

# CRIME PREVENTION REVIEW

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The CRIME PREVENTION REVIEW is a professional forum for the Criminal Justice System in California designed to provide discussion of varied concepts and issues of crime prevention and useful resources for the practitioner in the field.

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# The Compton Police Department and Law Enforcement in the Inner City

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## INTRODUCTION

Once a suburban college town, Compton today is a 94 percent minority community of 78,600 adjacent to the Watts section of Los Angeles, California.

One important difference between Watts and the city of Compton is the Compton Police Department. Unlike the Los Angeles Sheriff Department's nearby Firestone Station and the Los Angeles Police Department's Newton and 77th Street Divisions, Compton's police are "home ruled." Directly accountable to the minority community they serve, the Compton police have adopted a philosophy of law enforcement somewhat different in approach, while significantly forcing down the crime rate in their community.

In conjunction with graduate work at California State University, Fullerton, I had the opportunity to observe the Compton police. I believe my account an accurate, and hopefully interesting, report of what I saw.\*

## AN AFTERNOON IN COMPTON

Officer Jay Wilks has been with the Compton Police Department eight years. Graduating from high school in Compton, Wilks served a hitch in the Navy, taking the police test when he got out.

"Lots more open space and farm country when I was growing up. Lots of cows and chickens, but not so good for Black folks."

"When I was a kid," Wilks recalls, "we stayed on our side of Wilmington Boulevard. If you got caught over the line, people might beat on you, throw rocks at you, or the cops might pick you up." Now Wilks is a police officer keeping the peace this early afternoon in Compton, and Blacks live on both

\*Editor's note: This article was primarily prepared prior to the administration of the current chief of police Joseph Rouzan.

sides of Wilmington Boulevard, but with few Anglo neighbors.

A burglary in progress call came over the radio. Wilks rogered the call, wheeled through a tight U-turn, and put his foot to the floor, racing to the scene. An officer who beat Wilks to the scene was already standing with drawn gun at a corner of the three bedroom stucco, covering both front and rear exits. Wilks took the back door, preparing to enter, when a plainclothes robbery unit skidded to a halt next to him.

"They're out of the house. Two of them: 5'8", 150 lbs., blue denim hat, coat; 5'9", maybe 140 lbs., wearing brown."

The first at the scene officer kept the house covered in case other suspects were still inside. Wilks jumped into his car and took off after the robbery unit using his radio to coordinate the hunt. Cruising now, Wilks checked out a series of apartment complexes.

"There he is."

A denim clad Black male ducked behind an apartment. Wilks leapt from the car, running to block the suspect's escape. Gun at arm's length in a two-handed grip, Wilks shouted:

"Police, freeze!"

Hands on his head, the suspect turned, a "gun" shoved into his belt catching the afternoon sun.

"Down on the ground! Spread 'em."

Wilks approached the prone suspect, cuffing his arms behind his back, then pulled the "gun," a chrome cigarette lighter styled to look like a pistol, from his captive's waist. Wilks holstered his weapon, bringing the cuffed suspect to his feet and back to the police unit. Conducting a pat search for weapons, Wilks took a knife, camera and lady's wrist watch from a bulging pocket, put the suspect in back of the police car, and resumed the pursuit, reaching for the radio.

"One suspect in custody."

Minutes later Wilks spotted a Black male wearing a brown coat walking down the sidewalk of a residential street. Wilks maneuvered the police unit over into the left lane against the curb, matching pace with the pedestrian.

Wilks stopped, glanced back to check the prisoner's reaction, then stepped out of the vehicle.

"Where you going, brother?"

"Well, then, where you coming from? You're sweating, man. Where you been running?"

"O.K., hands on the hood of the car."

Enroute to the station, both suspects acknowledged burglarizing the residence. Both suspects had "track marks" and were heroin dependent.

*Comment: The arrest of the first suspect was accomplished with a minimum of fuss. The suspect was immediately taken out of the area, removing him as a focal point for community curiosity.*

The second suspect was stopped and questioned without restraint, or threat. Wilks established the individual matched the description of the remaining suspect, could not explain where he was going or where he had been, and was perspiring heavily; formed the opinion he had his man, then placed him under arrest, searched him and got him out of the area. Wilks did not shout at or intimidate the second suspect during his brief field

interrogation. Up to the moment of arrest, Wilks could have decided he had the wrong man and driven off, leaving the citizen no reason to feel inconvenienced by the police contact.

