 Reporting Districts were not co-extensive with Skid Row, and indeed included area far from Skid Row. Nevertheless, we performed the same statistical analyses as reported here. The only difference in the two sets of analyses was that the SCI Deployment Area analysis showed a significant difference in the crime of burglary of automobiles – which declined *less* in Skid Row than in the control area.

<sup>13</sup> The term and category "Part I Crimes" comes from the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports and includes the categories of crimes reflected in Figure 1. For further information, see *Uniform Crime Reporting Handbook*, infra, FN 15.

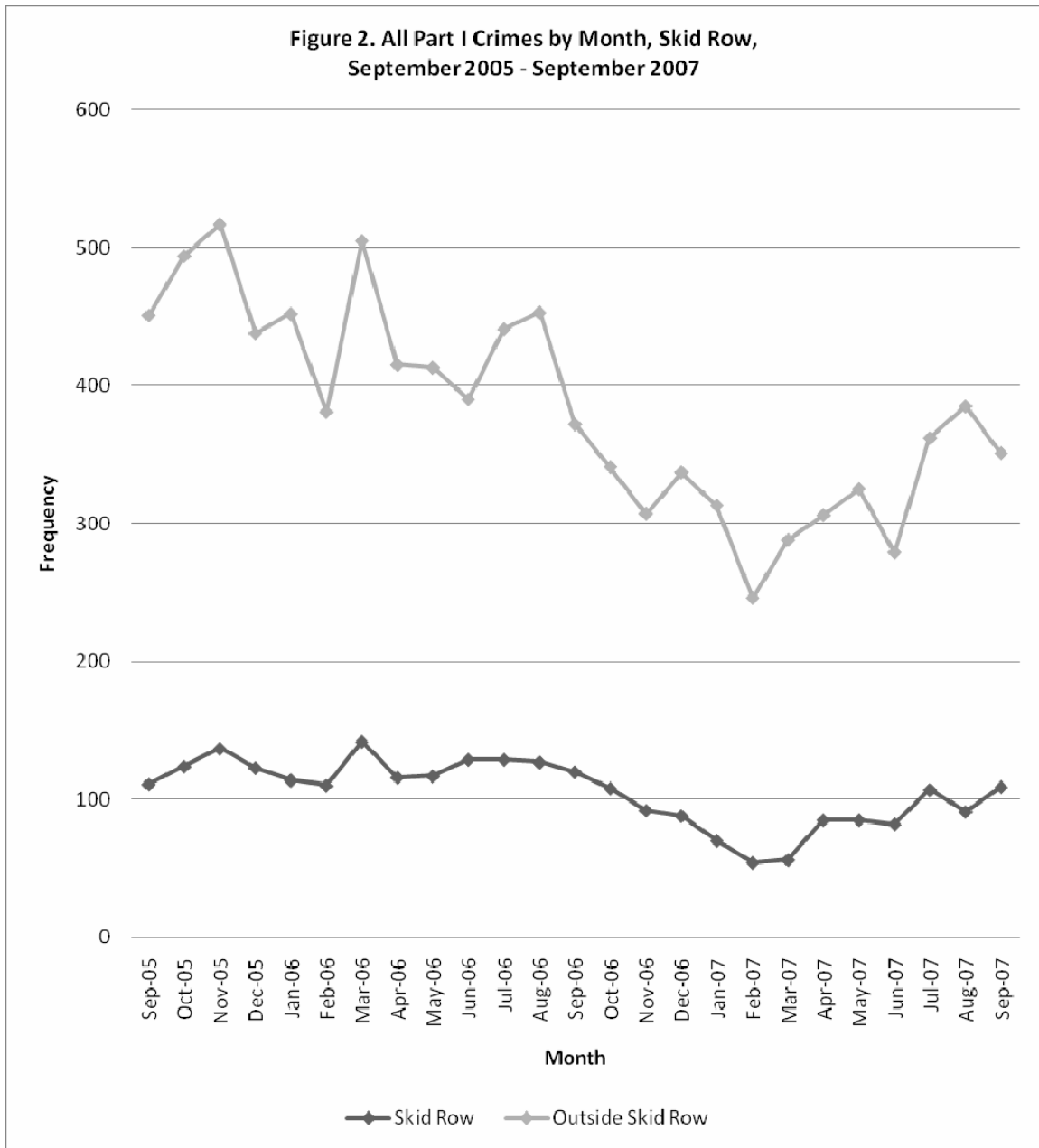
<sup>14</sup> We included crimes occurring on both sides of these streets as well as those occurring at the intersections along the boundary.

