

SSP Los Angeles Study and Discussion Guide

Welcome!

To Team Leaders: We hope that you will find this study guide to be interesting and useful. We welcome your feedback on it. Our intent is to provide an overview of interesting material about Los Angeles, along with probing questions for discussion. Reviewing and discussing this material before your visit to Los Angeles is recommended. We also think you will find many of the discussion questions useful when debriefing with your youth following your trip.

Sierra Service Project's urban activities take place in South Los Angeles. This summary will present you with some basic material about the Los Angeles area, the city of Los Angeles and, finally, the South Los Angeles area in which our project takes place.

First of all, where in the heck are you going?

The World...

The United States...

The State of California...

Southern California...

The City of Los Angeles...

South Los Angeles...

the Neighborhood of Vermont Square

Question for Reflection: When you hear or think about "Los Angeles", what images or ideas come to mind?

Los Angeles

LA is the nation's second largest city and is arguably its most diverse and most dynamic. It is one of the world's most important centers of business, entertainment and culture. Los Angeles is - and has always been - a constantly changing mix of races, ethnicities, and social classes. Los Angeles is probably one of the best known "names" on the globe and attracts people from virtually every nation on earth. It's truly an exciting and fascinating place to be. During your week at SSP, you'll get some glimpses into different facets of Los Angeles.

The greater Los Angeles area is unique in the world. It is...

The largest Mexican metropolitan area outside of Mexico

The largest Japanese metropolitan area outside of Japan

The largest Taiwanese metropolitan area outside of Taiwan

The largest Korean metropolitan area outside of Korea

The largest Filipino metropolitan area outside of the Philippines

The largest Armenian metropolitan area outside of Armenia

The largest Thai metropolitan area outside of Thailand

The largest Vietnamese metropolitan area outside of Vietnam

Over 90 different languages are spoken by students of the LA Unified School District.

The City of Los Angeles

The area we usually think of as "Los Angeles" includes the city of Los Angeles and many adjacent communities. The population of this region is an incredible 17.5 million people - roughly half of the population of the State of California.

The City itself is home to almost 4 million people. The City stretches from the San Fernando Valley in the north San Pedro harbor in the south. On the next page is a map of the City and the surrounding communities. The City consists of all of the colored areas on the map; the white areas are outside of the official borders.

Things to do:

1. Find South Los Angeles - the area we will be staying and working in.
2. Find some other communities that you've heard of: Hollywood, Beverly Hills, "the Valley."

Question for Reflection: Notice that the borders of the City are a bit odd and illogical. Find the area around Beverly Hills in the Hollywood Hills. Why do you think Beverly Hills isn't part of the City? Find Universal City, the home of Universal Studios. Is it in the City or outside of it? Why?

The names of all of the areas and neighborhoods within the City are in black.



Racial and Ethnic Makeup

LA is a “majority minority” city, meaning that no single racial or ethnic group constitutes a majority of the population.

What’s the difference between a racial group and an ethnic group? Historically, people have thought of racial groups as distinct groups of people with genetic differences which manifested themselves in things like skin color and facial features. We now know that a lot of this racial thinking is based a lot more on prejudices than any kind of scientific facts. Nevertheless, we continue to use these labels. One of the things the U.S. Census asks people is what race they belong to.

The term “ethnic group” tends to mean a group of people with a common culture and language. Some ethnic groups are associated with nations – like “Mexican” for example. Other ethnic groups with distinct cultures and languages have no nation of their own – like the Navajo or the Kurds. Other nations, like the United States, are multi-ethnic, made up of many different ethnic groups.

