

Gang sweep targets decades of murder

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Chicago Tribune

Jun 30, 2007

A three-year investigation, unprecedented in its size and scope in Kane County, culminated this week with 31 Latin Kings street gang members charged in connection with 22 slayings in and around Aurora during the last two decades, officials announced Friday.

All but two of those charged were in custody. Police are seeking the other two.

Officials said they hoped the results of the investigation, dubbed Operation First-Degree Burn, would comfort the families of murder victims, debilitate the Latin Kings and discourage others from joining gangs.

"Hopefully, these arrests will put an end to the false perception that gang members can get away with murder, because that is not true," said William Monroe, special-agent-in-charge of the FBI in Chicago.

"It should rattle the foundation of that entire street gang," said Kane County State's Atty. John Barsanti.

The charges are the result of a joint investigation involving the Aurora and Montgomery Police Departments, the FBI, the Kane County sheriff's police and the Kane County state's attorney. Indictments were issued by a special grand jury that had met in secret since April.

The slayings ran the gamut. There was the 2003 death of Robert Rem, 17, who was gunned down days before Christmas on the evening before he was to travel to Germany to meet his mother, who had been stationed in Iraq. Police said Rem had no gang affiliation and was killed as a result of a mistaken identification.

A Kane County sheriff's police detective called Rem's mother, Wendy Galloway, in Germany early Friday to tell her two men had been charged in her son's slaying. She was "happy and relieved," said Sheriff Pat Perez.

There was the killing of Willie Arce, 20, shot to death through a window in June 1989 as he walked down the basement stairs of his home in the 700 block of Liberty Street. Police said Friday that Angel "Doc" Luciano, 55, of Aurora and his son Michael Luciano, 34, of Mesa, Ariz., were charged in Arce's death. Doc Luciano was once the highest ranking Latin King in Aurora, said Aurora Police Chief William Powell.

And there was the 1996 slaying of Noe Salinas, 16, who was on his way home from a friend's house when he was chased down and shot to death at 5 p.m. in January 1996. His body was found less than a block from his home.

"I felt like crying this morning so badly when they told me [suspects] had been caught," said Salinas' grandmother, Paulita Salinas.

Marie de Jesus had tears in her eyes as she recalled her slain cousin.

"He was very young. He was very special to us," de Jesus said.

Aurora is a diverse city racially, economically, even geographically. With more than 140,000 residents, Aurora is the second largest city in Illinois, and it has become over the last two decades another bedroom community where commuters can afford upscale homes on large lots. But its downtown -- a former booming industrial center struggling to make a comeback -- and some of its inner-city neighborhoods struggle with the same crime and social problems as big cities.

Aurora recorded its first gang-related homicide in 1984, and over the next two decades, homicides soared from two or three a year to more than 20 annually. During the 1990s, 163 people were murdered in Aurora, and 98 of those killings were gang-related, according to Aurora Police Department statistics.

Aurora Police Chief William Powell would not say how many of those gang slayings remain unsolved.

Powell said the department battled street gangs single-handedly for years and had some success. But he said the department has really started to make headway against gangs since partnering with federal agencies such as the FBI, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives and the Justice Department.

"In policing, the mentality sometimes is, we can do it ourselves, we don't need help," Powell said.

"We've come to realize we have to collaborate."

Police began working with federal agencies in 2002, and Powell said it is having an effect. In 2005 the city saw nine gang-related murders, and last year there were three, a drop from 2002 when 15-gang related homicides were committed in Aurora.

The massive gang sweep announced Friday was the ninth conducted in Aurora, said police spokesman Dan Ferrelli. The first eight resulted in federal prosecutions on drug or weapons charges and provided investigators with leads and information about some unsolved crimes, Ferrelli said.

Three years ago, the Aurora Police Department and the FBI formed a cold case task force to investigate unsolved gang crimes.

"We had targets on some of these crimes maybe four, five, six years ago, but we have to corroborate things we suspect," Powell said.

The cold case task force continues to operate, and Powell said investigators have told him they are close to solving several other gang-related homicides.

"I want to guarantee to everybody who has suffered a loss through gang violence that we are not going to give up," Powell said.

Barbara Wesby said she was close to giving up hope that police would ever charge someone for the 1995 slaying of her son. Larry Wesby, 17, was shot to death while standing in the parking lot of an Aurora apartment complex on East Indian Trail on Aug. 28. She said she was shocked when police called her this week to tell her two men had been charged with the murder.

"The whole thing unfolds in your mind again: the phone call, waiting at the hospital," she said. "It doesn't seem like 12 years. It's fresh in your mind, like it just happened."

She added, "But I'm sure those who were caught were shocked after 12 years, too."

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Charged in sweep

Charges were announced Friday against:

- * Charles Lantz, 26, in the 1998 murder of Donald Goodman, 25.
- * Quentin Moore, 25, Ruben Hernandez, 24, Juan Vargas, 18, Max Aguilar, 17, and Roman Lucio, 26, in the 2005 death of Jorge Caro, 21. Moore also is charged with the 2001 murders of Sharon Paulette, 20, and Larry Postlewaite, 17, and the 2003 murder of Jorge Uriostigue, 19.
- * Jose F. Melero, 26, in the 2004 murder of Raul Romero, 30.
- * Juan Carlos Verdugo, 25, and Jorge Alanis, 32, in the 2003 death of Robert Rem, 17.
- * George Torres, 30, in the 1997 murder of Fernando Dieppa, 21.
- * Julian Acosta, 23, and Arnolando Aguilar, 22, in the 2001 murder of Brian Lambert, 26.
- * Roel Soto, 35, in the 1997 murder of Michael O'Gara, 19.
- * Andres Beltran, 23, in the 2000 death of Steven Quigley, 17.
- * Omar Soto, 29, and Rashaan Thomas, 31, in the 1995 murder of Demetrius Washington, 17.
- * Angel "Doc" Luciano, 55, Michael Luciano, 34, Irving Childress, 32, and Michael Rodriguez, 33, in the 1990 murder of Albert Gonzalez, 18. Angel and Michael Luciano also are charged with the 1989 murder of Willie Arce, 20.
- * Shane Lopez, 31, and Johnny Gonzalez, 32, in the 1996 murder of Noe Salinas, 16. Lopez also charged in the 1996 death of Curtis Thompson, 25.
- * Michael Diaz, 31, and Jimmy Torres, 32, in the 1995 murder of Larry Wesby, 17. Diaz also is charged with the 1995 murder of David Jimenez, 31.
- * Jose Javier Ramirez, 29, in the 1995 murder of Rogelio Hernandez, 26.
- * Abraham Estremera, 37, and Michael J. Reyes, 34, in the 1993 murders of Jesus Montoya, 20, and Francisco Montoya, 19.
- * Jesse M. Lopez, 25, in the 2003 murder of Juan Carlos Rodriguez, 22.

Police withheld the names of a juvenile who was charged and two suspects not yet in custody.