

Cocaine Smugglers Move Into Suburban 'Stash Houses'

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Cocaine Smugglers Move Into Suburban 'Stash Houses'

By ROY H. CAMPBELL *Times Staff Writer*

The Colombian woman and her husband leased a \$250,000 house on Belleau Road in Glendale, furnished it in grand style, and soon blended into the affluent neighborhood like chameleons. They led a quiet life, avoiding most of their neighbors and rarely entertaining.

But, occasionally, a truck pulled up to the house at night and men made brief visits.

Glendale narcotic detectives, suspecting that the pair were using the home as a cocaine warehouse, began watching it. But before the detectives could confirm their suspicions, the couple dealt cocaine to an FBI agent in a Las Vegas casino. The husband managed to elude federal agents, but the wife was arrested and later sentenced to 10 years in prison, authorities said.

Police searched the Belleau Road house, but someone had beaten them to it. The house had been ransacked and the backyard was dug up, leading police to theorize that cocaine had been buried there. Investigators say they did discover records of shipments and transac-

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Los Angeles police

tions that indicated that the house had provided a cover for drug trafficking.

That 1983 incident illustrates what police say has become a prevalent practice in drug smuggling operations: setting up "stash houses" where large amounts of cocaine are warehoused, awaiting distribution to dealers, in suburbs like Glendale.

Although some of the stash houses have been occupied by couples with a flair for opulence, most of them house small families who try to

avoid attention from authorities or other criminals, investigators say.

In their quest for suburban anonymity, many of the drug smugglers have taken to driving mid-sized sedans and dressing in bargain-basement clothes. They are so mobile that they could lease a house in Montclair for five months and then pick up and move to another house in South Gate in a matter of hours.

Stash houses have been raided recently in Pasadena, West Covina, Burbank, Chatsworth, Sunland and upper-income sections of Orange County.

"They are everywhere," said Detective Donald MacNeil of the Glendale Police Department.

Glendale, however, is a particular favorite of drug smugglers because it is along several freeways and near Burbank Airport, which is large enough for clandestine drug shipments, yet not as heavily monitored as larger airports such as Los Angeles International, federal officials say.

Also, the city's population is about 18% Latino, which means that the smugglers—who are usually from South America—can blend in.

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STASH: Cocaine Smugglers Move Into Suburbs

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investigators said.

"The Southern California area has been the cocaine and drug capital for many years. So the smugglers figured, why not set up a direct line of smuggling right to the site," said Los Angeles Police Lt. J. R. Schiller.

Suburban outposts for cocaine distribution are the first resting place for drugs smuggled into the country from Mexico and South America. The cocaine is shipped to the houses and held there until sold to wholesale dealers, beginning the first of several changes of hands.

This shift to suburbia as the shipping terminal for smugglers started around 1980, authorities say. Glendale police say no such activity was noticed before then.

"For the last six years, it has become so much of a problem that instead of just regular narcotics we had to increase our bureau and split it. We now have those who deal just with major smugglers because those cases are more involved," said Glendale Police Lt. Jerry L. Stolze.

Increase in Arrests

In 1980, the department hired four new detectives and started the major smuggling unit. That year there were 95 arrests involving heroin or cocaine in Glendale. In 1985, Glendale police made 214 such arrests. The department does not keep statistics on how many of those may have been linked to stash houses, but investigators say the number has definitely risen.

To fight the increase, the Glendale City Council this month approved the hiring of two additional narcotic officers at a cost of about \$86,000 a year.

Glendale has become so attractive as a drug smuggling way station that last winter the Glendale Board of Realtors mailed its 850 members a warning to watch for South Americans with cash who want to move into a house quickly. The mailing was a duplicate of a police-provided profile handed out earlier by the Burbank Board of Realtors, Glendale board officials said. A real estate agent who recently leased a house in northern Glendale to a Colombian couple who were later arrested as drug smugglers said the pair paid five months' rent in advance—about \$9,000—in cash.

"They had no credit history, but they had the money and the lady who owned the house was quite happy to accept it," the real estate agent said. Fearing for her safety,

she spoke on the condition that she not be identified.

"What are we supposed to do? We're not the FBI; we're in the business of selling houses, and these people don't wear T-shirts saying 'we are dope dealers,'" she said.

Police ask that real estate agents notify authorities if they suspect a home is being used for illegal purposes. Since the homes are usually leased or rented, Glendale police say, they have never confiscated the property when they arrest suspects in these cases. Federal authorities, however, have confiscated homes purchased by drug traffickers.

Stash houses are not heavily fortified like rock houses, where "rock cocaine" is sold and where Los Angeles police have used a battering ram to gain entry. Raids on stash houses are usually carried out without resistance.

"They're not vicious. The rock house person is . . . dealing with lowlives in comparison. These people staying in these stash houses only deal with one or two persons," said an agent of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration. He said suburbia is the choice for stash house locations because it offers

relative isolation from street criminals.

