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DID ANYONE GO TO JAIL FOR STRIKE FORCE SCANDAL?



Michael Campion, commissioner of the state's Department of Public Safety, shared concerns about the Metro Gang Strike Force during a meeting in 2009. (Elizabeth Flores/The Minnesota Star Tribune)

A scandal-ridden Twin Cities law enforcement unit called the Metro Gang Strike Force imploded 15 years ago. Audits and investigations found a pattern of corruption — which included illegally seizing property and engaging in excessive force, often against people of color.

Reader Shawn Bassett of St. Paul followed the story closely as the scandal unfolded in a series of cascading revelations. Years later, he wondered whether any of the people involved were ever punished.

He reached out to Curious Minnesota, the Strib's reader-driven reporting project, asking, "What happened to the officers who were part of the Metro Gang Strike Force?"

“I remember that it was egregious corruption,” Bassett said. “I didn’t know if there were consequences.”

The officers seized cash and valuables, including television sets, cars and, in one case, even an auger used to drill holes for ice fishing, investigations found. Members of the multijurisdictional agency even at times took home property for their own use.

They drove some of the vehicles they confiscated. Evidence was often mishandled. Frequently, criminal charges were not filed against those they targeted.



Shelly Blas, shown here with her father, Felix Blas, said in 2009 that the Strike Force came into her home, broke a number of windows and items, and verbally assaulted the family. (Elizabeth Flores/The Minnesota Star Tribune)

As the scandal deepened, Michael Campion, then the state’s commissioner of public safety, permanently disbanded the force on July 17, 2009. But [only one officer faced federal criminal charges](#). Some were suspended, while others resigned.

Hennepin County prosecutors [never charged anyone involved](#). Investigators were unable to produce “sufficient legally admissible evidence,” Hennepin County Attorney Mike Freeman said at the time. “The record-keeping is so bad, it’s sickening.”

A finding of ‘substantial misconduct’

Created in 1998 to target gangs in the Twin Cities, the force was made up of officers from local police departments, mainly Minneapolis and St. Paul. It also had deputies from sheriff's offices, including Hennepin and Ramsey County.

Working with little supervision or ethical restraints and no prosecutor assigned to the unit, they became increasingly aggressive, conducting raids without probable cause.

It took about 10 months for the Strike Force to unravel. The Minnesota Department of Public Safety uncovered financial mismanagement in a preliminary audit that began in October 2008.

That audit prompted the legislative auditor to investigate. The auditor reported that money was missing, evidence had been routinely mishandled and seized vehicles had been improperly forfeited.



James Nobles, the state's legislative auditor, testified at a joint hearing about the task force. (Jim Gehrz)

A steady drumbeat of articles in the Star Tribune also raised questions about the Strike Force's operation. One of its first stories revealed that six members of the Strike Force [attended a conference at a luxury hotel in Hawaii](#) at a cost of \$17,000. The trip was labeled "ridiculous" by a Hennepin County sheriff's official who had just been appointed as part of an effort to clean up the force.

Ron Ryan Sr., the Strike Force commander, admitted to the legislative auditor that his members took property from people they shouldn't have. "That's just the mentality of coppers," Ryan said, [according to a Star Tribune article](#). "So you almost have to tell 'em, 'Quit taking stuff.'"

After it was announced they were being investigated, Strike Force members went into their office and shredded files, [the Star Tribune reported](#).

Commissioner Campion tasked attorney Andrew Luger, now U.S. Attorney in Minnesota, and John Egelhof, a retired FBI agent, to investigate the unit. They issued a damning report, saying they had [found “substantial misconduct.”](#)

Strike Force members committed crimes by taking property seized during police operations, Luger said at a news conference. He said that 10 to 12 members of the 34-member unit were implicated.



Michael Campion, left, and John Egelhof looked on as Andrew Luger, co-chair of the Metro Gang Strike Force review panel, shared findings and recommendations. (Jerry Holt)

A payout to victims as officers clammed up

A group of victims sued the defunct force, saying officers illegally seized their property or violated their rights. In court papers, victims’ attorneys described a “run-amok, rogue police force” and called it an “ugly chapter in Minnesota history.”

The League of Minnesota Trust Fund, the insurance arm that represented the Strike Force, [settled the lawsuit in 2010](#). They agreed to a \$3 million payout, and [about \\$840,000 went to 96 Strike Force victims](#) in 2012.

In the scandal's aftermath, two Minneapolis police officers were fired over their Strike Force activity, though one got his job back. The Strike Force's office manager was dismissed by the Ramsey County Sheriff's Office.

Freeman announced in 2010 that no charges would be filed against Strike Force members.

Strike Force members had clammed up, hampering the investigation. Freeman said 29 Strike Force officers and employees declined to talk to investigators. This was their constitutional right, he added.

"It was a situation where nobody talks and everybody walks," said Fred Bruno, who was lead defense attorney for Strike Force members under scrutiny by prosecutors.

Bruno said in cases like this, prosecutors need evidence to prove to a jury there is intent to commit a crime. "It means getting into the mind of the actor," he said.

For example, defense attorneys might argue that officers who took home property only did so on a temporary basis, he said.

Still, Freeman was criticized at the time for failing to bring charges. "We have what I believe is one of the largest governmental corruption cases in decades," said Charles Samuelson, then executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Minnesota.

Freeman, now retired, would only say it occurred "a long time ago" and he would have to stand by the statements he made in 2010.

"You can't expect a group of cops, or a group of Boy Scouts or a group of doctors, to say they were cheating the system," said attorney Peter Wold, who represented Ron Ryan Sr., now deceased. "You can't violate a person's right to choose to remain silent."

The U.S. Attorney's Office did bring charges against one Strike Force member, Jason Andersen. He was accused of kicking a boy in the head in Crystal. A jury acquitted him in 2010.

The following year, the FBI announced it was closing its Strike Force file and was not going to prosecute anyone else.



Minnesota Department of Public Safety Commissioner Michael Campion met with community leaders and other state officials about the Metro Gang Strike Force. (Jim Gehrz)

A 'perfect storm' and changing rules

Communities United Against Police Brutality (CUAPB) later brought complaints against 31 Strike Force members to the Minnesota Board of Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST), which licenses officers.

They were told the board lacked the power to revoke their officers' licenses unless they were convicted of a felony or gross misdemeanor, said Dave Bicking, a CUAPB member. The group lobbied the POST Board to change the rules.

Major changes eventually did happen, after the Legislature got involved.

Under new rules, adopted in 2023, the board can revoke the license of an officer who violates its conduct guidelines based on evidence presented in an administrative hearing. The officer does not have to be charged or convicted of a crime.

"The Legislature made statutory changes that gave the board the authority to act in those circumstances," said POST Board Executive Director Erik Misselt.

He said the changes happened in "a perfect storm" that began in 2020 when George Floyd was murdered by Minneapolis police

“It created expectations from the POST Board and Legislature to take further action in the area of police accountability,” he said.

In the end, the most important part of the Strike Force saga is that the force itself was put of business, some observers say.

“It was a major case of police violating their oath of office, violating the law, unconscionable methods of doing their police work,” said Joseph Daly, emeritus professor at Mitchell Hamline School of Law. “I’m glad they stopped the Gang Strike Force. It was out of control.”

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