

# The San Diego Union-Tribune.

SDSU drug cases ending with little fanfare

**Some wonder if publicity did more harm than good**

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UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITERS

August 17, 2008

The buzz started with early-morning raids on apartments and fraternities around San Diego State University on May 6, then built as students were corralled into Cox Arena for questioning.

A news conference quickly followed where federal, county and campus officials announced that dozens of SDSU students had been snared in a massive drug sting dubbed Operation Sudden Fall. Guns and bags of marijuana, cocaine and ecstasy were laid out for the cameras.

In a flash, the news went national.

Three months later, the court cases stemming from the yearlong undercover operation are wrapping up with much less fanfare. Almost all of the defendants sentenced after pleading guilty to felony charges have been placed on probation or ordered into drug diversion programs.

Some defendants have misdemeanor cases pending. Others received citations or their cases were dismissed. Some were not charged at all.

To borrow from T.S. Eliot, it would seem Operation Sudden Fall is ending not with a bang, but a whimper. Although attorneys say the cases are playing out as expected, some question whether all the hype did more harm than good.



**Thomas Watanapun**  
*Arrested in drug raid*

## OPERATION SUDDEN FALL: BY THE NUMBERS

**125:** Total arrests reported by prosecutors in drug sting

**95:** SDSU student arrests reported by prosecutors

**38:** SDSU student

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“It does create an impression that this is a bigger problem than it is,” said Michael L. Crowley, president of the San Diego Criminal Defense Bar Association.

“It's pretty common that when law enforcement holds a press conference, that (the case) is less in the final analysis than it was purported to be.”

Prosecutors defended the busts and the subsequent publicity.

“It's worthwhile,” said Damon Mosler, chief of the narcotics unit of the District Attorney's Office.

Mosler noted that the investigation was prompted by the fatal cocaine overdose of a 19-year-old SDSU student in May 2007.

While the investigation was under way, a 22-year-old Mesa College student died from a Feb. 26 cocaine overdose in an SDSU fraternity house.

“We put a little bit of pressure on all university officials to say, 'We've got to take this a little more seriously,' ” Mosler said.

## National attention

The drug raid generated a media frenzy. The case was widely discussed on the Internet and across the community, and the publicity lingers. Operation Sudden Fall generates more than 47,000 hits on Google. It also has its own entry on Wikipedia.

Within weeks of the sweep, the university launched a public-relations campaign featuring alumni and others praising the school's actions.

SDSU President Stephen Weber said the school acted appropriately in contacting federal drug agents and allowing them to pose as students on campus.

“There were very serious consequences to drug abuse on campus, including student deaths,” Weber said. “We had serious reason to believe the health and welfare of students was at risk, and we took action.”

On May 6, authorities reported 96 arrests, 75 of them SDSU students, as a result of the investigation by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration and campus police. Officials also seized four pounds of cocaine, 50 pounds of marijuana, \$60,000 in cash and three handguns, among other things.

Six fraternities were placed on interim suspension.

A couple of days later, prosecutors revised the total number of arrests to 125 – 95 of them students – since January.

arrests reported by the university, contradicting prosecutors' tally

**22:** SDSU students being expelled

**77:** Cases handled by the District Attorney's Office

**29:** Defendants who have pleaded guilty to criminal charges, of the 77 cases

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University officials contradicted the numbers provided by prosecutors, saying many students were arrested on drug-related charges unrelated to the federal investigation.

According to SDSU, about 38 student arrests can be attributed to Operation Sudden Fall. Twenty-two students accused of felonies are being expelled. Nine charged with misdemeanors were put on disciplinary probation, and two were suspended for at least a semester.

Five others are still under investigation.

Since the announcement, interim suspensions for three fraternities – Sigma Alpha Epsilon, Sigma Alpha Mu and Phi Kappa Theta – have been lifted. Lambda Chi Alpha was expelled in May for unrelated reasons. Theta Chi and Phi Kappa Psi remain on interim suspension.

## **The bigger players**

Deputy District Attorney Shawn Tafreshi provided a list of 77 defendants whose cases were handled by the District Attorney's Office. Twenty-nine have pleaded guilty to criminal charges, most of them felonies.

Charges were dismissed for six defendants on the list, and three were issued citations. No charges were filed for eight. Others are still pending.

Of those charged with felonies, few are likely to serve long sentences in jail or prison.

Kenneth Ciaccio, 19, whom prosecutors described in May as a “major cocaine dealer,” pleaded guilty last month to one felony count of furnishing a controlled substance for sale. Ciaccio is scheduled to be sentenced Sept. 4.

Omar Castaneda-Arce, 37, a nonstudent who prosecutors said served as a middleman between students and Mexican drug cartels, has pleaded not guilty to possession of cocaine for sale. Castaneda-Arce's trial is scheduled to begin in October.

Thomas Watanapun, 21, was arrested for selling a half-ounce of cocaine, worth \$400, to an undercover agent. Watanapun pleaded guilty to a felony count of furnishing a controlled substance for sale and was placed on three years' probation.

A judge ordered Watanapun to spend 120 days in jail but allowed him to serve his time in work furlough.

According to court documents, Watanapun told a probation officer he “was not a big-time drug dealer and supplier.” He said he sold cocaine as “favors” to friends.

His lawyer, Nathan Aguilar, said in an interview that his client made a bad choice but didn't deserve time in custody.

“I don't think that he was very involved in what they were trying to discover in the sting operation,” Aguilar said. “The bigger players pretty much went under the radar.”

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## Good and bad publicity

Prosecutors said they weren't surprised that most of the defendants who pleaded guilty to felony charges received little or no jail time. They said such outcomes are common in drug cases when defendants have no criminal history.

"First-time drug dealers are going to get probation," Mosler said. "The system is designed to give people second chances."

Mosler said he measures the success of the drug sweep not by prosecutions, but by whether it will deter drug dealers and users on campus. He said he hopes the effort will ultimately prevent more drug-related deaths.

"It's the message, and hopefully it resonates," Mosler said.

**Crowley**, a veteran defense lawyer, said the deterrent effect would happen without the media splash and resulting damage to the suspects' and the school's reputations.

"It's pretty low-hanging fruit to be able to go in and bust college students for low amounts of drugs," he said. "There's no indication of a larger problem than at any other big college campus like San Diego State University."

Weber, the university's president, said negative publicity was never a consideration when the school asked federal officials for help.

"You don't make these decisions based on that," Weber said. "You're going to get good publicity and bad publicity, and we got good publicity and bad publicity."

But he said this has been the university's best fundraising year. "So we must be doing something right."