

Beat: News

39 Defendants Indicted in \$4.7 Million Meth, Heroin Conspiracy

20 Defendants are Mexican Nationals

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USPA NEWS - Distributed Over 335 Kilos of Meth, 22 Kilos of Heroin, 140 Officers, 14 Agencies Participated in Takedown, Seized Large Quantities of Drugs

Twenty Mexican nationals are among 39 defendants indicted by a federal grand jury for their roles in a \$4.7 million conspiracy to distribute more than 335 kilograms of methamphetamine and 22 kilograms of heroin over the past two years.

"This operation took a significant amount of illegal drugs off the street, and disrupted a large Mexican drug-trafficking organization in the Kansas City metropolitan area," said U.S. Attorney Teresa Moore. "State, local, and federal law enforcement agencies worked together in this Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Forces operation to bring drug traffickers to justice and protect our community from the violence and other harms that result from the flow of illegal drugs."

On June 8, 2022, Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) led an operation that involved 140 officers and agents from 14 state, local and federal law enforcement agencies. The takedown resulted in the arrests of 31 defendants charged in the indictment as well as three additional felony state arrests. Three of the federal defendants were already in custody at the time of the takedown and five of the federal defendants remain fugitives from justice.

On the day of the takedown, officers executed 16 search warrants and seized 84.4 kilograms of methamphetamine, 4.5 kilograms of heroin, 10.4 kilograms of fentanyl, 7.6 kilograms of cocaine, 10.5 kilograms of marijuana, 687 Xanax pills, 3.1 kilograms of unknown pills, a quantity of bulk cash, five firearms, a 3D printer with manufactured ghost gun parts, and a liquid methamphetamine conversion lab.

"This indictment represents HSI and our law enforcement partners' dedication to removing deadly narcotics from our community," said Special Agent in Charge of the Kansas City area of responsibility Katherine Greer. "We stand alongside our community leaders, stakeholders and the public, to continue our work toward a safer community without the significant dangers associated with these illegal substances."

The 91-count indictment was returned under seal by a federal grand jury in Kansas City, Mo., on June 1, 2022. The indictment was unsealed and made public following the arrests and initial court appearances of the defendants.

The federal indictment charges Jose Jesus Sanchez-Mendez, also known as "Michoacano," 41, Jesus Morales-Garcia, also known as "Don Jesus," 43, Luis Eduardo Pineda-Zarao, 26, Juan Bernardo Galeana-Aguilar, 45, Baltazar Flores-Norzagaray, also known as "Sinaloa," 50, Rafael Perez-Esquivel, 51, Jose Eliazar Valle-Rivera, 39, Uziel Morales-Baltazar, 31, Erick Fernando Martinez Contreras, also known as "Alex," 34, Joel Enrique Roman, also known as "Pelon," 44, Miguel Angel Juarez-Lopez, also known as "Chapo," 47, Jonathan Zuniga-Villafuerte, 30, Sergio Armando Valencia-Ochoa, 36, Juan Humberto Lemus-Mejia, 24, Yuliana Del Carmen Perez Ciprian, 38, Trinidad Torres-Meza, 41, Miriam Veronica Bustos-Martinez, 37, and Liliana Valencia-Mendoza, 40, addresses unknown and all citizens of Mexico; Flor Gonzalez-Celestine, 52, a citizen of Mexico residing in Kansas City, Mo.; and Jose Bernabe Zamora-Cardenas, also known as "Mufa," 52, a citizen of Mexico residing in Kansas City, Kan.

The federal indictment also charges Tina Marie Cruces, 36, Lisbet Espino, 24, Frank Anthony Valdivia, 43, Melissa A. Bates, 55, and Monica L. McCubbin, 39, all of Kansas City, Mo.; Santiago Raul Mendieta-Sanchez, 41, a citizen of Honduras residing in Kansas City, Mo.; Jennifer S. Lawson, 35, of Buckner, Mo.; Felton Stone Jr., 45, Donald R. Moses, also known as "Moe," 51, Felipe Antonio Alcala, 30, Anthony C. Hughes, 37, Maria Nancy Valdez, 32, Ignacio Barragan-Vazquez, 32, Yvonne Guzman-Carpio, also known as "Morena," 39, Kongmhink Her, 41, addresses unknown; Marco Antonio Salazar, also known as "Tono," 29, and Nelson Alirio Garcia-Guerra, 28, both citizens of Guatemala, addresses unknown; Arantxa Sabrina Valderrama-Barros, also known as "Sabri," 25, a citizen of Venezuela, address unknown; and Daniel Felipe Suarez-Reinoso, 30, a citizen of Colombia, address unknown.