The officers at the crime scene and the other units participating in the manhunt worked together as a team, requiring a minimum of coordination. I repeatedly observed this ability of Compton officers to immediately function as a team after reaching a crime scene and asked officers to account for it.

"Well, you know with us, we promote from patrol officer to sergeant. Detective is a step up, but it's the same police rank with the guy in the black and white. A lot of us work narco, or robbery, then go back to patrol, and we get so we move as a team. We see each other on the street, and we know what we're going to do."

It may be that this rotation factor and a high crime rate produces a high experience rate. Whatever the reason(s), the Compton police move exceedingly well together, and possess a marked capacity for personal initiative.

Officers are not reluctant to call for backup, but they do seem to consciously get out of an area when their business is concluded, avoiding build-ups of police visibility. They have the command flexibility for a patrol officer at a crime scene to take charge, quickly resolving a situation without first seeking guidance from a supervisor.

### THE COMPTON POLICE DEPARTMENT

The Compton police prove law enforcement can maintain a sense of community and receive public support while policing an inner city.

Compton officers drive police cars of the same make and model as other police, complete the same training academies as other police, and study and graduate from colleges attended by other police. Yet there is a conspicuous lack of police-community tension in Compton, which I believe is attributable to cultural empathy resulting from this department's ethnic composition still slightly more than half Anglo, but far more representative of the community served than the patrol forces fielded in the preponderance of American inner city beats.

The Compton Police Department has 147 sworn full-time officers, 76 Anglo, 49 Black, 21 Latino, and 1 Asian. Employing its first woman police officer in November 1968, Compton now has 11 women officers. The full-time officers are supplemented by a 65 officer reserve force, 26 Black, 25 Anglo, 14 Latino.

The Chief, Joseph T. Rouzan, Jr., is one of two Black police chiefs in California. Rouzan served with the Los Angeles Police Department 21 years prior to becoming chief, earning both a Bachelor of Science and Master of Business Administration degree from Pepperdine University. Rouzan's last assignment with LAPD was as a Captain commanding the Employment Opportunities and Development Division.

Taking charge of the department in October 1976, Rouzan brought with him a commitment to keeping Compton a safe place to live, with mutual trust between the police and public.

Stressing improved communication with the community, Chief Rouzan,

recognizing that a fifth of Compton's residents are Spanish-speaking, initiated a conversational Spanish course for in-service personnel, and is recruiting bilingual dispatchers who can accept calls for service in either English or Spanish.

Bringing the community into crime prevention, Rouzan re-established a Block Club program to get police and residents working together to help each other.

Drawing on his experience with one of the nation's largest departments, Rouzan restructured Compton's administrative functions, going outside his agency to bring in several mid-level personnel with expertise in key areas. The result was an increase in administrative efficiency, allowing the Chief to don another hat when he assumed the duties of Assistant City Manager in summer 1977.

In July 1977 Chief Rouzan found serious crime for the year had been forced down 17.6 percent from the rate for the first seven months of 1976, and was able to report a dramatic reduction in gang activity.

Despite gun-in-hand media portrayals of inner city cops and its own success as a crime reducing agency, the Compton Police Department believes good police work demands officers be accepted in the community and keep open two-way communication. In this, Compton officers are remarkably successful.

Many officers grew up attending local high schools and have an intimate understanding of the residents' problems and life style. Most, if not all, feel a strong commitment to Compton, matched by a strong pride in the police profession.

"It's different with us," mused Officer Jay Wilks, "than with the big departments, the LA Sheriff, the LA Police. Over there you can be working Firestone, or Newton Street, then be transferred somewhere else, maybe Hollywood or the Valley. I think we keep cool with people because we know we aren't going anywhere, and we are going to see them again. We know we can't do our job without the public's help."

"Being from the area helps," a detective commented. "We come up to a party, or maybe a disturbance in a park, and I can say 'Hey, you Donnie's cousin' or 'Hey slick, your brother still playing ball?' This makes things more personal; calms things down."