"You just don't deal with that amount of cocaine with any old dirtbag off the street," said Captain Robert Blanchard, head of the Los Angeles Police Department's narcotics division.

The guardians of the houses are usually South American families set up by drug smugglers to act as "dope sitters." Cocaine is sold from stash houses in large quantities and will usually go through at least four more hands before it is available to street dealers, authorities say. Along the way the cocaine, which begins about 90% pure, is mixed with other chemicals.

The networks are usually run by one man who oversees the shipping of cocaine to certain houses and large sums of money to others.

Suspected Ringleader

Earlier this month, Glendale police arrested Jaime Giraldo, a 48-year-old Colombian who, they charge, was the ringleader of such a cocaine distribution network.

Giraldo commanded a seven-city network around Los Angeles that stretched into San Bernardino County, investigators allege. A few months before he was arrested,

Giraldo moved to Sunland from Glendale, where the case started.

Raids on the alleged stash houses linked to Giraldo took place in Sunland, Sylmar, South Gate, Pasadena and Montclair on June 2. Police arrested 17 suspects, including Giraldo, and seized 812 pounds of cocaine worth more than \$100 million. Police also confiscated \$275,000 and four cars.

The suspects were arraigned in Los Angeles Municipal Court on June 5. However, Giraldo, his 23-year-old son, Luis, and eight others were later indicted by a federal grand jury. They were charged with conspiracy to possess cocaine with intent to distribute, distribution of cocaine and weapons violations.

The 10 men pleaded not guilty at their arraignment on the federal charges Monday. Trial was scheduled for Aug. 26.

The other seven arrested in the June 2 raids remain in custody in that case.

Glendale police entered the Giraldo case last July when an anonymous tip led police to an apartment at 428 S. Verdugo Road, where they found the body of Jaime Restrepo, alias Jaime Lotera, lying

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in the living room. He had been shot 14 times and had been dead for nearly a week.

Police said they discovered that Restrepo was a drug dealer. The victim's drug trade was linked by informants to Giraldo, detectives said. Giraldo is not a suspect in the slaying, which police believe was the work of a hit man.

"Murder, shooting in the street, it's happening here. We're feeling it," said MacNeil.

Glendale's first big smuggling case began at 2 a.m. Dec. 16, 1980, when police received a call from a hysterical woman who said her brother was being beaten and robbed in their home in the 4000 block of Karen Lynn Drive. As police neared the affluent Chevy Chase Canyon neighborhood, a black car sped by them. Police gave chase, captured three robbery suspects and found a suitcase full of cocaine.

Meanwhile, the robbery victims,

Shelah Johnston and Joseph Rowland, packed their bags and abandoned the house, which investigators discovered was a stash pad with a makeshift lab to convert cocaine from paste form to powder, Stolze said.

The robbery, for which three more men were also arrested on conspiracy charges, was a plot to steal \$3.5 million in cocaine and \$1 million, police said. All six were found guilty and given prison terms, police said.

Johnston and Rowland surfaced in February, 1983, near Charleston, S.C., after federal agents intercepted 28 pounds of cocaine shipped to the pair from South America. They were held on smuggling charges and fugitive from justice warrants relating to the Glendale case.

Johnston pleaded guilty to conspiracy and importation of cocaine in U.S. District Court in Roanoke, Va. She was sentenced to a five-year prison term. Rowland pleaded guilty to aiding and abetting the

importation of cocaine and was given three years' probation.

Glendale police did not pursue their case but said the incident made them more aware that narcotic trafficking had infiltrated their former bedroom community.

"We were really kind of naive about this up until then. We talked with some of the Colombians and learned they were coming up from South America like the explorers moved west to California," Stolze said.

Investigators checked the records of the home on Karen Lynn Drive and learned that it had been leased to South Americans before it was rented by Johnston and Rowland, leading them to believe a Glendale real estate agent was acting as location scout for the smugglers.

"We finally had to pull her in here with her attorney and tell her we knew what she was doing and we were going to find a way to put her in jail if she didn't stop," Stolze

said.

But they suspect that she then alerted tenants of other homes to move on because Glendale police were on to them.

In another case shortly afterward, a Colombian who lived in northern Glendale reported that his 6-year-old son had been kidnaped. The child was released within a few days. Investigators say they later learned that the man was a drug dealer who owed money to smugglers and that the child had been taken as collateral.

The use of suburban stash houses is helping cocaine reach the Los Angeles area more quickly and at a higher rate than in previous years, authorities said. Los Angeles police this year have already seized 4,000 pounds of cocaine, more than in the previous five years combined, Schiller said.

But, authorities say, the cooperation of state, local and federal authorities in the pursuit of suburban drug networks is demonstrating that they can combat the upper echelon of the drug distributing business.

"We're making some real inroads," said Stolze. "These raids prove that."