

The Los Angeles police scandal and its social roots

Part 1 of a series

By Don Knowland and Gerardo Nebbia
13 March 2000

Substantially more information has been made public in the Los Angeles Police Department corruption and frame-up scandal. News reports have revealed a widespread pattern of unjustified arrests, beatings, drug dealing, witness intimidation, illegal shootings, planting of evidence, frame-ups and perjury at the CRASH unit of the Rampart Division of the LAPD.

CRASH is the acronym for the Community Resources Against Street Hoodlums, an anti-gang program the LAPD implemented over a decade ago. The Rampart Division covers an eight square-mile area, just west of downtown, which is largely working class, heavily immigrant and densely populated.

LAPD officer Rafael Perez joined Rampart CRASH in 1996. In 1998 Perez was arrested for stealing eight pounds of cocaine, valued at a million dollars, from the Rampart evidence locker. In 1999 Perez began to cooperate in giving evidence against his former associates in the hope of receiving a reduced sentence on the cocaine theft charge. On February 24, 2000 Perez received a five-year prison term on the cocaine theft charges, but he is expected to stay in jail only a little over a year more, given time served and credit for good behavior.

Investigators from a task force put together by the LAPD and the Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office logged over 50 hours of interviews with Perez over the last six months. Two *Los Angeles Times* reporters undertook an investigation of the scandal, and bits and pieces of Perez's story began to emerge.

Last month the *Los Angeles Times* published many of the revelations from 2000 pages of Perez's testimony. The law-breaking activity among police was so pervasive that the *Times* concluded: "An organized criminal subculture thrived within the LAPD, where a secret fraternity of anti-gang officers and supervisors committed crimes and celebrated shootings."

Among the most chilling revelations concern outright police murders or attempted murders. In 1996 CRASH officer Kulin Patel shot Juan Saldana when he was running down an apartment hallway. Patel and his partner then planted a gun on Saldana after he went down. When the CRASH supervisor, Sergeant Edward Ortiz, arrived, he delayed calling an ambulance so the officers could concoct a cover story. Saldana bled to death by the time he arrived at the hospital.

In another incident CRASH officers fired 10 rounds at Carlos Vertiz, a 44-year-old man with no criminal record, after they mistook him for a drug dealer. To justify the shooting, officers then planted a shotgun near the dying Vertiz which they claimed he had pointed at them.

In 1996 Perez and his partner Nino Durden shot 19-year-old Javier

Ovando in the chest and head and then planted a gun on him. Ovando received a draconian 23-year prison sentence because he would not show contrition. In fact, he was innocent. Ovando was released last year, after serving two years. As a result of his injuries he is now confined to a wheelchair.

On New Year's eve 1996, Rampart CRASH officers opened fire on and wounded two holiday revelers, afterwards arresting them on trumped-up charges. The officers then rehearsed the story that they had fired in self-defense, claiming the revelers had fired guns in the officers' direction. One unnamed officer has reportedly told his attorney that the CRASH cops were out "hunting" that night, that is, looking for people to ambush in sport.

Perez told investigators the lengths to which Rampart officers and their supervisors went to cover up bad shootings. In one instance, a rookie patrol officer shot a man when he opened a closet during a search and was startled to see the man inside. When the rookie's supervisor arrived at the scene he decided the rookie should say the man was holding a mirror, causing him to see his own reflection with a gun and open fire, thinking he had encountered an armed suspect.

Officer Melissa Town shot at a youth who was sitting with a group of friends by a park and then ran when she accosted him. When her supervising sergeant arrived, he pulled a 5-1/2 inch piece of chrome from the bumper of a nearby car and instructed Town that she should say the suspect had pointed it at her.

Perez has also explained how Department shooting investigation procedures were easily thwarted. Those procedures require local area brass plus a specialized team of detectives from the Robbery-Homicide Division to "roll out" to each officer involved shooting (OIS) scene. The report by the OIS team is relied on by the police chief and the police commission to determine whether a shooting was in or out of policy, justified or not.

According to Perez, the shooting officers' immediate local supervisors typically arrive at the scene first. The supervisors are supposed to preserve the scene and segregate the involved officers so that the OIS team can interview them separately before the officers have a chance to confer and agree on a story. Instead, investigators were diverted from the scene until the involved officers and their immediate supervisors had a chance to come up with and iron out a cover story. Typically Rampart CRASH officers used secret radio codes to accomplish this—they would create a diversion to delay the investigation, such as claiming that other suspects were involved and on the loose.

Not surprisingly, all the dirty shootings related by Perez were found

by the Chief of Police to be carried out “in policy,” although in some cases the officers involved were required to receive additional training so that they did not unnecessarily expose themselves to danger in the future. In other words, the LAPD was concerned with the health of the perpetrators of the shootings, not the fate of their victims.

Rampart CRASH officers routinely planted drugs, guns or other evidence on arrestees, or fabricated probable cause—the constitutional prerequisite to search or arrest someone. Many of the victims whose democratic rights were flagrantly violated were innocent of any crime.