<sup>15</sup> "Part II" crimes include simple assault, embezzlement, forgery, disorderly conduct, driving under the influence, drug offenses, fraud, prostitution, and vandalism. Full information on the Uniform Crime Reports data can be found in the FBI's *Uniform Crime Reporting Handbook*, available online at <http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/handbook/ucrhandbook04.pdf>.

9,124 total Part I offenses. Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of Part I offenses during this period. Consistent with FBI data on national trends, *Other Theft* makes up the most frequent offense, while *Forcible Rape* and *Criminal Homicide* are relatively rare. *Robbery*, *Aggravated Assault*, *Motor Vehicle Theft*, and *Burglary/Theft from Auto* are all committed at similar rates.



Visual inspection of the data is an appropriate starting point to understand the impact of SCI on downtown crime rates. Figure 2, below, charts all Part I crimes longitudinally by month. One of the most readily apparent observations is that while the control area – which is much larger – experienced more crimes, both areas are characterized by similar changes in crime both before and after the SCI began, with some increase in crime in both areas since February, 2007. At least on inspection, it appears that the control area experienced a change in the crime rate that closely paralleled the SCI area, despite the infusion of 50 additional officers (including a large number of narcotics officers) into the SCI area.



However, inspection is not a substitute for statistical analysis. In order to test the hypothesis that the treatment (SCI) area experienced a greater decline in crime than the rest of the LAPD Central Area (the control) we need to determine whether there is a statistically significant difference between the changes in the two areas, before and after the SCI began.

In order to determine whether an intervention has had an effect that can not be accounted for by random chance, we need to assess the statistical significance of any apparent difference between the intervention area and the control area. Moving beyond visual inspection, we assessed the statistical significance of the change in crime rates between the SCI and non-SCI areas using the most common measure, Pearson's Chi-

Square test. The contingency table below (Table 1) compares the number of crimes in both areas during the two periods in question. In the year before SCI implementation, there were 5,287 total offenses. This fell to 3,837 total crimes during the following year. According to a Chi-Square test, if SCI is in fact associated with the reduction in crime, the decline should be most discernible in the treatment area directly covered by the policy intervention – Skid Row. However, crime in both the treatment and control areas fell at a strikingly similar rate. The difference in the decline in crime between the two areas is not statistically significant, using the conventional standard for statistical significance in social science research.

**Table 1. All Part I Crimes in LAPD Central Area (Skid Row and Other Areas) One-Year Before and After Implementation of SCI**

Area	Time		Total
	Before	After	
Skid Row	1481	1031	2512
	58.96%	41.04%	100%
Outside Skid Row	3806	2806	6612
	57.56%	42.44%	100%
Total	5287	3837	9124

Pearson's Chi-Square,  $p > .05$   
 (Chi-Square=1.45, DF=1,  $p = .228$ )  
 Source: LAPD Dataset

It is still possible, however, that some differences between what happened in the two areas are obscured by combining the data on all crimes. To address this issue, we performed significance tests on each of the categories of crimes. Table 2 displays the Chi-Square and P-Values for Part I offenses that occurred in the downtown area between September 2005 and September 2007.

**Table 2. Chi-Square and P-Values of Part I Offenses, Skid Row and Control Area One-Year Before and After Implementation of SCI**

Offense	Chi-Square Value	Degrees Freedom	P-Value
All Crimes	1.454	1	0.228
Aggravated Assault	1.578	1	0.209
Auto Theft	0.375	1	0.54
Burglary/Theft from Auto	0.545	1	0.46
Burglary	0.078	1	0.779
Homicide	0.428	1	0.513
Other Theft	0.086	1	0.77
Personal Theft	0.547	1	0.459
Rape	0.0027	1	0.959
Robbery	4.8032	1	<b>0.028</b>

