

ACLU cites black complaints of police abuse

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Complaints about police misconduct and abuse are disproportionately high among blacks and are lodged against National City police officers at the highest rate in the county, according to figures provided yesterday by the American Civil Liberties Union.

The ACLU's San Diego chapter, in releasing a report on its police-complaint hot line, said that police violence against civilians is increasing and should be curbed through disciplinary and corrective action.

"The ACLU, as well as large segments of the community, has felt increasingly exasperated with the continuing flood of allegations of abuse and of police shootings," said Linda Hills, the group's executive director. "We have a right to expect that law enforcement professionals carry out their duties within the limits of the law and Constitution."

A San Diego police spokesman, however, called the ACLU's report superficial and said it does not reflect accurately on the department.

With the shooting death of seven men this year by San Diego police, the activities and policies of law enforcement agencies throughout the county have come under intensified scrutiny.

The ACLU report is based on 152 calls received by its police hot line in the past two years.

The complaints involve 15 law enforcement agencies and allegations of misconduct, ranging from assault to harassment to theft and false arrest. More than one-quarter of those contacting the ACLU said they needed medical attention as a result of police violence.

The National City Police Department had the highest rate of complaints: 12.3 calls per 100 officers. "There appears to be an acute problem in National City," said Michael Crowley, co-chairman of the ACLU police practices committee.

National City Police Chief Stan Knee was unavailable for comment yesterday. "No one will make any comment until the chief is back in town," said National City police spokeswoman Mary Gaffney.

Whites made 63 percent of the total complaints, blacks 14 percent, Latinos 13 percent and Asians 1 percent. Nine percent were described by the ACLU as "other" or did not disclose their race or ethnic background.

"Minorities are being abused in disproportionate numbers, especially blacks," said Crowley.

Commander Larry Gore of the San Diego Police said the ACLU's report is overly general and "a bit superficial."

He also challenged Crowley's contention that law enforcement agencies often discourage civilians from filing complaints, either through intimidation or bureaucratic obstacles.

"We try to make it as easy as possible to facilitate complaints," Gore said. "If the ACLU's hot line helps to do that, I'm all for it."

The hot line was established two years ago in response to what the ACLU described as a "serious problem of police misconduct." Volunteer attorneys provide callers with legal information and referrals for those seeking legal counsel.

Crowley said the ACLU does not investigate the complaints to determine their validity. "It's not our position to be making any judgments" on reports received over the hot line," he said.

To halt what it describes as the escalation of police misconduct, the ACLU recommends the establishment of an independent civilian review board for each law enforcement agency, with investigatory powers including the right to subpoena.

A San Diego civilian review board appointed by the city manager now reviews police misconduct complaints but acts only in an advisory capacity.

Gore said he sees no reason to change the procedure, declaring: "I think what we have works very well."

A proposal for a review board with investigative powers for county residents living within the jurisdiction of the Sheriff's Department will be put on the November ballot.

Credit: Staff Writer

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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