

Authorities Move to Charge 16 Officers After Widespread Ticket-Fixing

By William K. Rashbaum and Al Baker

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Fifteen police officers began surrendering to the authorities in the Bronx at about midnight on Thursday to face criminal charges after a long-running grand jury investigation into the widespread practice of fixing traffic tickets for colleagues, family members and friends, people with knowledge of the matter said. A 16th officer was arrested earlier Thursday night.

Ten of the officers are officials in the union that represents police officers, the Patrolmen's Benevolent Association, the city's largest police union, and they served essentially as liaisons for fixing tickets, several of the people said. Also among those facing charges are two sergeants and a lieutenant.

The accusations against the men, one of the people said, were contained in more than a dozen indictments that total roughly 1,000 pages, with about 1,600 criminal counts. Ten of the officers were expected to be charged with multiple counts of ticket-fixing, while six were expected to be charged with unrelated corruption counts, the people said.

The Bronx district attorney's office, which oversaw the inquiry, said the indictments would be unsealed Friday.

The ticket-fixing investigation has been plagued by leaks to union officials from within the Internal Affairs Bureau, several people briefed on the inquiry have said, and the leaks prompted a separate inquiry. The lieutenant charged in the case, who worked on the initial stages of the inquiry when she was in Internal Affairs, has been indicted on misdemeanor charges that she leaked wiretap information, several people said.

The broader investigation, which was the subject of scores of news articles, has proved to be an embarrassment to the Police Department and to Commissioner Raymond W. Kelly. He has defended the department, saying the officers involved in the ticket investigation and other recent corruption scandals represent a tiny fraction of the 35,000-member force.

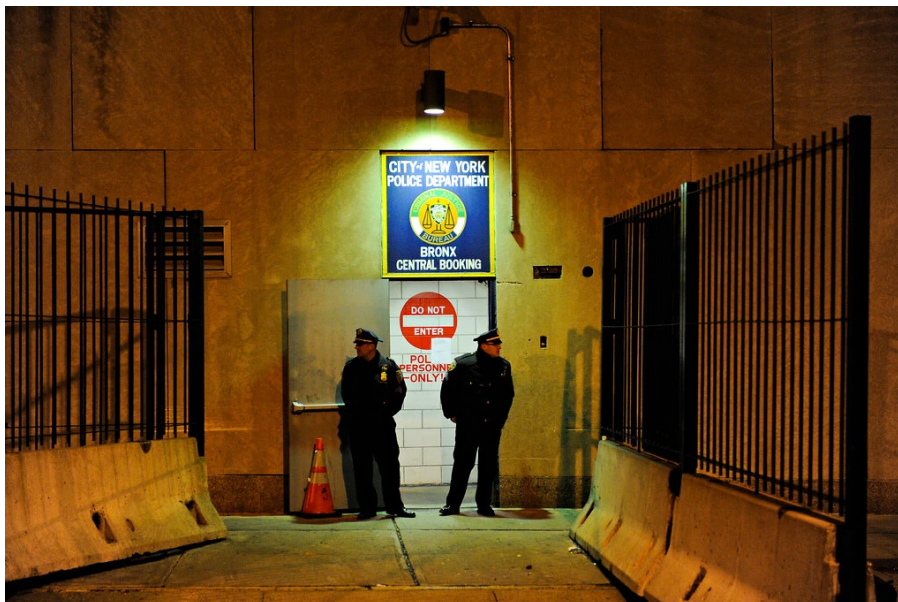
But the investigations have clearly taken their toll on police morale, and the ticket case has hit the city hard financially amid a recession, with officers writing significantly fewer traffic and parking summonses, cutting what has traditionally been a reliable and substantial income stream for the city.

The ticket charges involve more than 300 traffic summonses that were fixed, one of the people with knowledge of the inquiry said, noting that about 800 instances of ticket-fixing arose during the three-year investigation.

