

# "Operation Rio Grande" arrests announced

## ACLU looks behind numbers for the real story

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Link: <https://www.abc4.com/news/local-news/-operation-rio-grande-arrests-announced/1691495634>

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Salt Lake City, Utah - Hundreds of arrests and a cache of drugs. Those are the numbers Utah law enforcers announced Monday - the results of the first year of Operation Rio Grande, the sweeping crackdown on Salt lake City's homeless population. They're hailing the numbers as evidence of success. Civil libertarians are warning of violations of citizens' rights.

484 arrests. Of those, Department of Public Safety commanders say more than half - 287 - have been suspected drug dealers. Along with the arrests, DPS reports 4.6 pounds of heroin confiscated, 5 pounds of cocaine, and 6.5 pounds of marijuana.

This massive multi-government, multi-agency effort is the state's reaction to a crash of socioeconomic classes at a downtown intersection in Utah's capital city. Time was, the homeless shelter at 500 West and 200 South was a stand-alone in this neighborhood, which

really wasn't much of a neighborhood. Then, the Gateway Center - then, the retail epicenter of Salt Lake City - was built, attracting cash to the neighborhood. It wasn't long before luxury condominiums popped up, followed by high-end apartment houses. Before they knew it, the people who live in the shelter were surrounded by people who don't want them there.

Phase One of the operation was and is a police dragnet. Monday, the state Department of Public Safety announced the results of the operation's first year.

"From the beginning of operation Rio Grande," says DPS Captain Jared Garcia, "we committed to focusing on the most violent offenders following those criminals that are impacting not only our communities but also the homeless."

Law enforcers say the numbers add up to success. Civil rights advocates are looking behind those numbers. And what they're seeing, they say, is that the program is harming, more than it's helping.

"What's happening with Operation Rio Grande is that a small section of Salt Lake City has become a place where the density of law enforcement focus has made it very difficult for people to live there and move around there," says Jason Stevenson, of the Utah office of the American Civil Liberties Union.

Stevenson goes on to issue a dire warning.

"When you start eroding rights of certain people in a certain parts of an area, really, it endangers all their rights. Because what's to say that they can't do that same sort of enforcement in your neighborhood or in your city, or against people that live around you?"

The state has invested \$67 million in the two-year social and law enforcement program.