

A New Report Shows How Often Cops Sexually Assault Civilians | VICE | United States

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2015 Rapist cops In America



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By now, most Americans know the country has a glaring problem with police brutality and excessive force, especially against people of color. Virtually every week, a new video emerges of an unarmed black person being roughed up by cops under questionable circumstances. And one of the worst things about this dire state of affairs is that, at least until a few news organizations began trying to track police killings recently, we have no comprehensive database of the tragedies.

If that weren't enough, the United States is also plagued by an even less visible scourge of cops abusing their power to coerce sex from vulnerable citizens, according to a year-long Associated Press investigation released this week.

At an annual gathering of police chiefs in 2007, nearly all of the 70 department heads present raised their hands when asked if they'd had to deal with sexual misconduct. A task force was formed to look into the problem, but it doesn't seem to have stamped out sex assault by any means: The AP pulled records from 41 states from 2009 to 2014 and was able to see just how rampant sexual misconduct is in departments across the country.

The picture the news organization paints is not a pretty one.

The AP focused on officers who'd faced decertification—"an administrative process in which an officer's law enforcement license is revoked"—for sexual misconduct. The findings suggest a problem that spans the country; 1,000 officers were stripped of their badges in that time due to sexual misconduct, which encompasses a whole host of wrongdoing like sexual contact without consent, sodomy, child molestation, incest, fondling, rape or attempted rape, and sexting juveniles, among other perverted—and often illegal—acts.

More sobering still is that these numbers don't represent all cases: Nine states and the District of Columbia either don't decertify officers or wouldn't turn over info to the AP.

"It's happening probably in every law enforcement agency across the country," Chief Bernadette DiPino of the Sarasota Police Department in Florida told the AP. She helped study the problem

for the International Association of Chiefs of Police. "It's so underreported and people are scared that if they call and complain about a police officer, they think every other police officer is going to be then out to get them."

One of the worst cases detailed by the AP centers on an officer named Sergio Alvarez of West Sacramento, who allegedly abused his power over a period of years, raping his victims or forcing them to perform oral sex on him in a darkened alleyway behind a strip mall. His victims were marginalized and voiceless: addicts, prostitutes, and the mentally ill. He's currently in prison, but the report suggests there are likely plenty others like him who have avoided any accountability.

Former officer Daniel Holtzclaw in Oklahoma City is another repeat offender, according to the report. He is accused by 13 women of sexual assault ranging from forced oral sex to rape, and faces them all in a court case that began Monday. Among his accusers is a woman named in police reports as "J.L.," who describes a routine traffic stop that ended in forced oral sex and the fear that Holtzclaw was going to kill her. "Come on," he allegedly told her after forcing her into the back seat of his car and exposing himself. "I don't have all night."

In a report issued by the Department of Justice in March that blasted the San Diego Police Department for its failures, the feds seemed to get at practical steps that might help reduce future wrongdoing. That department's officers lacked proper supervision, a result of recent budget cuts and staffing problems. After said cuts, nearly a quarter of sergeant positions had been filled with officers who "lacked the training and authority of their predecessors," the AP wrote.

At times, sergeants didn't work the same shifts as the officers they supervised or saw their subordinates infrequently, "creating an environment more vulnerable to undetected misconduct," the report said.

San Diego saw the hiring of a new police chief, Shelley Zimmerman, in March 2014. She's committed to turning the department around, and is now requiring patrol officers to wear body cameras. Overall complaints have dropped 23 percent in three divisions where officers began wearing the cameras in July 2014, she told the AP.

Tom McDonald, the new chief in West Sacramento who came on board after the Alvarez case, is taking his own steps to help weed out officers he calls "bad actors" within his force. He's mandated that all cars have functional GPS systems, for one, and made sergeants in his department directly responsible for the supervision of police on the street, mandating they show up to help with arrests, among other sensible steps.

Perhaps the most depressing thing about all of this is that it seems like often, the only way cops are brought to justice is when fellow officers police them. Victims reportedly fear a good ole boy network—often called the blue shield or blue wall of silence—that operates in the most corrupt departments. The blue shield is usually discussed in the context of traditional police brutality, where officers don't report misconduct when they see it, but it's hard to imagine the same kind of shady shit isn't going on when it comes to sexual assault.

Still, it was a colleague of Alvarez's, patrol officer Jason Mahaffey, who brought him down, reporting an allegation of misconduct against the cop to his superiors. Alvarez, who is appealing his sentence, is set to serve 205 years to life in prison. The West Sacramento Police Department has paid out \$4.1 million in public funds to six of his victims.

Bleak as it sounds, cops refusing to turn a blind eye is the surest way to get this disaster under control. "They need to understand that it's an expectation that if they see something that's inappropriate, they need to stand up," McDonald said.

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