The census doesn’t ask people directly about ethnic group, but it does ask people whether they are Hispanic (or Latino.) On that question, here are the results:

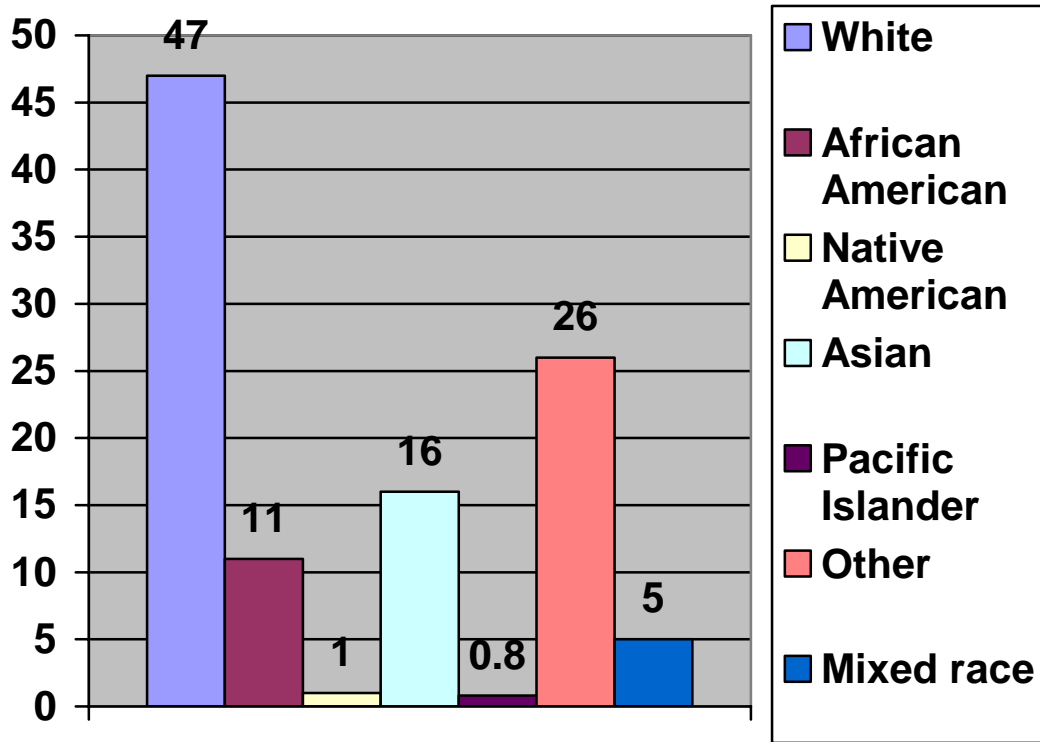
Hispanic or Latino:	47 percent
White of non-Latino/Hispanic origin:	30 percent
Other (African-American, Asian, etc):	23 percent

The census also asks about racial groups. Table 1 shows the breakdown of population by major racial group. Notice that the number of people identifying themselves as “white” is much higher. That is because many people who identify themselves as “Hispanic” will also identify themselves as “white,” while some will pick “Black” and some will pick “Other.” Confusing? Welcome to the subject of race in America!

Los Angeles is also home to the largest community of Asian-Americans in the United States. Filipinos are the largest Asian ethnic group.

LA is truly a world city. A whopping 40 percent of its residents were born outside of the United States. It is estimated that natives of over 140 different countries make their home in LA today and speak over 200 different languages. Everyday, dozens of international flights bring thousands of people to Los Angeles from all over the world. These flights all land at LAX, only a few miles from South Los Angeles.

Table 1: Race as percent of total population, City of Los Angeles



Question for Reflection: How does this ethnic and racial makeup compare to the street you live on, in your apartment complex, in your school or your city? If you don't know, what would you guess?

Crime

Los Angeles is often associated with crime, although the total crime index is LA is lower than in Chicago, San Francisco and Boston. Among major American cities, only New York City has a lower overall crime rate. Crime has also been on the decrease in Los Angeles (as in most American cities) after peaking in the early 1990's.

Questions for Reflection: Why is the image of LA as a crime-ridden city so prevalent?

Hints: Video games set in LA (True Crime, Grand Theft Auto); televised car chases; music videos; movies.

Income and Poverty

One of the most shocking signs of poverty in Los Angeles is the number of **homeless people**. It is estimated that there are currently nearly 90,000 homeless people in Los Angeles County. On any given night, about 10 percent of these people are in shelters. The rest live on the streets, in vacant lots, under freeway bridges, etc. About one-quarter of these people are in the Skid Row area of downtown. This 50-block area has the largest concentration of homeless people in the U.S. There are many reasons for this enormous population: lack of affordable housing, lack of mental health and drug addiction treatment options and the mild climate which probably attracts some people from other parts of the country.

