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BLACK TRADESMEN FACE A DAILY WALL OF SUSPICION; RACE RELATIONS: MANY SAY SERVICE CALLS IN WHITE AREAS SPARK FEAR, HARASSMENT. POLICE SOMETIMES ARE SUMMONED.

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Hawthorne building contractor Nathan Whaley, who is black, puts on his "stage show" whenever he visits a white neighborhood to give an estimate.

"I pull out my briefcase, my note pad and clipboard -- I have no need for either one -- and look and wave" at all the neighbors, Whaley says. "You have to show that you have a reason to be there."

It's a precautionary maneuver, one of many used by African Americans making service calls in white communities. Some others: Avoid working at night or showing up at a job too early in the morning. Never linger inside houses or gaze at a resident's possessions. And always keep your tools at hand to allay suspicion.

These unwritten rules have evolved in response to one of the most troubling themes in race relations: the fear and mistrust with which many whites regard black males.

Black service workers say they are commonly treated with extreme apprehension by customers or police in white neighborhoods. Some white residents, they say, will not come to the door when they see the visitor is black. Others, upon seeing a black tradesman in their neighborhood, are more likely to ask him if he is lost -- or, when he's on the job, to question his skills. Still others may check up on a black worker by calling his headquarters or complaining to police about a "suspicious" man.

"These incidents are almost an everyday occurrence," said Charles La Capra, a black Los Angeles plumber, his voice trembling with hurt and anger. "I spend more time calming people's apprehension than just doing my job. It eats at you but you can't dwell on it or it will consume you."

Many whites defend their suspicion by citing increased fear of crime and of strangers. Many blacks do not believe that argument, regarding *stranger* as simply a euphemism for *black*. In this environment -- where feelings of self-preservation take precedence over concern about social relations, and some perceived slights are so subtle that they can scarcely be documented -- resentment and prejudice multiply.

The consequence, experts in race relations say, is increased estrangement on both sides.

"To be constantly looked at with fear can be devastating . . . it hurts you and makes you angry and causes frustration, disappointment and disgust," said psychologist Richard Majors, author of "Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America" and a senior researcher at the Urban Institute in Washington, D.C.

John Mack, director of the Los Angeles Urban League, added: "If we don't get beyond this vast racial divide, it will ultimately destroy our society."

African American builders, plumbers, electricians, gas company employees and other men who make service calls complain of being "watched" by residents and hassled by police not only in high-income enclaves such as Palos Verdes Estates and Bel-Air but also in such middle-class communities as Santa Monica and Glendale. The signs of that mistrust abound far more than in the case of other minority service workers, according to interviews with workers from those ethnic groups.

Many black tradesmen talk about this low-key harassment with a sense of painful acceptance rather than outrage. Yet most acknowledge that they are unprepared for the shock of some encounters.

Plumber La Capra said that last July he was emerging from a stairwell in a Santa Monica apartment building when he found himself confronted by three Santa Monica police officers, their guns drawn.

A resident in the neighborhood had spotted him and called police about a "suspicious character." The police interrogated La Capra for 20 minutes, examined his tools and toured the basement, where he had repaired a water heater, to verify he had done work there. They made no apologies nor any attempt to notify the resident about the mistake, he said.

Said Kevin Quinn, a white contractor who hired La Capra and witnessed the incident: "I never realized these guys were going through so much . . . it really opened my eyes up."

Quinn and some other managers of service businesses say they take precautions to avoid such incidents.

"I'm leery about what time to send them," said Quinn, a construction manager who subcontracts with many African Americans. "I've had to call some customers ahead of time and say I'm sending a black man. . . . If I don't, (the worker sometimes) shows up at the door and no one answers."

Experts in race relations attribute some of the fear of black men to media crime accounts, saying they are stigmatized as prowlers, burglars or violent felons.

