



CALIFORNIA

Video shows L.A. probation officers letting group beat teen in Los Padrinos juvenile hall



Footage obtained by the L.A. Times shows a December 2023 incident in which staffers can be seen allowing at least six youths to hit and kick a 17-year-old.

By James Queally and Rebecca Ellis

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Several L.A. County probation officers stood by as at least six youths assaulted a 17-year-old inside Los Padrinos juvenile hall in December, with some officers appearing to laugh and shake hands with the assailants as the beating progressed, according to footage obtained by The Times.

The video shows a teen sustaining punches and kicks from a series of youths in a “day room” inside the Downey facility. On more than one occasion, the victim falls to the ground while officers do little to stop the violence. At one point in the video, a female probation officer steps out of the way as a youth charges the victim and delivers a running kick.

The videos raise the question of whether the violence was coordinated. Each youth attacks the 17-year-old for a few seconds before returning calmly to breakfast.

The video was first made public during a court hearing in Sylmar Thursday morning, when the 17-year-old’s attorney asked a judge to have her client released ahead of his criminal trial, arguing that he is not safe at Los Padrinos. The Times obtained a copy of the video hours later.

The 17-year-old sustained a broken nose, his public defender, Sherrie Albin, said in court Thursday. Probation officers did not take the teen to receive medical treatment for several days, Albin said.

The video led the probation department [to suspend eight officers in January](#), but the agency has declined to answer any questions about the incident. Sources who requested anonymity because they were not authorized to speak publicly told The Times in January that the officers were suspended for failing to intervene in a fight.

A probation department spokesperson said Chief Guillermo Viera Rosa “took immediate action upon learning of the incident and observing the footage.” The spokesperson would not comment on the status of the suspended officers. The video has been shared with the L.A. County office of the inspector general, the spokesperson said.

The roughly six-minute clip shows youths eating in a room filled with Christmas decorations on the morning of Dec. 22, 2023. But things quickly turn violent when a youth charges the 17-year-old and throws several punches at his head. After about 15

seconds, the fight stops and the youth who initiated the attack sits down to eat. Four probation officers standing around the perimeter of the room can be seen watching and do nothing to intercede.

As the 17-year-old paces and wipes at his face, another youth runs into the room and unleashes a flurry of punches, knocking him down and kicking him in the head as a female probation officer standing nearby appears to check the time on her watch.

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“She’s allowing it,” the 17-year-old’s mother said through a Spanish interpreter in the Sylmar courtroom as the video was playing.

The probation officer who appears to be in charge in the video was identified in court as Taneha Brooks. Los Angeles County Superior Court Judge Sandy Ser did not allow Albin to question Brooks during the Thursday hearing. Brooks left the building before a Times reporter could approach her for comment and she did not immediately respond to messages sent on LinkedIn and Facebook that appeared to belong to her.

Albin said it was “clear in the video that Deputy Brooks is laughing,” during the beatings.

The video stands in stark contrast to Brooks' own report of the incident. In a Dec. 22 special incident report, reviewed by The Times, Brooks wrote that she was the only deputy present at 8:20 a.m. when youths from two different gangs began fighting. She wrote that the youths continued to fight after she gave a "verbal command ... to stop fighting." The youths complied after a "second verbal command."

Brooks wrote that the same pattern — youths from different gangs fighting the teen and stopping after she gave them two warnings — played out seven more times over breakfast.

As the video continues, one youth after another approach the 17-year-old and wrestle with or punch him. As the teen crumples to the ground under a series of punches, a second probation officer can be seen shaking hands with one of the previous attackers and smiling.

That probation officer was identified in court as Shawn Smyles. He could not immediately be reached for comment. Both Brooks and Smyles have been with the agency for over a decade, according to the county's public employee database

"This case is just a microcosm of the bigger problem—a failure of the Los Angeles County Probation Department to protect our children," attorney Jamal Tooson, who is representing the family, said in a statement Thursday. "Regrettably, some who have sworn to safeguard these minors have instead become agents of brutal violence."

