

# Suburban cops target blacks — NAACP head

By Pat Murphy  
staff writer

Could the Rodney King incident in Los Angeles happen in the Detroit area?

Robert L. Willis, vice president of the South Oakland chapter of the NAACP, claims suburban police treat blacks and minorities differently than whites.

Willis, a Southfield resident, said police are more watchful of black drivers and, consequently, issue more tickets to them. "They even have code phrases in radio communications. They'll radio to each other 'BIL,' meaning 'Black in Livonia.'"

And, as long as there is discriminatory treatment, the potential exists for violence, Willis says.

Michigan has had cases of police using excessive force before, said John Roy Castillo, director of the

Michigan Civil Rights Commission. Last summer, for example, law officers in the Benton Harbor area shot and killed a man who ran from a house and failed to heed the officer's order to halt.

"But we've never had anything like that incident in L.A.," Castillo said Friday, "particularly in the Detroit area."

"But then, we might not find out about it."

CASTILLO HAS been head of the civil rights commission for almost six years and was a deputy director and the department's legislative liaison prior to that.

In Michigan a person can complain about police actions in numerous ways. Besides contacting the Civil Rights Commission, he or she can contact agencies such as the American Civil Liberties Union or

the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

They can also complain directly to the police agency involved or its host community. "Or they can go directly to court," Castillo said.

Would we know if something as blatant as the Rodney King incident had happened locally?

"Whether or not anybody found out about it might depend on who was assaulted and who, if anybody, witnessed it," said Reginald Lewis, the civil rights department's community service representative in western Wayne County.

"Most police encounters aren't tape-recorded," he said, referring to the fact that the King beating was videotaped by a bystander using a camcorder.

"Something like that could definitely happen here. Anything's possible."

JERRY TOBIN, Southfield public safety director, agreed. But for

some what different reasons. "Something like that could happen in any department in the United States," said Tobin, whose 38-year

law enforcement career includes stints in Birmingham, West Bloomfield Township and the Michigan Attorney General's office.

The prevalence of guns and drugs — most specifically crack cocaine — makes for some very tense arrests, Tobin said. The drugs and guns give the violator a sense of power and aggressiveness while at the same time making law enforcement

officers more apprehensive.

The answer, Tobin said, is sensitivity training within the department and a code of discipline. "Everybody has to realize there are rules and policies concerning physical force," he explained. "And everybody has to realize there will be problems if those rules and policies are violated."

THE RECORD that exists seems indicate, however, that complaints of excessive force by police are infrequent and in most cases are dismissed for lack of probable cause.

Either that excessive force was used, or that it was causally linked to race.

Livonia, for example, had five complaints of excessive police violence from September 1979 to the present, according to the Michigan Department of Civil Rights.

All but two were dismissed after the department investigated and determined there was no probable cause to conclude there was violence or that it was related to race, said William J. Holmes, the department's assistant director of enforcement.

A determination of "no probable cause" means there is not enough evidence to conclude that excessive force was used, he said. "But that could mean it never happened, or that nobody could prove it happened."

Two of those cases in Livonia were withdrawn from the jurisdiction of the Civil Rights Department after the person involved decided to

take the case into civil court, Holmes said. "I don't know what happened after that."

The Wayne County Sheriff's Department has had three similar complaints during that same 12-year period, according to state records.

One was dismissed because of a lack of evidence, or no probable cause. Two cases were withdrawn after the complainants withdrew their complaints to pursue them in civil court.

Again, state records do not reflect the outcome of those cases.

In January 1989 a black male complained that Garden City police used excessive force in dealing with him. That complaint was dismissed about a month later, again after the civil rights department ruled there was no probable cause to believe the allegations occurred.

IN OAKLAND COUNTY, the City of Southfield had five complaints of excessive police force over the last 12 years, according to state records. All were dismissed or withdrawn.

Birmingham had one complaint of excessive force. That too, was dismissed after the civil rights official determined there was no probable cause to justify further action.

Castillo, head of the civil rights department, cautioned against reading too much into incomplete records.

"We all know that anything can happen," he said. "But so far, we know nothing has happened here that even approaches the King case in Los Angeles."

"I believe police departments are more sensitive to the rights of individuals as well as to the possibility of getting caught."

**"Whether or not anybody found out about it might depend on who was assaulted and who, if anybody, witnessed it."**

— Reginald Lewis  
Michigan Civil Rights Department

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