

Men and Boys on Restaurant Row

The array of better bistros on "Restaurant Row," the block of 46th Street between Eighth and Ninth Avenues, captures the best of Manhattan after dark: elegant menus, trays of sumptuous desserts, fresh flowers on every table. The sidewalks outside offer another kind of night life: prostitution, drug dealing, gatherings of homeless mental cases.

The restaurant owners, contending that business had begun to suffer, last week brought in the Guardian Angels, a volunteer citizens' patrol, to rid the block of undesirables. The owners picked the wrong people for the job, and the results offer a lesson about law enforcement for all urban America.

Prostitutes and drug dealers have long congregated on the corner of Eighth Avenue and 46th Street. The activity may have increased in recent months as more homeless people gravitate to Times Square and crack inflames the drug trade. Yet theater patrons are used to traversing this no man's land for the sake of a good meal. A downturn in the restaurant business might as well have resulted from rainy weather as from any change in street life.

Still, the restaurateurs decided they needed more help than the police could provide, even though arrests have increased in the area. The owners called in the Guardian Angels, well-meaning adolescents who dress in red berets and T-shirts, and who make no apologies for "patrols" designed to intimidate. In exchange for headquarters space and expense money, the Angels swagger up and down 46th Street claiming it as their turf.

Trouble was inevitable. On Saturday night a 16-year-old Angel got between rival crack gangs on Eighth Avenue and suffered serious stab wounds. During the fight, another Angel threw a man into a

plate glass window. On Sunday night police arrested two Angels along with a man who charged they were harassing him. Some residents of 46th Street find themselves challenged to explain their own presence.

The police rightly insist that the Angels, manifestly lacking in judgment and experience, must obey the law. Community outrage over drugs doesn't warrant any group's abuse of the public. The Angels charge that police are trying to sabotage their effort. The tension weakens law enforcement.

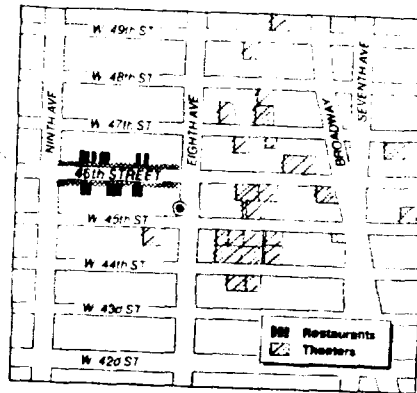
Given their other options, the restaurant owners didn't have to reach so quickly for the Angels. They might have sought to organize residents of the block, as hundreds of other neighborhoods have been doing, to patrol in close cooperation with police. Or they might have paid for trained commercial security guards.

The restaurateurs scoff at such ideas: their street crime problem, they say, is too serious for neighbors with walkie-talkies or uniformed scarecrows. If

things are truly that bad, however, the owners, whose official appeals have been limited to letter-writing, could make a much more powerful appeal for police help. They could mount a campaign with public officials and the media to demand a review of police deployment in Times Square and elsewhere.

That idea already elicits the sympathy of the Citizens Crime Commission. Its President, Thomas Repetto, calls upon City Hall to "tell us how many [police officers] we need to run the drug dealers off the streets in every neighborhood. Then we'll figure out what has to be done" to hire and deploy them.

To clean up 46th Street, the restaurateurs are likely to gain more from grown-ups who run the city than youngsters who run the Guardian Angels.



Circle shows stabbing site.

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