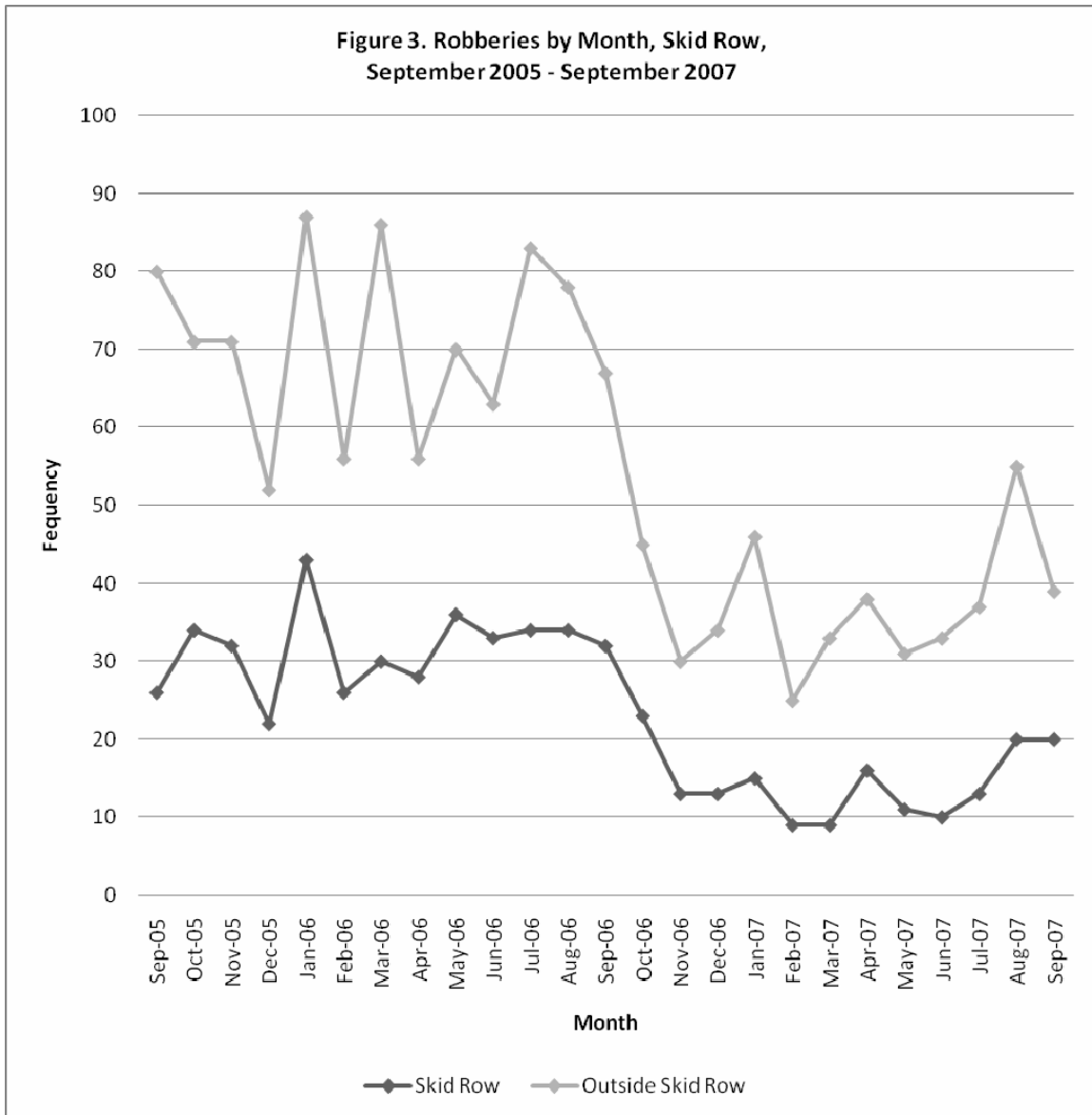
Statistically significant differences were found only with respect to the crime of robbery. Table 3 provides a more detailed account of the change to robbery rates. That a difference is statistically significant does not mean that the differences are important. The decline in robberies experienced in the treatment group relative to the control group can be discerned from Figure 3, which charts the decline longitudinally.

**Table 3. Robberies by Area and Time, Skid Row and Control Area One-Year Before and After Implementation of SCI**

Area	Time		Total
	Before	After	
Skid Row	386	175	561
	68.80%	31.19%	100.00%
Outside Skid Row	466	274	740
	62.97%	37.02%	100.00%
Total	852	449	1301

Pearson's Chi-Square,  $p < .05$   
 (Chi-Square=4.8, DF=1,  $p = .028$ )  
 Source: LAPD Dataset





As with crime overall, the number of robberies has followed a similar pattern in Skid Row and in the area of Central Area outside Skid Row. Here, however, the patterns are sufficiently different to meet the threshold of statistical significance. As with crime in general, robberies reached their lowest number in February 2007 in both areas, but rose somewhat thereafter.

