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From the Los Angeles Times

96 arrested in San Diego State drug bust

Fraternity houses were infiltrated in a six-month undercover investigation, and widespread drug-dealing was found, authorities say.

By Tony Perry

Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

May 7, 2008

SAN DIEGO — The undercover officers started to appear at San Diego State fraternity parties about six months ago.

They dressed like students, complained about their parents and professors, and talked freely and knowingly of things of great interest on campus: music, sex and drugs.

Soon they were accepted, with no questions asked. They were spotted at student hangouts on and off campus. They swapped cellphone numbers with other partygoers. They text-messaged their newfound friends.

The real students appeared to accept the pretend ones -- most but not all of whom were men. On a campus of 34,000 students, blending into the crowd was not difficult. Neither was collecting evidence of drug dealing and drug use.

On Tuesday, authorities announced that 96 young men -- including 75 students -- had been arrested on a variety of drug charges as a result of Operation Sudden Fall, which infiltrated seven fraternities on Fraternity Row and Fraternity Circle. Officials said the name of the operation referred to the prospect of sudden death from drug usage.

The investigation involved marijuana, cocaine, methamphetamine and Ecstasy.

One of the alleged drug dealers is 19 and recently had been praised as a model student in a university publication. Another was just a month away from earning a master's degree in homeland security and had worked with the campus police as a security officer. One allegedly was selling cocaine to high school students.

A criminal justice major was arrested on suspicion of possession of cocaine. As he was being arrested, he asked officers if this would hurt his chances for a law enforcement career, officials said.

Among the suspected drug dealers is Omar Castaneda, 36, who is not a student and is allegedly connected to a gang in Pacoima that has possible ties to the Mexican Mafia, said Ralph W. Partridge, a special-agent-in-charge for the Drug Enforcement Administration in San Diego.

"This operation shows how accessible and pervasive illegal drugs continue to be on our college campuses and how common it is for students to be selling to other students," said San Diego County Dist. Atty. Bonnie Dumanis.

University police began the investigation a year ago after a 19-year-old female student died of cocaine and ethanol intoxication, San Diego State President Stephen Weber said at a news conference Tuesday morning at the district attorney's office.

About six months ago, the probe was broadened to include agents from the federal Drug Enforcement Administration and youthful-looking undercover officers from several local police departments, who quickly became regulars at the weekend party scene.

During the investigation, a 24-year-old student at San Diego Mesa College died of a cocaine overdose after a party at a San Diego State fraternity house. None of the arrests Tuesday was linked to the two students' deaths, officials said.

About 20 of the arrested students were involved in selling drugs, authorities said. The remainder were arrested on suspicion of possession. About 130 drug purchases were made during the investigation, both on and off campus.

Deputy Dist. Atty. Damon Mosler, head of the district attorney's narcotics unit, said the operation was so successful that the alleged drug dealers sold narcotics to people they didn't know on the basis of undercover officers' referrals. More experienced drug dealers would never exhibit such carelessness, Mosler said.

Weber, the university's president, said he did not hesitate to allow undercover officers on campus, even if that decision sparked ire.

"We did the right thing," he said. "I think, frankly, more universities should step up and take these kinds of actions."

As for those responsible for drug dealing, he said, "if we find that the fraternities as organizations were involved, they will be kicked off campus."

Several members of the Theta Chi, Phi Kappa Psi and Delta Sigma Pi fraternities were arrested.

Late Tuesday, the university announced the suspension of six fraternities -- Lambda Chi Alpha, Phi Kappa Psi, Phi Kappa Theta, Theta Chi, Sigma Alpha Epsilon and Sigma Alpha Mu -- pending a hearing into their involvement in the drug dealing.

All of the arrested students have been suspended, Weber said. Those who live in university-owned or maintained housing are being evicted, he added.

On the sprawling campus in eastern San Diego, word of the drug busts spread rapidly.

Angela Beckwith, 22, a child development major, said the arrests "are a shocker but not really a surprise. Lots of people are using."

"I'm surprised more people aren't caught or get hurt," said Adam Klein, 23, a business major and a member of the Phi Kappa Theta fraternity. "This looks bad for the whole Greek system."

