



Department of Justice

Acting United States Attorney Troy Rivetti
Western District of Pennsylvania

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Prolific Drug Trafficking Organization Dismantled

57 defendants charged; seizures include over two million fentanyl pills and 400+ pounds of methamphetamine

JOHNSTOWN – Fifty-seven defendants have been charged in two separate, but related Indictments, and by Criminal Complaint, with violating federal narcotics and firearms laws, Acting United States Attorney Troy Rivetti announced today.

Agents from the Federal Bureau of Investigation and Department of Homeland Security – Homeland Security Investigations in the Western District of Pennsylvania initially began investigating a violent street gang operating in western Pennsylvania beginning in 2018. Agents received information from confidential sources, conducted more than 50 controlled buys from members of the organization, and used other investigative techniques over the course of this lengthy investigation. In May 2022, agents commenced court-authorized Title III interception of telephones used by members of the drug trafficking organization. The wiretaps revealed that the DTO was conducting drug trafficking operations in the following areas: Indiana, Westmoreland, and Armstrong counties in the Western District of Pennsylvania; Cleveland, Ohio; Phoenix, Arizona; Seattle, Washington; Minneapolis, Minnesota; Wichita, Kansas; and in Mexico. These interceptions revealed that Arizona-sourced drugs, which consisted of fentanyl (in both pill and powdered form), heroin, cocaine, crack cocaine, and methamphetamine, were being distributed in our communities by the western Pennsylvania members of the DTO. Over the past ten months, investigators have seized more than 673 pounds of fentanyl-laced fake prescription pills, over 400 pounds of methamphetamine, and more than 16 pounds each of fentanyl powder and cocaine, over \$600,000 in cash, nine vehicles, and 47 firearms.

“The Department of Justice is working tirelessly to remove deadly fentanyl from our communities and to dismantle and hold accountable the violent cartels and drug-trafficking organizations responsible for distributing it,” said Acting U.S. Attorney Rivetti. “We are committed to using every tool at our disposal to save lives. Operation Lake Effect exemplifies that commitment.”

“These defendants exploited our neighborhoods as they dealt deadly fentanyl and other drugs without a second thought to the harm being inflicted on the community,” said FBI Pittsburgh Special Agent in Charge Mike Nordwall. “This multi-state state operation is an outstanding example of what federal, state and local law enforcement can accomplish when we work together to target the individuals who threaten the safety and stability of our neighborhoods. The FBI is committed to working with our partners to rid the streets of this type of criminal activity and the

violence that so often accompanies it.”

“The sheer quantity of narcotics seized and the magnitude of defendants charged in this investigation is staggering,” said Special Agent in Charge of HSI Philadelphia William S. Walker. “But even more impactful is how this investigation disrupted nearly every distribution apparatus of a prolific drug trafficking organization peddling addictive opioids and narcotics in communities all over the United States. These are the types of far-reaching investigations that bring about real and positive change in our communities, and these successes could not have been achieved without the selfless dedication and seamless cooperation of the many investigators and prosecutors who took part. This investigation will cause ripples within drug trafficking markets throughout the country, underscoring HSI’s worldwide strategy to counter threats posed by opioids and dangerous narcotics. Most importantly, cases like this one save lives.”

The 25 residents of Pennsylvania and Ohio named in a four-count indictment returned on Feb. 14, 2023, and unsealed today are:

Robert Hurst, 44, of North Royalton, OH;
Barry Baker, 44, of Indiana, PA;
Michael Brown, 41, of Indiana, PA;
Kayda Burek, 23, of New Kensington, PA;
Joseph Busch, 43, of New Kensington, PA;
Christine Cafazzo, 53, of New Kensington, PA;
Ernest Clinton, 40, of Leechburg, PA;
Misti Durante, 38, of Indiana, PA;
Travis Ezekiel, 34, of Cleveland, OH;
Melissa Frain, 34, of Indiana, PA;
Frank Gardner, 38, of Indiana, PA;
Keith Hurst, 45, of Tarentum, PA;
Kasmin James, 38, of New Kensington, PA;
Lamar Johnson, 40, of Indiana, PA;
Thomas King, Jr., 55, of New Kensington, PA;
Torrence Lyde, 33, of Cleveland, OH;
Lonnie McCann, 48, of Pittsburgh, PA;
Kareem Middlebrook, 41, of Creekside, PA;
Devan Nicholson, 29, of New Kensington, PA;
Milton Paschal, 43, of Arnold, PA;
Cathie Payson, 52, of Indiana, PA;
Kevin Thomas, 46, of Vandergrift, PA;
DeAngelo Ward, 33, of Cleveland, OH;
Ashley Weston, 38, of Muncy, PA; and
David Williams, 60, of Creekside, PA.

The Indictment charges all defendants with conspiring to distribute and possess with intent to distribute Schedule I and Schedule II controlled substances, from August 2018 to February 2023, in the Western District of Pennsylvania. All defendants are facing a mandatory minimum sentence of ten years of incarceration.