Others cite housing patterns, noting that blacks remain the most segregated group in Los Angeles. Still others say changing demographics -- the replacement of blacks by lower-paid Latino workers in service jobs -- has made black laborers more conspicuous in white areas. Workers themselves believe the proliferation of Neighborhood Watch groups and their emphasis on surveillance has further heightened mistrust.

Terri Tippit, a white woman who heads a Westside Neighborhood Watch group, said the latter allegation is unfair.

"It's not just a black person. Anyone new and strange in the neighborhood causes suspicion -- white, black or Hispanic," she said.

Whatever the cause, such small indignities have the cumulative effect of "water torture" on African Americans, said Halford Fairchild, an associate professor of psychology and black studies at Pitzer College in Claremont. They produce "a hole in the psyche. . . . It's a cross that must be borne that starts to wear people down over time."

To avoid such incidents, Whaley, who has owned a contracting firm in Hawthorne for 15 years, uses an extreme tactic. When he's working in a white neighborhood after sundown he always calls 911 to notify the police.

"Sometimes the dispatchers act real crazy, like 'Why are you calling, is this an emergency?' " Whaley said. "And I say, 'Yeah, it's going to be an emergency when the other residents get home and see my truck still parked in Suzy Q's driveway.' "

Whaley says he resorted to the practice because over the years he has continually been asked by police to show his contractor's license, been tailed by private security services, and was once handcuffed and questioned at a job site after the owner had left the premises.

"You just feel violated," he said.

Of the two dozen black workers interviewed for this story, half said they routinely encounter discriminatory treatment in white neighborhoods. Twenty of the 24 reported at least one instance of hostile treatment by white residents or police who, in their opinion, were suspicious of them because of their race. Five reported that police or security guards had drawn guns on them at job sites.

Some of the slights that might seem trivial at face value become hurtful in the context of past experience, workers say.

Plumber Thurston Limar said that on one job in Beverly Hills he was riding in an elevator when several residents of the apartment building barraged him with questions.

"I had a bucket full of tools, a snake machine for a kitchen sink and a shirt on with (the company) logo . . . and they were all acting like I'm on the subway about to take a gold chain," said Limar, who then worked for Clark Plumbing & Heating in West Los Angeles.

Marion Fisher, a 33-year-old black plumber, says the behavior of some customers borders on the ridiculous.

"There was one woman who called our dispatcher and said, 'I want a white plumber of German descent, with blue eyes and blond hair,' " said Fisher, who was with Rescue Rooter at the time of the incident. "We were all kind of saying, 'What is this, the dating game?' "

Said Tony Cisneros, Fisher's former manager at Rescue Rooter: "I took offense and called the (person) back and told her that unfortunately we could not accommodate her, that we could only send an available person. . . . She called two days later and apologized."

Dudley Thomas, a 53-year-old electrician who lives in South-Central Los Angeles, remembers the time he was leaving a house in Rancho Park, a swank section of West Los Angeles, after installing light fixtures. Late for another job, he ran to his van -- just, unfortunately, as a police patrol car was passing by.

The patrol car made a U-turn and two officers emerged with their guns drawn, yelling at Thomas to freeze. An Asian woman, the owner of the house Thomas had just left, ran out and threw her arms around him, fearing he'd be shot.

After a few tense moments, the police backed off. But according to Thomas, the police later chided the lady for not being more careful, indicating they had almost used their weapons.

"There were no questions asked before they acted. It was a lucky thing she came," said Thomas in a tone of sad acceptance. "But, oh, I was really crying when I came home that day. Afterward, I had many nightmares."

Fisher recalls a night a year ago when he was sitting in his clearly marked Rescue Rooter van outside a Glendale apartment building, filling out an invoice for work he had just done.

Suddenly, five police cars screeched to a halt and, with guns drawn, the officers demanded that Fisher, who was wearing his company uniform, step out with his hands up. As Fisher complied, some tenants in the building ran out screaming at the police that Fisher was a plumber. Tense negotiations followed between the white police officers and the tenants. Fisher, the only black at the scene, felt his life was out of his hands.

