

Police show evidence of progress in Rio Grande, but criticism persists

by Kyle Harvey

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SALT LAKE CITY (KUTV) — Law enforcement officials on Monday gave updates on Operation Rio Grande, touting a considerable reduction in the criminal element in the area.

“If you go down there today, I think you’ll see and feel a much different environment,” said Captain Jared Garcia of the Utah Department of Public Safety.

Law enforcement officials on Monday gave updates on Operation Rio Grande, touting a considerable reduction in the criminal element in the area — but there's more to the story, police and civil rights advocates agree. (Photo: KUTV)

He did not, however, declare a lasting victory over homelessness or crime in the area.

“We have to continually adapt and look for new ways to make an impact because we can’t arrest our way out of the problem,” Garcia said.

Since August 2017, Garcia said an 11-person team assigned to the Rio Grande area has [arrested 387 drug dealers and confiscated](#) a lot of heroin, methamphetamine, cocaine, marijuana and spice. They've also seized 33 guns, according to the department report.

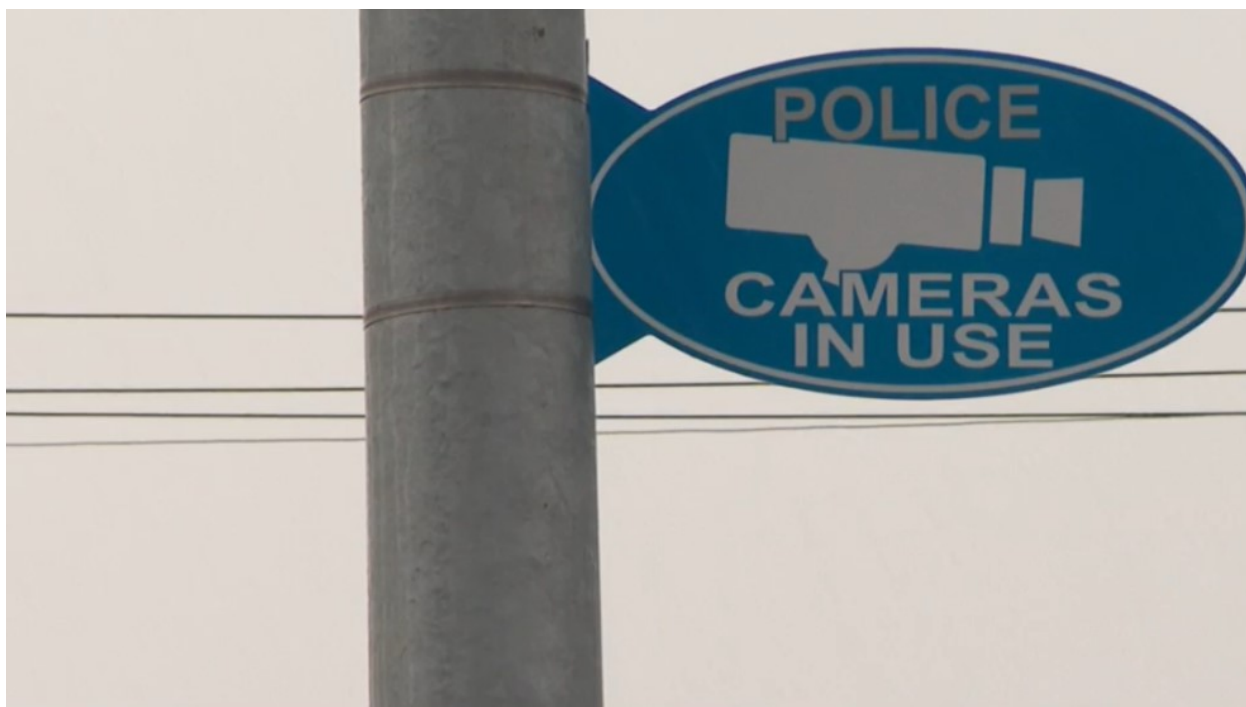


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“They are some of the hardest-working individuals I’ve ever met,” Garcia said of the team. “It’s because they absolutely believe in what they’re doing, and they want to make the community safer.”

But ACLU Utah, a standing critic of the operation, said Monday the operation is winning the battle while losing the war. They’d like to see greater investment in addiction treatment and mental health care.

“It’s really easy to arrest people,” said spokesperson Jason Stevenson. “It takes a lot more hard work and money to actually get them into treatment beds and stuff like that.”



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Garcia says the enforcement team works collaboratively with social workers and the court system to promote more lasting change.

“We try to work with the district attorney’s office and the public defenders’ office to structure deals that are focused on getting them the help that they need,” Garcia said.

Stevenson says progress has been made in that arena, but not enough.

“We feel that Operation Rio Grande — although it has increased investment in these areas — hasn’t really done enough to turn the tide,” Stevenson said.