

Scandal-plagued Los Angeles County police head named US “Sheriff of the Year”

By Alan Gilman
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Los Angeles County Sheriff Lee Baca has been named “Sheriff of the Year” by the National Sheriffs' Association. The group represents about 2700 sheriffs' departments throughout the country.

The Los Angeles Sheriffs Department, the largest in the United States with nearly 18,000 deputies and a budget of \$2.5 billion, had been embroiled in a series of scandals involving rampant abuse of inmates in the county jail, the existence of secret gangs within the department, racial harassment by deputies in the Antelope Valley, and for having given special treatment to Baca's friends and supporters.

The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) has been involved in an ongoing federal lawsuit against the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department dating back to 1975 that has focused primarily on the abusive and inhuman conditions in the Los Angeles County Jail. After a 17-day trial in 1978, the court granted injunctive relief designed to improve conditions with the jail. By 1984, it had become clear that despite the prior court order, conditions in the jail had worsened. Consequently, the lawsuit was reopened resulting in the court appointing various parities and experts to monitor the jail.

Based in large part on the observations and information obtained by these monitors, the ACLU in September 2011 submitted to the court 70 sworn declarations detailing deputy abuse of inmates, including statements from two chaplains, and Hollywood producer Scott Budnick, who had worked at the jail for five years as a volunteer teaching writing.

In response to this long-standing and well documented abuse by deputies within the jail, the FBI was compelled to open its own investigation. In doing so, it recruited a jail inmate to be its informant. The FBI arranged for this inmate to pay a deputy \$1,500 to smuggle to him a cell phone. Thereafter, the FBI

showed up at the deputy's home in an attempt to recruit him as an informant.

This operation collapsed when the inmate's cell phone was discovered by jail deputies, along with his notes detailing his involvement in the FBI investigation. The deputy who provided the phone to the inmate was suspended and thereafter resigned.

Instead of addressing the numerous complaints of abuse by his deputies, Sheriff Baca, incensed that the FBI had not notified him of their investigation, initially sent his investigators to the home of the lead FBI agent, ostensibly to investigate him for the crime of unlawfully providing an inmate with a cell phone.

The Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department also has had a long history of secret deputy gangs developing in specific assignments. One of the first to be exposed was the Lynwood Vikings, which was described by Los Angeles federal judge, Terry J. Hatter, in 1992 as a “neo-Nazi, white-supremacist gang.” A Lynwood supervisor associated with its founding, Paul Tanaka, has risen through the ranks to Undersheriff, the second in command to Sheriff Baca.

Tanaka has been linked to a variety of abuses, particularly in the County Jail, and scandals. He serves as mayor of Gardena, a suburb, and has been accused of soliciting campaign contributions from subordinates within the department.

Baca's department during the last few years has had to also acknowledge the existence within its ranks of gang-like groups with such names as the Grim Reapers, the Vikings, the Little Devils and the 3000s. Members have distinctive tattoos, use gang-like signs to identify themselves, and use distinctive code words.

The 3000s consisted of a group of deputies who work on the 3rd floor of the jail, and sport “3000” tattoos. This is the floor of the jail that has recorded the most

use-of-force incidents. In March 2011, Sheriff Baca was compelled to fire six of its members. Their firings, however, had nothing to do with their abuse of inmates. Instead they were terminated for assaulting, during a sheriff's Christmas party, two other deputies who complained about their work performance.

Last year, the *Los Angeles Times* revealed the existence of another Sheriff gang called the "Jump Out Boys." In response to this latest exposure, Baca ordered an investigation and as a consequence announced early February that he has notified the seven-deputy gang members they will be terminated.

The Sheriff's Department describes the Jump Out Boys as a secret law enforcement "clique," whose members wear distinctive, morbid tattoos, and celebrate police shootings. All seven deputies were assigned to an elite gang enforcement unit. The *Times* published a pamphlet describing the gang's creed, including tattoo modifications for police shootings.

Department investigators told the *Times* they did not uncover any criminal behavior by the Jump Out Boys, but the group clashed with department policies and image. Their tattoos, for instance, depicted an oversize skull with a wide, toothy grimace and glowing red eyes. A bandanna with the unit's acronym is wrapped around the skull. A bony hand clasps a revolver. Smoke would be tattooed over the gun's barrel for members who were involved in at least one shooting.

Passages from the Jump Out Boys' pamphlet reported in the *Times* include, "We are alpha dogs who think and act like the wolf, but never become the wolf," and "We are not afraid to get our hands dirty without any disgrace, dishonor or hesitation... sometimes (members) need to do the things they don't want to in order to get where they want to be."

In the Antelope Valley, the most northern section of Los Angeles County, a group of families and one deputy are demanding unspecified damages from Los Angeles County for alleged episodes by sheriff deputies of racially motivated abuse, including two fatal shootings. In addition federal authorities have been involved in an ongoing probe involving allegations by residents of the area that sheriff's deputies have targeted minorities for harassment.

In naming Baca "Sheriff of the Year," Fred Wilson, the director of operations for the National Association of Sheriffs' said the award "looks at what the sheriff

has done in their community but also what the sheriff has done to advance the office of sheriff nationally. Sheriff Baca certainly embodies that. He is an exemplary sheriff."

The very public evidence of the rampant abuse and misconduct that has been ongoing within the Los Angeles Sheriffs Department, suggests that Sheriff Baca has been named "Sheriff of the Year" not despite his department's record, but because of it.

As the social crisis continues to deepen across the US, police departments have been given combat weaponry, along with unprecedented powers to search, detain, and employ deadly force. The Los Angeles department has excelled in oppressing the working class, poor and immigrant populations. The conduct of its deputies and management in this regard are indeed the model to which other departments around the country are conforming.

Critics of the department were shocked upon learning of the award. "You got to be kidding," said Peter Eliasberg, legal director of the ACLU of Southern California. "The years of malfeasance in the jails and the blatant failure of the sheriff to address the problems make his winning of this award mind-boggling."

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