

## Cocaine traffickers, international cartels use Houston as base

HOUSTON (AP) — Authorities say a reputed link between Houston and Colombia's cocaine traffickers has left a trail of dead bodies, millions of dollars in cash, cocaine caches and a communication network that sends word of arrests back to South America.

In a copyright story, the *Houston Post* reported Houston is home for thousands of members of the Colombian drug cartels. The newspaper said the cartels are suspected in the slayings of at least 10 people.

"From day one, whenever big seizures of cocaine began happening in Houston, you can bet either the Medellin or Cali cartels were involved," said Jesse Rodriguez, an assistant U.S. attorney based in Houston and a member of the Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force.

The two organizations supply between 80 and 90 percent of all the cocaine in the world, according to federal officials.

Task force members said Houston operatives have been

key to the cocaine trafficking operations in the United States. About 100 "solid" members of the dreaded Medellin cartel are believed to be living in Houston, while "thousands" of operatives of the smaller Cali cartel also reside in the southeast Texas area.

Banks of phone booths set up in Houston businesses allow operatives to communicate with Colombian drug chieftains without a record of calls, investigators say. Inconspicuous financial institutions launder money and wire

funds back to cartel hideouts. The cartels' clout in Houston is equaled in the U.S. only in Miami, New York and Los Angeles, said Charles Gutensohn, national head of cocaine investigations for the Drug Enforcement Administration.

After the Medellin cocaine smugglers pioneered trafficking through Miami in the 1970s, Gutensohn said, "the cartels realized they had to vary their method of shipments and smuggling."

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