

## How police hot-wired an auto theft probe into something much bigger

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Originally published 04:59 p.m., April 23, 2010

Updated 05:28 p.m., April 23, 2010

Word got out on the street that buyers could be found at an Oxnard warehouse — and the sellers came calling, offering stolen cars, drugs and guns, according to authorities.

What they didn't know was that the supposed felon buyers were actually undercover cops, that backup officers were ready for action nearby and that the transactions were being recorded by covert audio and video equipment.

That's how an auto theft investigation by a local task force grew into a massive case that culminated Thursday when raids by hundreds of law enforcement officers netted scores of suspects for a variety of alleged crimes, said Audry Nafziger, the lead prosecutor on the case for the Ventura County District Attorney's Office.

"This is probably the largest-scale operation of any kind that we've done here," said Nafziger, a 16-year veteran of the office.

More than 250 officers from local, state and federal agencies served search warrants Thursday across Ventura County, arresting numerous suspects. Many other suspects were already in custody for different cases and were rearrested. All told, authorities expect to charge more than 90 people in the case, Nafziger said.

Eleven suspects have already been indicted by federal authorities and more indictments are expected.

During the 15-month effort, dubbed "Operation Sudden Impact," investigators recovered 92 stolen vehicles, 65 firearms, 938 grams of crystal methamphetamine, 203 grams of heroin, 95 grams of cocaine, 27 grams of marijuana and \$14,010 in counterfeit money, authorities said.

The operation was much smaller when launched in January 2009 by the Ventura County Auto Theft Task Force to recover stolen vehicles. About 15 officers were involved in the clandestine Oxnard shop where several of them posed as criminals buying stolen autos, Nafziger said.

Sellers later began offering other items, including drugs, guns and counterfeit money, Nafziger said. With recording equipment rolling, officers purchased items about 160 times, she said.

Some of the sellers bragged about their illegal activities, said the prosecutor. In some cases, authorities used the video footage to identify the suspects.

Many were on probation or parole for previous convictions, and some were documented gang members, Nafziger said. One prevalent charge in the federal indictments is being a felon in possession of a firearm.

Authorities said the case does not involve a large, organized criminal ring, and none of those arrested were suspected ringleaders. "There were a few small criminal groups that did a lot of business with our people," Nafziger said.

Three of the suspects — a woman with previous drug and theft convictions and her two nephews — are expected to face a total of 28 counts, including the sale of eight stolen cars and three guns, said the prosecutor.

Several of the federal indictments detail alleged drug buys by undercover officers, such as the purchase of about 55.7 grams of cocaine for \$1,800.

Buying illicit goods in undercover operations can be expensive, and even when arrests are made, the money is often gone.

Money was one thing the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives contributed to the investigation, said Special Agent Mike Hoffman. The agency has money specifically for buying guns, to get them off the street and arrest the sellers, Hoffman said.

It was the agency's largest case in Ventura County in three years, Hoffman said. "This many guns purchased is quite an achievement," he said.

The agency is now trying to trace the guns. Except in rare cases where they can be returned to a legal owner, they are destroyed, Hoffman said.

The alleged stolen cars included many older Hondas and trucks and only a few newer cars. Because the sellers thought the vehicles were being resold, authorities had to squirrel them away in warehouses, Nafziger said.

Because most insurance companies reimburse auto-theft victims within a month, many of the recovered vehicles are now owned by the insurance carriers, Nafziger said.

Authorities do plan to return personal property found in some cars and seek financial restitution for victims if and when suspects are convicted.

Oxnard police Assistant Chief Jason Benites said auto theft has dropped dramatically in the city because of the task force. "They lived and breathed this for a year," Benites said.



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