

L.A. Jury Awards Teacher \$18 Million For False Arrest

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A federal jury awarded \$18 million to a teacher who claimed a sheriff's detective falsely accused him of kidnapping and assaulting a girl and hid evidence that would have exonerated him.

Wednesday's award was the largest ever against the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department. The jury could decide that plaintiff Raul Ramirez deserves more money when the trial enters its punitive phase Thursday.

Because the county is not insured, the award, if upheld, would be paid by the department at a time when Sheriff Lee Baca is complaining that underfunding is forcing him to release jail inmates early and preventing him from placing enough deputies in jails to improve security.

Ramirez, 29, a teacher at Charles R. Drew Middle School in Compton, was arrested after a student there identified him as the man who kidnapped her at gunpoint in May 2002 as she waited for a bus, drove her to another location and demanded that she perform a sex act. The 16-year-old girl managed to escape.

A jury found Ramirez not guilty after he produced ATM receipts and cell phone records showing he was miles from the scene when the crime occurred. A judge later made the rare finding that he was "factually innocent."

Ramirez, of Bellflower, then sued the Sheriff's Department, alleging that Detective Frank Bravo built a false case against him.

According to Ramirez's federal complaint, Bravo knew Ramirez did not match the victim's description of her assailant but withheld that information until just before trial. Ramirez's attorney also alleged Bravo did not disclose the existence of the girl's backpack, which did not bear Ramirez's fingerprints.

Bravo "arrested Mr. Ramirez and basically shattered his life based on the unreliable eyewitness identification of a teenage girl who was mistaken," said Ramirez's attorney, Michael Artan. "Then he hid evidence that would have exonerated Mr. Ramirez."

Bravo, a 20-year veteran assigned to the Century Station in Lynwood, could not be reached for comment by the Los Angeles Times.

Assistant County Counsel Roger Granbo said the county was disappointed by the verdict. Sheriff's officials believed they were not liable because prosecutors thought the case against Ramirez had merit, he said.

"The district attorney knew the problems with the case and the positive aspects and made an independent decision to prosecute," Granbo said.

The largest previous award against the sheriff's department was \$15.9 million, which a jury ordered paid to 36 people who had been arrested at a Cerritos bridal shower six years earlier.