A fact to ponder: A recent study came to the conclusion that one-third of the homeless in downtown LA get most of their daily nutrition from garbage.

Mental Exercise! How many people is 90,000?

Do some exercises to show just how large the number "90,000" is. For example, how many people attend your school or your church? Using that number, calculate how many schools or churches you need of that size to hold 90,000 people!

Is Los Angeles a rich or a poor city?

In truth, LA is home to both very poor and quite wealthy people. According to 2000 census data, 22 percent of Los Angelenos live below the poverty level. How are below? 10 percent of the total population lives at between zero and 50 percent of the poverty level. On the other hand, over 50 percent of the population has income of at least twice the poverty level.

What is the "poverty level"?

The federal government calculates a poverty threshold. People living on income below this level are considered to be "poor." But rather than being a single number, it is actually a number that depends upon the number of people in a household, the age of the household members and some other factors.

- Using this measure, the federal government estimates that there were 37 million Americans living in poverty in 2004.
- Example: In 2004, the poverty threshold for a family of three was \$15,200.

About the Community of Vermont Square: Zip Code 90037

How do the statistics above compare to the neighborhood in which we will be working? To get comparative information, we have used the local zip code data. Our neighborhood is about in the middle of area covered by this zip code, so the data should be quite representative of what you will experience.

Racial and Ethnic Makeup

Question for reflection: When you think of walls or boundaries that unfairly separate people in our work, what do you think about?

Until shortly after World War II, blacks were only allowed to purchase property in specific areas within South Los Angeles and not in the Vermont Square area. (The “black area” was east of Main Street. The 110 freeway, like many freeways, was built along what was at the time the racial dividing line.) In the 1920’s, 1930’s and 1940’s, Los Angeles was the scene of significant white-on-black violence, as black residents found outside of this “settlement area” were routinely harassed and beaten up by white gangs. This led to the establishment of black “mutual protection clubs” which eventually evolved into today’s street gangs.

In 1948, the U.S. Supreme Court outlawed the use of racially-restrictive covenants in housing. Several things happened at this point:

- Blacks began to move out of the overcrowded settlement area into neighboring areas, such as the Vermont Square neighborhood.
- Newly-built freeways and a suburban housing boom led to the exodus of whites.
- Racial fears and “block busting” (a practice by which real estate speculators exploited racial fears, purchased whole blocks at cheap prices from white residents and re-sold them at inflated prices to blacks) accelerated this process.

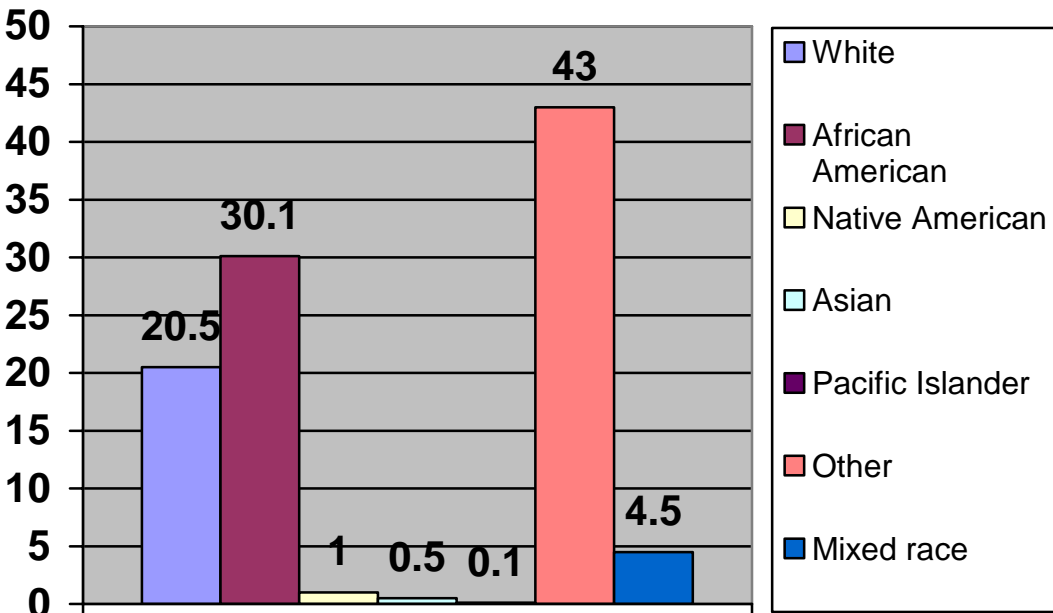
By the 1960’s, nearly all of South Los Angeles, including the Vermont Square area, was completely black. The Watts Riots of 1965 pushed middle-class blacks to move to safer and more affluent areas outside (or on the edges of) South Los Angeles. At the same time, unemployment increased as many manufacturing businesses, which had employed large number of African-Americans, closed down and moved away. This occurred in the late 1960’s and 1970’s and result in widespread poverty and crime.