All of the defendants are charged with participating in a conspiracy to distribute methamphetamine and heroin from Feb. 28, 2020, to

June 1, 2022.

In addition to the drug-trafficking conspiracy, Sanchez-Mendez, Zamora-Cardenas, Valencia-Ochoa, Valencia-Mendoza and Suarez-Reinoso are charged with participating in a money-laundering conspiracy related to transporting or transferring the proceeds of the drug-trafficking conspiracy to Mexico.

Sanchez-Mendez and Morales-Garcia are also charged with engaging in a continuing criminal enterprise related to the drug-trafficking and money-laundering conspiracies and other offenses alleged in the indictment. The indictment alleges Sanchez-Mendez and Morales-Garcia occupied a position of organizer, supervisor, or manager of the ongoing criminal enterprise, from which they obtained substantial income.

The federal indictment charges various defendants in various counts of distributing heroin and fentanyl, distributing methamphetamine, possessing methamphetamine and heroin with the intent to distribute, possessing firearms in furtherance of a drug-trafficking crime, being an illegal alien in possession of a firearm, being a felon in possession of a firearm, money laundering, reentry by an illegal alien, and using cell phones to facilitate drug-trafficking crimes.

The indictment also contains forfeiture allegations that would require the defendants to forfeit to the government \$4,718,700, which represents the proceeds of the alleged drug-trafficking conspiracy and criminal enterprise. The indictment alleges the conspiracy involved the distribution of more than 335.5 kilograms of methamphetamine, with an average street price of \$300 per ounce, and more than 22.1 kilograms of heroin, with an average street price of \$1,500 per ounce.

The forfeiture allegations would also require the defendants to forfeit to the government \$277,440 that was seized by law enforcement officers from a vehicle driven by Suarez-Reinoso and \$51,445 that was seized by law enforcement officers while executing two search warrants at Kansas City, Mo., residences.

The charges contained in this indictment are simply accusations, and not evidence of guilt. Evidence supporting the charges must be presented to a federal trial jury, whose duty is to determine guilt or innocence.

This case is being prosecuted by Assistant U.S. Attorneys Byron H. Black, Patrick C. Edwards, and Mary Kate Butterfield. It was investigated by Homeland Security Investigations, U.S. Customs and Border Protection, the Drug Enforcement Administration, the Jackson County Drug Task Force, IRS-Criminal Investigation, the Kansas Bureau of Investigation, the Kansas City, Mo., Police Department, the Kansas City, Kan., Police Department, the Missouri State Highway Patrol, the Kansas Highway Patrol, the Independence, Mo., Police Department, the Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension, the Minnesota State Patrol, the Olmsted County, Minn., Sheriff's Office, the Texas Department of Public Safety, the FBI, the Clay County, Mo., Sheriff's Department, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, and the U.S. Marshals Service.

Organized Crime and Drug Enforcement Task Force

This case is part of an Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Forces (OCDETF) operation. OCDETF identifies, disrupts, and dismantles the highest-level criminal organizations that threaten the United States using a prosecutor-led, intelligence-driven, multi-agency approach. Additional information about the OCDETF Program can be found at <https://www.justice.gov/OCDETF>.

KC Metro Strike Force

This prosecution was brought as a part of the Department of Justice's Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Forces (OCDETF) Co-located Strike Forces Initiative, which provides for the establishment of permanent multi-agency task force teams that work side-by-side in the same location. This co-located model enables agents from different agencies to collaborate on intelligence-driven, multi-jurisdictional operations against a continuum of priority targets and their affiliate illicit financial networks. These prosecutor-led co-located Strike Forces capitalize on the synergy created through the long-term relationships that can be forged by agents, analysts, and prosecutors who remain together over time, and they epitomize the model that has proven most effective in combating organized crime. The principal mission of the OCDETF program is to identify, disrupt, and dismantle the most serious drug trafficking organizations, transnational criminal organizations, and money laundering organizations that present a sign.

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Wendy writes for the United States Press Agency and is a former columnist with the Fulton County Expositor, Wauseon, Ohio.

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