These frame-ups sometimes took on a wholesale character. Perez has related an occasion when officers roused a party where several dozen gang members were ordered to their knees with their hands behind their backs. Officer Brian Hewitt then walked down the line, randomly dictating which youth would be charged with which imaginary crime.

CRASH officers routinely and arbitrarily punched, kicked, choked and otherwise beat suspects or bystanders. At times beatings were a response to suspected infractions committed against officers. For example, the slashing of an officer's tires resulted in officers driving around the neighborhood, indiscriminately beating youth. On another occasion a gang member suspected of slashing a tire was roughed up and then dropped, stripped of any clothing, into rival gang territory.

Many times the beatings were simply for harassment or sadistic pleasure. One youth was shot repeatedly with a bean bag gun purely for amusement. Officer Brian Hewitt routinely beat handcuffed suspects, preferring administering beatings to bothering with booking procedures and reports.

Hewitt was eventually fired in 1998 for grabbing Ismael Jimenez by the neck at the station where all could see, shoving him against a wall and hitting him repeatedly in the chest and abdomen with his fists. The evidence indicates that Jimenez was beaten because the mother of another alleged gang member filed a complaint against other officers who beat her son. Despite serious injury to Jimenez, district attorney prosecutors, citing a lack of evidence, have twice declined to file charges against Hewitt.

Another suspect was used as a human battering ram against a target drawn on a wall because he said he did not know anything about a gun officers were seeking. The young man told investigators that his head was pushed through the plaster and was pierced by splinters from the wooden studs inside the wall.

Officer Hewitt's partner Daniel Lujan beat a youth at the end of a foot pursuit, badly injuring the suspect's knee. When the supervisor arrived at the scene Lujan admitted he had no reason for the beating. The supervisor instructed Lujan to book the man anyway on a drug charge. On another occasion Lujan dislocated a handcuffed suspect's elbow for sport.

LAPD procedures normally require filling out a use of force report when force is used. Perez related how officers routinely fabricated elaborate stories in their reports. For example, a man was sitting on a bench when officers suddenly approached, handcuffed and threw him to the floor, and began kicking his head and body. According to the report the officers filed the man injured himself when he jumped out of a third floor window head first. Police supervisors rubber-stamped this tall tale.

CRASH officers also took revenge on anybody who complained to the LAPD about their methods, or who tried to interfere with their attempts at framing up people. Alex Sanchez, who heads a local group that attempts to help youth to leave gangs, came forward as an alibi witness for Jesus Rodriguez, a 15-year-old accused of a fatal double

shooting by CRASH officers. In retribution, a CRASH officer attempted to arrange Sanchez's deportation so he could not testify and clear Rodriguez.

In fact, the close cooperation between Rampart CRASH officers and the US Immigration and Naturalization Service to deport witnesses or others against whom police charges did not stick has become a key aspect of the scandal. In order to promote cooperation by immigrants as witnesses, LAPD regulations have long prohibited turning them over to immigration. CRASH officers routinely ignored that prohibition with impunity.

Perez has also told investigators about the social aspects of this virtually paramilitary unit. CRASH officers often got together at a bar near Dodger Stadium to drink and celebrate shootings. Supervisors handed out plaques to shooters, containing red or black playing cards. Killing was more prestigious than wounding, meriting black as opposed to red cards on the plaque. At least one Rampart lieutenant attended one of these celebrations.

Rampart officers also wore tattoos of the CRASH logo, a skull with a cowboy hat surrounded by poker cards depicting the “dead man's hand,” aces and eights. Other CRASH units wore similar tattoos. CRASH paraphernalia, with this logo, is still for sale at the LAPD gift shop.

An officer could not join Rampart CRASH without a reliable “sponsor” to vouch for the officer's “character.” Officers who had worked with the prospective initiate were contacted to find out if the candidate was too “by-the-book,” that is, undesirable for initiation. A “solid” or “stand-up” candidate was someone who bent the rules—planting evidence, falsifying probable cause to arrest and committing perjury in court testimony.

Once in the unit, the officer's conduct was closely monitored to make sure he or she could be trusted to be “in the loop.” Once in, the officers were trained in CRASH methods, such as planting weapons. The job of CRASH supervisors “in the loop” was to protect the CRASH line officers from investigation by higher-ups of their misdeeds.

Perez's revelations directly involve 30 Rampart CRASH officers and at least three of their supervisors. The investigation has already resulted in 20 officers being fired or relieved of duty. Criminal convictions have been overturned in 30 cases; at least 70 more are under investigation. LAPD Chief Bernard Parks has called for the dismissal of charges against another 99 defendants in 57 cases. The County District Attorney's Office concedes that the number of cases tainted by the Rampart officers under suspicion may run into the hundreds, if not the thousands. Significantly, in the vast majority of these cases, the victims of police frame-up confessed rather than take their chances in the court system.

See:

Part 2

Part 3

Part 4

To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>