



NEWS RELEASE

United States Attorney's Office Central District of California

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LEADER OF VINELAND BOYS GANG GETS LIFE IMPRISONMENT FOR RACKETEERING AND DRUG TRAFFICKING OFFENSES

The leader of a San Fernando Valley gang called the Vineland Boys was sentenced today to life without parole in federal prison for his convictions on federal racketeering, drug trafficking and money laundering offenses

Rafael Yepiz, 35, of Reseda, is the last of nine Vineland Boys gang members and associates who were convicted during a jury trial last year to be sentenced. In sentencing Rafael Yepiz to life in federal prison – there is no parole in the federal system – United States District Judge John F. Walter in Los Angeles found that he was a leader and organizer of the Vineland Boys gang.

The nine defendants convicted at trial were among 49 named in a federal racketeering indictment that outlined a series of crimes that spanned a 15-year period. The offenses include narcotics, weapons and violent crimes, including the murder of a Burbank Police officer, the wounding of a second Burbank Police officer and the attempted murders of several United States Marines.

The nine defendants who were convicted at trial all received lengthy federal prison sentences. Judge Walter previously sentenced the other eight defendants. They are:

- Sergio Mejia, 39, of Arleta, who was sentenced to life in federal prison;
- Francisco Zambrano, 27, of Mission Hills, who was sentenced to 40 years in prison;
- Mariano Meza, 34, of Sun Valley, who was sentenced to 25 years in

prison;

- Sergio Mejia's brother, Jose Luis Mejia, 37, of Bakersfield, who was sentenced to 27 years in prison;

- Jesus Contreras, 33, of Pacoima, who was sentenced to 25 years in prison;

- Rafael Yepiz' brother, Manuel Yepiz, 32, of Shadow Hills, who was sentenced to 20 years in prison;

- Ernesto Mendez, 39, of Sylmar, who was sentenced to 18 years in prison;

and

- Gilberto Carrasco, 27, of Sun Valley, who was sentenced to 15 years in prison.

In addition to those found guilty at trial, Judge Walter has sentenced 26 other Vineland Boys gang members and associates who pleaded guilty. Several of the leaders and senior members of the Vineland Boys who pleaded guilty have received prison sentences of more than 20 years.

The 49 defendants were indicted as a result of Operation Silent Night, a joint federal, state and local investigation of the Vineland Boys gang, which was a powerful street gang with cliques operating in parts of Burbank, North Hollywood, Sun Valley and Palmdale. The gang had an extensive drug-trafficking network, which distributed cocaine, methamphetamine and marijuana throughout the Los Angeles area, as well as in Hawaii, Indiana and the East Coast. In addition to the sale of narcotics, the gang engaged in acts of violence to protect its turf.

The indictment specifically linked the gang to four murders, including the fatal shooting of Burbank Police Officer Matthew Pavelka and the attempted murder of his partner, Detective Greg Campbell. The indictment charged 39 of the defendants with violations of the federal Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) Act. Of the 49 indicted defendants, 38 have been convicted of various federal charges. Three other defendants named in the indictment are pending trial, including two alleged gang members who face the death penalty if convicted of a charge related to the murder of a 16-year-old girl who had testified against a Vineland Boys member. The remaining defendants are fugitives.

This case is the product of an investigation by the High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area Task Force (HIDTA), which is made up of agents and officers from several agencies, including the Drug Enforcement Administration, the Los Angeles Police Department and the Internal Revenue Service-Criminal Investigation Division. The Burbank Police Department and the Glendale Police Department also participated in the investigation.

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