One suspect, Kenneth Ciaccio, 19, a member of the Theta Chi fraternity, sent out a mass text message early last month to "faithful customers," saying that he was traveling to Las Vegas and would not be able to make his normal cocaine sales, the DEA said.

A publication produced by the university's public relations department that recently lauded Ciaccio as a model student was taken off its website Tuesday.

Although the investigation was widely praised in San Diego, the nationwide group Drug Policy Alliance blasted it as "sensationalistic" and futile. The group believes in the decriminalization of marijuana and favors increased drug education and treatment over mass arrests.

"College students on any campus in this country are easy pickings," said Margaret Dooley-Sammuli, the group's deputy state director for Southern California. "But these types of arrests are not the best use of the DEA's resources. They should be targeting large-scale traffickers and distributors."

According to the DEA, the seized evidence included 4 pounds of cocaine, 50 pounds of marijuana, 48 hydroponic marijuana plants, 350 Ecstasy pills, 30 vials of hash oil, methamphetamine, psilocybin (mushrooms), various illicit prescription drugs, a shotgun, three semiautomatic pistols, three brass knuckles and \$60,000 in cash.

Officials put the value of the seized drugs at more than \$100,000. They said the marijuana was high-grade and probably grown locally because marijuana smuggled from Mexico is usually of a lower quality.

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Major SDSU drug probe nets 96 arrests in raids

75 are students; DEA took part in yearlong operation

By Jeff McDonald,
Sherry Saavedra
and Tanya Sierra
STAFF WRITERS

May 7, 2008

San Diego State University police have contended with illegal drugs before, but what investigators discovered over the past year was worse – more sophisticated, more pervasive and more dangerous.

- [Parents of student who died laud SDSU efforts](#)

Federal agents and SDSU police culminated a yearlong investigation into drug dealing around campus yesterday, the first anniversary of a freshman's cocaine-related death.

Ninety-six suspects, including 75 SDSU students, have been arrested on drug-related charges as a result of the undercover operation, launched after Jenny Poliakoff, 19, was found dead in her off-campus apartment after a night of celebration with her sorority.

An early-morning roundup of 18 of the suspects had the campus in an uproar yesterday. Students and staff members traded updates about what was going on at Cox Arena, where agents processed and questioned dozens of people.

Some parents of suspects heard about the raids from friends or news reports.

Officials said the tactics were necessary to confront the problem.

“We know there's drug use in college . . . but when you have an organization that's actually based out of a college area, that's a whole different thing,” said Garrison Courtney of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration. “You just don't see that.”

The SDSU Police Department approached the DEA and county narcotics task-force officials for assistance in December, when it became clear that the trafficking was more widespread than it could handle.



K.C. ALFRED / Union-Tribune
SDSU President Stephen Weber spoke yesterday at a news conference in which authorities said 96 suspects were arrested on drug-related charges. Among the items seized were 4 pounds of cocaine, 50 pounds of marijuana and three handguns.

“We were coming in contact with more types of narcotics,” SDSU Police Chief John Browning said. “If you’re serious about this, you have to go to someone who has the resources to take it to the next level.”

As the investigation was unfolding, the campus dealt with another drug-related death. An autopsy showed that Mesa College student Kurt Baker died Feb. 24 at an SDSU fraternity from oxycodone and alcohol poisoning.

In addition to the arrests, authorities seized 4 pounds of cocaine, 50 pounds of marijuana, \$60,000 in cash, three handguns and other drugs and paraphernalia.

One suspect, Phi Kappa Psi member Michael Montoya, worked as a community-service officer on campus and would have earned a master’s degree in homeland security next month. Another student arrested on suspicion of possessing 500 grams of cocaine and two guns was a criminal-justice major.

Authorities identified 22 SDSU students as drug dealers who sold to undercover agents. At least 17 others allegedly supplied the drugs. The rest of the suspects apparently bought or possessed illegal drugs.

Authorities said students from seven fraternities were involved in the drug ring, which operated openly across campus. Six of those fraternities have been suspended, university officials said.

Evidence showed that “most of the members were aware of organized drug dealing occurring from the fraternity houses,” officials said. Drug agents confirmed that “a hierarchy existed for the purposes of selling drugs for money.”

Authorities singled out the Theta Chi fraternity as a hub of cocaine dealing.

