

Mexican Mafia Connections to Santa Barbara

By Robert Eringer, The Investigator

Why do Eastside gang-bangers want to rumble with Westside gang-bangers – and vice versa? It's a lot like asking, why did the chicken cross the road? So one must delve deeper to understand that we in Santa Barbara are witnessing only a piece of a larger puzzle.

While everyone deliberates a simplistic credo that State Street is a boundary for chicken crossing, a higher (dis) order is influencing and manipulating both-side Hispanic gangs.

The Mexican mafia, a prison gang known as Eme, maintains links to East- and Westside gangs in Santa Barbara. Moreover, Eme – or M – utilizes violence among rival gangs to keep their extortion and drug-peddling operations on track throughout southern California –according to gang expert Richard Valdemar.

"It is a criminal prison drug culture," Mr. Valdemar, a retired sergeant with the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, told The Investigator. "It's hard to understand how much control they have. They have an intelligence network that goes from Pelican Bay –California's most secure prison – to street level. They use rival gangs, which are migrating from southern to northern California, to discipline those who don't follow their edicts."

Sgt. Bernie Goana, supervisor of the Santa Barbara Police Department gang unit, expounds a different school of thought. He told The Investigator that local gang members don't know why they do what they do, except to copy what's out there, stoked by movies, video games and rap music that glamorize gang culture. However, Sgt. Goana added, "I'm sure (contact with Eme) happens to some extent. We have people from here who have gone to prison and gotten out. I don't know specifically if they are getting instructions to support the gang in prison. Could there be money going back? I couldn't doubt it. Can I prove it? No. How else would a prison gang get money? Someone's got to give it to them. But there are no receipts, no records."

The SBPD investigates specific crimes; it does not follow a money trail from illicit street revenues to prison accounts, said Sgt. Goana.

"Kids are more sophisticated than police and parents think," said Mr. Valdemar. "They think kids don't know what they're doing because they don't know."

Founded in 1957 by a dozen Hispanic inmates at Deuel Vocational Institution in Tracy, Calif., Eme has about 300 members or carnales (brothers). It exists devoid of hierarchy and operates with a "one man, one vote" system for issuing "kites" (orders) from prison. Three carnales are generally needed to induct a new member; sponsors then take responsibility for their recruit, and must kill him if he screws up – or face their own execution.

Eme has far outpaced other prison gangs – namely, Aryan Brotherhood and Black Guerilla Family – in its ability to transcend prison walls for the purpose of preying on street gangs for revenue.

Anthony Manzella, a Los Angeles District Attorney with vast experience prosecuting gang members, told The Investigator, "The Mexican mafia makes money by controlling the streets. It punishes drug dealers who don't pay their 'taxes' – and also targets witnesses of gang attacks."

A witness to the gang-related murder of 15-year-old Luis "Angel" Linares survived a gang stabbing just before he was scheduled to testify at the murder trial of gang-banger Ricardo Juarez last autumn. "There is a certain level of organization needed to intimidate witnesses," Tony Rafael, author of "The Mexican Mafia" (Encounter Books, 2007) told The Investigator, "This is indicative of a Mexican mafia presence."

Not unlike the Italian Cosa Nostra, Eme endeavors to motivate through fear, and to operate invisibly, to the extent that a carnale can never admit to membership or even acknowledge its existence, under penalty of death. Non-members who pretend membership are also subject to execution. So are informants, who fall under this mantra: "Snitches belong in the ditches."

The Mexican mafia's reglas (rules) override local gang policies. One ironclad regla is "Blood in, blood out" – meaning, the only way out is death.

Within the California prison system, Eme controls drug smuggling and extorts or "taxes" prisoners. Mr. Rafael quotes a correctional officer as saying, "We don't run the prison – they do."

Out on the streets, Eme conducts illicit business through "spoons" (recent parolees), and it orders executions – called "greenlighting" – against drug-dealing competitors or those who refuse to pay up. "They can even greenlight a whole gang," said Mr. Valdemar.

Local street gang members are known as surenos (south-siders). Once a sureno goes to jail, he can become a full-fledged carnale.

Eme favors using juveniles to deal their drugs because the penalties for minors (under 18) are not as stiff as for adults.

They are organized enough to infiltrate gang intervention programs.

Santa Barbara's gang-banger dress code derives directly from Eme's prison look: Long, baggy shorts, socks pulled up high. "Showing leg in jail is considered effeminate," said Sgt. Goana. "Gangs show respect to those who have been in prison and copy it."

When you see graffiti around town with the letter M or the number 13, it is symbolic of the Mexican mafia's turf staking or allegiance to Eme. (M is the 13th letter of the alphabet.) In addition to sporting emblematic tattoos, these misguided gangsters even scar their own arms with 13 razor cuts. "They see it, they copy it," said Sgt. Goana. "It's showing allegiance, but they can't tell you why they're doing it. They don't really know."

Tony Rafael begs to differ. "They know exactly what they're doing," he told The Investigator. "When they put up a tag like that, they're saying, 'We're affiliated.' They're saying, 'We'll get with the program and be loyal.' When I address law enforcement forums, I find that cops are behind

the times. If you're already seeing these signs in Santa Barbara, the Mexican mafia is ahead of its timetable."

Richard Valdemar concurs. "If you see M or 13 or SUR around town, or the Aztec numeral for thirteen – two horizontal lines beneath three dots – someone is claiming allegiance to the Mexican mafia."

A source who has studied gang activity in Santa Barbara for years told The Investigator: "Westside and Eastside gangs as well as Goleta gangs like G-13 must pay a revenue to the Mexican mafia in order to sell drugs in certain parks and (on) certain streets, and shopkeepers – primarily on Milpas and San Andreas streets – must pay in order for their businesses to stay safe. The Mexican mafia usually sends women to collect. The money is transferred into the accounts of carnales in prison." The source continued: "Mexican tar heroin is trafficked from Mexico, goes through San Diego and heads north all the way to Oregon and parts of Washington."

Added Mr. Valdemar, "The Mexican mafia will recruit a member of the gang they are taxing, and he will become their tax collector and enforcer. You're going to see more inter-gang killings because of gang members violating Eme's rules."

"I ask a 13-year-old gang member, 'Where will you be in 5 years?'" said Sgt. Goana. "And he says, 'Dead or in prison.' They've pretty much set themselves a goal. They're going to do the things that get them there."

Mr. Valdemar told The Investigator that two failed anti-gang policies in Los Angeles are still copied elsewhere: "One, hiring ex-gang members to run intervention programs, and two, suppressive patrol – a show of uniforms. The only thing that works is good intelligence for knowing who they are and for identifying and destroying their sources of income."

The CIA's most effective tool against al Qaeda is their "Terrorism Finance" program, which pinpoints and disrupts terrorist money flow.

While all the big talk (and no action) by city burghers is mostly confined to gang injunction – "which displaces them, doesn't stop them," said Sgt. Goana – what Santa Barbara may actually need is an intelligence task force to target the Mexican mafia and Gang Finance.

The opinions in the column are Robert Eringer's and not necessarily the newspaper's. Readers may write Robert Eringer c/o the News Press. P.O. Box 1359, Santa Barbara 93102-1359.

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