

The Sun

**13 face charges in drug warfare
Indictments allege murder, racketeering**

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Federal prosecutors unsealed indictments yesterday charging 13 people with participating in two warring drug gangs that terrorized an East Baltimore neighborhood and killed at least four people, including a Northern High School all-star quarterback.

The quarterback, 18-year-old Rocco Colavito Cash, was killed in an August 1997 drive-by shooting when a member of one of the gangs mistook him for a rival enforcer who had been targeted for execution, prosecutors said in U.S. District Court in Baltimore.

"This was a drug-related feud," Robert R. Harding, an assistant U.S. attorney, said at a court hearing yesterday. "A sort of war had broken out over turf in the O'Donnell Heights project."

One of the alleged gang leaders, 28-year-old Antonio "Big Black" Howell, appeared in court for a detention hearing yesterday wearing a red T-shirt with the words, "Anyone can be a father, but it takes someone to be a Daddy."

Harding and Cassandra L. Costley, a specially assigned assistant U.S. attorney, said that Howell's gang was the larger of the two feuding drug organizations and grossed between \$30,000 and \$40,000 a day in cocaine and heroin sales.

The group called itself the "Nickel Boys" because it typically sold bags of cocaine on the street for \$5 -- or a "nickel" in street slang, prosecutors said. Howell allegedly oversaw the drug operation from a Glen Burnie townhouse and used part of the money to buy himself a black Mercedes Benz and his wife a purple BMW.

Court papers said the Nickel Boys' chief rival was a smaller group of neighborhood drug dealers in O'Donnell Heights headed by Marshawn D. Stokes, 24. Stokes also is charged in the federal indictments unsealed yesterday.

One of the indictments alleges that it was one of Stokes' chief enforcers, Ahmad Simmion Linton, who killed Cash in the 6500 block of Boston St. on Aug. 17, 1997. Cash was the popular starting quarterback for the Vikings, Northern High's football team.

Prosecutors said Cash apparently looked like one of the Howell gang members whom Linton had been commissioned to kill by his superiors in the Stokes gang. Stokes had ordered "hits" on Damon "Tay" Reaves and Alfred Cheese, known on the street as "Big Cheese," prosecutors said.

Howell's attorney, Howard Cardin, said yesterday that the government's case was tainted by cooperating witnesses of questionable character. Cardin said the witnesses had testified against Howell before a federal grand jury because they were looking to save themselves from jail.

"They are simply trying to endear themselves to the government," Cardin said.

But U.S. Magistrate Susan K. Gauvey refused to release Howell on bail as Cardin requested, noting the seriousness of the charges and Howell's apparent lack of a job. Howell, Stokes and their lieutenants are charged with murder in aid of racketeering and face life in prison without parole if convicted.

Prosecutors said they suspect Howell's drug organization has been operating since 1989, when it began as a small neighborhood ring in the Dundalk and Essex areas. In recent years, they said, the organization grew much larger and employed couriers who ran drugs from New York to Baltimore.

Federal drug agents videotaped the goings-on of the drug organizations for several hours as part of their investigation, authorities said.