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SEX ATTACKS ON DISABLED GIRL STUN A BERKELEY COMMUNITY

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 By EVELYN NIEVES
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As the police count it, the first time the 12-year-old mentally disabled girl was sexually assaulted occurred on Oct. 24, by a 13-year-old fellow student at Willard Middle School.

The next day, he returned with company.

The girl, a sixth grader at the school, was assaulted many more times -- the exact number is still in question -- by 9 boys, ages 11 to 16, for more than 5 hours in 11 different places. They assaulted her in a storage shed on the grounds of the school, in an abandoned building, in an underground parking lot, behind bushes, in someone's backyard.

Two weeks later, the girl, who has the mental capacity of an 8-year-old, was moved to Martin Luther King Jr. Middle School, where, on her second day of classes, Nov. 8, she was lured by a 13-year-old boy into a secluded area on the school campus where he raped her, the police said. The boy was arrested a day later.

The girl is now out of school completely, and the police, school authorities and a shocked south Berkeley community are grappling with how such a violent assault could have been perpetrated under

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their noses multiple times by boys -- their boys -- who are barely adolescent.

Seven youths, ages 11 to 14, were arrested in connection with the group assault, and three were charged by the Alameda County district attorney last week with oral copulation, false imprisonment, misdemeanor battery and threatening a witness for reportedly telling the girl not to tell anyone about the assault.

The police were still looking for two other youths, ages 15 and 16, who they determined were part of the assault. They have remained at large because the other boys refuse to name them, the police said.

Lt. Russ Lopes of the Berkeley police said the department was hopeful that the boys would name the others as they began to understand the seriousness of the crime.

The seven boys from Willard and the one from Martin Luther King Jr. have been suspended and face expulsion from school, along with criminal penalties.

The police and prosecutors have said that in assessing charges they will examine the role of each boy. Police and school authorities said the investigation had been arduous, based on the number of suspects and their ages. Joaquin Rivera, president of the Berkeley School Board, said, "The allegations and reports are conflicting and have changed on an almost daily basis."

A three-inch-thick packet of police reports, witness statements and hospital records reveals the chronology of the gang assault as starting just after school let out for the day.

The police said the assault began at the shed on school property, which the girl entered with four of the boys. They tried to force her to perform oral sex, but she managed to free herself.

Two of the boys from the shed caught up with her with two other boys and forced her into a backyard, where they assaulted her. The assault then gained participants and moved from place to place.

Eventually, the police said, the girl's ability to resist dissolved.

News of the gang rape, including the identity of the victim, spread quickly among students at both middle schools. It appears that word was leaked by the suspects themselves. Although they threatened to hurt their victim if she told anyone, they could not help bragging, the authorities said.

Within days of the incident, police officials were conducting an investigation, suspects were naming themselves as part of the assault, and the school community began organizing teach-ins for students.

Police officers said the boy who raped the girl at her new school was apparently not associated with the other boys, some of whom called themselves the "mini-mob."

Teach-ins for students were held on the Willard campus last Wednesday on topics like peer pressure, and an emotional community meeting on the assault was held on Thursday with 300 parents and teachers from Willard. Parent after parent stood up to ask how such a horror could have happened, and a father of one of the boys arrested in the group assault stood up to say that his 12-year-old son watched the attack but did not take part in it.

"He said, 'Daddy, I was scared,' " the man said. " 'I didn't want the other kids to think I was a punk.' "

Thursday night's meeting occurred before the news broke on Friday that the girl had been raped at her new school.

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