

The Los Angeles police scandal and its social roots

Part 2 of a series

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The testimony of former Los Angeles police officer Rafael Perez about widespread police frame-ups and corruption has so far been limited mostly to the Rampart Division of the Los Angeles Police Department. But according to Perez, 90 percent of the officers assigned to the specialized CRASH anti-gang units, not just those from Rampart, routinely falsify evidence.

Los Angeles Police Chief Bernard Parks recently admitted to the Los Angeles City Council that investigators have found “telltale signs” that the same practices were a common occurrence at other CRASH units, such as the 77th Division in south central Los Angeles and the Hollywood Division.

Parks and the Department are attempting to present the scandal as limited to anti-gang operations, which are not subject to the same oversight, paperwork and reporting obligations as typical line operations. No doubt a high percentage of officers in such specialized units may be particularly violent and unscrupulous. However, the falsification of evidence and reports, perjury, cover-ups, “bad” shootings and administration of street justice reported by Perez have been common practice in LAPD patrol and field operations as well for years, particularly those in working class and poor communities. Those incidents which have become matters of court record demonstrate that the abuses at Rampart were tried and true LAPD practice.

In 1989 patrol officers in the 77th Street Division in south central Los Angeles shot and barely missed killing John Shelton, a 30-year-old black man, in the course of an investigation of the theft of some beer and pocket change at a gas station parking lot. The officers claimed that they thought Shelton had pointed a gun at them from a shooting stance. Sergeant Stacy Koon, later infamous as the supervisor of the Rodney King beating, rolled up to the scene. The victims of the theft immediately told police that Shelton was not the man who had robbed them. Koon nevertheless ordered Shelton booked for the crime, and ordered coins planted in Shelton's pocket to falsely link him to the theft, while an ambulance took him bleeding to the hospital.

Not one of the dozens of officers at the scene protested. The OIS (officer involved shooting) investigation team whitewashed the shooting and Chief Daryl Gates and the police commission adopted its conclusions. Although the criminal charges against Shelton were eventually dropped, later an officer falsely testified at a parole violation hearing that Shelton had been positively

identified by the victims, resulting in Shelton's incarceration for 18 months.

In 1992 patrol officers in a south central Los Angeles police division near the University of Southern California shot 15-year-old Kenny Moore, an aspiring high school cartoonist. The youth was riding a stolen car that he found abandoned in the street. When police attempted to pull Moore over, he jumped out of the car and ran. First one officer and then four others in three patrol cars opened fire, later claiming Moore had pointed a gun at them from a shooting position.

The officers then planted a gun at the scene by Moore's body, a gun found to be inoperable because the trigger guard had been hammered in. At a subsequent civil trial a firearms expert who had been range master at the sheriff's department in a neighboring county testified that in his opinion the gun likely had been decommissioned by the LAPD range master, and a civilian witness claimed she had seen a plainclothes detective take the gun out of the trunk of his car and place it next to the dying youth.

As in the Rampart shooting of Juan Saldana, officers at the scene delayed calling an ambulance, so Moore bled to death by the time he arrived at County hospital. Again the OIS team and Chief Gates found the shooting to be “in policy,” crediting the officers' stories.

Also in 1992, LAPD patrol officers shot 19-year-old Alfonso Aguirre-Alvarez when he ran from them after joyriding in a car. LAPD supervisors then “disappeared” the wounded youth, instructing UCLA hospital not to contact his family members. Aguirre-Alvarez died two weeks later, without ever seeing his family again.

In 1996, officer Melissa Town, later identified by Perez as one of the Rampart cops involved in fabricating evidence to justify a shooting, falsely fingered county worker Michael White as a drug dealer while she worked for an undercover narcotics unit. White had arrived at a skid row park in downtown Los Angeles to deliver mail to his half brother just as a sting operation aimed at sellers of \$5 bags of marijuana had commenced. Because White told officers he could not identify whomever had been selling the drugs, officers booked him instead for sale of the narcotics. Although a jury took only a few minutes to acquit White, he languished in jail for months before his trial.