In 1960 only 3½ percent of law enforcement employees throughout the nation were non-caucasian<sup>1</sup>, and even in Compton caucasians are proportionately over-represented in the police department. But in Compton, an Anglo cop stepping into the police station must adapt to a Black atmosphere, laugh at Black jokes, and get along with Black co-workers. Adapting to the Black culture in the police locker room lessens the potential for tension when the Anglo officer patrols in the predominantly Black community.

Ironically, this may mean little in future years if the wages paid to a police officer force a class separation.

A case can be made that the problems of inner city police are less Anglo vs. minority than suburbanite vs. ghetto resident or old vs. young. Certainly

<sup>1</sup> President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice, *Task Force Report: The Police*, Washington, D.C., US Government Printing Office, 1967, p. 10.

many police problems common to Harlem or Watts surfaced when an influx of Anglo young people submerged San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury district in the mid-1960's.

Prior to the 1974 passage of Proposition 5 (an amendment to the California state constitution striking down municipally imposed residence requirements) the city of Compton insisted police officers live within the city limits. By Fall 1975, only 29 officers of the 132 officer force had Compton addresses.

Today's police officer takes home a considerably larger paycheck in terms of real income than the cop of twenty years ago: a Compton officer starts at \$1140 a month and can earn up to \$1620 a month at the top pay step for police officer #3, lieutenants earn from \$1850 to \$2250 a month. The restricted availability of quality housing in Compton is a strong force driving police to live where housing equivalent to their income is readily available.

Whatever desire the city government may have to bring the police back home, the move conflicts with two economic facts of life encouraging officers to reside in any of the nearby subdivision communities offering new homes in new neighborhoods:

- The Compton police officer is, by virtue of his salary, affluent by Compton standards, and well off by any standard.
- The majority of homes and neighborhoods in Compton are well below the police officer's income and future earning potential.

### A FRIDAY NIGHT IN COMPTON

Jim Weed came to Compton six years ago from the Los Angeles Police Department. Weed likes working "swing," and tonight had the report car. Compton black and whites are paired after dark, a one-officer car with a two-officer car. The solo unit fields "cold" calls and writes the crime reports. Its function is to absorb time-consuming chores, freeing the two-officer unit to respond to "hot" calls.

Turning a corner, Weed saw a vehicle parked against the curb, a figure slumped over the steering wheel. Weed warily approached the car, half convinced the figure was the victim of a murder. Weed opened the car door, examined the figure for signs of life picking up a strong whiff of alcohol, then shook the figure awake, ordering him onto the street. Groggy, but able to stand, the man mumbled an obscenity then shook himself into a semblance of alertness.

"Count from one to ten, Sir."

"Good night, Sir."

Weed got into the police car and left.

"I bet you are wondering why we didn't take him for drunk," Weed asked. "Well, at first I thought we could have had a dead one. Heart attack, murder victim, that sort of thing. The car had been sitting for awhile, had a cold hood, and the man was more asleep than drunk. He recognized me as a police officer, he could stand, he could count from one to ten. I figure he was drinking or drunk, pulled over to the side of the road, and went to sleep several hours ago. We woke him up. After he had a chance to get himself together, he seemed o.k., so why make a big thing out of it?"

Similar circumstances in other communities frequently result in arrest, or a search and prolonged interrogation of the subject. Not so in Compton.

When the Compton police are looking for someone, they look for him. When a citizen stopped by the police is determined to be unrelated to the crime being investigated, he is released without prolonged interrogation, or recording of the incident on a field investigation card. Compton police are therefore spared the hostility generated by "shake slip" procedures frequently cited as an irritant by residents of low income communities. Compton residents, believe their police won't stop them without reason, and without a reason they support. They believe they will not be harassed if they are not being looked for, and will get an explanation from the police before going about their business.

The Compton officer employs a great deal of discretion in deciding what an arrestable offense is and what he will do about it. He does not as a general practice make traffic stops for minor violations as a pretext to launch fishing expeditions. The incidence of serious crime and sparse number of police to deal with it results in the Compton officer valuing his street time. His handling of minor infractions conserves it.

"See those two brothers on the bikes?" Weed pointed to two Black youths coasting down a residential street. "I know they're 'dirty,' I can feel it. You develop an instinct, but with me it's a matter of pride. I don't want to be stopping them for some weak reason."

"When I stop someone, I want to be right."

The radio called out a silent alarm at a fish market. Weed drove up as two juveniles quickly walked away. The youths were stopped, searched and released moments later when the call was cancelled as a false alarm.

