

Police SCAM hooks 34 on gun charges

By John O'Brien

THE SIGN ON the storefront window at 8010 S. Ashland Ave. read: "Security Consultants and Management." The first letter of each word spelled SCAM, and that's what the store was.

But none of the store's customers caught on.

The customers were peddlers of guns and stolen Social Security and welfare checks who thought they were dealing with a fence. The operators of the store were federal agents and members of the Chicago Police Department's gang crimes south unit.

The U.S. attorney's office announced the payoff Wednesday: Thirty-four of the store's customers—most of them street gang members—have been indicted by a federal grand jury on charges of mail theft, check forgery and illegal possession and sale of firearms.

THE STORE WAS open for seven months, ending in March. During that time, the lawmen said, they operated a highly successful "sting" operation, buying guns and checks while filming and recording the transactions.

The grand jury began returning indictments last week and returned the last batch on Tuesday on evidence presented by Assistant U.S. Atty. Sheldon Zenner. Most of those indicted were in custody late Wednesday.

"The sting was set up to rid the neighborhood of illegal guns and stem a rash of mail thefts involving government checks," said Robert Gorecki, a spokesman for the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (BATF).

Members of that bureau, postal inspectors and U.S. Secret Service agents joined Chicago police in operating the store and in video-taping

Continued on page 4, this section

SCAM

Continued from page 1, this section the customers.

U.S. ATTY. DAN WEBB and William Curley, acting special agent in charge of the BATF office here, supervised the operation.

In the seven months the store was

open, more than \$100,000 in stolen checks was received. The owners paid 22 cents for every \$1 of face value on a check. This was the going rate among fences in the area, they said.

In addition, hundreds of guns, many of them stolen, were sold in the store.

In many instances, the customers freely gave their names, possibly in anticipation of a long and profitable relationship at the store. This made it easy for the agents because they

already were secretly filming customers' faces and the sale of the goods while tape-recording conversations.

When a customer didn't give a name, agents followed him outside and noted the license plate number on his car or followed him home to get his name.

Often members of the gang crimes unit, observing from a back room in the store, recognized customers, having dealt with them before.

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