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Mayton*

When a Cop Is the Rapist

A Los Angeles sheriff's deputy has pleaded no contest to charges that he raped two women while he was on the job. This is part of an alarming trend.

On Thursday, a Los Angeles County sheriff's deputy pleaded no contest to rape and sexual assault of two women. Jose Rigaberto Sanchez, 29, faces a sentence of eight years and eight months in prison and must register as a sex offender, according to the district attorney's office.

Both crimes occurred in September 2010. The first incident included the forcible sodomizing of a 24-year-old woman in Palmdale after Sanchez offered her sex in exchange for not arresting her. He took her to a desert where the crime occurred.

Two nights later, Sanchez pulled over a 36-year-old woman on drunk driving suspicion and attempted to bribe her with sexual favors, according to the Los Angeles County district attorney's office.

This is only one of several recent cases of sexual violence where a police officer has been accused or convicted of abusing his power and authority to abuse women while on the job. In January 2012, a Milwaukee jury convicted a policeman of violating the civil rights of a woman by raping her. In November 2013, a Texas police officer was

accused of raping a 19-year-old woman. And earlier this month a sheriff's deputy in Oklahoma was arrested on suspected rape charges at a nursing home.

And in San Jose last week, another police officer was accused of rape after reportedly being sent to protect a woman during a domestic dispute. Geoffrey Graves, 38, a six-year veteran of the force, allegedly assaulted the woman at a hotel where she was staying.

"The officer gained information and location of her hotel room and then went up there approximately 15 minutes later and knocked on the door," Santa Clara County deputy district attorney Carlos Vega said. "Unbeknownst to her, he opened the door. She was asleep, and that's when he let himself in and forcibly pushed her on the bed."

According to reports from Next Door Solutions, a San Jose agency that helps survivors of rape and domestic violence, the victim did not report the incident for three weeks, fearing reprisal if she reported the crime. She chose to report the rape to the California Highway Patrol and not San Jose police, highlighting the growing social problem of reporting rape to police when officers are involved.

Kathleen Krenek, executive director of Next Door Solutions, said this is common in many rape cases, where fears of further violence play a key role in whether a woman reports the incident.

Statistics concerning sexual crimes by police against women are hard to come by, but the recent surge in incidents has left many questioning whether police departments are sending a strong enough signal over "improper" behavior while on

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Sanchez was on paid leave from the time the report of rape occurred until he was arrested in July 2013, leaving many women's rights organizations and activists questioning the role of police in investigating and holding its officers responsible for crimes committed on the job.



The Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department did not comment on Sanchez's current status with the force when questioned as to whether he had been officially fired from his position following the felony conviction, saying they would not comment on the case until a later date. Normally, police officials said, a felony conviction is the basis for dismissal.

The San Jose Police Department is also embroiled in controversy because Graves, who turned himself in on March 10 and

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was released the next day on \$100,000 bail, also continues to receive paid leave while the investigation continues.

"This is difficult for everybody because it reflects on our job and what we do every day, so I know that the officers are troubled by it," said San Jose police spokesperson Sgt. Heather Randol. "But we are resilient, and we have been through other hard times, and we've pulled together to rebuild the trust of the community, and that's what we're going to work on doing."

The two cases have put the specter of rape and sexual violence by police at the forefront of conversations in California, with many women coming forward to demand more justice for victims of police abuse of power.

Maria Jesus Gomez, 22, a cashier at a Bay Area Safeway, said that she narrowly avoided being assaulted by a Bay Area police officer earlier this year as she was walking home from work late one evening.

"I was walking home in my quiet neighborhood when a police officer pulled up and demanded that I get in the vehicle or face arrest," she said. "I immediately began running away from the officer and hid behind a home until he left. I didn't know what to do."

She added that she did not report the intimidation and feels that other women in the area face similar abuse by police, who she said "go after the immigrant women because we are more vulnerable than others and don't have the means to fight back."

Fighting back is key, say observers and organizations working with sexual violence survivors. If those who are supposed to be protecting women from violence are the ones perpetrating the crimes, it makes reporting much more difficult.

"I think a lot of people in so-called developed countries do not give rape and sexual violence enough thought," said a former UN Women official now working as a consultant in the San Francisco Bay Area and who spoke on condition of anonymity. "What we are witnessing here in California and elsewhere across the country is a floundering of media reporting and discussion on the role of authority and sexual violence. The two are linked here in the U.S. and abroad. It is time that we as a society accept this and start to make efforts to criminalize to the fullest these perpetrators as a sign that there is no place for rape or abuse."