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## Crackdown to target L.A. skid row drug dealers

**Planned injunction would zero in on specific people and could extend to John Does.**

By Kate Linthicum

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Los Angeles prosecutors on Wednesday announced that they would seek a criminal injunction targeting potentially hundreds of so-called commuter drug dealers who travel to skid row from other parts of the city to sell their goods -- an aggressive new tactic in the city's crackdown on the West Coast's largest drug bazaar.

The proposed injunction, if approved by a judge, would ban the 80 named dealers from skid row and would allow authorities to expand the list by as many as 300 additional names over time. The idea has sparked protests from some homeless advocates and civil liberties activists who say it would give too much power to police and could prevent some people from receiving drug treatment or other services located in skid row. The way to tackle the area's drug problem, they say, is to fund more programs for drug rehabilitation.

The plan was announced by Los Angeles' top law enforcement officials -- Police Chief Charlie Beck, Sheriff Lee Baca, City Atty. Carmen Trutanich and Dist. Atty. Steve Cooley -- during a raucous news conference Wednesday in the heart of skid row. Shouting protesters, some of them homeless, surrounded the speakers, prompting LAPD officers to push into the crowd.

"The single biggest criminal threat facing this area is the open and notorious drug dealing," said Trutanich, who could barely be heard over the protesters' jeers. When one demonstrator yelled "You lie!" at Trutanich, the prosecutor responded by suggesting the man was "working for these street gangs."

The skid row measure is modeled after gang injunctions that have been imposed in other parts of the county. The city attorney's office said this is the first time such a measure has been proposed to specifically target drug dealers.

The injunction is needed because the more than 30 gangs who control the skid row drug trade have come to a "mutual understanding" to forgo rivalries, keep the peace and share business, according to Peter Shutan, a deputy city attorney.

The action is the latest step in the city's attempt to crack down on crime on skid row. The area has been home to the city's most concentrated police presence since 2006, when Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa and then-Police Chief William J. Bratton deployed 50 extra officers there as part of the controversial Safer City initiative. Dozens of undercover narcotics officers were deployed to

the same area.

Crime has dropped sharply in recent years -- property crime dropped 44% and violent crime dropped 40% between 2005 and 2009. The decline has coincided with a downtown revitalization effort that has brought luxury lofts and trendy shops to the urban core.

But drug problems persist.

At the Union Rescue Mission early Tuesday, one man died of a suspected heroin overdose in the shelter's overflow dormitories. The same morning, another man died of a suspected overdose at the Midnight Mission across the street.

Getting current dealers off the street -- even if others take their place -- would give former drug addicts a better chance at recovery, said Andy Bales of the Union Rescue Mission.

"This is the best news we've had in a while," Bales said.

Other downtown organizations expressed support for the injunction. Estela Lopez, director of the Central City East Assn., which represents businesses and merchants downtown, said at the news conference she hoped the move would put an end to the drug trade. "Our ability to bring greater economic ability to this area simply cannot be fulfilled with this kind of activity," she said.

Critics, however, say the plan is flawed because it doesn't target big-time drug suppliers. Many of the street-level dealers are addicts who sell or hold narcotics to feed their habit, the critics argue. Barring those addicts from skid row means they won't have access to the drug-treatment facilities and other social service centers available there, they say. In the meantime, they predict, suppliers will find other dealers to fill the gap.

Activist Becky Dennison of the Los Angeles Community Action Network said targeting such street dealers would "criminalize addiction."

Of particular concern to the activists is the part of the proposal that would allow police and the city attorney to ban up to 300 individuals -- now identified in the injunction simply as John Does -- if authorities can prove those people are drug dealers. Some worry that the injunction would open the door for authorities to target the friends and associates of skid row drug dealers and bar them from downtown simply by association.

"Now if a John Doe is hanging out with one of the 80 people on that list, he better watch out. He could get served, he probably will get served," said Alex Alonso, who runs a website tracking Los Angeles gangs.

The city attorney's office says the injunction will not target people who are homeless. The people named in the injunction will have a chance to challenge it at a preliminary hearing that will be held this spring, said Bruce Riordan, the city attorney's director of anti-gang operations.

After that, there will be another hearing in which a judge could choose to make the injunction permanent. Violating the order would be a misdemeanor offense.

The injunction is designed, officials say, to protect people such as Iris Mingo, a skid row resident and former crack user who says she has been sober for 10 months. Mingo said she faces temptation every time she walks down the street because dealing is so rampant in the neighborhood.

"Now I'm free, but don't think it don't come up on me," said Mingo, 56. "It can be very trying."

Cmdr. Blake Chow of the Los Angeles Police Department's Central Division called drugs "probably the biggest threat to the community right now."

The injunction, Chow said, would help police "protect the homeless from the predators coming from other parts of the city." Of the dealers, he said: "We can arrest them and arrest them and arrest them, but what we need to do is keep them away."