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MELTDOWN IN SOCAL

When thinking “troubled police,” Southern California doesn’t usually come to mind. Well, think again.

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. [Daniel Dana](#) was a San Diego cop. Married, with a kid on the way, the former Marine had been enforcing the law in one of Southern California’s favorite tourist destinations for four years. Just a few days ago his career hit a brick wall. Dana, 26, is now facing charges of extorting sex from a prostitute who complained that he had been relentlessly text-messaging threats to arrest her unless she submitted to his demands. What these were became clear at his arraignment two days ago, when he pled not guilty to felonies including rape and oral copulation under color of authority. Dana is being held on \$300,000 bail. A police spokesman says that other women have come forward with similar tales.

Officer Dana (actually, ex-officer, as he has reportedly resigned) isn’t the only San Diego cop to find himself on the wrong side of the law. One week earlier officer [William Johnson](#), a 12-year veteran, was arrested for DUI after being involved in a minor traffic accident in a nearby city. But the worst of it happened in March. That month brought the arrest of three veteran San Diego officers: [Roel Tungcab](#), 39, for domestic violence; [Sergeant Kenneth H. Davis](#), 47, for stalking and harassing a female officer with whom he once had an affair; and in the most serious case, [officer Anthony Arevalos](#), for pulling over and sexually assaulting female drivers who were leaving a nightclub district. One victim complained, and during a telephone call that investigators recorded Arevalos reportedly admitted his crime. More complaints have surfaced; Arevalos has been fired and awaits trial on eighteen felony counts.

And there’s more. In February a 19-year old college student told El Cajon police that she was raped by San Diego vice detective [Arthur A. Perea](#). Perea, 42 was placed on unpaid leave and resigned the following month. Also in February off-duty San Diego motorcycle cop [David C. Hall](#), 41 allegedly left the scene of a traffic accident. An alcohol test reportedly revealed that he was three times the legal limit.

“You know you disrespected us by talking like that.” That was all the warning that Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Deputy [Chris Vasquez](#) supposedly got before six deputies jumped him and a colleague at a Christmas party last year. What was the reason? According to Vasquez’s Federal lawsuit the six were members of “The 3,000 Boys,” a gang-like clique of deputies who worked on the third floor of the Men’s Central Jail, which houses many hardened offenders. They were apparently incensed by Vasquez’s complaint about their inefficiency and used their fists to let him know it.

Vasquez was lucky to come out of it with only a few bruises. According to a [KTLA investigative series](#) the six deputies had taken on the trappings of a street gang and were mimicking the appearance and behavior of the thugs they watched. Three are defendants in a lawsuit filed by an inmate who complained that he was severely beaten and arrested after complaining about jail conditions. (Charges against him were later dismissed.) Asked about the clique’s tattoos (members sport the number “3,000” on the back of their necks) and use of a hand sign, Michael

Gennaco, head of a county agency that investigates serious misconduct within the Sheriff's department, said "I think it suggests that a group of individuals within the jail...have lost their way." The department has moved to fire the deputies, who have been suspended without pay.

It's been nearly two years since [a Federal judge released](#) the LAPD, Southern California's largest law enforcement agency, from a decade of monitoring imposed by DOJ in connection with the [Rampart scandal](#). Since then the department has caught considerable flack over a string of controversial shootings (for recent examples click [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).) But according to [a recent Los Angeles Times analysis](#), the LAPD's problems haven't only been with citizens. Over the past decade lawsuits filed by LAPD officers against their superiors, alleging sexual harassment, discrimination and retaliation, have made millionaires out of a stunning *seventeen* cops. Dozens more have won or settled like cases against the city for amounts in the five and six figures.

Litigation and misconduct have also beset nearby agencies. The L.A. suburb of Glendale (pop. 191,000) [just fired three officers](#) for taking a police car to Las Vegas (there may be more to it, but the department's not saying.) Several Glendale cops are also under investigation for conduct ranging from an off-duty road rage incident to sexual solicitation. Meanwhile, taking a cue from their LAPD brethren, a number of cops in Glendale and a neighboring city, Burbank, [have sued their agencies](#) for discrimination and shabby treatment.

What's to be done? [San Diego chief William Lansdowne](#) says his department will increase the number of internal investigators, create a hotline to take citizen complaints and make better use of a system that alerts superiors about problem officers. While Mayor Jerry Sanders, the city's former police chief, welcomes the improvements, he has brushed off the scandal to a few bad apples. "I'm concerned," he said, "about the fact that we have so many officers out there that work so hard and do such a great job, and then they get tarred by a few of these guys who are absolute jerks."

Chief Lansdowne, Mayor Sanders and other city leaders insist that the troubles of "America's Finest" (SDPD's motto, displayed on patrol cars in bold print) amount to nothing more than [a series of isolated events](#). Tony Young, the president and sole African-American member of the city council gushes that cops and minorities get along famously. Despite what's happened he calls SDPD "one of the finest police departments, if not the finest, in the country." Even the normally skeptical *Los Angeles Times* has apparently bought the line that SDPD's problems don't reflect a systemic failure: "There are no accusations involving racial or ethnic bias; there is no evidence of a cover-up among police officials; the allegations do not seem to point to one particular station house or division."

Yet there are things to worry about beyond biased policing. As for the department's supposedly brisk and forthright response, the cases that came to light did so because victims complained. What's more, several of the incidents occurred in other cities, so the decisions to arrest had not been San Diego's to make.

When a bunch of officers get caught up in serious offending – the present count stands at ten, including a couple of episodes of excessive force – there’s reason to suspect that something’s rotten in Denmark. Pressed to explain why so many cops got in trouble in such a brief period, Mayor Sanders fell back on the economy. “You know, there are stresses right now. There are stresses for city employees, but I think especially the police officers.”

Conflating financial problems and sexual assault is ridiculous. [Sheriff Lee Baca’s](#) explanation that the scandal at the L.A. County Jail was caused by a “locker room mentality” is equally lame. Despite past problems with deputy cliques he refuses to acknowledge what is clearly an appalling failure of supervision. “I don’t think it’s the environment of the jail that’s a problem,” he said. “It’s a failure to follow the department’s core values.”

Gennaco, the county’s external investigator, is far more candid (naturally, he doesn’t need to run for reelection.) He sharply faults a past lowering of entry standards to fill vacancies. “You end up hiring some deputies you wouldn’t ordinarily hire. Folks had been disqualified or not hired by the LAPD or other agencies got jobs...because they just needed bodies.” (Click [here](#) and [here](#) for related posts.)

In the end it all comes back to selection and oversight. Much of the misconduct reported in San Diego and Los Angeles literally screams personal character. Poor screening may have allowed individuals who lacked integrity to join the force. Once they got in an absence of guidance and supervision let them get and stay on the wrong track. Placing immature, impressionable rookies in the jails for up to five years is bad enough; not watching them closely is unforgivable. How could sworn law enforcement officers run around sporting gangster-like tattoos without challenge? Where were their managers? And most importantly, why didn’t someone in authority ask that most basic of questions:

“Why?”