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Jury Orders Sheriff to Pay \$18 Million

The federal panel rules that a detective withheld evidence that proved a teacher from Bellflower did not kidnap and assault a teenage girl.

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In the largest single plaintiff verdict against the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, a federal court jury on Wednesday awarded \$18 million to a middle school teacher who said a detective falsely accused him of assaulting a teenage girl and hid evidence that would have cleared him.

Raul Ramirez, 29, of Bellflower was charged by prosecutors with assault and kidnapping of a 16-year-old girl but was found not guilty. A judge later ruled that Ramirez was "factually innocent," a rare finding in the criminal justice system.

Ramirez then sued the Sheriff's Department, alleging that a detective withheld key evidence, including automated teller machine transactions and cellphone transmissions that placed him miles from the site of the assault, and a composite drawing of a suspect who did not look like Ramirez.

County officials said the jury could order the sheriff's detective to pay Ramirez more money today when the trial enters the punitive phase -- though the judge can reduce the award. Wednesday's award covers compensatory damages.

The verdict eclipses the previous record in civil cases against the department. In 1995 a jury ordered the county to pay \$15.9 million to 36 people who had been arrested at a Cerritos bridal shower six years earlier. The jury awarded between \$35,000 and \$3.8 million to party-goers in the case. By the time the county paid the verdict, the judgment had grown to \$25 million, including accrued interest, attorneys' fees and other costs.

The latest award is more than four times the \$3.9-million settlement paid by the city of Los Angeles to Rodney G. King. King's 1991 videotaped beating by Los Angeles police sparked a national outcry and helped trigger the 1992 riots.

The county is not insured, but pays its own legal judgments and settlements. That means that the award, if upheld, will have to be paid by the Sheriff's Department at a time when Sheriff Lee Baca is complaining that he lacks the funds to keep inmates in jail long enough to serve their full sentences or to provide enough deputies and cells to improve jailhouse security.

Assistant County Counsel Roger Granbo said sheriff's officials believed that they should have been freed from liability because prosecutors had reviewed the case against Ramirez and decided that there was enough evidence to file criminal charges against him.