The 1970’s and 1980’s saw the growth of criminal street gangs and the crack cocaine epidemic, which fueled the money and power of these gangs. By the time of the 1992 riots, the term “South Central” had come to represent violence, urban decay, bad schools and drive-by shootings. The riots also accelerated the movement of working and middle class blacks out of South Central and the influx of Latino residents moving from East Los Angeles or coming as nearly-arrived immigrants from Mexico and Central America.

Today, the “latinization” of South Los Angeles has reached the point where the area is about 70 percent Latino, while the city as a whole is about 50 percent Latino. Evidence of this is everywhere - from last year’s election of a Latino mayor (Antonio Villagairosa), to the prevalence of Mexican markets and Central American restaurants and street vendors hawking tamales.

So where does this leave us today in the Vermont Square neighborhood? The table below shows the current racial makeup of this area (2000 census figures.)

Table 2: Race as percent of total population, Zip Code 90037



Hispanic Versus non-Hispanic residents
 According to the 2000 census, 68 percent of the population identified themselves as Hispanic. Where do these Hispanic residents show up in the graph above? They make up the “white” category and the “other” category. This means that there are virtually no non-Hispanic white residents of South Los Angeles.

Income and Poverty

40 percent of the residents of the Vermont Square area lived below the poverty level in 2000. How poor is this area compared to the rest of California?

Comparison of Income Levels		
	Percent of Population Vermont Square	Percent of Population California
Less than \$15,000	39.92	14.04
\$15,000 - \$25,000	18.05	11.45
\$25,000 - \$35,000	13.87	11.42
\$35,000 - \$50,000	13.54	15.17
\$50,000 - \$75,000	8.29	19.14
\$75,000 - \$100,000	3.35	11.52
\$100,000 - \$150,000	1.89	10.36
Over \$150,000	1.09	6.9

The table above tells part of the story. Take a look at the first line showing the percentage of households living on less than \$15,000 per year. For Vermont Square, the number is about 40%; for the state as a whole, it is about 14%. So, compared to California as a whole, the Vermont Square area has almost three times the number of people living on a household income of less than \$15,000.

Now, take a look at the line for households living on \$100,000 to \$150,000 per year. Here, the ratios are reversed. In Vermont Square, less than 2 percent of the households fall into this category. But for the entire state, the number is over 10 percent - more than five times more than in Vermont Square.

Schools and Education

Public schools in South Los Angeles are part of the Los Angeles Unified School District. The district is one of the largest in the nation and has 700,000 students. Some of the educational challenges present in South Los Angeles include:

- For teachers, it's not a very desirable place to work
- There is a very high percentage of English-learners in the system
- Poverty rates are very high - perhaps as many as half of the students in South Los Angeles live in poverty
- Crime and drug use are pervasive problems.

These factors, and others, create really high dropout rates. For the district as a whole, it is about 50 percent. For Latino students, the **graduation rate** is about 40 percent - meaning that out of 10 kids who begin high school, only four will graduate.

In 2006, all students will be required to pass the California Exit Exam in order to graduate. What will happen to these graduation rates then? Currently, only 70 percent of black and Latino students are pass the exit. This means that the graduation rate will probably fall to about 30 percent.

Questions for Reflection: Why is the drop out rate so high? What are some of the impacts on communities of this drop out rate?

