

Undercover Deputies Crack Multi-School Drug Ring

Teens, adults arrested in county-wide sweep Tuesday morning

By Sarah Grieco (Tuesday, Apr 30, 2013) San Diego NBC 7



Six minors and 10 adults were arrested Tuesday morning during an undercover operation by the San Diego County Sheriff's Department.

San Diego County sheriff's deputies posing as students for an undercover narcotics operation resulted in the arrest of six juveniles and 10 adults Tuesday.

Ages of the adult suspects range from 18 to 45 and they were arrested throughout the county. Five of the juvenile suspects were arrested at local high schools including Poway HS, Mt. Carmel HS, Ramona HS and Mission Hills HS.

Nine of the arrest warrants were for current and former students, and 10 warrants were served to adults who sold narcotics to the undercover deputies, according to the sheriff's department.

The year-long narcotics investigation was called "Operation 'A' Team" and deputies spent time at Poway, Mission Hills, Abraxas and Ramona High Schools for an undisclosed amount of time. Officials said deputies witnessed purchase of a variety of drugs including marijuana, heroin, cocaine, oxycodone and hydrocodone.

The San Diego Sheriff's Department worked in conjunction with three county school districts during the operation.

One suspect, 21-year-old Jesse Escalante, has been placed custody at Vista Detention Facility on fraud charges. Other adults who were arrested included:

- Johny Nguyen, 18, of Poway
- Philip Silva, 25, of San Diego
- Christopher Payne, 18, of Ramona
- Kevin Meza, 18, of San Marcos

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- Ramon Kelly, 45, of Vista
- Edwin Sanchez, 19, of San Marcos
- Milton Ortena, 19, of San Marcos
- Maxwell Gaffney, 19, of Ramona
- Skylor McGee, 20, of Ramona



Three suspects are still outstanding, including Poway residents Troy Gagliano and Erik Johnson in addition to Jesus Zurita of San Marcos.

Sheriff Bill Gore said the operation has provided information on other drug suppliers in San Diego and his department is following those leads.

“The take-away from today is this: If you want to buy illegal drugs, you very well could be talking to a Deputy Sheriff,” he said in a statement.

The undercover deputies have had an average of 2.5 years of experience and also participated in an undercover training program.

Poway School District Superintendent John Collins emailed parents, letting parents know PUSD does not tolerate drugs on campus.

"We have a strong and cooperative relationship with the Sheriff's Department and while it saddens me that the investigation led to the arrest of PUSD students," he said in a statement.