### Discussion

If the only statistically significant effect of SCI had been to reduce the number of robberies in Skid Row, that would nonetheless be an accomplishment. The remaining questions are: How much was the reduction? And at what cost? As a matter of policy, the question is less one of statistical significance than what social scientists call “effect size” – the size of the effect being produced, in this case the number of robberies being

prevented or deterred, the costs of obtaining that effect, and how those effects compare with other results the same resources might have obtained elsewhere. With respect to the effect of SCI on the number of reported robberies, the “effect size” can be determined by the following simple calculations:

1. In the one year after SCI began, robberies declined by 41% in the *control* area (part of Central Area *outside* Skid Row).
2. If Skid Row had experienced the same decline, we would expect that Skid Row would have seen robberies decline to 226 (41% fewer than the 386 seen in the year before the SCI).
3. In fact, the SCI area saw only 175 robberies.
4. We can fairly attribute the difference,  $(226 - 175 = 51)$  fewer robberies per year, to the SCI, and not to other factors also at work in *all* of Central Area, including Skid Row.

The effect size, or benefit in terms of reduced numbers of robberies, is thus clear. But the benefit was obtained only at a cost, in this case the deployment of 50 SCI Task Force officers and an additional 25-30 officers from other units. According to both common sense and LAPD doctrine, these same officers would no doubt have had an effect on crime rates had they been deployed in other areas. In fact, they might have had a far greater effect.

If we attributed the reduction entirely to SCI and share the credit for the reduction among the 50 additional SCI Task Force officers, each additional officer was responsible for a reduction of just under 1 robbery per year. Looking only at the 50 SCI Task Force officers, the deployment costs about \$6 million per year,<sup>16</sup> resulting in a cost for the benefit of each robbery avoided at about \$117,000 per year. While no one can really place a dollar figure on the value of avoiding a robbery, we can put these numbers in context by considering what economists call the “opportunity cost” of an activity, namely, the value of what might have been gained by spending resources on something else.

Assuming that preventing or deterring robberies has the same benefit in every community, then it is useful to compare the robbery problem in Central Area with other LAPD areas. The data on Table 5 below are taken from the monthly statistical reports posted on LAPD’s website, and indicate the number of robberies reported for the period January 1 to August 23, for both 2007 and 2008 for Central and the six nearest other areas.

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<sup>16</sup> LAPD does not account for expenditures in a way to make precision possible. This number is based on dividing the entire LAPD budget by the number of sworn officers to arrive at a cost of about \$120,000 per officer – assuming that other parts of the budget are there to support the work of the sworn officer corps.

**Table 5**  
**Three-Year Reported Robberies**  
**Year-to-Date Through August 23<sup>17</sup>**  
**2006-2008**

<b>LAPD AREA</b>	<b>YTD 2008</b>	<b>YTD 2007</b>	<b>YTD 2006</b>
Central	332	281	555
Rampart	778	766	714
Northeast	303	317	339
77th Street	820	947	1012
Newton	685	656	715
Hollywood	509	617	581

A few things are apparent from inspection of these data and LAPD summary data for the entire year 2007. First, other areas, notably 77<sup>th</sup> and Rampart, have many more robberies than does Central. Second, as noted in our own data, the number of robberies in Central has risen significantly from 2007 to 2008. Finally, the number of robberies in Central Area is but a small fraction (4.6%) of the 13,445 robberies reported in the City in 2007.<sup>18</sup>

From this perspective, the question is not whether reducing the expected number of robberies in Skid Row is a good thing, but rather whether this is a reasonable use of police resources, given the effect size. The residents of the Rampart or 77<sup>th</sup> Street Areas might reasonably ask whether the same 50 officers, deployed to their neighborhoods, might have produced an even greater reduction in robberies, and why the SCI area merits the permanent deployment of the additional police officers, when the Mayor and Chief of Police are quite clear that Los Angeles as a whole lacks enough police officers.

### Conclusion

The answer to the question posed in the title of this research report is this: No, the Safer Cities Initiative did *not* cause the overall decline in crime in Skid Row, independently of other social, economic, and policing factors at work in LAPD's Central Area more generally. When the types of crime are examined independently, the only statistically significant difference is the decline in robberies in Skid Row, equal to a reduction in one robbery per year for each officer assigned to the Safer Cities Initiative. There is some reason to believe that the same 50 officers might have had more impact on serious crime in other areas of the City facing a greater crime problem.

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<sup>17</sup> LAPD, COMPSTAT Area Profiles, available at [http://www.lapdonline.org/crime\\_maps\\_and\\_compstat](http://www.lapdonline.org/crime_maps_and_compstat)

<sup>18</sup> LAPD, Crime and Arrest Weekly Statistics, year to date through 12-31-07, available at website noted, FN 17, *supra*.