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## Ga. police raid one of largest meth labs in nation

Local and federal law enforcement officers seized 984 pounds of methamphetamine from the 'superlab' worth an estimated \$44 million

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NORCROSS, Ga. — When self-described "nosy neighbor" Cosetta Campbell stepped outside to investigate police activity near her home in Norcross on Monday evening, even she never suspected what was afoot.

Officers were raiding what would turn out to be one of the largest methamphetamine labs in the nation just a few houses down from Campbell, in an otherwise quiet crook of Newbury Road. Local and federal law enforcement officers carted away 984 pounds of methamphetamine worth an estimated \$44 million. The slate gray two-story house in question had been unoccupied since 2008, and no one had been seen coming or going in months, Campbell said.

"We never suspected anything, that's the alarming thing," Campbell said Tuesday as she surveyed the activity from her front porch.

Authorities say that was all part of the drug traffickers' plan.

"We are seeing Mexican organized crime operating the way they have been in this region — in middle-class neighborhoods, quiet, under the radar," said Rodney Benson, special agent in charge of the Drug Enforcement Administration's Atlanta Field Division. Benson said the operation had all the fingerprints of the Mexican cartels, although investigators have not confirmed that connection.

Benson classified the operation as a "superlab," which is any meth lab capable of producing more than 10 pounds.

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Gwinnett police requested assistance from the Drug Enforcement Administration, Norcross police and the Gwinnett fire department's hazmat team to help safely dismantle the lab. A few neighboring homes were evacuated as a precaution, but no injuries were reported. The chemicals used to manufacture the drug are extremely volatile, making for an "extremely hazardous situation," Gwinnett police spokesman Cpl. Edwin Ritter said.

Ritter said that investigators obtained a search warrant after getting a tip that a large amount of meth was being produced at the home. Inside they found numerous propane tanks, plastic tubs, bottles of acetone and barrels of methamphetamine oil. Benson said the methamphetamine oil was smuggled in liquid form across the border from Mexico and stashed in the Norcross house, where it was being converted into crystal meth and then distributed along the East Coast. He said crystal meth seized in the bust was about 80 to 90 percent pure and highly addictive.



Police say they raided a house on Monday, after being told a large amount of meth was being produced there. (AP Photo)

Late Monday, police arrested 33-year-old Jose Galvez-Vela, a Mexican native whose last known address was in Weslaco, Texas, on a charge of trafficking methamphetamine. Ritter did not know if Galvez-Vela was a legal U. S. resident. Police assume he was not running such a sophisticated operation alone and said more arrests are likely.

The neighborhood where the lab was found sits about a quarter-mile off Beaver Ruin Road. Norcross police Capt. Brian Harr said the area is in transition but is not crime-ridden. Long-time residents have seen lower income people moving in and many houses being rented or foreclosed upon.

Norcross Mayor Bucky Johnson said it has been difficult to keep tabs on all vacant and foreclosed properties in the city, which tend to invite crime.

"It's a national issue and a lot of times people don't think of us as an urban area, but we are," Johnson said. "It takes all of us being vigilant. Police can only be so vigilant and they can only see so much."

Authorities said the lab in many ways resembled another large-scale methamphetamine manufacturing operation in unincorporated Duluth that was dismantled in May 2009.

In that lab, which was run by the La Familia Mexican drug cartel, police seized 351 pounds of crystal methamphetamine with a wholesale value of about \$6 million. The drugs were being manufactured in a rental home on Buckingham Place, only about four miles north on Buford Highway from the location of Monday's raid.

Gwinnett County District Attorney Danny Porter said the county continues to battle the influence of the cartels on an unprecedented level.

"You've sort of seen the tide as it's come in," Porter said. "Certainly meth labs are nothing new. We've had those since the 1980s. But on this kind of scale, no. I never really anticipated it."

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