

Police harassment `chronic,' ACLU says | Two-year report tallies complaints about local law enforcement

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A two-year compilation of complaints of police abuse and harassment indicates that such problems are chronic in the San Diego area and need to be corrected to restore trust in law enforcement, says a report by the American Civil Liberties Union Foundation of San Diego and Imperial counties.

The complaints were made between June 1988 and June 7, 1990, to the ACLU's Police Hotline, which the organization established in 1988 because of increasing reports of police misconduct.

The "Initial Report of the ACLU Police Hotline" cited 152 incidents of alleged police misconduct. It was released in a press conference yesterday at the San Diego County Bar Association's Law Library downtown.

Some of the incidents in the report involved multiple complaints, bringing the total number of abuse reports to 203.

ACLU officials said they did not know the total number of phone calls that were made to the hot line in two years, only that 152 individual incident reports were eventually taken when ACLU staff got back in touch with people who had called.

The incidents, which were not investigated by the ACLU but only taken as a result of extensive interviews, involved 15 San Diego County law-enforcement agencies.

The report cited 17 different categories of alleged misconduct, ranging from general harassment and false arrest to verbal abuse and personal assault.

Harassment headed the list, with 49 citations; followed by assault, 30; false arrest, 28; verbal abuse, 26; assault while handcuffed, 16; false imprisonment, 12; property stolen, 9; choke hold, 8; handcuffs too tight, 8; homes searched without a warrant or ransacked, 5; damage to personal property, 4; baton assault, 3. There was one complaint in each of the following categories: bad warrants, racial remarks, sexual remarks, flashlight assaults and tear-gas assaults.

According to the report, the National City Police Department had a higher ratio of complaints about its officers than any other law-enforcement agency, with 12.3 complaints per 100 police officers during the two-year period.

During that time, eight actual reports of abuse or harassment were made against the National City police force, the report said.

Comparatively, the ratio for the much larger San Diego Police Department was 3.8 complaints per 100 officers, with 69 reports of abuse or harassment made to the ACLU.

The Sheriff's Department, which like the San Diego Police Department has been strongly criticized by civil libertarians over reports of abuse, had a complaint ratio of 2.7 per 100 officers, or 35 actual complaints filed with the ACLU.

"The problem is continuing and is chronic," said Michael Crowley, co-chairman of the ACLU's Police Practices Committee, which oversaw the hot line and initial report.

"The report ...underscores the seriousness of the problem of police misconduct and makes recommendations to combat it," said ACLU executive director Linda Hills. "We have the right to expect professional law enforcement accountable to the public."

Among the recommendations:

- o Establishment of independent civilian review boards for each law-enforcement agency.
- o Improved training for law-enforcement officers, especially about the constitutional limits on the use of force.
- o Strong leadership in each agency to show that misconduct will not be tolerated.
- o Vigorous investigation and prosecution of police misconduct.

Crowley said the ACLU report was being mailed to the 15 law- enforcement agencies.

Spokesmen for the San Diego and National City police departments and Sheriff's Department said they could not comment on the report because they had not seen it.

The report also said that one-third of the complaints arose from incidents at a victim's home. Incidents involving vehicles accounted for the next highest number of complaints.

One-quarter of the victims said they required medical care as a result of injuries suffered at the hands of police.

Credit: Tribune Staff Writer

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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