The allegations unrelated to ticket-fixing include narcotics corruption, covering up an assault and, in the case of the lieutenant, leaking secret information, the people have said.

Five civilians were arrested Thursday night, including two accused of drug dealing, a tow-truck operator and a paint-store manager, one person said.

The investigation began in December 2008 with an anonymous complaint that Jose R. Ramos, an officer in the 40th Precinct, was providing protection for a drug dealer, several people have said. After investigators gathered enough information to obtain a wiretap on the officer, who was once a union delegate, they began hearing conversations about fixing tickets, the people said.



Outside Central Booking and Criminal Court in the Bronx early Friday morning where 16 members of the NYPD were expected to surrender. Robert Stolarik for The New York Times

Officer Ramos and his wife, one of five civilians to be charged, were arrested at their Washington Heights home Thursday night. His lawyer, John R. Sandleitner, said his efforts to surrender his client were rebuffed and that Officer Ramos denied the protection accusation.

“We’ll fight the case, and when everything comes out in the light of day before a jury, we’ll see who’s believable,” Mr. Sandleitner said.

The grand jury heard from about 80 witnesses over six months, the people said, and voted over a period of several weeks, with the ticket-fixing charges including grand larceny, tampering with public records, conspiracy and official misconduct.

The charges represent a blow to the Patrolmen’s Benevolent Association, and the case has already changed the union’s culture of freewheeling favor trading, which many said grew from a kind of professional courtesy — one officer helping another — to fixing tickets for family, friends and more distant acquaintances.

About midnight Thursday, some of the accused officers began arriving at Central Booking at Bronx Criminal Court, at 215 East 161st Street. About 60 off-duty officers crowded in the main foyer to support their comrades. They formed a human wall, four-deep, between reporters and the some of the accused officers as they came out of a hallway. At three different times, when three of the accused men showed their faces, the crowd burst into applause. The accused men waved and pumped their fists in the air. An official came out of the hallway and stared down the crowd, drawing insults. A woman told the assembled officers to meet in the morning to support the accused officers at their arraignments.

Among those who had been expected to surrender, several people said, were three of the union’s midlevel managers, Officers Joseph Anthony, 46; Michael Hernandez, 35; and Brian McGuckin, 44.

A spokesman for the 23,000-member union said that Patrick J. Lynch, its president, declined to comment earlier Thursday afternoon.

But prosecutors notified union officials on Thursday that 12 officers were being told to surrender and to appear in Bronx Criminal Court on Friday morning, according to a person familiar with the situation.

On Thursday afternoon, the union sent a text message to 400 of its delegates encouraging them to fill the courtroom in the Bronx with officers in a show of support for the implicated union members. The idea was for those delegates to spread the message to rank-and-file members, the person said.

Mr. Lynch was expected to be in court on Friday, the person said.

One former and six current union delegates from the Bronx who are facing ticket-fixing charges were also expected to surrender, the people said. They are Officer Virgilio Bencosme, 33, of the 40th Precinct; Officer Christopher Scott, 41, of the 48th Precinct; Officer Jaime Payan, 37, of the 46th Precinct; Officer Eugene P. O'Reilly, 39, of the 45th Precinct; Officer Christopher Manzi, 41, of the 41st Precinct; Officer Luis R. Rodriguez, 43, of the 40th Precinct; and Jason Cenizal, 39, a former delegate from the 42nd Precinct.

Also facing charges were two sergeants — Officer Ramos's supervisor, Jacob G. Solorzano, 41, and Marc Manara, 39 — and two other officers, Jeffrey L. Regan, 37, and Ruben Peralta, 45. The lieutenant facing charges is Jennara Cobb.

Her lawyer, Philip E. Karasyk, called her “the quintessential police professional,” adding: “She is knowledgeable, caring and well respected by her fellow officers. She will be vindicated.”

Joseph Goldstein and Nate Schweber contributed reporting.

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