Each brawl happens one at a time, with some youths charging the teen as soon as they enter the room. The 17-year-old stands his ground and punches and shoves in self-defense on multiple occasions, and the officers make no attempt to escort him out.

As the video ends, the attacking youths are allowed to leave the room without incident. The 17-year-old eventually sits down at a table. No one immediately checks to see if he's injured.

In court Thursday, Albin said Brooks “instigated” the incident, claiming the officer told the assailants that the 17-year-old was a racist based on his gang affiliations and where he lives. All of the assailants were Black, and the 17-year-old is Latino. Albin said Brooks “picked my client out and told the youths he was racist” on Thursday.

In his notice of claim against L.A. County, which is a prelude to a lawsuit, Tooson said the officers “organized and encouraged a series of brutal fights and assaults.” Tooson said a female officer — whose name is redacted from the filing — claimed the teen was a member of the “‘Canoga’ gang, and commented that she ‘hoped he could fight.’”

In addition to the broken nose, Tooson said the teen suffered “internal injuries, severe bruising, and moderate traumatic brain injury,” according to the notice of claim.

Ser, the judge at Thursday’s court hearing, called the video “extremely concerning,” and said Brooks “should not be employed by the probation department.”

The teen is awaiting trial for a robbery and shooting that left one victim in a wheelchair for months, prosecutors said. Ser declined to release him, in spite of the safety concerns raised in court. The teen has been transferred out of the unit where the fight happened, but remains housed at Los Padrinos, Ser said in court.

Albin said he remains unsafe there as other probation officers constantly monitor his phone calls and claimed officers have branded the teen a “snitch” to other youths, a distinction that risks more violence.

During the hearing, Albin questioned several probation department supervisors about the information provided by Brooks, asking if any attempts were made to corroborate her account. Multiple supervisors acknowledged they never question officers’ observations or review video when compiling reports and providing them to the court.

“I’m not looking for truth, I’m not looking for falsity, I’m looking to record what’s been recorded,” Officer Jerrod Montgomery, a supervisor who reviewed Brooks case notes when compiling a report on the incident, testified on Thursday.

The probation department did not respond to questions about what, if any, steps it takes to verify the accuracy of “case notes” submitted by probation officers about incidents in the halls. From the bench, Ser determined that Brooks’ report was “inconsistent” with the video.

The identities of the other officers suspended have not been made public. Albin said she filed a subpoena for their identities, but the county has not responded.

The clip has also been provided to the Los Angeles County district attorney’s office, which did not respond to a request to comment about possible charges against the officers or any of the youths in the video.

The clip was made public just hours before the Board of State and Community Corrections, which oversees correctional facilities statewide, [narrowly voted](#) to keep Los Padrinos open.

The facility — which was reopened last summer after the oversight body ordered [the probation department to shutter its other juvenile halls](#) — has dealt with a staffing shortage and “high levels of youth on youth assault” since it was re-opened, according to an internal probation department memo obtained by The Times earlier this year.

[Los Padrinos’ struggles](#) have included a riot, an escape attempt and the discovery of a gun on the grounds in less than a year of operation. Chief Deputy Kimberly Epps told the state board Thursday that there had been also issues with staff bringing in contraband.

“Unfortunately, we’ve had arrests of staff. We’ve had arrests of parents,” she said.

“Those things are no secret.”

Some members of the state oversight board were concerned about the Los Padrinos video and requested to review it before Thursday’s vote, according to two people with direct knowledge of the situation who requested anonymity because they were not authorized to speak to the media. But the vote was cast without any such review.

The probation department said the board did not request a copy of the video. A spokesman for the state board did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Sean Garcia-Leys, a member over the probation oversight commission who regularly testifies at the state meetings, expressed frustration that the state body used what he viewed as extremely narrow parameters when assessing the suitability of Los Padrinos. The brutal assault, he said, was not a factor in their decision.

“Inspectors were laser focused on only what they saw during the two weeks they were there, not things that had happened in December,” he said in an e-mail. “That’s my criticism of how this went down. The staff put unnecessary blinders on the Board to get the result they did.”

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