Byline: By Paul Brinkley-Rogers, The Arizona Republic

Remember the movie Blade Runner, set in a future L.A., where expert practitioners of violence prowl the streets and everyone is in a rotten mood? On a balmy weekend late in August, 28 people were shot or stabbed to death and 24 were wounded. This was not the result of riots or a Hollywood screenplay.

The record carnage was simply the price of living in America's first Third World city, a place so complex racially, culturally and economically that its people apparently no longer share a vision.

Class against class, nationality against nationality, race against race: They are struggling for a piece of turf, for jobs, or merely to survive.

Increasing numbers of people - Anglo, Asian and middle-class African-Americans and Hispanics - are talking about leaving the city forever, and some say they would do so now if they were not trapped by houses that will not sell or by L.A.'s 11.4 percent unemployment rate or by family ties.

For the city's vast underclass of poor Americans and immigrants from Latin America and Asia who rioted in April, there is even less chance of escape. Census figures show, for example, that Hispanics and African-Americans, 53 percent of the population, make up 72 percent of those living in poverty and that median Anglo and Asian household income - more than $39,000 - exceeds that of African-American and Hispanic households by $13,000.

Five months after the riots, the twisted wreckage of the 3,500 businesses destroyed in 733 arson-caused fires has mostly been cleared away. But only 40 rebuilding permits have been issued. Only a handful of looted stores have been reopened. The city frets over the reluctance of owners of supermarkets, gas stations and other basic enterprises to start up again.
This is because there is widespread despair over the future of L.A. There is a perception that America's No. 2 city has become unmanageable, that its leaders don't know how to make it work, and that it will only be a matter of time before the dispossessed make their anger known again.

Last month, four-term Mayor Tom Bradley decided not to run for office again. L.A.'s highly regarded district attorney and school superintendent quit. Police Chief Darryl Gates exited after the riots, kicking and snarling.

"I see L.A. becoming a real free-for-all," said Kelvin Jones, a 42-year-old movie-unit photographer. "I don't think the white-power elite can maintain control. I see it like a Brazilian city, where the center has lost control of the barrios and anarchy rules."

Jones, who does volunteer work at a Pico Union agency helping resettle immigrants from Central and South America, said he and his wife, Barbara, who is expecting, have decided not to rear their first child in Los Angeles.

"This is a city where there are more shootings on a weekend than there are in an entire year in some countries," Jones said. "Violence is part of the culture. It's like people say if you have a problem with someone, just zap them."

'IT ISN'T WORKING'

Warren Olney has heard just about everything since his talk show Which Way LA? began airing on KCRW radio after the riots. He said that "L.A. is a multicultural entity and it must have political parity between all these factions or it won't work."

"It isn't working, period," he said. "People have been buying guns, not talking."

Olney talked with anguish of attending a recent symposium on race relations at the University of Southern California "but only a handful turned up."

"I had the feeling if it had been on black nationalism, the hall would have been packed," he said.

U-Haul dealer Ralph Santos said he has seen a 120 percent jump in requests for trucks to go out of state since April. The number arriving is off 30 percent.

"They are like gold," Santos said, advising a young woman trying to move to Oregon that it would be easier for her to go to Las Vegas to rent a vehicle.

"You couldn't pay me enough to get a truck on short notice. We don't have any because we got customers going everywhere, except
California."

'NOT GOING TO GET BETTER'

There is fear of earthquakes and bankrupt state government and rap music with doomsday messages and the Los Angeles Police Department and the city's 110,000 gang members and beaches closed because they are a health hazard and freeway samurais. Even the Los Angeles sports franchises, especially the town's beloved Lakers and Dodgers, have hit new lows.

"A generalized neurosis that is not exactly irrational affects many of my patients," Westwood psychologist Joel Brooks said. "Los Angeles is a stressful environment under the best of circumstances, but in the last 15 years, it has all gone to hell. In the next 15 years, a whole new science of urban stress is going to start up here because it's not going to get any better."

'PEOPLE ARE NUMB'

One strange aspect of that worst-ever Los Angeles weekend crime spree was that the statistics caused hardly a ripple.

No commissions were appointed to study the occasion, no investigations were mounted.

"People are numb," said accountant Jim Savitz, 56. "Everyone was mugged by the riots. No one feels they have any security."

For two nights last spring while fires dotted the horizon, Savitz said, he sat on his bed on the 10th floor of his condo unit at glitzy Marina Del Rey clutching a 12-gauge shotgun.

"Friends were coming in here saying things like, 'Have you heard? They're hitting Hollywood. They're moving north into the (San Fernando) Valley.' I didn't know if I'd have to make a last stand."

He says he is staying, but is moving north, into the San Fernando Valley.

Arab-American shopkeeper Tawfik Moos, 38, whose convenience store in Compton was torched the day of the Rodney King police-beating verdict, put it this way: "Killings. Rape. Robbery. That's nothing compared to all the anger in the city. It's the anger that gets you down, because it is everywhere, all the time, like heartburn."

KEEPING THE LID ON

Post-riot Los Angeles is a scary place. The riots put the city under siege - the people besieging the city from within. The sheer flamboyance of crime in Los Angeles is legend.

Many people say the infrastructure of Blade Runner - L.A. 2019 - already
is in place, designed to keep the lid on.

In Los Angeles, Bill Porter, a south-central L.A. resident who is black, said, "'To Protect and Serve' (the Police Department motto) means to protect the rich and to serve them. We don't get no service. They (the police) are just trying to keep us in our place."

Technocops backed up by infrared-reading helicopters roam the megalopolis, greater Los Angeles, where violence is acted out in 140 languages in 132 cities and towns on 34,000 square miles of neon and concrete with a 14.5 million population.

