

The Star-Ledger

Police shut down heroin mill in Paterson amid fears of new overdoses

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NJ Advance Media for NJ.com and The Star-Ledger

Published July 24, 2020

Police shut down a “major” fentanyl and heroin mill in Paterson this month, grabbing drugs linked to more than a dozen deaths, officials announced Friday.

Five people were arrested after a month-long investigation, according to the state attorney general’s office. Officers seized an estimated \$100,500 worth of narcotics, including a kilogram of heroin, thousands of individual doses and more than 170 grams of fentanyl.

“By shutting down this drug mill ... we undoubtedly saved lives,” state Attorney General Gurbir Grewal said in a statement.

The operation comes amid fears that the coronavirus could push even more people toward addiction.

“COVID-19–related protective shelter-in-place orders have pushed individuals battling sobriety into isolation,” two researchers recently wrote in *The American Journal of Managed Care*, and the pandemic has “decreased access to treatment and opportunity for distraction from addictions.”

New Jersey overdose deaths dropped slightly in 2019 after years of increases, according to preliminary data, but more than 3,000 still died.

In July, police observed drugs passing between people near 41 Cliff Street, according to court records. Labels on the drugs, including “Scorpion” and “Captain America,” were linked to more than two dozen overdoses overall, State Police said, including fourteen deaths.

Four people from Paterson were charged with five drug offenses, including maintaining a controlled dangerous substance production facility and possession with intent to distribute within 1,000 feet of a school zone.

Joel Rodriguez-Gomez, 29, William Jimenez-Reyes, 37, Nelson Reinoso, 41, and Johanna Reynoso, 29, are in the Passaic County Jail. It was not immediately clear if they have lawyers.

A fifth Paterson resident, Jordani Barragan, 22, was also charged with possession with intent to distribute, among other offenses, according to court records. He was released before his first hearing.

Barragan walked out of the Cliff Street building holding a plastic bag earlier this month, according to public records. When officers pulled his car over they found 50 bricks of “suspected ... heroin.”

His lawyer, Matthew T. Priore, disputed police accounts.

“My client has absolutely no connection to the alleged heroin mill,” Priore said. “The vehicle he was driving was unlawfully stopped and searched without his consent.”

The state’s Opioid Enforcement Task Force has focused on so-called opioid mills, where large amounts of drugs are moved and packaged. Over the past two years, officers have taken down more than 20 packing facilities, arrested 217 people, grabbed 53 guns and seized millions of dollars worth of drugs, officials said.

State Police worked with the Passaic County Sheriff’s Office and New Jersey’s criminal justice division for the arrests announced Friday.