

Calgary police hope to broker gang truce

Feud has killed 25 over past seven years

BY JASON VAN RASSEL, CALGARY HERALD MARCH 14, 2009

A police-brokered truce once ended a gang war on Calgary streets in the 1990s, and the same tactic might again defuse a conflict between FOB and the FOB Killers that has killed at least 25 people since 2002.

Calgary police Deputy Chief Murray Stooke said Friday the department has endeavoured to make that happen, even though Calgary's gang structure--with no defined hierarchy and numerous people in charge of multiple cells--makes brokering such a peace pact difficult.

Nevertheless, Stooke said Calgary police are "in constant contact" with gang members, associates and their families.

"We keep throwing out the possibility of (helping to negotiate a truce), but we would actually need to be able to get them to believe that this would be something that they would be interested in doing before we could move it forward."

Despite the challenges, the father of a city man targeted by rival gang members believes a truce is the best way to end the violence.

"If one admits that this is a war, how do you end a war? With a truce," said the father, who spoke on condition of anonymity. "Let's talk and put an end to this. Let's end all the killings."

The idea of a truce might be a tough sell politically, said Ald. Diane Colley-Urquhart, one of two local politicians on the Calgary police commission. She backs a continued police crackdown on gang activity. "It's a non-starter," she said. "It's like dealing with the devil."

The current gang violence has its roots in a dispute between a group of former high school friends who split into two rival gangs almost 10 years ago. The original group became known--in the beginning, at least--as Fresh Off the Boat (FOB), while the breakaway faction got labelled the FOB Killers (FK).

In a letter to the Herald last fall, imprisoned FOB member Roland Chin accused police of exploiting the violence to get more funding.

"The violence will only get worse before it gets better and I feel sorry that innocent people are getting caught in the crossfire. The CPS has themselves to blame for this failure to the citizens of Calgary," wrote Chin, who is serving a two-year, eight-month sentence for drug and weapons offences at Bowden Institution in central Alberta.

The violence has continued, with more attacks claiming lives on both sides--including a shooting on New Year's Day, when gunmen burst into a Calgary restaurant and killed FK member Sanjeev Mann, his friend Aaron Bendle, and bystander Keni Su'a.

There has not been any violence connected to FOB and FK in recent weeks, but one source said that should not be mistaken for a change of heart.

"They all know they are in the city's eyes and they are keeping it low key," a source associated with FOB recently said.

In the early 1990s, putting police pressure on the gangs' criminal business helped spur two enemy factions in Chinatown to agree to a truce, but Supt. Ken Marchant said the hatred between FOB and FK is so deep-seated that the threat of imprisonment isn't likely to bring the two sides to the table.

"It makes it extremely difficult," said Marchant, who was involved in efforts to halt the Chinatown conflict and later headed a police task force that temporarily quelled violence between FOB and FK.

The 1992 Chinatown truce was brought about by the efforts of a specialized police unit called CRASH:Community Response Against Street Hoodlums. But the CRASH unit's former staff sergeant recalled it took considerable groundwork to create the right environment for the truce talks.

"Community engagement was No. 1. That's where we got our informants who talked to us," recalled Peter Cople, who retired at the rank of deputy chief in 2001.

That proved vital in 1992, when CRASH investigators learned from informants that the Devil Boys and a second, unnamed gang were arming themselves and recruiting out-of-town reinforcements.

Their intelligence allowed the CRASH unit to clamp down on the two gangs and to offer a safe place for negotiations.

The leader of the second gang, Minh Tri Truong, called police and told them both sides had agreed to sit down and talk face-to-face. After three meetings--each with a heavy police presence--the two sides reached an agreement. CRASH disbanded in 1993.

Colley-Urquhart said Calgary's gang war has grown more complex since then.

"Some of these grudges go back 10, 15 years. . . . How do you broker a thing like that?" she asked.

Cople, however, said the benefits of a truce make the idea worth considering.

"If it's done with a purpose, and working toward an end --which is public safety--it's one more tool that could be tried," he said.

With files from Jason Fekete and Joel Kom, Calgary Herald

Jvanrassel@theherald.com CanWest.Com

© Copyright (c) The Calgary Herald