"The police were talking at the tenants while pointing their guns at me. . . . I was standing there for almost 15 minutes in a total state of shock," he said. "It was a learning experience. I know it's going to happen again."

The Glendale police told the tenants they were responding to a call from a neighbor about a black man stealing furniture from the building, according to Fisher, who said he received no apology.

Though severely shaken, Fisher said he never considered taking legal action. "All the money, the litigation . . . I couldn't afford to play that game," he said.

Frank Berry, an executive assistant at the Los Angeles chapter of the National Assn. for the Advancement of Colored People, said it is important that such encounters be reported.

"We encourage people to make a formal complaint to the NAACP and to their company," said Berry. "Real victims seem to be of the mind that this goes with the job. . . . (They) feel the attitudes are so widespread and will not change and there's no point in complaining."

Rafael Sehabbazian, a white Glendale resident who witnessed Fisher's encounter, said he felt sorry for him "but I feel much safer knowing my neighbors are out there to protect me. This case was a misunderstanding . . . but you can't trust anyone these days. You must make sure."

Black service workers say they receive their coolest receptions in heavily white communities, not in areas where non-African American minorities -- Asians or Latinos, for instance -- predominate.

"It's totally different, like night and day," said Cedric Johnson, a field representative for Southern California Gas Co. "In one area they're happy you're doing something for them. In the other the attitude is more suspicious."

Some residents of heavily white communities say their suspicion is understandable because African Americans rarely are seen in their neighborhoods. Said one Pacific Palisades resident, who declined to be quoted by name: "Due to the ethnic makeup of our neighborhood, it's hard not to focus in on minorities -- they attract greater attention."

Statistics from several predominantly white residential communities in Los Angeles County show that the highest percentage of serious crimes in those areas are committed by whites. Two such cities, Sierra Madre and Manhattan Beach, did not report a single felony arrest of an African American in 1993, according to the most recent statistics from the state Department of Justice. Of 101 felony arrests in San Marino, where whites account for 66% of the population and Asians make up virtually all of the rest, only one involved an African American.

Experts cite other forces at work, most notably the image of African American men as criminals who routinely invade white neighborhoods. "Broadcast news continually bombards us with images of black people committing crimes in the street, which makes for better visuals than crimes of whites in nice homes, neighborhoods and offices," said Kelly Madison, a professor of broadcasting and film at Cal State Los Angeles.

A Los Angeles police spokesman said officers respond to all calls in an equal manner without regard to the ethnicity of suspects.

Michelle Robinson, a crime prevention coordinator for the Santa Monica Police Department who works with Neighborhood Watch groups, says she advises residents to use common sense when they spot strangers.

"We encourage neighbors to question workers, to report any suspicious activity," she said. "We say, 'Don't base your call just on a person's appearance, but base it on their behavior.' "

But Robinson acknowledges that residents' definitions of suspicious activity tend to differ -- and that many people prefer to play it safe. Said Robinson: "People are really concerned about crime -- it's in the news. Better to report something than not and live to regret it later."

La Capra, the Los Angeles plumber, said he and other African American tradesmen have one wish. "We're not looking for any special privileges," he said. "We just want to be treated like everyone else."

PERSON: CHARLES LA CAPRA (73%); KEVIN QUINN (58%);

ORGANIZATION: LOS ANGELES URBAN LEAGUE (65%);

COUNTRY: UNITED STATES (94%);

STATE: CALIFORNIA, USA (92%); DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA, USA (79%);

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GRAPHIC: Photo, Plumber Marion Fisher uses metal detector to find a pipe. Once while sitting in his marked service van, police surrounded him with guns drawn after a resident reported seeing a black man stealing furniture. ; Photo, (Southland Edition, A20) Plumber Marion Fisher uses a metal detector to locate sewage pipe on land owned by Art Chmielewski. Fisher once found himself surrounded by police while sitting in his clearly marked service van. ALAN J. DUIGNAN / **Los Angeles Times**

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