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Oakland police scandal: How often are cops having sex with prostitutes?

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OAKLAND >> As the Oakland police sexual misconduct scandal reverberates across the nation, it may underscore a reality among law enforcement workers that has largely been hidden from public view — there's a long history of cops having sex with prostitutes and engaging in other illegal or unethical sexual behavior that runs counter to their responsibility to enforce the law and protect victims of sex crimes.

Over the last two decades, several law enforcement officers from Oakland and other Bay Area agencies have solicited prostitutes, sexually harassed crime victims or forced them to have sex, according to a review of lawsuits, news accounts and interviews with attorneys, criminal justice experts and sex workers.

The sex misconduct scandal that started with Oakland police has quickly spiraled across the East Bay as a teenager claims she's had sex with more than two dozen officers from multiple departments, some while she was underage, which would make her a victim of sex trafficking and statutory rape. She said that she was paid for some of those encounters.

While there are no hard data that soliciting prostitution and other sexual misconduct are more prevalent in law enforcement than in other lines of work, experts on police department malfeasance have found that testosterone, power, a culture of silence and lack of career supervision contribute to an environment that enables such behavior. They call it a serious problem among agencies across the country, one that jeopardizes any gains law enforcement hopes to make against illegal sex trafficking.

"It is impossible to fight the sex trade if you are participating in it," said Penny Harrington, the former Portland, Oregon, police chief and board chairwoman of the National Center for Women and Policing. "Men in uniform who feel that it is fine to utilize the services of prostitutes, first of all, should not be in uniform, and secondly, cannot possibly deal with the issues of human trafficking or drug dealing or abuse of women because they believe that it is OK to participate in all of that."

The issue was considered so serious that in 2011 the International Association of Chiefs of Police drafted a report recommending that departments create written sexual misconduct policies to stem the frequency of sexual assault and harassment within law enforcement.

Few departments have followed the recommendations, experts say. The only relevant Oakland policy in its employee manual involving sex and residents is the prohibition of sex while on duty.

Even that basic tenet has been violated, according to lawsuits, reported crimes and the young woman at the center of the Oakland scandal who goes by the name Celeste Guap. The allegations have led to the departure of three police chiefs, retirements and suspensions of several officers, and multiple criminal investigations.

“This is not unique to Oakland. What I’ve learned is some departments are more problematic than others ... and some units within a department are more problematic than others,” said Tim Maher, a criminologist at the University of Missouri-St. Louis and a leading expert on police sexual misconduct. “Sexual misconduct has been a problem for a long, long time, and it continues to be a problem.”

Former Oakland police Chief Howard Jordan said that in his 25 years with the department he can recall six officers fired or prosecuted for their involvement with prostitutes.

“Those are just a small fraction of the people that are out there doing their work,” Jordan said. “99.99 percent of them are doing an honest job under very difficult circumstances. They are just as embarrassed and ashamed of the few officers that are tarnishing the badge.”

CLIENTS

Jo Violet says she runs an East Bay escort agency with a dozen law enforcement officers as clients, even two mayors. The 48-year-old, who goes by her activist name and lobbies for the legalization of prostitution, said half of the sex workers she knows have a cop or law enforcement member as a client, and she’s had judges and prosecutors use her services.

“It’s a very, very common thing. They often tell you up front that they are a cop to calm you down and say, ‘Look we’re not here to arrest you,’” Violet said. “They are just normal human beings.”

One 33-year-old San Leandro sex worker — who advertises her services on Backpage.com, a site popular with prostitutes — said her clients include police, federal agents, an internal affairs officer and members of district attorneys’ offices.

“Whether they wear a badge or a construction uniform, the money is the same,” she said, estimating she can make \$1,000 a day from her hotel room.

Even when officers are purportedly enforcing sex laws, the interactions can be inappropriate, some say. Jane, a Bay Area sex worker, said she got caught in a 2007 sting operation by a Bay Area police agency, and a group of officers ogled her as she was naked, commenting on her looks, calling her the “best one so far” and saying she reminded them of the girl from the movie “Flashdance.”