"O.K.," Weed explained, "that place just had a silent burglar alarm. You were leaving the area, so I checked you out, O.K.?"

That was it. No names taken, no problems.

Weed called in as "clear," and was directed to a shopping center parking lot to "back up" a robbery unit and take a crime report from the 13 year old victim of an assault with a deadly weapon. Pulling in next to a blue two-door sedan parked in front of a liquor store, Weed rolled his window down, asking the plainclothed occupants "Is this me?"

"Right, here's your victim," Robbery replied, pointing to a 13 year old youth perched on the back seat of the two door. The victim climbed into the back of the black and white, explaining a young man called "Home Boy" pushed him, held a gun to his head, then rode off in the direction of an apartment complex on a 10-speed bike.

Weed rolled out of the parking lot, following the robbery unit to the apartments. The two police cars separated, entering an alley running through the block of apartments from opposite ends. As Weed swung the black and white into the alley, a watching group of teenagers on a second floor corner landing ducked back into an apartment. Midway down the alley Robbery halted a group of five teenagers, two on 10-speed bikes.

"O.K., hands on the car, spread 'em." Robbery patted the kids for guns, then held them while Weed pulled up. The victim, staying in the black and white, said "Home Boy" wasn't one of them.

We stopped you because we're looking for a guy on a 10-speed with a gun.

We're still looking for him, so be smart and stay in your apartments."

"Now split."

Resuming the search, Weed drove out of the alley, turned right, and right again, doubling back to the corner. The victim recognized "Home Boy's" bike on the second floor corner landing. Weed radioed the robbery team, then with gun drawn secured the stairs below the apartment landing. Robbery arrived, learning several teens had ducked into the apartment after spotting Weed's pass through the alley.

Climbing the stairs, the robbery team stood to either side of the door and knocked.

"Police."

"Good evening, who owns the yellow bike?"

"O.K., we want to talk to you outside. We have a complaint about a gun; we're checking it out."

Robbery marched the bike owner downstairs; Weed holstered his weapon and checked with the victim. It was "Home Boy." Robbery patted the suspect down, pulling a blue steel automatic from a jacket pocket.

"Home Boy, you are under arrest."

Ten minutes after leaving the parking lot, it was over; the suspect in custody.

*Comment: The five teens in the alley were held momentarily, then released with an explanation following the victim's negative identification. No names were taken, no field interrogation cards were filled out.*

Although the officers had cause to believe a man with a gun had ducked into the second floor apartment, they left their shotguns out of sight in the cars. They were voluntarily admitted, and took their suspect out of the dwelling without unnecessarily violating the privacy of the home owner. The red light on the black and white stayed off, the arrest took place with a minimum of visibility. With the suspect in custody, the police immediately left the area before a curious crowd could form. This was police work stripped to the essentials.

## CONCLUSION

Five characteristics of the Compton police are primarily responsible for their community acceptance and effectiveness.

—Officers exercise considerable discretion in handling crime situations and deciding what is and is not cause for arrest. Because of the latitude granted the police officer, he is looked on as a leader, the man in charge, and can be accepted as a human being, not the impersonal, armed representative of a remote power structure.

—The Compton cops play fair. When asked about using traffic stops, curfew stops and suspicious circumstances stops as a pretext for surfacing drugs, weapons, or traffic warrants, then making arrests, Compton officers strongly opposed such fishing expeditions. In instances when the Compton police were looking for a gun, they searched for a gun. I observed no Compton officer make a stop or conduct a search simply hoping something would turn up. Compton police direct little resentment toward the United States Supreme Court, perhaps because they observe the spirit of the law

expressed in decisions imposing restraints on police, and seldom exceed their prerogatives or capriciously invade the privacy of Compton citizens.

