

ICE Arrests 375 Gang Members and Associates in Two-Week Enforcement Action

Release Date: 03/10/06 00:00:00

For Immediate Release
Office of the Press Secretary
Contact: ICE Public Affairs, 202-514-2648
March 10, 2006

During a two-week enforcement action that culminated yesterday, federal agents from the Department of Homeland Security's U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) arrested 375 gang members and associates in 23 states in a joint effort with law enforcement agencies nationwide.

The arrests are the latest under the auspices of "Operation Community Shield," a comprehensive initiative launched by ICE roughly one year ago to disrupt and dismantle transnational, violent street gangs. Operation Community Shield represents the first time the federal government has used immigration and customs authorities in a combined, national campaign against criminal street gangs in the United States.

Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff announced the results at a press conference today with ICE Assistant Secretary Julie Myers; Director of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) Emilio Gonzalez; Assistant Director of Field Operations at the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) Michael Bouchard, First Assistant Chief of the Dallas Police Department David O'Neal Brown, and Deputy Assistant Director of the FBI's Criminal Investigative Division Deborah Pierce.

In the past year, ICE has conducted several targeted enforcement actions under Operation Community Shield, including the latest one. In total, these efforts have resulted in the arrest of 2,388 members of 239 different gangs and the seizure of 117 firearms. Fifty-one of those arrested were gang leaders. Roughly 922 of those arrested were from the street gang Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13). Those arrested under Operation Community Shield are prosecuted criminally or removed from the United States through immigration proceedings. To date, 533 have been charged criminally, while 1,855 have been hit with administrative immigration charges.

In the latest enforcement action that began on Feb. 24, 2006, ICE teamed up with its law enforcement partners to arrest large numbers of gang members in Dallas (44), San Diego (41), Washington, D.C. (22), Miami (22), and Raleigh, N.C. (19). Gang members were also arrested in locations such as Sioux Falls, South Dakota; Des Moines, Iowa; and Springfield, Missouri. Those arrested included members of MS-13, Surenos, 18th Street Gang, Latin Kings, Bloods, Crips, Armenian Power, Street Thug Criminals, Brown Pride, Asian Dragon Family, Avenue Assassins, Spanish Gangster Disciples, Big Time Killers and Hermanos Pistoleros Latinos.

More than 260 of the 375 individuals arrested in the latest action have past criminal records, most of them violent. ICE agents arrested 73 of the individuals on new criminal charges ranging from drug and firearms violations to charges of re-entering the country after deportation. The rest have been accused of administrative immigration violations and placed into deportation proceedings. Some of those arrested include:

- Convicted murderer & gang member whose son is charged with shooting an ICE agent -- On March 3, ICE agents in South Texas arrested Juan Eladio Villareal-Saenza, a convicted murderer and member of the gang, Hermanos Pistoleros Latinos, on criminal charges of re-entry after deportation. The same day, ICE agents and U.S. Marshals deputies arrested his son, Leobardo Villareal, who was wanted on federal charges of shooting ICE agent Maria Ochoa in May 2005; escaping from federal custody; and federal drug violations. After his first arrest for the attempted murder of an ICE agent, Leobardo Villareal escaped in Sept. 2005 from the McAllen Medical Center, where he allegedly carjacked a mother and her children to flee. He was later featured on "America's Most Wanted."
- Gang member who robbed state representative & beat individual in the head with bat -- On Feb. 28, ICE agents worked with the Fuquay-Varina, N.C. Police Department to arrest Jose Carlos Peralta-Morales, a Surenos gang member who was observed that day beating an individual in the head with an aluminum baseball bat in a Wal-Mart store. ICE interviews of the suspect revealed that he had previously been deported in May 2005 and had been convicted of robbery / accessory after the fact in connection with an incident in which gang members broke into and robbed the house of a North Carolina state representative. Peralta-Morales faces federal criminal prosecution.

"The lawlessness that these violent gangs propagate presents a grave threat to public safety," said Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff. "We are meeting their victimization of the innocent with hard-hitting enforcement actions

Secretary Michael Chertoff. "We are meeting their victimization of the innocent with hard hitting enforcement actions that lead to criminal prosecutions and deportations. Operation Community Shield embodies the power behind law enforcement partnerships, at all levels, to share information and combat these intolerable criminal elements."

"Transnational street gangs pose a growing public safety threat to urban and rural communities throughout the United States. Their violence, sophistication, and scope have reached intolerable levels," said ICE Assistant Secretary Myers. "Operation Community Shield demonstrates how ICE is working with its law enforcement partners and leveraging its broad authorities to disrupt these criminal organizations on a national scale."

Partnerships with law enforcement / Impact on violent crime

Law enforcement partnerships at the local level are critical to the success of Operation Community Shield. Recent collaboration in Dallas was representative of joint operations nationwide. In Dallas, ICE received data from the Dallas Police Department about local violent gang members. ICE conducted further investigation to determine if any were subject to arrest for federal customs or immigration violations. After identifying targets subject to ICE authorities, ICE and Dallas police conducted a joint operation that netted 44 gang members.

First Assistant Chief of the Dallas Police Department David O'Neal Brown said, "Operation Community Shield has had a direct impact on violent crime in the Dallas area. Over the past year, the murder rate in the Dallas metropolitan area decreased roughly twenty percent compared to the year before. This is a successful program that the Dallas Police Department is proud to participate in."

ICE has also worked with its partners at the federal level. In the recent action, ICE teamed with USCIS to identify 48 MS-13 members who had recently applied for immigration benefits by comparing its list of thousands of gang targets against the USCIS database of immigration benefit applicants. This effort led to the arrest of 4 MS-13 members and the placement of immigration detainees on 8 MS-13 members in custody.

"Operation Community Shield is a prime example of how USCIS and ICE have joined forces to identify and remove those who pose a threat to public safety," said USCIS Director Emilio Gonzalez. "Just this past year, USCIS identified and referred more than 4,000 cases involving fraud to ICE. This joint anti-fraud and national security effort is a major priority for the Department of Homeland Security."

ICE has also worked closely with its partners at the ATF and FBI. ICE has been coordinating street gang operations with the ATF's Violent Crime Impact Team (VCIT) initiative, which operates in 23 cities throughout the country to identify, arrest, and prosecute the most violent criminals in communities. The VCIT is especially focused on the reduction of gun-related violence often perpetrated by violent gangs. ICE has also been coordinating all its gang targets with the FBI and its MS-13 National Gang Task Force prior to arrest.

About Operation Community Shield

Operation Community Shield was launched in February 2005 after a threat assessment by ICE field offices identified MS-13 as one of the largest and most violent street gangs in the country. The assessment found that most of these gang members were foreign-born; in the United States illegally; had prior criminal convictions; and/or were involved in crimes that made them subject to ICE's broad immigration and customs authorities.

ICE kicked off Operation Community Shield with an enforcement action that resulted in the arrest of more than 100 members of MS-13. In the months that followed, ICE agents nationwide joined ranks and continued targeting MS-13 members in their jurisdictions. In May 2005, ICE expanded Operation Community Shield to include all criminal street gangs and prison gangs with foreign-born members.

Since that time, ICE has been targeting all violent gang members nationwide by using its administrative immigration authorities to detain and remove illegal alien gang members from the country and by using its criminal authorities to arrest and prosecute gang members involved in criminal activities.