One alleged dealer, Theta Chi member Kenneth Ciaccio, sent text messages to his “faithful customers” announcing that cocaine sales would be suspended over an upcoming weekend because he and his “associates” planned to be in Las Vegas, authorities said.

The same message posted “sale” prices on cocaine if transactions were completed before the dealers left San Diego.

Until yesterday, Ciaccio was featured on SDSU’s Web site promoting the Compact for Success program, which guarantees certain Sweetwater Union High School District students admission to the university if they maintain a B average.

Leaders at the Theta Chi national office in Indiana said they have barred the San Diego chapter from hosting any events.



SCOTT LINNETT / Union-Tribune
Omar Castaneda (left) and Patrick Hawley were arraigned yesterday in San Diego Superior Court on drug-related charges.



BRUCE K. HUFF / Union-Tribune
The Theta Chi fraternity at San Diego State was singled out by authorities as a hub of cocaine dealing.

“This is not indicative of what Theta Chi is about,” executive director Dale Taylor said in a phone interview.

SDSU President Stephen Weber said that even when campus police decided to ask for help from other authorities, “it wasn’t clear that we were going to end up at the point where we were today.”

All of the students arrested in the sweep – dubbed Operation Sudden Fall – were suspended pending a review. Any suspects living in campus housing have been evicted.

Damon Mosler, chief of the narcotics division of the District Attorney's Office, said the investigation could have happened on any college campus in America. Mosler said his unit joined in because the university took the unusual step of asking for help.

“Oftentimes administrations don't want us to do this stuff, and that's unfortunate,” Mosler said. “I think it's important to do this every now and then to wake people up. It raises everyone's awareness to the dangers of drugs.”

Raids began as early as 6 a.m. yesterday, several witnesses said. Greg Muender, president of Phi Kappa Psi, said police showed up to scour two of the fraternity's apartments.

“They searched pretty rigorously for probably two hours with dogs,” Muender said. “Quite honestly, they trashed the apartments pretty good. Everything was turned over. Everything's on the bed.”

One student whose apartment was raided and whose two roommates were arrested said he was shocked to wake up to gun-toting officers swarming his second-floor, two-bedroom home.

“Our door was battering-rammed in,” said the student, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because he didn’t want to be associated with the drug allegations.

“They got us out of bed and turned our apartment upside down looking for stuff. I was clean. They told me to leave for a few hours, and I did.”

Scores of students were herded into an area below Cox Arena, where they sat handcuffed and silent while they waited to be fingerprinted and interviewed.

“I felt shaken up the whole day,” said one student who was arrested, then released. “I was relieved when they released me, but I was scared.”

News of the mass arrests didn't make it to one Los Angeles mother, whose son's name appeared on list of arrestees that was released by law enforcement officials.

“Oh, my, my,” said Wong Watanapun, whose son Thomas Watanapun was among those charged. “I don't know anything.”

Watanapun said she spoke with her son last week. “I wanted to see his place, but he said he was studying and that it was very messy. But I wanted to go. I asked him, but he said he's too busy.”

According to the search-warrant affidavit, Thomas Watanapun sold \$400 worth of cocaine to undercover agents from a Lexus sedan registered to his father in Los Angeles.

Authorities said some of the suspects made little effort to conceal their activities.

Dealers “weren't picky about who they sold to,” Mosler said.

One of the main suspects is Omar Castaneda, a gang member from Pomona with ties to some Mexican drug cartels, officials said.

Castaneda, 36, was arraigned yesterday in San Diego Superior Court on charges of possession of cocaine for sale. He is suspected of being a major link between drugs flowing into California from Tijuana and sales at SDSU.

Also arraigned was Patrick Hawley, 20, who was arrested on suspicion of armed robbery and selling cocaine near the campus, officials said.

Research indicates that university campuses are fertile markets for drug dealers.

According to a 2007 study by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University, nearly half of the nation's 5.4 million full-time college students abuse drugs or alcohol at least once a month.

Weber said he doesn't know whether the arrests will tarnish the university's image.

“That's not our primary concern,” he said. “It would have been wrong to look the other way. . . . My guess is this will reflect positively on San Diego State because of what we did.”

