



# Department of Justice

Robert M. Duncan, Jr.  
United States Attorney  
Eastern District of Kentucky

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
WEDNESDAY, March 4, 2020  
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CONTACT: Gabrielle Dudgeon  
PHONE: (859) 685-4887  
E-MAIL: [gabrielle.dudgeon@usdoj.gov](mailto:gabrielle.dudgeon@usdoj.gov)

## South Carolina Man Pleads Guilty to Armed Methamphetamine Trafficking

**LONDON, Ky.** - A Blacksburg, South Carolina man, Joe Barlow Owens, 44, pleaded guilty in federal court Tuesday, before U.S. District Judge Claria Horn Boom, to possession with intent to distribute methamphetamine and possession of a firearm in furtherance of drug trafficking.

Owens admitted that on February 25, 2019, in Knox County, he knowingly possessed with intent to distribute more than 50 grams of methamphetamine, and also possessed a firearm in furtherance of this drug trafficking crime. According to his guilty plea agreement, law enforcement officials searched the defendant's vehicle and found the methamphetamine, cash, and a loaded firearm, that Owens admitted was to protect his drugs and drug proceeds. Owens also admitted that he knew he had a prior felony conviction, for possession with intent to distribute methamphetamine..

Owens was indicted in July 2019.

Robert M. Duncan, Jr., United States Attorney for the Eastern District of Kentucky, and Brett R. Pritts, Acting Special Agent in Charge for DEA, Louisville Field Division; jointly announced the guilty plea.

The investigation was conducted by the DEA. The United States was represented by Assistant U.S. Attorney Andrew Trimble.

Owens' sentencing date is TBD. He faces a sentence of not less than 15 years, up to life imprisonment, and a maximum fine of \$20 million for the drug offense, and a consecutive sentence of not less than 5 years for the firearm offense. However, any sentence will be imposed by the Court, after its consideration of the U.S. Sentencing Guidelines and the federal sentencing statutes.

This is another case prosecuted as part of the Department of Justice's "[Project Safe Neighborhoods](#)" Program (PSN), which is a nationwide, crime reduction strategy aimed at decreasing violent crime in communities. It involves a comprehensive approach to public safety — one that includes investigating and prosecuting crimes, along with prevention and reentry efforts. In the Eastern District of Kentucky, U.S. Attorney Robert Duncan Jr., coordinates PSN efforts in cooperation with various federal, state, and local law enforcement officials.

This case is part of Project Guardian, the Department of Justice’s signature initiative to reduce gun violence and enforce federal firearms laws. Initiated by the Attorney General in the fall of 2019, Project Guardian draws upon the Department’s past successful programs to reduce gun violence; enhances coordination of federal, state, local, and tribal authorities in investigating and prosecuting gun crimes; improves information-sharing by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives when a prohibited individual attempts to purchase a firearm and is denied by the National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS), to include taking appropriate actions when a prospective purchaser is denied by the NICS for mental health reasons; and ensures that federal resources are directed at the criminals posing the greatest threat to our communities. Click [here](#) for more information about Project Guardian.

The year 2020 marks the 150th anniversary of the Department of Justice. Learn more about the history of our agency at [www.Justice.gov/Celebrating150Years](http://www.Justice.gov/Celebrating150Years).

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