



LESSON FROM L.A.: GANG 'SAFETY ZONES' KEEP THE PEACE

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The Sainly City wants to legally ban the Sureno 13 gang and, by name, 10 reputed members from showing up at the upcoming Cinco de Mayo Festival. Eighty years ago, this city provided refuge for the likes of John Dillinger, Baby Face Nelson and Bonnie Parker of "Bonnie and Clyde" fame.

But that was then. This is now.

I say "orale." That's Mexican slang for "all right" or "right on." I say this as long as this well-intentioned public-safety move passes rigorous judicial and constitutional muster.

There's been gang-related trouble at this festival in recent years, including the near-fatal shooting last year of a 14-year-old as the annual gathering wrapped up.

As someone who regularly attends this family-oriented event, I don't want to deal with riffraff or dodge bullets.

But a civil injunction? We might as well as expand it to ban registered sex offenders, pickpockets, check forgers. Heck, I'd throw in Bernard Madoff and the gaggle of soon-to-be indicted Wall Street shark co-conspirators.

The injunction does seem at first glance to smell of pure show if not Big Brother.

A sitting Twin Cities judge who grew up on the streets and also understands the legal system doesn't think so.

"I actually don't have a problem with it," said the jurist of the proposed temporary injunction St. Paul will seek at a court hearing April 24 before Ramsey County Judge Gregg Johnson.

"I've seen the trouble at the recent ones and noticed the punks walking around, trying to intimidate people," added the judge, a regular festival-goer who requested anonymity because of an understood if unwritten ban on speaking publicly on such matters.

"In the old days, the OGs (old-school gangsters) knew better than to disrupt such an event. But the ones out there now don't understand or don't care that they are not only disrespecting themselves, they are also disrespecting the community."

St. Paul City Attorney John Choi calls the proposed injunction under the state's public nuisance statute "another tool in the toolbox" in an effort to minimize problems at the festival.

Sounds good. But are such civil actions effective? We need to head west for some answers.

CRIME DOWN IN 'SAFETY ZONES'

California is the birthplace for such injunctions. They were first implemented more than a decade ago in gang-infested locales such as San Jose, San Diego and Los Angeles -- the reigning and still undisputed street-gang capital of America.

To give you a taste of the gang problem, there are roughly 500 L.A. cops -- nearly the size of the Saintly City's total police force -- pretty much just assigned to gang-related activities.

The injunctions started there much like what St. Paul is trying to do here.

Using a wealth of gang intelligence and adult and juvenile rap sheets, prosecutors made a case that a particular gang and its members violated public-nuisance laws.

Such injunctions, which can range from simple nighttime curfews to barring public congregation of two or more known gang members, have invariably withstood legal challenges that reached up to that state's highest court.

"I just finished my 22nd injunction," said Jim McDougal, a veteran gang prosecutor with the Los Angeles city attorney's office and perhaps the nation's most sought-after speaker and expert on the execution of such injunctions.

"We've done studies and work on this, and I can tell you that crime has gone down by between 30 to 50 percent in the 'safety zone' areas that have been subjected to injunctions," McDougal said. "Why that is? I really don't know. But it seems to work."

Similar results also were found by an independent Los Angeles civil grand jury charged four years ago with measuring the effectiveness of such injunctions.

"Los Angeles is not St. Paul," McDougal said Wednesday. "Our injunctions are permanent, go well beyond specific events like your Cinco de Mayo."

"Parks that people never dared use or go to because of gang presence are now safe for people to go to," he added. "There is one former gang-infested park that is now the meeting place for a local Girl Scouts outfit."

Now that's a gang to be wary of, particularly if you are a hapless cookie lover or closely monitoring your waistline. But that's my kind of gang.

One of my cousins, Gary Graika, is a veteran community gang-prevention and intervention worker in Milwaukee. That is a city historically grappling with a gang presence far more entrenched than the Twin Cities. Until a medical condition sidelined him, Graika was contracted by the head of that city's annual Summerfest to help provide security for the 11-day event that attracts more than 1 million people.

Graika also has no major problems with St. Paul's intent.

"No doubt. The gangs of old knew enough to not (soil your own nest)," Graika said. "But with the new gangs and kids out there now, that's pretty much been thrown out the window."

MANY WAYS TO KEEP THE PEACE

Bruce Ferrell, president of the Midwest Gang Investigators Association, sees St. Paul as among an increasing number of jurisdictions in America's heartland either studying or seeking such civil actions in an attempt to help curb a rising gang presence.

There is, of course, always room for abuses with any such law. Kevin Moore heartily agrees -- he's the one whose affidavit is the centerpiece for the local injunction request.

"There should always be challenges," said Moore, a 30-year police veteran and member of St. Paul police's gang unit.

In fact, Moore was among the first cops to respond after last year's shooting at Cinco de Mayo. He found the 14-year-old lying in the street, bleeding profusely from a gunshot wound to the back. Two reputed members of a rival gang were arrested and later copped guilty pleas to the shooting.

Moore has worked gangs for many years. Yet, that day, as he often does, he saw simply a 14-year-old victim of stupidity and senselessness.

He is the kind of cop who understands that only a fool thinks the gang situation is resolved purely through law enforcement measures. He believes early intervention is as valuable a tool as the injunction.

"We have programs out there to help kids like these get out of this gang life," Moore told me this week. "You want out? Call me. This injunction is just another way we can try to help keep the peace."

ONLINE

To read some of St. Paul's court filings on the proposed civil gang injunction, as well as a Los Angeles County civil grand jury report on the same issue, go to twincities.com.

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