From a neighboring room, she said she watched on the police hidden camera as an officer performed oral sex on the next prostitute who entered the sting room.

“It was disgusting. I was appalled,” she said, of the officer’s conduct. “And this is routine in sting operations for there to be sexual contact.”

OAKLAND LEGACY

Long before Guap told her story, Oakland police had garnered headlines for sex misconduct.

- One of the more egregious cases involved Oakland officer Gary Romero. A prostitute named Rory Keller-Dean filed a lawsuit in 2000 alleging Romero forced her to repeatedly engage in sex with him during a two-year period, sometimes in Romero's patrol car and other times at her home in the presence of her elementary school-aged daughter. Once, she said, Romero forced her to perform oral sex on other officers.

She said she complied with Romero's demands because he threatened to have her daughter taken away, but finally decided to report him. When the city settled the lawsuit in 2002 for \$350,000, it acknowledged many of Keller-Dean's allegations were true.

Romero, who was fired in 2000, admitted to having sex with the woman but said it was consensual and off duty. He was never prosecuted.

Keller-Dean, who left sex work behind long ago, said she came forward to retell her story to show support for Guap.

"I saw it on the news and it made me sick," Keller-Dean said in a recent interview. "It's never gonna end. It'll never stop. They've got to arrest somebody."

- In 2002, narcotics officers Mark Neely Jr. and Eric Richholt were on-duty when caught soliciting prostitutes working in a San Leandro brothel. The sex workers were actually undercover sheriff's deputies and the Oakland officers later pleaded no contest to a misdemeanor charge of soliciting an act of prostitution.

And it's not just Oakland.

- In Contra Costa, the head of a drug enforcement task force, Norm Wielsch, was convicted in 2013 of robbing prostitutes and accused of running a Pleasant Hill brothel. He claimed his ex-cop partner blackmailed him with a purported sex tape of Wielsch and a prostitute.

- In Kensington, former Sgt. Keith Barrow had his gun, badge, handcuffs and wallet stolen last year after sleeping with a prostitute in Reno. Barrow continues working for the department but was demoted for other infractions.

- Menlo Park police detective Jeffrey Kenneth Vasquez was arrested in Sunnyvale in January 2013 after being caught naked in a Motel 6 with a prostitute. Officers opened a door to the room and found a woman dressed in a black cat suit, while Vasquez was found on his knees nude in the bathroom floor, according to police. Vasquez told police he had an "hour to kill" before serving a subpoena, and it wasn't his first time soliciting a prostitute, according to police.

- Hayward police Sgt. Michael Beal was charged with nine felonies in April 2015 for scamming a mentally ill woman out of a half-million dollars starting six years before he retired from the department. The woman, whom he arrested in 2002 in a prostitution sting, gave him more than \$450,000 between 2007 and 2015. She also provided "sexual favors" to Beal in his police car while on duty, according to court documents.

In January, Bowling Green State University in Ohio professors released a study that found 1,475 cases nationwide where officers were arrested for sex-related crimes from 2005 to 2011. All but

eight of those cases involved male officers. A 2010 Cato Institute report determined sex misconduct as the second-highest complaint against officers, behind excessive force.

‘THE MACHO MALE’

While most officers do not commit sexual misconduct, Harrington said the problem is “prevalent” in agencies, and it starts with poor screening by departments. Once on the force, if rookie officers’ supervisors turn a blind eye to inappropriate behavior, “they’re giving tacit approval,” she said.

Harrington, who has worked with police and fire agencies to combat sex misconduct, said Oakland needs a new outside chief, preferably female, and a written policy that holds supervisors accountable for rank-and-file actions.

Mayor Libby Schaaf has an opportunity, she said.

“She could set an example for the entire nation because no one is dealing with this at all.”