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Black residents in Marin County complain about police abuse

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Black residents in Marin County, known for its wealth and progressive politics, claim that they're unfairly targeted by authorities, alleging that police routinely stop, handcuff and manhandle blacks to train young officers.

Residents and officials here want to form a citizen review board to investigate complaints of police abuse of minorities throughout Marin County, which has one of the state's highest median household incomes.

Marin County's population of 250,000 residents is predominantly white. Blacks as a percentage of the population fell from 3.5 percent to 2.9 percent from 1990 to 2000, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

At a recent hearing of the county's Human Rights Commission, about a dozen people, many of them black, said they had been harassed or arrested by county authorities. Most of the complaints came from Marin City, an unincorporated community between Mill Valley and Sausalito that's home to many of the county's black residents.

"You can almost be guaranteed if you're a person of color in Mill Valley that you'll be stopped at one time or another," Raphael Durr, chair of the commission's law enforcement committee, told the San Francisco Chronicle.

But the Marin County Sheriff's Department, which has law enforcement jurisdiction in Marin City, denied claims that deputies target minorities, according to sheriff's Sgt. Mike Crane. He did say, however, that Marin City is used as a training area for new deputies.

"Marin City has the most activity and calls for service," Crane said. "We are not harassing people, we're responding to calls for service."

Kerry Pierson, a black resident of Mill Valley and a member of the county Human Rights Commission, said he was stopped in November while walking home, questioned and thrown in jail. He said he was arrested for public intoxication but was never actually charged, calling it part of a pattern he has experienced over the years.

Mill Valley police Capt. Angel Bernal denied Pierson's specific complaint and the broader charges raised at last month's hearing. Bernal said the department gets only a handful of complaints each year, and denied any pattern of abuse or targeting of minority residents.

"We look into all of the complaints thoroughly," Bernal said. "I'm Hispanic myself, and I would not condone any type of bias based on someone's race or ethnicity or sex."

Information from: San Francisco Chronicle,

www.sfgate.com/chronicle

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