Pervasive misconduct in the LAPD was documented by an official commission appointed by former Mayor Tom Bradley. The

blue ribbon commission, led by former US Secretary of State Warren Christopher and manned by lawyers from the city's most prestigious law firms, investigated the LAPD in the wake of the videotaped beating of Rodney King in 1991.

The Christopher Commission concluded in its report that there were a significant number of officers in the LAPD who repetitively use excessive force against the public. In many cases the Department not only failed to deal with the problem group of officers, but it often rewarded them with positive evaluations and promotions.

Although it was infrequent that victims of police violence complained to the LAPD, the Commission's report found that there were 183 officers with four or more brutality complaints against them. The Commission singled out 44 officers with six or more complaints. Most of these officers functioned in routine patrol assignments; many were then promoted to specialized units, such as CRASH or narcotics.

Such unstable and violent elements, many from military backgrounds, typically set the tone. Police recruits originally harboring less brutal impulses soon learn to join in the misconduct to one degree or another to fit in, and/or they cynically ignore abuses by virtue of the "code of silence" documented in the Christopher Commission report.

Assignment of the most sadistic and sociopathic elements to "macho" units such as CRASH is hardly limited to the LAPD. Every major city in the United States has such units, which account for many of the shootings and assaults.

Most of these attacks occur with no publicity. While the February 1999 shooting of 22-year-old Amadou Diallo, a West African immigrant, by four New York City police officers received national attention, generally shootings such as these get minimal local coverage. Explanations are concocted, and cops are exonerated.

In state after state, police carry out street death sentences that far exceed the number of court ordered executions. In Chicago, for instance, the police shot 505 people between 1990 and 1998; 123 died.

One of them, Chad Edwards, a black youth, was shot in the head by Chicago police on February 1998. Edwards and his girlfriend were visiting a neighbor's house with permission when the police entered unannounced. Edwards, unarmed, was shot when he went to the doorway to investigate the noise. The police ruled the shooting justifiable. While he was hospitalized in critical condition, police charged Edwards with criminal trespassing and aggravated assault. He later died from his wounds.

In November 1998 Brennan King, a 21-year-old father of three, may have been executed by the police at the Cabrini-Green housing projects. Witnesses said they heard him begging for his life before he was shot six times in a stairway.

In Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Jonny Gammage, a black motorist and cousin of Pittsburgh Steelers football player Ray Seals, was murdered by five suburban police officers on October 12, 1995, after he was pulled over in a routine traffic stop.

In 1998 in Riverside, California police came upon Tyisha Miller, a young black woman, who had dozed off in the front seat of her car. When she did not awake in response to their summons, the

cops smashed through the window of her car, then opened fire and killed Miller, claiming that they thought the startled girl was reaching for a weapon.

For California cities, statistics exist comparing killings by police and murders which the police are supposed to investigate. San Jose, in booming Silicon Valley, leads in this grisly comparison with 5.8 police killings per 100 murders, followed by San Diego with 5.3 and San Francisco with 4.1. At 2.2 police killings per 100 murders, Los Angeles is tied with Oakland.

The victims of these police killings tend to be those who are marginal to society. The killing of the homeless, the mentally ill, and the young is almost a routine event, particularly if they are poor, immigrant, African-American or Latino.

Paul Garcia, a mentally ill youth, was shot and killed in San Jose last September by four policemen who had been called by his mother to help him.

In May of last year LAPD bicycle patrol officers approached a 51-year-old mentally ill homeless woman, Margaret Laverne Williams, to see if she was in possession of a stolen shopping cart. According to the cops, they had to shoot the 5'1" woman when she lunged at them with a screwdriver. Chief Parks upheld this testimony from the officers even though the civilian witnesses contradicted it.

Similarly, a few months before initiating the fusillade of bullets that killed Kenny Moore, officer Rafael Acosta shot and killed an unarmed retarded man outside the Los Angeles Coliseum. No discipline resulted.

Most recently, on November 20, LAPD officers shot and killed an unarmed 16-year-old youth named Felix Valenzuela who was running naked through the street while on LSD. Predictably the officers claimed Valenzuela was screaming and charged at them. A recently filed suit claims that the officers withheld or delayed emergency medical attention for the bleeding youth.

See:

Part 1

Part 3

Part 4



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