

*“We don’t want them to get a foothold and feel comfortable here.”*  
*— State College Police Lt. John Gardner*

Authorities say they are starting from the bottom up to catch high-level drug dealers and combat what they call an escalating drug situation in Centre County.

## CRACKING DOWN

By Sara Ganim  
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From the time he stepped out of the police car to just before the judge slapped him with 30 to 60 years, the court humored his antics — his blatant disregard for authority and his nonchalant attitude.

But authorities weren't laughing. The sentence was read. And with it, a list of grievances.

Taji “Verbal” Lee caught the county by surprise, Centre County Judge Bradley Lunsford said.

The drug ring run by Lee was arguably the largest that Centre County has ever seen. Lee's \$1.5 million drug empire, built on heroin and cocaine, lasted for 18 months.

His arrest marked a new focus of police enforcement. More attention shifted to the Centre County drug task force.

State College Police Chief Tom King said the increased efforts are an attempt to put a dent in dealing — partly because of speculation from other authorities that there is a growing drug problem in Centre County, and it could be leading to more serious crime.

As Lunsford said when he put Lee away, drugs breed crime.

“I don't think it is a coincidence that we have had a number of homicides at the same time as people like [Lee] come into the county,” Lunsford said.

### An escalating problem

The body of beaten 24-year-old Penn State student Youngcheol Park was found April 30 after an altercation in his alleged murderer's home, police said. Cocaine was found in Park's blood, and Andrew Rogers, who is charged with Park's murder, described white bags at the scene, according to court documents.

On June 5, police reported another Penn State student, Langston Carraway, was found stabbed to death in his apartment. Madeira said Wednesday that the police investigating the murder are leaning toward drugs as a motive.

At Lee's sentencing Tuesday, Lunsford said if anything good came out of Lee's presence in the community for about 1 1/2 years, it was that he made the area more aware of its drug issue.

King said growing drug activity in surrounding areas has raised a red flag and provoked concentration on the topic in Centre County. He said rural counties are experiencing problems with methamphetamine and heroin.

“There have been other counties facing serious problems, and we want to try to thwart that kind of activity as much as we can,” King said. “We don't want to see an increase of drug-related crimes such as retail thefts, robberies and home invasions.”

Adding further focus to the problem, Centre County District Attorney Michael Madeira was elected in 2005 on the platform that he would use his 13 years of experience in the Pennsylvania Attorney General's office to make drug task force resources more effective in the county.

Since the task force stepped up activity, State College police, Penn State University Police and Pennsylvania State Police working with the Pennsylvania Attorney General's office have made four major raids.

The most recent raid in June was conducted by the task force, which used resources from agencies throughout the county.

In June, police reported 20 people were arrested for allegedly selling predominantly marijuana and cocaine. Half of them were Penn State students.

The 20 arrested are what Madeira called street-level dealers. They were arrested and placed in Centre County Prison after a six-month investigation that led to their arrests, Madeira said.

Most of them waived their preliminary hearings, and some have been released after making bail.

Five more people decided to cooperate with the police investigation, State College Police Lieutenant John Gardner said.

In May, a raid of 10 people accused of selling mostly crack cocaine was carried out by State College and Pennsylvania State Police agencies, Gardner said.

He said police were unsuccessful in arresting the kingpin of the operation — Michael Wright, 32, of State College — during the raid. Wright is still at large.

Gardner said Wright is the crack cocaine equivalent of Lee in Centre County.

A September 2005 raid brought down 19 people, six of who had ties to the university, for allegedly selling marijuana, heroin, cocaine and prescription medications.

And in January 2005, police reported 11 Penn State students, one State College Area High School student and one Bellefonte resident were arrested on charges of selling marijuana, cocaine, ecstasy and Psilocybin mushrooms.

Gardner said stepping up task force efforts would help prevent high-level dealers from profiting in the area.

“We don't want them to get a foothold and feel comfortable here,” Gardner said. “This community is not going to tolerate these actors setting up here.”

### The source

Madeira said drug busts similar to the one in June are most effective in finding information investigators will use to go after upper-level dealers.

Kevin Harley, press secretary for the Pennsylvania Attorney General's Office, said the goal will be to question the 20 people in custody and find out where they received their drugs. From there, more arrests might be made.

Eventually, upper-level dealers, the main sources of drugs in the county, can be caught, Harley said.

In return for the leads, Madeira said those who cooperate could receive lighter sentences at trial.

“It is our hope that this will lead to more arrests at the mid-level, then the high level,” Harley added.

Pennsylvania Attorney General Tom Corbett said at a press conference June 20 that he anticipates arrests of the next level of dealers from the June raid will come within six to 10 months.

Gardner, who supervises State College police drug investigations, said the arrest and recent conviction of Lee was a “classic” example of the end result of a drug task force investigation that began with arresting street-level dealers in drug raids.

But it takes time.

Madeira said information and arrests that led investigators to Lee began more than a year before the day he was caught.

Lee was arrested in January 2005 and was sentenced July 18 for possession of cocaine and heroin, as well as criminal use of a communication facility.

“If you break into an organized organization it could take six to eight months to do a long-term investigation,” Madeira said. “If it's smaller, it could take less time, but it depends on the tools you decide to use.”

### The student effect

It's no secret that Penn State students add to Centre County's underage drinking problem. But, officials are warning that students may be attracting a growing number of drug dealers who are drawn to the ready market.

“I think these arrests are an indication that we are putting more resources into drug investigations and have for the past year to make it really clear that while we continue to battle the alcohol problem, we will battle the illegal drug problem in State College,” King said.

King said that, unlike the alcohol problem, he believes only a small percent of students engage in illegal drug sales at Penn State.

However, he said the potential market lures dealers into the area.

“Anytime you have 42,000 people, 18 to 24 years old, that means there is potentially a market for illegal drug sales,” King said.

Penn State University Police Supervisor Tom Sowerby said Penn State leads the nation in on-campus drug arrests, which he said explains the extent of the university's issues with drugs.

“It's an ongoing issue,” he said. “Just like alcohol is an ongoing issue.”

University police have arrested 41 people for selling marijuana and two people for selling cocaine and opium between January 2005 and March 2006.

Madeira said the drug problem may be growing because of the university's presence, but the students do not necessarily add fuel to the fire.

“I think that there is a ready market, but I am not blaming the students,” Madeira said. “The students are not to blame.”