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Ivan James Sentenced to 35 Years, Four Others Receive Prison Terms in Drug Trafficking Case

Ivan James, acquitted of a 2017 murder, was sentenced to 35 years for drug and firearm charges. Four accomplices received sentences ranging from 68 to 90 months for roles in the drug smuggling network and related violence

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Late on Sunday, U.S. Attorney Delia Smith announced that leader 44-year-old Ivan James had been sentenced to 420 months in prison — 35 years — for his role as the head of a major drug trafficking organization, and for possession of firearms used to murder a rival gang member.

“The sentencing of Ivan James...should send a powerful message,” said Special Agent Denise Foster of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency's Caribbean Division. “Justice will prevail against

those who threaten the safety and stability of our communities.”

According to U.S. Attorney Smith, sentenced along with James were four other [members of his gang](#) who were convicted of participating in the drug trafficking conspiracy. Joh Williams, who served as the gang’s jailhouse distributor of narcotics while he was incarcerated at the Golden Grove prison (the John A. Bell Correctional Facility), received a term of 90 months imprisonment (7.5 years). Ariel Persen and Jahkiebo Joseph both pleaded guilty to importation of firearms and possession of firearms in furtherance of a drug conspiracy, and received sentences of 93 months and 68 months respectively. Malachi Benjamin, who pleaded guilty to possession of a firearm in furtherance of a drug conspiracy, was sentenced to 72 months in prison. After serving their terms of incarceration, all will be subject to supervised release ranging in length from three to seven years.



Ivan James (Credit: The V.I. Police Department)

Acquitted of Murder

James and Williams were however acquitted of local first-degree murder charges in the 2017 killing of Legar Pogson, who died in a [barrage of gunfire](#) at the D. Hamilton Jackson housing community in May of that year. Williams was also acquitted on a charge of possession of a firearm that led to Pogson's death.

The acquittals came despite witness testimony that placed both men at the scene, armed with a handgun and rifle. The witness also testified that the pair stood over Pogson's body and fired more than 50 times, according to the press release from the U.S. Attorney's office. The killing occurred one day after Williams was released from the Golden Grove correctional facility. DNA evidence linked James to a Glock 22 pistol and an Olympic Arms AR-15 rifle seized at his LaGrange compound in August 2017, and ballistic testing showed that shell casings found at the scene of Pogson's murder matched casings from those two seized weapons.

Other violent attacks stemmed from the gang activity instigated by Ivan James, according to the U.S. Attorney. Robert Brown, himself awaiting sentencing after pleading guilty to [murdering Jermaine Williams](#) in 2015, testified that the murder was in retaliation for being robbed of five kilograms of cocaine and pistol whipped at the hands of Williams and other members of Ivan James's gang. The next year, Brown and another individual were ambushed and shot as they were driving out of the Good Hope community. Both survived the attack.

An Expansive Trafficking Operation

Meanwhile, two of the seven – Tillisa Caesar and Luis Ortiz – who confessed to helping James smuggle bricks of cocaine through the Henry Rohlsen Airport on St. Croix, are currently awaiting sentencing. The last of the indicted group, Kai James is preparing for trial, which is scheduled to begin on January 22, 2025.

The investigation began in January 2013 with the seizure of a phone from Williams while he was incarcerated at Golden Grove. A search of the device, and a wiretap of a second phone used by Williams, revealed that the inmate was distributing cocaine and marijuana inside the facility. The narcotics were supplied by Ivan James, and their distribution was facilitated by former corrections officer Vivian Ford, who smuggled the contraband into the prison in food containers, then handed them off to Williams for distribution, according to evidence provided in court. Ford, who died in a single-vehicle crash in December 2017, was also alleged to have traveled to St. Thomas on several occasions to purchase kilograms of cocaine on behalf of Ivan and Kai James.

The trafficking conspiracy extended to the airport, where Caesar admitted to using her secured access between 2015 and 2018 to ultimately smuggle hundreds of kilograms of cocaine onto departing flights headed for the mainland. Ortiz was one of several couriers recruited by Caesar to help expand the smuggling operation at the behest of Kai James, according to the U.S. Attorney's Office.

The wide-ranging investigation was coordinated between the Drug Enforcement Administration, Homeland Security Investigations, Customs and Border Patrol, Virgin Islands Police Department, and the Bureau of Corrections. “This victory is a testament to the relentless commitment and seamless collaboration between federal and local law enforcement,” said Special Agent Foster. “Together we are dismantling violent criminal networks and transnational drug organizations in the U.S. Virgin Islands, ensuring that those who sow violence and chaos will face the full weight of the law.”

“The Ivan James Organization was a violent and lawless gang that terrorized and victimized the people of the Virgin Islands for over a decade,” stated U.S. Smith. “The tremendous work of the Drug Enforcement Administration, Homeland Security Investigations, Customs and Border Patrol, Virgin Islands Police Department and the Bureau of Corrections delivered the ultimate reward to the people of St. Croix – just and lengthy sentences of imprisonment to those involved. These sentences demonstrate that the Department of Justice and our law enforcement partners are committed to combating the threat of gang violence.”

“The sentencing of Ivan James to 420 months of incarceration should send a powerful message: justice will prevail against those who threaten the safety and stability of our communities. This victory is a testament to the relentless commitment and seamless collaboration between federal and local law enforcement. Together, we are dismantling violent criminal networks and transnational drug organizations in the U.S. Virgin Islands, ensuring that those who sow violence and chaos will face the full weight of the law,” stated Special Agent in Charge Denise Foster, DEA Caribbean Division.

“These sentences speak volume and are credited to the extensive collaboration between federal and local law enforcement partners. Our joint efforts are essential in the U.S. Virgin Islands towards combatting violent crimes and illicit activities of transnational criminal organizations in our area of responsibility,” said Homeland Security Investigations Special Agent in Charge Rebecca Gonzalez-Ramos.

