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Officer on leave for using pepper spray during girls brawl at LA County juvenile facility

A probation official called the incident a 'preventable operational failure, and it needs to be corrected before someone gets seriously hurt'



Camp Kilpatrick in the Santa Monica Mountains, Tuesday, Sept. 6, 2022. (File photo by David Crane, Los Angeles Daily News/SCNG)

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A Los Angeles County probation officer has been placed on administrative leave pending an internal affairs investigation for carrying and using pepper spray during a fight involving 14 girls at a juvenile facility that restricts access to the chemical irritant.

The mid-January brawl broke out when seven girls rushed from one classroom inside Campus Kilpatrick to another and began “attacking and assaulting seven youth inside,” according to a notification sent to county officials.

All available officers responded to the classroom to stop the “major disturbance,” in which one officer was struck in her face “approximately three times causing injury,” the report states.

Vicky Waters, a spokesperson for the Probation Department, confirmed a staff member was placed on administrative leave.

“Department policy is also clear that OC spray is not to be issued to line staff assigned to Campus Kilpatrick,” Waters said. “Importantly, we remain committed to the Board of Supervisors’ motion regarding the prohibition of OC spray at that facility, maintaining accountability, and ensuring the safety and well-being of everyone who lives and works in our juvenile facilities.”

She could not say where the pepper spray came from, or whether the staff member who used it received permission from a supervisor.

If the investigation determines that “any actions were inconsistent with Department practices and policies, appropriate corrective and disciplinary action will be taken,” she said.

An incident notification sent to the Probation Oversight Commission on Jan. 13 made no mention of the use of pepper spray. A separate [“OC Deployment Report”](#) provided to the board weeks later stated that six youths were injured at the time and that officers failed to follow the department’s decontamination policy.

Such reports typically do not include Kilpatrick at all because pepper spray usage there is so rare.

Supervisor demands answers

County Supervisor Lindsay Horvath, upon learning about the incident, [demanded answers](#) from Probation Chief Guillermo Viera Rosa at the supervisors’ Feb. 3 meeting.

“It is my understanding that there was a significant fight and use of force a few weeks ago and that OC spray was used by line staff despite an explicit commitment that line staff would not use OC spray and that it would only be available with supervisor approval in case of emergency,” Horvath said.

Viera Rosa responded that Horvath was right.

“Without being cryptic, what I can say is that you are correct in your statement, that does not reflect the policy of the Probation Department and that there are employees that currently are undergoing investigation and are not being allowed to work,” he said. “They’re off work because of the severity of these allegations.”

Viera Rosa reiterated the department’s commitment that line staff “are not issued OC spray, or pepper spray, when they are on that campus and any time an employee fails to

follow our directives or uses force that is outside of the scope of policy, they will be investigated and disciplined properly.”

Pepper spray bans

Thirty-five states — and seven California counties — have banned pepper spray in juvenile halls. California is one of five states that allow probation officers to routinely carry canisters on their person.

Los Angeles County has unsuccessfully attempted to phase out the use of pepper spray inside its juvenile facilities for nearly seven years, and all of the current Board of Supervisors publicly oppose its continued use. Yet it is still deployed, almost daily on average, within [the county’s two largest facilities](#).

In 2023, the Probation Department reopened one of those locations, Los Padrinos Juvenile Hall in Downey, without any pepper spray. The ban [lasted about two weeks](#) before the decision was reversed following a violent escape attempt. The reinstatement of pepper spray, described as temporary at the time, has continued since then, with line staff arguing that it is necessary to keep them safe from violence amid perpetual short staffing.

Boys moved out

Until recently, Kilpatrick housed a small number of boys in a camp-like setting, but efforts to reduce the population at Los Padrinos, amid threats of a state takeover and the juvenile hall’s closure, led to a repurposing of the campus in the Santa Monica Mountains to hold all of the girls and gender expansive youth in county custody.

The Board of Supervisors [directed the Probation Department](#) to stop using pepper spray on those populations in 2022, but the broader reinstatement of the chemical agent at Los Padrinos led to its [use against them](#) again.

While department officials [initially were cagey](#) about whether pepper spray would be allowed at the new Kilpatrick, the department ultimately determined officers would not carry it.

Safety concerns not addressed

In a statement, the Supervising Deputy Probation Officers Union blamed the rapid expansion of Kilpatrick for the incident, saying the department had failed to “adequately account for critical safety, classification and operational considerations.”

The county eliminated the screening policy that limited the previous population at Kilpatrick, combined youth from “multiple bureaus and classifications, including off-the-

street cases, into a single setting” and failed to address “predictable safety concerns,” the union’s leadership said.

Kilpatrick was designed to function as a “residential treatment-style, home-like environment,” not as a juvenile hall or Secure Youth Treatment Facility, a type of detention that houses youth who have been sentenced for the most serious of crimes. The union argued juvenile hall and SYTF settings “permit the use of OC spray.”

“It reflects a different security posture and risk profile,” the statement reads.

The department received warnings about potential conflicts and gang affiliations ahead of the moves last year.

“Reform cannot mean recklessness. When you eliminate screening, mix classifications, and ignore known rivalries, you are not advancing rehabilitation; you are creating preventable risk,” said Reggie Torres, president of the Supervising Deputy Probation Officers Union.

“Our members support meaningful change, but it must be grounded in sound correctional practice and safety for both youth and officers. What happened at Campus Kilpatrick was a preventable operational failure, and it needs to be corrected before someone gets seriously hurt.”

The county’s efforts to [“depopulate” Los Padrinos](#) have [led to instability](#) at its other facilities. Both Kilpatrick and [Barry J. Nidorf Juvenile Hall](#) have failed [recent inspections](#) by state regulators.

Pepper spray usage and violent incidents [surged at Nidorf](#) last year following the transfers, according to data released by the department.