

## U.S. CHARGES 56 SUSPECTED GANG MEMBERS

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In a roundup that included phony invitations to a stag party, federal agents have struck at a notorious southwest Detroit street gang, charging 56 people with gun and drug crimes.

The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms began arresting members of the **Latin Counts** on Sunday afternoon and was still rounding them up Monday. More than 30 people were in custody and detention hearings went into Monday evening in U.S. District Court in Detroit.

Federal prosecutors asked Magistrate Stephen Pepe to jail all the defendants without bond pending trial.

Bernard LaForest, special agent in charge of the Detroit ATF, said almost all of those arrested were members of the gang, which has about 130 members in Detroit. Several were handcuffed after being lured Sunday to a downtown hotel by an offer of booze and prostitutes at a nonexistent bachelor party, agents said.

The eight-month investigation, including the purchase of drugs and guns by undercover officers, netted 19 sawed-off shotguns -- described by police as the gang's weapon of choice -- plus 31 handguns, 26 long guns, 29 homemade silencers, an ounce of heroin and two pounds of crack cocaine. "We feel we had a significant impact, based on the community response we had today," LaForest said Monday. "We made sure we took off the top echelon of this gang. That doesn't mean that someone tomorrow won't step in to take their place, but we know we got the leaders."

LaForest said the **Counts**' leadership has been in flux in the last two years, with gunfire claiming its two most recent top men, David (Shadow) Morales and Octavio Viramontes.

LaForest said the investigation began after residents complained to police about gunplay, violence and intimidation by gang members.

U.S. Attorney Stephen Markman said the operation, dubbed "Down for the **Count**," was aimed at preserving southwest Detroit's still-vital business community and neighborhoods.

"To let street gangs undermine this area would be tragic," he said.

The area's residents and merchants were pleased by news of the arrests.

Shopkeepers said they have been hit hard by vandalism and graffiti and frightened by violence.

"They have their wars," said Ralph Scherbart, whose auto repair shop, Reliance Motors, has been in southwest Detroit for nearly 30 years. "There have been killings in this area. These punks are very intimidating to people."

LaForest said the arrests did not deliberately coincide with President George Bush's visit to Detroit on Monday. Bush held a roundtable on crime with area police officials.

The people arrested face charges under federal laws aimed at gun-toting felons and drug traffickers. One such law mandates five years for carrying a gun while dealing drugs, in addition to whatever sentence is imposed for the drug offense.

Other charges include gun possession by a convicted felon, and possession of an unregistered firearm, each of which can carry up to 10 years in prison on conviction.

Several of those arrested were juveniles and were taken by Detroit police to the Wayne County Youth Home to face charges in state courts.

Federal investigators said the **Latin Counts** are the leaders of Hispanic street gang activity that began in southwest Detroit in summer 1989.

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