

# Los Angeles Times

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## Trapped in a Nightmare That Seemed Endless

**County Jail: Plaintiffs  
tell of humiliation, fear  
and official indifference  
while wrongly detained.**

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They were treated like chattel, strip-searched, shackled, harangued and humiliated, then turned loose without even an apology.

Loretha Britt, a plaintiff in Los Angeles County's record \$27-million settlement over wrongful detainment of jail inmates, said she was strip-searched six times in four days during her 1997 incarceration. Several times it happened in hallways where passing male inmates and deputies made lewd jokes, she said. Her last search came after jail officials finally acknowledged that she should be released because the warrant that landed her there was from a narcotics charge dismissed nearly a year before.

Each time it was the same—take your clothes off, turn around, pick them up without bending your knees, said Britt, a 33-year-old housekeeper from Temple City. "You have to turn your back toward these people and you have to wonder, 'What are they thinking?'"

Britt was among 62 plaintiffs who filed class-action lawsuits against the county for routinely holding inmates beyond their release dates. Their stories offer a chilling lesson in how one mistake can land you in a drama straight out of Kafka or Poe.

By the legal calculus of Tuesday's announced settlement, Britt will receive money according to a point system. She gets points for being strip-searched, points for being wrongfully detained six days, points for turning down cash settlement offers from the county that did not include reforms.

But there are no points for the inner terror that drove Britt to talk of suicide.

As many as 400,000 former inmates could join the class and di-

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People who were jailed too long, strip-searched or otherwise humiliated include, from left: Loretha Britt, Rene Acosta, Leellen Patchen, Samuel Gladnew and Jacqueline Newson. KEN LUBAS / Los Angeles Times

## JAIL: Plaintiffs Describe Horrors of Being Detained

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vide the award. A Web site has been set up for anyone who might qualify for the class action: [www.rosenthalco.com/jail](http://www.rosenthalco.com/jail).

The eight victims who spoke Thursday with The Times do not care to calculate the price of their experiences.

"What is it worth to you to be humiliated, to be degraded and treated like an animal? How do you put a price on that?" asked Valerie Ann Streit, who was held 24 hours beyond a judge's release order.

The victims were from ordinary walks of life: accountant, hotel clerk, film editor, fitness trainer. All arrived under the premise cen-

tral to the American justice system: innocent until proven guilty.

Instead, victims say they were verbally and psychologically abused as if their sentences had already begun.

### 'This Happens to Regular People'

Beyond tales of rules gone awry and lost paperwork, the cases offer a look at life inside the lockup from people whose only previous view of the system was from television and books.

"This happens to regular people," said Diane Betts, a Moorpark accountant arrested along with her

husband in a domestic dispute and kept for four days after charges were dropped.

"I know how people think: People in jail are all guilty. That's their life," she said. "But it could be anybody. It could be your wife, your daughter. It's not right. People down there don't even know that they have constitutional rights."

The stories begin with what appeared to police to be justifiable arrests: allegedly driving while intoxicated, domestic abuse, bench warrants. All the victims, however, were supposed to be released pending trials or hearings, after charges were not filed or warrants were vacated.