The “Role Model” Effect. One theory about high drop out rates has to do with the lack of successful role models in communities like South Los Angeles. We know from the income data that very few people with good paying jobs live in this area. This includes teachers, nurses, computer programmers, accountants - basically jobs requiring a college degree. The role model theory is that in communities like this, where young people know or see very few people with college degrees and decent-paying jobs, they will lack the motivation to finish school and attend college.

Question for Reflection: What do you think of the “role model” theory? What other impacts does the lack of these types of role models have on young people?

Summary

When you visit South Los Angeles and the Vermont Square area, you will be immersed in a complex and dynamic community with these diverse characteristics:

- Residents are overwhelmingly either black, Spanish-speaking or recently immigrated to the US.
- The area which is significantly poorer than most of California.
- There are also higher levels of crime, which means than - on average - residents of Vermont Square are more likely to be the victim of a crime than is someone living somewhere else in California.
- Educational achievement is lower than in the state as a whole, with less than half of all teenagers graduating from high school.
- There are very few residents with college degrees.

Suggestions for Further Study

There are lots of important topics that we haven't covered here. Here are just two:

- Youth opportunities, unemployment and gangs. Gangs are definitely part of the social landscape of many parts of Los Angeles, and there is a definite correlation between gang member, youth unemployment and the lack of other after-school activities for young people.
- The AIDS/HIV epidemic in communities of color. Two-thirds of all women with AIDS are black but comprise on 12 percent of the population. AIDS is the leading cause of death among African-American

men between the ages of 25 and 44. Why is this? What is being done within the African-American community to combat this incredibly tragic problem?

Further Discussion Questions

1. How do these various factors -- racial and ethnic demographics, income distribution, crime and education - fit together? Which factors cause other factors and which are caused by other factors?

For example: Does the crime rate increase poverty by driving people out of the neighborhood who can afford to move? Or does poverty cause crime, perhaps because people steal or sell drugs as a way of getting money?

2. As individual Christians, what are our responsibilities?
 - Do we have a responsibility to understand this situation?
 - Do we have a responsibility to do anything about it?
 - Is it "okay" that many of our communities are segregated by income and race?
3. As members of the Christian church, what are our responsibilities?
 - What has been the role of organized churches in the past with regard to creating economic and racial segregation?
 - What has been its role with regard to combating it?
 - What role are organized churches taking today in terms of either perpetuating or combating this?

Additional Study Materials

The Internet

The internet is full of material about population, crime, poverty, race and the City of Los Angeles. You can find a number of reliable sites by searching with any of these underlined key words.

Books

There are dozens of good books about today's urban reality ranging from novels to very academic studies. There is just a sampling:

- "Upon this Rock, the Miracles of a Black Church" by Samuel G. Freedom. This book is about a pastor in Brooklyn who builds a church and helps revitalize a neighborhood. It's not about L.A., but many of the issues are similar.
- "Ain't no Makin' It" by Jay Macleod. This book is quite academic, but the first chapter might be interesting to talk about how the aspirations of urban youth are affected by their environment.
- "City of Quarts" by Mike Davis. A series of essays about the history and current social structure of Los Angeles. Quite academic but fascinating.
- Any of the detective novels of Walter Mosley. These are very entertaining novels set in LA and written from the perspective of an African-American detective.

Movies

There is also a wealth of material in movie form, although much if it is not rated PG. Most of them contain strong language and sexual content. Some of the best are:

- "Crash." It just got the Oscar for best picture. This is a hard-hitting, disturbing view of race in Los Angeles. It is not suitable for high school youth. It has been criticized by some in the black community for focusing on very unrepresentative members of the community. Rated R.
- "Rize." Rated PG-13. A very interesting and entertaining look at "krump", a hip-hop like dance style developed in South Los Angeles.
- "Mi Vida Loca." A movie about two teenage friends in Echo Park. Rated R.
- "Bread and Roses." A story of two Latina sisters and the fight to unionize office cleaners in downtown LA. Rated R.
- "Real Women Have Curves." A delightful film about a Latina teenager growing up in East Los Angeles. Rated PG-13.
- "Boyz in the Hood." Outstanding 1991 film about gangs and growing up in South Los Angeles. Great performances by Ice Cube, Cuba Gooding Jr., Angela Bassett and Laurence Fishburne. Rated R.