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## NOT ALL COPS ARE BLUE

*Internal strife besets two well-regarded police departments*



By *Julius (Jay) Wachtel*. Nestled against foothills northeast of Los Angeles lie the twin cities of [Burbank](#) and [Glendale](#). Home to cadres of upwardly-mobile young professionals, the communities – Burbank hovers at slightly over 100,000 population; Glendale is nearly twice the size – are in most respects similar. Bordering Southern California’s largest urban park, sporting ultramodern shopping complexes and miles of shady, tree-lined streets, both are desirable places to live, enjoying good school systems and crime rates well below the national average.

Alas, both also have police departments that are verging on meltdown.

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On October 29, 2009 [Burbank Police Sergeant Neil Gunn, Sr.](#) called his superior. Assigned to work from his residence while the department’s internal affairs unit investigated reports that he and other officers had abused suspects, the 22-year veteran and former SWAT commander got permission to leave. He then drove his truck to a quiet place, grabbed his shotgun and blew himself apart.

According to department sources the use of force became a problem after a rookie’s killing in 2003. Currently as many as a dozen officers are targets of an [FBI civil rights investigation](#). One of the allegations, a 2007 incident in which an officer supposedly jammed a gun barrel against a robbery suspect’s head, came to light when a detective who said he witnessed this and other instances of abuse belatedly came forward. Suspended for originally lying to investigators, Detective Angelo Dahlia wound up suing the department, complaining that officers had intimidated him into

keeping quiet and that then-chief Tim Stehr (he resigned after Gunn's suicide) had "encouraged the beatings."

Dahlia isn't the only cop with a gripe. In another lawsuit, Burbank Police Captain Bill Taylor alleges that he was demoted from deputy chief after complaining to the former chief about police misconduct, including instances of discrimination against recently-hired minority officers.

Racial and ethnic tensions within the ranks have propelled even more litigation. [The original suit](#), filed in May 2009 by a Hispanic lieutenant and four officers – a female Hispanic, a male Hispanic, an Armenian and a Black – characterized the department as "an insider's club where if you aren't white, male and heterosexual you had better keep your mouth shut and play along with the bigots or suffer the consequences." White cops and the former chief were accused of subjecting minority officers to slurs and slights, passing them over for desirable assignments and promotions and unfairly disciplining them. According to the lieutenant he was harassed for hiring a qualified, openly gay female and was busted back to patrolman for reporting officer misconduct, with the chief going so far as to arrange his demotion with the police union.

[A sixth officer](#) filed a separate but nearly identical suit four months later. Excepting one of the original plaintiffs, whose [cause of action was recently dismissed](#) on technical grounds, the cases remain on track.

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Burbank is known for its movie and television studios. Glendale's fame, on the other hand, comes from hosting the [largest Armenian community](#) in the U.S., comprising between a third and a half of the city's population. [At last count](#), though, its police force of 257 officers has only nineteen of Armenian descent, with none holding ranks higher than sergeant. According to lawyer Carney Shegerian that's not nearly good enough. "How come they're not lieutenants yet?" he demanded. "Officers are going to explain and will testify that they should have been lieutenants by now."

The angry advocate was referring to a lawsuit he filed on January 20, 2010 on behalf of four current and one former Glendale police officers of Armenian ancestry, including two of the department's four current sergeants. Like their Burbank counterparts, the Glendale litigants allege a [pattern of hostile treatment and discrimination](#) resulting in "humiliation, emotional distress, and mental and physical pain and anguish," making their lives miserable and depriving them of the opportunity to freely exercise their profession and advance in the ranks.

Instances of bias include the removal of one of the plaintiffs from his position as the department's chief spokesperson, allegedly because he testified for another of the plaintiffs, who had been fired and was suing for reinstatement. There are also examples of derogatory comments and of failed attempts to gain transfers and promotions. A lot of emphasis is placed on statistics. If Glendale really doesn't discriminate, why do they have so few Armenian cops?

That, argues the City, isn't on purpose. Relatively few Armenians apply to join the force, and with few vacancies and little turnover it's unreasonable to expect more. Glendale also insists it's trying to do more. It [posted an announcement](#) for an Armenian-fluent officer several months before the lawsuit was filed, helping earn the new chief a commendation from the local branch of a national Armenian organization. Yet the lawsuit recently doubled in size to an astounding ninety pages, and with two out of four of the department's highest-ranking Armenians suing their own agency one must wonder whether reconciliation is within reach.

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Policing has traditionally been a white man's game. Your blogger recalls that when he joined ATF in 1972 the official job description specifically excluded female applicants because of the position's physical risks. When Federal law finally forced much-needed changes much of the resistance went underground. Bias remained so evident that qualified women and minorities were discouraged from applying, inadvertently furnishing a ready excuse for their continued absence from the ranks.

In time things did improve. Changes are most apparent in large agencies such as New York, Chicago and Los Angeles, whose ethnic (and to a lesser extent, gender) mix approaches that of the communities they serve. But substantial imbalances persist elsewhere. As [Glendale's chief explained](#), "we do not have people retiring or leaving in hordes. It's been very piecemeal over the years. So your opportunity for growth [more Armenians in leadership positions] is minimal."

In fact, in a department that's 92.7 percent non-Armenian, promoting an Armenian is likely to raise eyebrows. Was it done fair and square or is it an example of reverse discrimination? That's not an idle question. Last year [the Supreme Court ruled](#) that discarding the results of firefighter promotional exams because results favored whites violated the Civil Rights Act. Police officers have won reverse discrimination cases around the U.S., often gaining substantial settlements. In February 2008 [San Francisco](#) agreed to pay nine whites, two Hispanics and one Asian officer a total of \$1.6 million because they were passed over for promotion to lieutenant in favor of lower-scoring black applicants, all of whom were promoted.

In the end, it's not just about the money or who gets to wear the stripes, bars or stars. To the extent that officers don't consider all their colleagues to be equally "blue" everyone suffers. Policing is stressful enough without letting nonsensical distinctions about race, ancestry and what-have-you get in the way. It's the same issue that's bedeviled our land since a small contingent of religiously oppressed pilgrims made their way across the Atlantic. Regrettably, it doesn't seem to be going away.