Staff writers Tony Manolatos, Angelica Martinez and Debbi Farr Baker and library researchers Erin Hobbs and Beth Wood contributed to this report.

6 fraternities suspended in drug probe at San Diego State U.

By ALLISON HOFFMAN, Associated Press Writer 2 hours, 1 minute ago

San Diego State University has suspended six fraternities after a sweeping drug investigation that landed dozens of students in jail on suspicion of openly dealing drugs on campus.

The probe — prompted by the cocaine overdose death last year of a freshman sorority member — led to the arrests of 96 people, 75 of them San Diego State students. A second drug death occurred during the investigation.

Twenty-nine people were arrested early Tuesday in raids at nine locations including the Theta Chi fraternity, where agents found cocaine, Ecstasy and three guns, authorities said. Eighteen of those arrested were wanted on warrants for selling to undercover agents.

Theta Chi and five other fraternities have been suspended pending a hearing on evidence gathered during the investigation, dubbed Operation Sudden Fall.

All of the arrested students have been suspended and will be barred from attending classes or taking final exams until their cases are reviewed, San Diego State President Stephen Weber said in a statement. Those who live in university-owned housing were evicted, he added.

"If guilty, they have ruined an untold number of lives," Weber said. "We are determined to remove people from our community who have placed our students at risk."

Authorities said some fraternity members openly dealt drugs, and that one sent a mass text message advertising special prices on cocaine. Two kilograms of cocaine were seized in all, along with 350 Ecstasy pills, marijuana, psychedelic mushrooms, hash oil, methamphetamine, illicit prescription drugs, several guns and at least \$60,000 in cash, authorities said.

Profits may have been used to finance fraternity operations, according to an affidavit.

A member of Theta Chi sent out a mass text message to his "faithful customers" stating that he and his "associates" would be unable to sell cocaine while they were in Las Vegas for a fraternity formal, according to the Drug Enforcement Administration. The text promoted a cocaine "sale" and listed the reduced prices on bulk quantities.

"Attn faithful customers both myself and my associates will be in Vegas this coming weekend," the 19-year-old student wrote in the text message. "So stock up, we will be back Sunday night."

Those arrested included a student who was about to receive a criminal justice degree and another who was to receive a master's degree in homeland security.

The Greek (fraternity and sorority) system at San Diego State has about 3,000 students, out of an enrollment of 34,000, but Fraternity Row plays an outsized role in campus life. It sits a block from Cox Arena, home to many college sporting events.

Dale Taylor, national executive director of Theta Chi, said he was "obviously shocked and saddened" by the allegations. Theta Chi prohibited the San Diego chapter from group activities such as parties or sports activities and will investigate additional disciplinary measures, up to expulsion of members or the entire chapter.

The San Diego chapter, founded 61 years ago, was the first national fraternity on campus and has 65 members.

The chapter declined to comment. It occupies two low-slung homes a block off Fraternity Row, with large red and white Greek symbols propped on the roof.

Theta Chi has 131 chapters in the U.S. and Canada and more than 161,000 initiates. It was founded in 1856.

Besides Theta Chi, the other suspended fraternities are Lambda Chi Alpha, Phi Kappa Psi, Phi Kappa Theta, Sigma Alpha Epsilon and Sigma Alpha Mu.

University police launched their investigation into drug sales on campus after Shirley Poliakoff, 19, died from a cocaine overdose in May 2007. Investigators discovered many students in fraternities were aware of organized drug dealing within their houses.

As the investigation continued, another student, from Mesa College, died of a cocaine overdose at an SDSU fraternity house on Feb. 26, the DEA said.

Some drugs bought and sold by students were traced to gangs linked to Mexican cartels, according to the DEA. Agents collected about \$100,000 worth of drugs that were being advertised in "resale quantities" between members of the fraternity and other

Today's News

Wednesday, May 7, 2008

Drug Sting Nabs 75 Students at San Diego State U.

By [SARA LIPKA](#)

A yearlong undercover drug investigation has resulted in the arrests of 75 students at San Diego State University and 21 other people accused of being involved in illegal drug sales there, university and law-enforcement officials announced on Tuesday.

