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Jury finds 2 LAPD detectives negligent in witness' death

The 16-year-old girl was killed outside her home in 2003 after the officers -- as part of a ruse -- falsely told a gang member that she had implicated him in a murder.

By Victoria Kim

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A federal jury has found that two Los Angeles Police Department detectives were negligent and violated a teenage girl's constitutional rights when -- as part of a ruse -- they falsely told a gang member that she had implicated him in a murder.

After the detectives' ploy, the suspect arranged to have the girl killed, according to police records and a lawsuit filed by girl's family.

Jurors this week found that LAPD Dets. Martin Pinner and Juan Rodriguez acted maliciously and recklessly but also determined that the 16-year-old girl, Martha Puebla, and her parents were also at fault.

In the end, the eight-member panel awarded no money to Puebla's family. Jurors said Puebla and her parents were 80% responsible for her death and the detectives were 20% at fault.

After the verdict, U.S. District Judge Christina Snyder awarded \$1 in nominal damages to the family for the constitutional violations.

An attorney for the city argued during the three-week trial that Puebla and her family were advised by a prosecutor of the danger she faced and offered a witness relocation program but turned it down. The family's attorneys contended that the family was not offered any protection or relocation.

The detectives' ruse and Puebla's death were detailed in a Times investigation in 2008. After the article was published, LAPD officials said its detectives would receive clear instructions on how to balance investigative techniques with the need to protect witnesses.

The chain of events leading to Puebla's death began in November 2002 when a man was killed in a car outside her Sun Valley home.

In trying to get Jose Ledesma, a member of the Vineland Boyz gang, to admit to the killing, Pinner and Rodriguez showed him a "six-pack" photo array with a circle around his mug shot, a fake signature and a statement from Puebla.

The next day, Ledesma called a friend from a jail pay phone and told him he needed Puebla to disappear because she was "dropping dimes." The call was recorded by police, but detectives didn't listen to the recording in full until much later. Puebla was shot and killed on a curb outside her home in May 2003.

"Martha Puebla was murdered because the LAPD put a bull's-eye on her back by telling a gang member . . . that she was a snitch," said Benjamin Schonbrun, the family's attorney.

But Deputy City Atty. Elizabeth Fitzgerald said it was Puebla's testimony at Ledesma's preliminary hearing, not the detectives' interrogation, that led to the girl's murder.

Fitzgerald said even though Puebla did not identify Ledesma as the killer, she testified to other information, such as his gang affiliation, that would have led to retaliation by the gang.

Puebla began receiving death threats after she took the stand and was killed 12 days later, Fitzgerald said.

"I don't think the plaintiffs proved causation. The detectives' interview took place a full six months before Martha Puebla was murdered," she said.