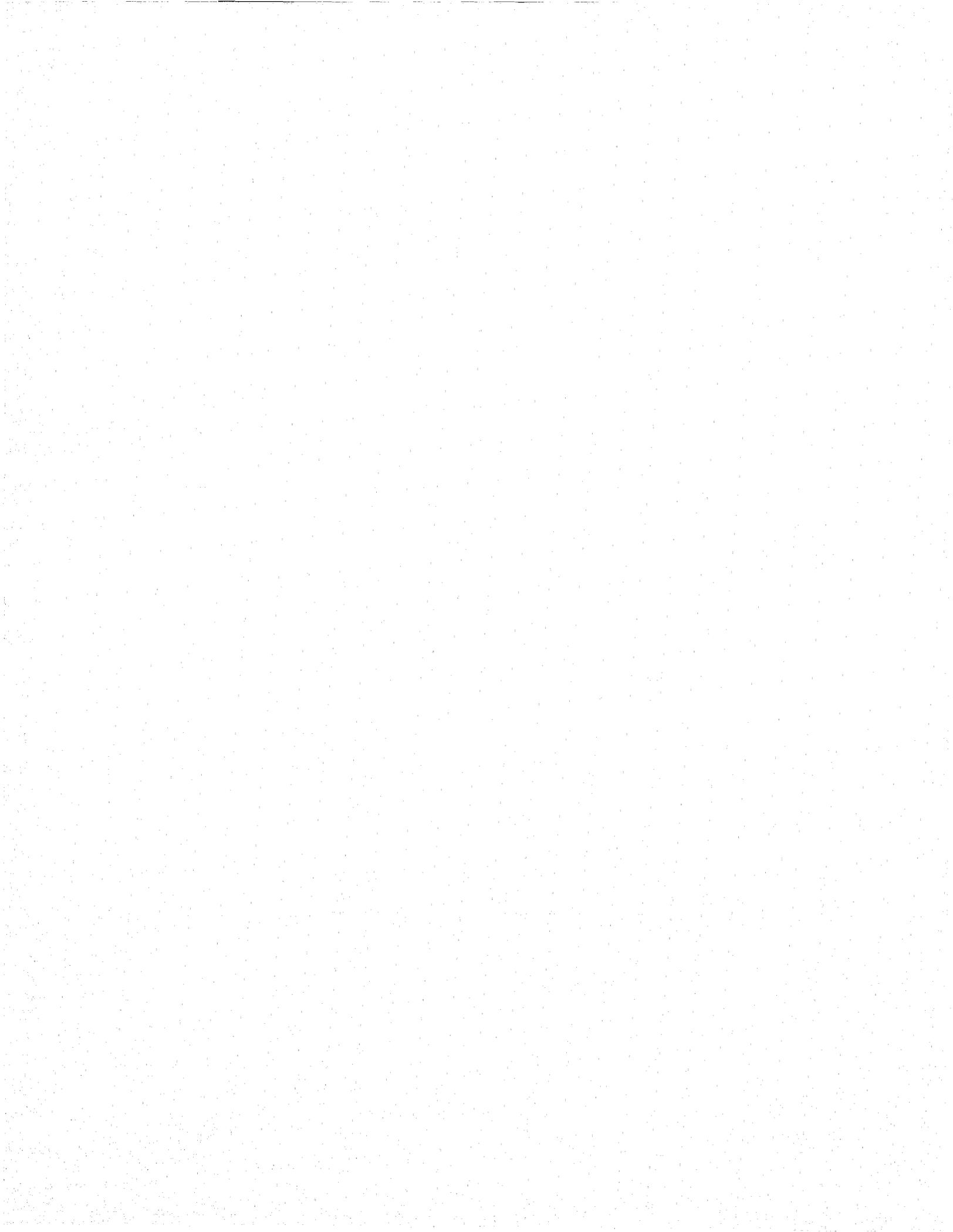
—Because the Compton officer's definition of crime parallels that of most residents, his definition of a criminal is accepted and his actions supported. The minimal separation between the value system of the police and the majority of the public results in an almost British acceptance of the police.

—The smallness of the community and the department bring home to the officer the importance of developing a good relationship with the residents, people he will see again, and must depend on for help and cooperation to do his job.

—The ethnic composition of the Compton Police Department exempts it from most racial problems plaguing urban police. The officer on the street is Black, Latin surname, or grew up occupationally with Blacks, picking up a touch of soul in the process. Racial prejudice may lurk below the surface in some officers, Anglo, Black, or Latino, but it is not likely to surface in police-citizen contacts.

The Compton police are not caught up in the formal, para-military ritual of some nearby departments; neither do they come across as automatons. They do produce results, and a high quality of police protection for their community, dispensing equal justice under the law.

Professional, dedicated, the Compton police set an example for fair and firm law enforcement.



**END**