Command decisions are made in steel-girded office towers guarded by 3,500 private security agencies while outside, a legion of the homeless demands handouts.

"Depersonalization is a religion here," said Rev. Walter Johnson, an African-American minister.

The wealthy, mostly Anglo or Asian, live in the mountains or along the coast or in walled enclaves posted with "armed response" signs and topped by electrified fences. They live in an ocean of poor, mostly African-American and Hispanic, whose decaying blocks are splattered with graffiti and whose empty, fire-blackened lots are the clearest warning yet of their frustration.

Many American cities are multi-ethnic, but greater Los Angeles, its population growing at a rate equal to that of Third World cities such as Cairo or Canton, China, is a world apart.

It is the second-largest Korean, Filipino, Mexican, Armenian, Salvadoran and Guatemalan city. More Samoans live in L.A. than in their homeland. There are 800,000 Canadians, 350,000 Iranians, 100,000 Thais, 350,000 Filipinos, 300,000 Chinese, 450,000 South Koreans, 390,000 Japanese. Immigrant Hispanics from 10 nations number 1.5 million. Children in Los Angeles city schools speak 91 languages. More than 50 foreign-language newspapers circulate.

"What we thought was working as a multi-ethnic melting pot was not," said Don Haydu, professor of multi-ethnic studies at El Camino Community College in Torrance, Calif.

"Everyone defines themselves as part of this group or that group - as Salvadoran, Taiwanese, Belizean, Iranian, African-American," he said. "The Jeffersonian ideal of individual responsibility is dead. L.A. has become ungovernable, and I'm very pessimistic about making it work."

A SEDUCTIVE ILLUSION

With its shoreline, its boulevards and its cult of youth, Los Angeles is still a seductive place.
At the beaches, bronzed mac daddies (guys) check out fly houchies (girls) in G-string bikinis. At the Beverly Hills Hotel, valets scramble to make sure the Mercedes and Ferraris are parked nearest the lobby for their high-tipping show-biz owners. In Bel Air and the Hollywood Hills, tour buses take gaping fans to the front gates of the mansions of the stars. On trendy Melrose Avenue, teen-agers of every racial hue dress in black and promenade to be seen, except that they all look the same.

But this is all illusion. That's why there are TV shows called Beverly Hills 90210 and Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous.

A darker side, however, is made all but invisible by freeways that enable the rich to literally ride over the poor.

The affluent never get to see black street vendors in the grim vastness of south-central Los Angeles selling T-shirts that show cops beating black motorists. The garments don't say, "Have a nice day."

They don't get to hang out at Florence and Normandie avenues, where truck driver Reginald Denny was nearly beaten to death and where local residents loudly proclaim the innocence of "The L.A. Four" - the young black men identified in TV footage allegedly assaulting him.

They don't witness the traffic stops black residents complain that the Police Department makes just because the driver is black. They don't see the nightly toll of blood and pain in the Hispanic barrios, where gang members stage shootouts and where La Migra - immigration officers - chase desperate Guatemalan illegals.

In cool L.A. last year, 2,401 corpses, all victims of violence, were wheeled into the Los Angeles County Coroner's Office. Twenty years ago, vehicular deaths were more than double death by gunshot. But in 1991, the gun ruled, the rate tripling to 1,554 from 464 deaths per 100,000. A post-riot Los Angeles Times survey showed that in the past five years, 466,453 handguns were sold in the county, one for every 19 residents.

The "rebellion," as black leaders call the response to the King verdict, resulted in 52 people killed, all African-American except for nine Hispanics, five Anglos, and two Asians.

In addition, emergency rooms treated 269 people who were beaten, 198 who were shot, 57 who were stabbed and 1,326 who suffered other injuries. Admitted to hospitals were 26 beating, 63 gunshot-wound, 17 stabbing and 174 other cases.

'LIFE IS MISERABLE'

"No one knows our story," said Haydee Sanchez, 37, a Salvadoran-born caseworker with a Hispanic social-action agency called Jovenes.

"For the poor, life here is miserable, even savage. Sure, for people from
Mexico or Nicaragua or Colombia, they can send some dollars home. But here, they have to endure police abuse. Unless America makes a decision to fight poverty, I predict there will be riots again.''

Mark Whitlock, 38, an African-American investment banker who leads a laymen's group at the influential First African Methodist Church, said, "What we need here is not more 'civil rights.' What we need are 'silver (economic) rights.' We need a black Ross Perot."

"We need vision," he said of his church's effort to persuade industry to invest in black-dominated south-central Los Angeles, "because as we try to give our people economic power, we are literally writing the book. We have nothing to reference by. All we have is our hope that it is not too late - that people don't really mean that no one gives a damn." Map and Chart by Joe Willie / The Arizona Republic (see microfilm)

Color Photo by Michael Ging/The Arizona Republic Photos (4) by Michael Ging / The Arizona Republic

Ethnic concentrations in the Los Angeles Area

Profile of Poverty in the Los Angeles Area

A mural in central Los Angeles pleads for unity, but that seems impossible in a racially divided city.

1) A lighted mural on the Playboy Building shines out over a symbolically darker Los Angeles. The wealthy, mostly Anglo or Asian, live in the mountains or along the coast. Increasing numbers of people - Anglo, Asian and middle-class African-Americans and Hispanics - are talking about leaving the city forever.

2) A sign advertises T-shirts for sale on the corner of Normandie and Florence avenues where "The L.A. Four" are accused of beating trucker Reginald Denny.

3) Kelvin Jones

"I see L.A. becoming a real free-for-all. I don't think the white-power elite can maintain control."

4) The intersection of Florence and Normandie avenues was a center of violence during the spring riots. Five months later, the twisted wreckage and burned-out buildings of south-central L.A. mostly have been cleared away, but not this one.

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