

Police Sweep Arrests Parents for Kids' Skipping School

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ORANGE – Authorities cracked down on chronic truants in Orange County on Tuesday, but this time, it was the parents who faced detention – not their school-skipping children.

In what prosecutors and police describe as the first sweep of its kind, bench warrants were issued for the arrests of six fathers and mothers in Orange, Stanton and San Juan Capistrano for allegedly contributing to the delinquency of a minor. By morning's end, five parents had been handcuffed, arrested and taken to the Orange County Jail in Santa Ana before being released on their own recognizance for what police say is ignoring repeated requests to make sure their kids go to school.

"This has gone to the extreme," Orange Police Officer Clara Ramirez said of the divorced parents of a 14-year-old girl who has racked up an atrocious attendance record at Yorba Middle School in Orange, with nearly 30 tardies and 10 unexcused absences this year.

In past sweeps aimed at keeping kids in school and out of gangs and other trouble, authorities have warned parents about possible prosecution – but haven't arrested them.

Tuesday's sweep, which involved four families, was different, with authorities eager to send the message that parents can be jailed for up to a year and fined \$2,500 for ignoring the law.

As he sat handcuffed in the back of an Orange patrol car, waiting to be booked, Porfirio Sanchez said he understood that the police were just doing their job.

"Sometimes I have to leave to go to work at 5 a.m., and I just assume she goes to school," Sanchez, 42, said of his daughter, the chronic truant at Yorba Middle School. "When I get home and ask her how was school, she'll say, 'I didn't go. I felt sick.'" Sanchez is divorced. His daughter has been living with him since the start of the school year, when she moved out of her mother's house in Placentia. There, she had fallen in with the wrong crowd, he and his ex-wife said. An aunt is supposed to drive Sanchez's daughter to school when he can't, he said.

Tuesday morning, Sanchez wasn't home when police pounded on his door. When they were able to contact him, he drove from his roofing job in Whittier to turn himself in.

Sanchez, like the other parents who were arrested Tuesday, repeatedly has ignored offers of counseling, tutoring and other resources available to help keep their children in the classroom, according to officials.

Shortly after he was arrested, Sanchez's wife also turned herself in to police. Natividad Arteaga-Perez, 33, of Placentia, said in a brief interview that her daughter starting acting up about a year ago. She said her daughter now lives with her father, who should make sure she

gets to school.

"I know (going to school) is very important," a handcuffed Arteaga-Perez said.

Sgt. Dave Vullo, who handles child abuse and school-related issues as head of the Orange PD's Youth Services Bureau, oversaw the arrests of Sanchez and Arteaga-Perez, as well as the attempted arrest of a single father who is raising six children on his own. Five of the man's children have multiple trancies and absences, Vullo said.

"He needs help, but he's not accepting it," Vullo said of the father, who works two jobs but was not at home when Vullo paid a visit Tuesday. "We're letting these parents know that we mean business," Vullo said. "Arresting parents for this is not something we like to do, or want to do – but to get the word out, we will do it."

Some parents just don't get the message, Vullo said. "They are undermining their children's entire future," he said of parents of chronic truants. "They're accountable to make sure their kids are in school and for their general welfare."

Tuesday's sweep was part of a multi-agency effort led by the Orange County District Attorney's Office. Since fall 2007, the DA's office has focused on gang prevention through the Gang Reduction and Intervention Program, or GRIP.

Cracking down on truants is one of many programs under GRIP, which in addition to police agencies, the DA's office, the Orange County Probation Department and Community Service Programs Inc. involves dozens of businesses and churches.

"What we're trying to do is fill in the hole when parents are not being parents," said Tracy Rinauro, a senior deputy district attorney who runs the GRIP program for the DA's office. "These parents have ignored the law."

The truancy sweeps have resulted in a dramatic increase in attendance and decreased suspension and expulsions, as well as increased test scores at the targeted schools, according to Rinauro.

The GRIP program now is active in Anaheim, Stanton, Orange, Buena Park, San Juan Capistrano, San Clemente and north unincorporated Orange County, Rinauro said. Parents of chronic truants are offered free family counseling, programs such as Big Brother Big Sister, sports activities – anything to get the kids motivated to stay in school.

Some parents, however, aren't listening, authorities say – like the parents arrested Tuesday. All were processed through the jail rapidly to make sure they would be home when their children returned from school. All were given dates to appear in court and likely will be put on probation until things change, Rinauro said.

Sanchez, who shares custody of his 14-year-old daughter with his ex-wife, said being arrested may be just the thing his family needs. Asked if his arrest will upset his daughter, he said: "Yes, I think so. She's told me that she never wants to see me go to jail because of her."

Sanchez's daughter also told him she would like to be a nurse someday. "I continually tell her that in order to do that," Sanchez said, "she needs to stay in school."