Kareem Middlebrook is charged at Count Two with possession with intent to distribute a quantify of fentanyl, on or about May 2, 2022. The statute calls for a maximum sentence of 20 years of incarceration.

Kareem Middlebrook is charged at Count Three with possession of a firearm and ammunition by a convicted felon, on or about May 2, 2022. The statute calls for a maximum sentence of ten years of incarceration.

Kareem Middlebrook is charged at Count Four with possession of a firearm in furtherance of a drug trafficking crime, on or about May 2, 2022. The statute calls for a mandatory minimum sentence of five years of incarceration.

A one-count Superseding indictment, returned on Feb. 14, 2023, and unsealed today named the following 29 individuals as defendants:

Marcos Monarrez-Mendoza, 53, of Phoenix, AZ;
Samuel Aguirre, 21, of Phoenix, AZ;
Marcos Armenta, 22, of Phoenix, AZ;
Mark Camacho, 24, of Phoenix, AZ;
Robert Foster, 25, of Buckeye, AZ;
Donald Garwood, 40, of Glendale, AZ;
Erivan Guerrero, 22, of Phoenix, AZ;
Bryce Hill, 25, Seattle, WA;
Emmanuel Lopez, 27, of Glendale, AZ;
Cesar Monarrez, 25, of Maricopa, AZ;
Marcos Monarrez, Jr., 23, of Phoenix, AZ;
Jairo Morales, 21, of Phoenix, AZ;
Stephanie Ortiz, 24, of Avondale, AZ;
Valerie Sanchez, 35, of Phoenix, AZ;
Heaven West, 21, of Phoenix, AZ;
Carlos Zamora, 27, of Peoria, AZ;
Humberto Arredondo-Soto, 23, of Phoenix, AZ;
Colby Barrow, 29, of Peoria, AZ;
Luis Chavez-Ortega, 26, of Glendale, AZ;
Donnell Collins, 27, of Cleveland, OH;
Mohamed Kariye, 34, of Kent, WA;
Jesus Lopez, 21, of Phoenix, AZ;
Diego Monarrez, 21, of Phoenix, AZ;
Avante Nix, 20, of Saint Paul, MN;
Alicia Parks, 24, of Kent, WA;
James Pinkston, 32, of Pittsburgh, PA;
Jesus Ramirez, 25, of Phoenix, AZ;
Sahal Sahal, 36, of SeaTac, WA; and
Diamond Williams-Dorsey, 29, of Cleveland, OH.

The Superseding Indictment charges all defendants with conspiring to distribute and possess with intent to distribute five kilograms or more of a mixture and substance containing a detectable amount of cocaine, 400 grams or more of a mixture and substance containing a detectable amount of fentanyl, and 500 grams or more of a mixture and substance containing a detectable amount of methamphetamine, from April 2022 to January 2023, in the Western District of Pennsylvania.

The statute calls for a mandatory minimum sentence of ten years of incarceration.

Three additional defendants are charged by Criminal Complaint. Raheem Hurst, 25, of Garfield Heights, OH; Leah Jackson, 37, of New Kensington, PA; and Samantha Jones, 40, of Arnold, PA, are charged with conspiracy to distribute and to possess with intent to distribute 500 grams or more of a mixture and substance containing a detectable amount of cocaine. The statute calls for a mandatory minimum sentence of five years of incarceration.

Under the Federal Sentencing Guidelines, the actual sentence imposed would be based upon the seriousness of the offenses and the prior criminal history, if any, of the defendants.

Assistant United States Attorney Arnold P. Bernard, Jr. is prosecuting these cases for the government.

This prosecution is a result of an Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force (OCDETF) investigation. OCDETF identifies, disrupts, and dismantles high-level drug traffickers, money launderers, gangs, and transnational criminal organizations that threaten communities throughout the United States. OCDETF uses a prosecutor-led, intelligence-driven, multi-agency approach that leverages the strengths of federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies against criminal networks.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation, Laurel Highlands Resident Agency, Homeland Security Investigations, and FBI Pittsburgh's Southwest Pennsylvania Safe Streets Task Force conducted the investigation leading to the charges in this case. Additional federal agencies participating in this investigation include HSI and FBI in Phoenix and Seattle, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, the Internal Revenue Service – Criminal Investigation, the United States Postal Inspection Service, the United States Marshals Service, and the Federal Air Marshals Service. Other participating agencies include the Pennsylvania State Police, Pennsylvania Attorney General's Office, New Kensington Police Department, Westmoreland County Detectives, Indiana Borough Police Department, Phoenix (Arizona) Police Department, Scottsdale (Arizona) Police Department, and the Arizona Department of Public Safety. Valuable assistance was provided by the Indiana County District Attorney's Office, the Westmoreland County District Attorney's Office, the Cambria County District Attorney's Office, and the Beaver County District Attorney's Office.

An indictment or a superseding indictment is an accusation. A defendant is presumed innocent unless and until proven guilty.

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