

What the DOJ's Report on Baltimore Teaches Us About Cops, Sex Workers, and Corruption

By Ethan Brown

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One of the most revealing and least examined aspects of the Department of Justice's recent report on the Baltimore Police Department was evidence that officers coerced sexual favors from sex workers, sometimes in exchange for immunity from arrest. These revelations confirm what sex workers themselves have long maintained: that law enforcement often does not protect, but rather victimizes their community. (In a 2010 study, the Cato Institute found that sexual misconduct committed by law enforcement was the second most common form of misconduct.) "For every sex worker 'rescued' by LE [law enforcement]," wrote a commenter in June on Tits and Sass, a group blog run by sex workers, "another one is arrested by LE, or trapped in an LE-sponsored diversion program, or coerced by LE, or literally pimped out by LE."

This same dynamic played out this summer in a scandal involving the Oakland Police Department; a teenage sex worker known as Celeste Guap claimed that at least three Oakland police officers sexually exploited her when she was underage, and that she traded sex for protection and information from the police. Guap told CNN that she had relationships with as many as 28 officers from law enforcement agencies ranging from the Oakland to the Alameda County Sheriff's Office (her claims are currently being investigated). In an unrelated controversy, an Alameda County sheriff's deputy, who has also been connected to Guap, faces termination for violating a restraining order filed by his wife after he allegedly warned her that he would "have her killed and fed to pigs if she ever did or said anything to hurt his job as a deputy."

Beyond the allegations themselves, what's also striking is that the abuse is taking place in a police department already mired in deep misconduct. The Baltimore Police Department is entering into a consent decree with the Department of Justice because of its pattern and practice of unconstitutional policing, and the Oakland Police Department has been under a consent decree since 2003 after a lawsuit was brought on behalf of African-American residents who said that the police systematically violated their rights.

For the past five years, I have been investigating a 2005 case involving eight murdered sex workers in Jefferson Davis Parish, Louisiana. In late 2008, a task force, comprised of local, state, and federal agencies, was created to investigate these unsolved murders — known as the "Jeff Davis 8." In interviews with the task force, several witnesses said that members of law enforcement paid for sex with the victims; that sex workers negotiated their release from the parish jail by engaging in sexual activity with at least one high-ranking jail official; and that one sheriff's deputy (now deceased) drove through an area in the parish seat (Jennings) to hire sex workers. That same deputy was even seen picking up some of the Jeff 8 victims. He was named as a suspect in the killings by at least nine of the task force's own witnesses. Relatives of the Jeff Davis 8, meanwhile, told me that the slain women often provided information about criminal activity in exchange for protection or drugs from cops.

These allegations of sexual misconduct in Jefferson Davis Parish have gone largely unpunished, just as they have in Baltimore. In the early 2000s, before the Jeff Davis 8 murders began, a culture of impunity was so pervasive in Jennings that several female officers sued the police department in federal court. One officer claimed that the police chief at the time forced her to videotape her nipples getting pierced and then played the footage for others. A police captain allegedly told a female cop, "You know I like to lick pussy, I can numb it all night," and then demonstrated the sexual act with his mouth. The same captain was alleged to have driven a young female officer to a dead-end road in his patrol car where he threatened to rape her. "You know what I want," he said, "it's time to prove yourself." A female prisoner, meanwhile, said that she performed oral sex on this captain to get the position of cook in the jail. The case was settled in 2007, and the terms of the settlement have not been made public.

What the scandals in Baltimore, Oakland, and Jefferson Davis Parish demonstrate is that sexual misconduct and abuse of sex workers can be indicative of a culture of corruption, and is just as persistent as the more widely publicized issue of racially biased policing. It should come as no surprise that the same police department that abuses sex workers does not take crimes, in which women are victims, seriously. According to the DOJ report on Baltimore, fewer than one in four rape investigations result in the arrest of a suspect, a rate about half of the national average. "In homicide, there are real victims," one Baltimore sex crimes investigator told the DOJ. "All our cases are bullshit."

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