

NY Times - New York State Steps Up Arrests of Parole Violators

By MICHAEL SCHWIRTZ and MICHAEL WINERIP

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The police and parole officers of Team 7 took up positions around the Harlem apartment building — a few at the fire escape, some out front on 140th Street, the rest in the lobby — in case Cynthia Garrett turned out to be a runner.

She had been in and out of prisons for years on drug charges and was wanted for skipping parole.

Chris Nunez, the team leader, directed several officers up the stairs to the fifth floor as children headed down on their way to school.

On parole roundups, they never knew what they would find behind a door and could not be sure Ms. Garrett was even there. For leads, investigators would normally search the addresses of friends and relatives who had visited an inmate in prison, but according to state records, Ms. Garrett never had a visitor or a package.

The woman who answered the door that morning in March said there was no Cynthia Garrett living there. Even so, Tyrone Horne, a plainclothes officer with the New York City police, liked to check for himself and found Ms. Garrett situated in a closet.

After two misses that morning, they had a hit.

The members of Team 7 were part of an unusual mass roundup in Manhattan last month aimed at some of the city's 2,800 parole violators. In the past, these "absconders," as they are called by law enforcement officials, had usually been a relatively low priority.

But this was the third major push by the state in the past three months to apprehend them, part of an initiative by the Corrections and Community Supervision Department to crack down on violators. The first, in Rochester in December, came after a parolee killed a police officer. The other was in Brooklyn in January.

There have been similar sweeps across the country, including one in Colorado in 2013 after a parole violator there murdered the corrections commissioner. But in New York, nothing on this scale had ever been done, corrections officials said. Parole violators had typically been handled individually. In some cases it could be a matter of chance, with violators picked up if they happened to be stopped by law enforcement officials for some other reason, like speeding.

During the five-day operation in Manhattan, 248 officers from the Police Department, the State Police, the Division of Parole and the corrections agency's Office of Special Investigations gathered before dawn in an industrial section of Queens.

Some on the roundup list, like Warren Morris, who had served 16 years for beating a person to death with a baseball bat, had violent pasts. But many more caught up in the dragnet were nonviolent offenders.

The people on the list had, for the most part, avoided committing crimes since leaving prison. A recent study by the state corrections department that followed 23,710 former inmates for three years found that only 9 percent returned because of new felony convictions.

But the 165 the police were after had repeatedly violated the rules of parole, such as missing curfew, failing drug tests, leaving their approved residences and failing to report to their parole officers. Many were like Ms. Garrett, serial drug offenders who tended to bounce from prison to shelters to the streets and back.

Stephen Maher, chief of the special investigation unit that oversaw the roundup, said the state corrections department had a responsibility to go after all violators regardless of their criminal history. Otherwise, he said, someone on the run could commit a serious crime, and the public would lose faith in law enforcement. "We'd be hard pressed to explain to a victim or a family member that we had no idea where that absconder was when they committed a heinous crime," he said.

The 69 people caught in Manhattan last month will probably go back to prison for as long as a year. Nearly 100 of those on the list got away. During the Brooklyn roundup in January, three ran and are still at large.

When Rudolph Lang opened his door last month and saw Mr. Nunez and Anthony Preston, an investigator for the State Police, he tried to slam it shut, but they pushed their way in. Another man hid under a bed.

Two were found squatting in an abandoned building on Myrtle Avenue in Brooklyn. A man with diabetes, Dwaine Williams, was picked up and taken to the hospital with gangrene in his hand.

Leads for arrests came from surprising sources. All week, officers received tips from mothers, sisters and brothers worn down by a troubled relative who had relapsed on drugs or drained the family's resources. One mother called twice to turn in her wheelchairbound son. When investigators arrived they found him trying to escape in an ambulette.

Though the sweep last month was code-named March Madness, it was a low-key operation. Officers did not kick down doors; they knocked. Their caravan moved around the city without flashing lights or sirens; they stuck to the speed limit and stopped for school buses.

On the day reporters followed Team 7, no officer drew a gun. As parents and children walked through building lobbies, several times officers apologized for being in the way.

“Just give us 30 seconds,” Mr. Nunez said to a mother with her baby, as the officers waited for Ms. Garrett to be led out. “Someone’s coming down.” Neither absconders or the officers raised their voices.

If anything, there was an embarrassed silence as handcuffed violators were led past their neighbors.

With the help of an angry ex-girlfriend whom investigators nicknamed “the woman scorned,” the team was able to track down one man who had done several stints in prison for drug sales and burglary.

“I’m going to enjoy this,” the woman said as the officers left for the new girlfriend’s apartment in Harlem.

Angel Vega turned himself in after officers showed up at his mother’s house. “They told her they’re just trying to help me get off the street,” he said in an interview while confined to a holding cell at the corrections agency’s New York City headquarters in Queens.

Since leaving prison after serving six years on a weapons charge, Mr. Vega said he had struggled with heroin addiction. “I gave in,” he said. “I just got tired of fighting this addiction, wasting all this money.”

Sitting in the cage, handcuffed to a bench, Mr. Vega dozed off at one point and seemed to be in a haze. Officers feared that he might be going into withdrawal. Normally detectives would have questioned him there, but decided that instead, he should be taken directly to Rikers Island.

In jail, they said, he could get treatment for his addiction.

Correction: April 1, 2016

An earlier version of the web summary on this article misstated the period in which the state has conducted three major sweeps for parole violators. They were in the past three months, not the past six months.