Eighteen students were arrested on Tuesday, and 15 others were arrested in recent weeks, the student newspaper, *The Daily Aztec*, reported. The other arrests were made over the past 12 months.

During the investigation, officers have seized \$100,000 worth of marijuana, cocaine, ecstasy pills, hallucinogenic mushrooms, methamphetamine, and illicit prescription drugs, according to the district attorney's office for San Diego County. The officers also seized four guns, brass knuckles, and \$60,000 in cash.

The university's police department started the investigation after a student died of a cocaine overdose in May 2007, the district attorney's office said in a [written statement](#). Federal drug agents joined the investigation about five months ago. During the investigation, another student, from San Diego Mesa College, died of a drug overdose in a San Diego State fraternity house near the campus.

The officers in the investigation infiltrated seven San Diego State fraternities and made more than 130 undercover drug buys, both on and off the campus, officials quoted in news accounts and in the district attorney's statement said.

The officials said that students had coordinated the deals mainly by text messages. In one case, a member of the Theta Chi fraternity sent a mass text message to his "faithful customers," informing them of a "sale" on cocaine after a brief waiting period while he and his "associates" traveled to Las Vegas.

The university's president, Stephen L. Weber, told *The San Diego Union-Tribune* that faculty and staff members were not informed that the undercover investigation was being conducted on and near the campus.

"This was not a difficult decision," he said. "We needed to do something about it. We're talking about drug trafficking. That's the thing we were not prepared to turn our backs on. We had to deal with this."

San Diego State has suspended all the students who were arrested, pending due-process reviews, Mr. Weber said in a [written statement](#) on the university's Web site.

The university is also looking into whether any fraternities were involved organizationally, beyond the actions of individual members. If it finds that they were, Mr. Weber told reporters, those fraternities will be kicked out as campus organizations.

In a [statement](#) issued later in the day, the university announced that six fraternities had been placed on "interim suspension," pending hearings.

Among the students arrested were an undergraduate majoring in criminal justice and a master's candidate who was a month away from a degree in homeland security and who worked as a community-service officer under the supervision of the campus police.

In his own [statement](#) regarding the arrests, Mr. Weber called the investigation "a big step forward towards a safer environment for our students, faculty, staff, and neighbors."

"Illegal substances are inconsistent with our values and with the pursuit of our mission," he said. "Certainly today's arrests underscore the scope of the challenges universities face as we fight this major societal problem."

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May 7, 2008

75 Students Arrested in Drug Raid

By WILL CARLESS

SAN DIEGO — Seventy-five students at San Diego State University have been arrested on drug and weapons charges in an undercover operation that grew out of a student's death from a cocaine overdose last year, law enforcement authorities said on Tuesday.

The operation netted more than \$100,000 worth of cocaine, marijuana and ecstasy and several weapons, including a shotgun and four handguns, said Damon Mosler, chief of the narcotics division of the San Diego district attorney's office.

"They were blatant," Mr. Mosler said of those arrested, including an additional 21 nonstudents, among them a known member of a Los Angeles gang with ties to Mexican drug cartels. "I think that they thought they weren't going to be scrutinized at all.

"They were naïve," Mr. Mosler added. "They were businesslike, but they were naïve."

Several of those arrested belonged to university fraternities, according to documents released by the police. A statement by the university said six fraternities had been suspended pending its investigation, Lambda Chi Alpha, Phi Kappa Psi, Phi Kappa Theta, Sigma Alpha Epsilon, Sigma Alpha Mu and Theta Chi.

Those arrested faced a variety of felony charges in the sale of cocaine, ecstasy or marijuana. The charges carry maximum sentences of four years in prison upon conviction.

Mr. Mosler said that some of the accused were caught selling drugs to undercover officers and that he was considering bringing gang charges against them because of the highly organized nature of the dealing out of the fraternities.

One student was about to graduate with a degree in criminal justice, said Special Agent Ralph Partridge of the federal [Drug Enforcement Administration](#), which took part on the operation. Another was studying for a master's degree in homeland security.

The university president, Stephen L. Weber, said the campus police called in the D.E.A. after it became apparent that the drug use on campus was not confined to isolated incidents and that drug distribution appeared to be organized.

All the students arrested have been suspended, Mr. Weber said, and any who were living in campus-managed housing have been evicted.

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