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How do you map the cost of mass incarceration in LA?

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A new archival project from UCLA seeks to unearth boxes of internal records obtained from the LAPD.

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Many already know about [the history of racist policing in Los Angeles](#), a city that boasts the [largest jail system in the world](#). The Los Angeles Police Department and [its scandals](#) have been the subject of countless movies. Major policy reforms have been forced on LAPD over the years in the form of federal consent decrees.

But what about the social cost of policing in our region? How do you sum up and tell the story with input from the communities hit the hardest? Where is their voice now?

[A new archival project from UCLA](#) seeks to become that conduit by unearthing boxes of internal records obtained from the LAPD. The effort recently received a \$3.65 million boost in the form of a grant. Leaders of the project are UCLA history professors [Marques Vestal](#) and [Kelly Lytle Hernández](#), who's also a 2019 MacArthur Fellow.

It builds on the previous work of the award-winning [Million Dollar Hoods](#) project. That plan maps and documents the fiscal and human costs of mass incarceration in Los Angeles by using arrest and jail data from the LAPD, Los Angeles Sheriff's Department, Long Beach Police Department, and several other municipal police departments in the area.

"We calculate how much is being spent to incarcerate residents of Los Angeles in a local jail system by neighborhood, and every neighborhood where we're spending more than \$1 million per year locking up residents," says Hernández. "That's a million dollar hood."

Available records on the LAPD are sparse, however, and Vestal says only annual reports are accessible. He calls this a "sanitized set of statistics."

“We don't know any of the details of its daily operation. We don't know any of the internal back and forth communications or rationales for many officer-involved shootings. Any of its ideas and justifications for over policing like, let's say, the war on drugs in communities of color in South Los Angeles, East LA We don't have any of that internal history.”

The files for the project were acquired through an ACLU lawsuit, a settlement with the LAPD and a set of oral histories. They have 177 boxes so far.

“Those records ... we call it the ‘war on drugs’ in a box,” says Hernández.

She explains that the LAPD is one of the most important institutions in the history of Los Angeles and the world. The agency affects policing innovations, training international officers, and fomenting the “war on drugs.”

“We want to make sure that these records of this incredibly important institution are preserved and retained. So that 100 years from now, scholars and committee members will be able to look back and tell the story of what happened and why and at what consequence,” says Hernández.

A file that stood out to Vestal was about an Angeleno who was shot by the LAPD under the guise of possible grand theft auto. When looking through the internal documents, he found that there was no such report. There was a report of a stalled car headlight.

Vestal explains, “That was the entire pretext for the stop, which ended up in this horrific shooting. This is the kind of information that's inside of this archive. We see this as a moment of reparative potential of these files to uncover.”

What's the goal of the project? Vestal says they're creating a path to healing. “The LAPD archive is essential to finding out what happened, how we were harmed and how we fought back, and how this can inform our process of healing and our process of creating a society that actually has real security and not policing.”

Hernández agrees, “We are pulling together a set of knowledge about how much needs to be returned to communities to help make us whole and to help us move forward in a new, more liberatory direction.”

She hopes the uprising of 2020 was a turning point. “We're going to move away from mass incarceration. But this is the moment we have to pause and make sure we're preserving a record that will tell the story of what happened, to whom, by whom and at what cost,” says Hernández.



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