

Safety deposit box raids yield £1bn of drugs, cash and guns

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Police have seized a potential £1 billion “treasure trove” of cash, drugs and guns in an unprecedented raid on concrete vaults holding 7,000 safety deposit boxes.



Police officers close Park Street in Mayfair before raiding Park Lane Safe Deposit in connection with suspected money laundering

Scotland Yard believe the operation may unlock clues to every layer of serious crime in Britain - including murders, shootings, drug trafficking, fraud and paedophile gangs. Metropolitan Police Assistant Commissioner John Yates said: “Each box will be treated as a crime scene in its own right.” More than 300 officers and staff were involved in simultaneous raids at three depots in London’s Park Lane, Hampstead and Edgware. Officers have secured the concrete and steel vaults and will take several weeks to remove each box, using angle grinders, to a secret location where they will be prized open with diamond-tipped drills. It is believed that a top tier of criminal masterminds may have rented out “the

majority” of the boxes. The safe-keeping company - Safe Deposit Centres Ltd - has been operating for more than 20 years. Two directors of the firm have been arrested. They are Jacqueline Swan, 44, who was arrested at the Mayfair address, and Leslie Sieff, 60, who was detained in Hampstead. A third director, Milton Woolf, 52, is believed to be abroad. Both men are from South Africa originally but have been residents in the UK since the 1980s.

Although the operation is being treated as a money laundering investigation senior officers admitted that there was a potential to uncover a massive range of “ill-gotten gains” stored at the depots, including expensive jewellery, computer data, stolen artworks and sculptures. Some of the boxes are only A4-sized, while others are “walk-in” vaults. Although they do not know how many of the 7,000 boxes are being rented - at around £100-a-year - police suspect up to 90 per cent of them may hold criminal assets.

Scotland Yard said that Met’s Specialist Crime Directorate raided seven properties: three safe depositories, an office and three residential addresses. Mr Yates said that detectives expect to seize a “substantial amount” of criminal assets from the searches. “Operation Rize is a money laundering investigation and is entirely unprecedented, one of the largest of its kind ever undertaken in the UK,” he said. “In the past safety deposit boxes have been searched on an individual basis often resulting in the recovery of guns, drugs and cash. We believe that this operation has the potential to impact upon many layers of serious crime.” The investigation - codenamed Operation Rize - has been running for two years and included intensive work with lawyers to ensure they were able to seize all of the boxes. Members of the public who have innocently and legally stored their valuables were “inevitably” going to get swept up in the disruption, it was predicted. Police said they could use a freephone number - 0800 030 4613 - to claim back their goods.

Mr Yates added: “This is an unprecedented operation and my officers have worked tirelessly and methodically, advised throughout by leading counsel, to ensure that this is the right action to take. “Operation Rize is a huge undertaking by the Met Police to tackle criminal networks who we believe are using safe deposit facilities to hide criminal assets. In the main this industry operates legitimately and it is in the public interest that we target this particular business to stop any criminal activity.”

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/2066470/Safety-deposit-box-raids-yield-andpound1bn-of-drugs,-cash-and-guns.html>