

# **Community Concerns About Law Enforcement in Sonoma County**

**California Advisory Committee to  
the United States Commission on Civil Rights**

**December 1999**

**This factfinding report of the California Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights was prepared for the information and consideration of the Commission. Statements and viewpoints in this report should not be attributed to the Commission, but only to the Advisory Committee.**

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## **Letter of Transmittal**

California Advisory Committee to  
the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights

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Attached is a report from the California Advisory Committee based upon a factfinding meeting convened February 20, 1998, in Santa Rosa, the county seat of Sonoma County. Commission Vice Chairperson Cruz Reynoso and Commission member Yvonne Y. Lee joined the California Advisory Committee in this effort to collect information on the concerns of citizens of Sonoma County regarding law enforcement practices and allegations of excessive use of deadly force.

In the period April 1, 1995, through September 27, 1997, law enforcement officers within the county shot and killed eight citizens, and all were found by the Sonoma County District Attorney's Office to be justifiable homicide. Citizens alleged that meetings with elected and public officials and law enforcement executives to discuss their concerns and pleas for reform only increased frustration. They alleged that officials were unresponsive and offered denials that a problem existed.

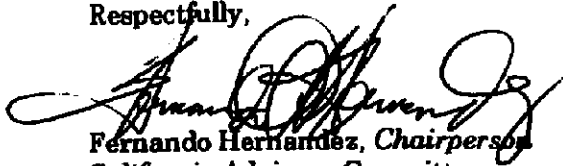
Demographically, Sonoma County is undergoing dramatic change which affects its agrarian, small town atmosphere. In addition, minority populations have increased. The county has a sheriff's department and nine local law enforcement jurisdictions. While noting that the allegations were leveled mainly at the Sonoma County Sheriff's Department, Santa Rosa Police Department, and Rohnert Park's Department of Public Safety, the broad scope of the community's allegations included smaller departments as well. The Advisory Committee found a highly polarized and charged atmosphere in respect to police-community relations. Distrust and fear of law enforcement by the community were countered by law enforcement belief that citizens did not understand the realities of modern policing. Community representatives spoke of the need for diversity training for officers, options other than the use of deadly force in critical incidents, and greater sensitivity when dealing with domestic violence and suspects who may be experiencing a psychiatric episode or are under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

The Advisory Committee heard frequent requests for the creation of civilian or citizen review boards or commissions as a potential avenue for redress of the problems confronting the community. While not opposed to such review boards, law enforcement executives questioned the need and were concerned about the parameters of such an entity. They noted that the Sonoma County Law Enforcement Chiefs Association was studying the issue and was considering a number of alternatives. The community alleged they were kept out of the Chiefs Association's discussions on the matter, which only added to the level of mistrust and frustration. The Advisory Committee believes each municipality will have to decide whether it requires a citizens review board, but believes that such boards should be implemented in Rohnert Park, Santa Rosa, and for the county sheriff.

The Advisory Committee appreciates the voluntary cooperation of many law enforcement officers, county and city officials, and community representatives who participated in this effort. It believes the report will assist in the dialogue necessary to effect the law enforcement reform the community seeks and to apprise police executives of the concerns of the people they are entrusted to protect and serve.

By a vote of 13-0, the Advisory Committee approved submission of this report to the Commission. The Advisory Committee notes that this document will add to the Commission's body of work on police-community relations issues and hopes that it will not only prove of value to the Commission as it continues its efforts to promote civil rights, but also assist the communities of Sonoma County in their quest for good governance.

Respectfully,



Fernando Hernandez, *Chairperson*  
California Advisory Committee

## **California Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights**

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Sacramento

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**Rachel Von Emon\***  
Sunnyvale

\*No longer a member of the Advisory Committee.

### **Acknowledgments**

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# Contents

<b>I. Introduction</b> .....	<b>1</b>
Demographics.....	3
Advisory Committee .....	4
<b>II. Community Concerns</b> .....	<b>6</b>
Use of Deadly Force .....	6
Accountability.....	11
Complaint Handling .....	14
Domestic Violence .....	17
Lack of Gender and Ethnic Diversity .....	19
Training.....	20
Review Board .....	23
<b>III. Law Enforcement Departments</b> .....	<b>28</b>
Cloverdale.....	29
Cotati .....	29
Healdsburg .....	30
Petaluma.....	32
Rohnert Park .....	33
Santa Rosa.....	35
Sebastopol.....	42
Sonoma .....	45
Windsor.....	47
Sonoma County Sheriff's Department.....	47
<b>IV. Conclusion</b> .....	<b>54</b>
<b>V. Recommendations</b> .....	<b>56</b>
<b>Appendices</b>	
A Observations on the Forum by Commissioner Yvonne Lee .....	59
B Police Abuse: Can We Change the Culture? by Vice Chair Cruz Reynoso.....	60

## Tables

1	Rohnert Park Department of Public Safety, Citizen Complaints Against Police Officers, 1993-97 .....	35
2	Santa Rosa Police Department, 5-year Gender/Ethnicity Composition, Sworn Personnel .....	38
3	Santa Rosa Police Department, 5-year Gender/Ethnicity Composition, Civilian Personnel.....	38
4	Santa Rosa Police Department, Disorderly Conduct/Resisting Arrest—Adults, July-December 1997 .....	40
5	Santa Rosa Police Department, Disorderly Conduct/Resisting Arrest—Juveniles, July-December 1997 .....	40
6	Citizen Complaints, Santa Rosa Police Department, 1993-97 .....	40
7	Santa Rosa Police Department, Sustained Complaints and Disposition, 1993-97 .....	42
8	Diversity Breakdown of Sworn Personnel, Sonoma County Sheriff's Department, February 1998.....	48
9	Diversity Breakdown of the Correctional Personnel, Sonoma County Sheriff's Department, February 1998.....	48
10	Citizen Calls for Service and Complaints Against Sheriff Deputies, 1993-97 .....	48