



Department of Justice

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Fifteen Defendants Charged in Joint Federal and State Investigation of C-Block Criminal Street Gang's Drug and Firearms Trafficking Organization

DES MOINES, Iowa -- Fifteen defendants are facing criminal charges as part of a joint federal and state investigation of the Des Moines-based C-Block criminal street gang and associated cocaine trafficking organization. Criminal complaints unsealed in the United States District Court in Des Moines charge fifteen defendants with federal drug and firearms offenses. Many of the federal defendants were arrested Wednesday and Thursday of this week, and preliminary and detention hearings will be held early next week. One other defendant, William Charles Gray, was charged in a state complaint and will make appearance in Polk County Criminal Court.

The charges were announced by Marc Krickbaum, United States Attorney for the Southern District of Iowa; Randall Thyse, Special Agent-in-Charge of the Omaha Field Division of the Federal Bureau of Investigation; John P. Sarcone, Polk County Attorney; and Dana Wingert, Chief of Police of the Des Moines Police Department, following a long term investigation conducted by the FBI's Central Iowa Gang Task Force, which included the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives; Drug Enforcement Administration; Dallas County Sheriff's Office; Polk County Sheriff's Office; Story County Sheriff's Office; and the Altoona Police Department. Assistant United States Attorneys Mikaela Shotwell and Adam Kerndt represent the government.

Fifteen federal defendants are charged across two complaint affidavits, stemming from a months-long investigation of the Des Moines-based C-Block criminal street gang. The primary complaint (Case Nos. 4:19-MJ-161 through 174) alleges that DAERON MERRETT, 31, of Des Moines; MARSHAUN MERRETT, 31, of Des Moines; and BARRY ADAIR, JR., 29, of Des

Moines, constitute the leadership of C-Block, a criminal street gang based in Des Moines. The complaint describes C-Block's involvement in the distribution of controlled substances, particularly the distribution of cocaine in the Des Moines area. In December 2018, law enforcement obtained court authorization to intercept telephone communications of JOHNNATHAN FRENCHER, 26, of Des Moines, who was receiving cocaine from DAERON MERRETT for redistribution in Des Moines. Law enforcement later received court authorization to intercept telephone communications of DAERON MERRETT himself, leading to further identification of his cocaine trafficking network. The primary complaint alleges, in late January 2019, DAERON MERRETT and MARCUS HUNT, 37, of Des Moines, began traveling to the Chicago, Illinois and Gary, Indiana areas to obtain cocaine for distribution in Des Moines. CORDNEY SMITH, 43, of Gary, Indiana, is alleged to have brokered at least four drug transactions for DAERON MERRETT and HUNT, who obtained over 500 grams of cocaine for distribution in Des Moines.

The complaint identifies additional customers and redistributors of cocaine who have been charged with drug conspiracy and distribution:

- FREDDIE FRENCHER, JR., 28, of Des Moines
- JOSE ANTONIO SANCHEZ, JR., 25, of Des Moines
- CONRAD FRED TAYLOR, JR., 32, of Des Moines
- JHAMEL DONTA BOOKER, 35, of Des Moines
- CORNELIUS NEAL POPE, 40, of Des Moines
- PETER E. COOPER, JR., 32, of Des Moines
- WALTER STEFON BURGGS, 48, of Des Moines
- ANTOWAN LEON TAYLOR, 40, of Des Moines
- PAUL JOSEPH CASTELLINE, 33, of Des Moines

In addition to federal drug charges, several other defendants are charged with federal firearms offenses and crimes of violence. In *United States. v. MARSHAUN JORDAN MERRETT* (4:19-MJ-160), MARSHAUN MERRETT is charged with unlawfully possessing an extended magazine loaded with 30 rounds of ammunition during a traffic stop on December 26, 2018. Brothers JOHNNATHAN and FREDDIE FRENCHER are charged with attempted Hobbs Act

robbery and possession of a firearm in furtherance of a crime of violence, stemming from an incident on December 13, 2018. The complaint describes intercepted communications between JOHNNATHAN and FREDDIE FRENCHER in which the two planned to commit an armed home invasion robbery of another drug trafficker in Des Moines, who possessed marijuana and marijuana wax in his residence in Des Moines. In an effort to prevent the planned robbery by force, the Des Moines Police Department conducted a traffic stop of the vehicle in which JOHNNATHAN and FREDDIE FRENCHER were passengers, en route to the suspected home invasion location. A subsequent search of that vehicle yielded loaded, Glock firearms under each of JOHNNATHAN and FREDDIE FRENCHER's seats. JOHNNATHAN FRENCHER has also been charged with possessing a firearm as a felon, based on a prior felony drug conviction in the Iowa District Court for Polk County in May 2014.

The months-long investigation culminated in the execution of federal narcotics and firearms search warrants at the following locations on March 27, 2019:

- 1100 block of 14th Street, Des Moines
- 6600 block of SE 5th Street, Des Moines
- 3700 block of Valdez Drive, Des Moines
- 2000 block of 55th Street, Des Moines
- 600 block of 24th Street, Des Moines
- 6500 block of SW 9th Street, Des Moines
- 2400 block of E. Porter Avenue, Des Moines
- 2400 block of Capitol Avenue, Des Moines
- 1100 block of 9th Street, Des Moines
- 1500 block of 20th Place, Des Moines
- 1800 block of E. 25th Street, Des Moines
- 3000 block of 54th Street, Des Moines

The charges in the complaints carry maximum penalties of between ten years and life imprisonment. If convicted, the Court must impose reasonable sentences under federal sentencing statutes and the advisory U.S. Sentencing Guidelines.

The public is reminded that charges contain only accusations and are not evidence of guilt. The defendants are presumed innocent and entitled to a fair trial at which the government has the burden of proving guilt beyond a reasonable doubt.

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