

## **Murder Factory, Part 1: 64130, The ZIP code of - Kansas City Star, The (MO) - January 25, 2009 - page A1**

January 25, 2009 | Kansas City Star, The (MO) | Stories by TONY RIZZO and photos by JILL TOYOSHIBA \* The Kansas City Star | Page A1

"We must dim the light on the

romantic belief that violence is the cure-all for most of our problems."

Behind every pull of the trigger there is a story.

In the Kansas City ZIP code 64130, there are a lot of stories to tell.

Its eight square miles, straddling Brush Creek downstream from the Country Club Plaza, is home to 101 convicted murderers incarcerated in Missouri prisons.

No other ZIP code in Kansas City, St. Louis or any other part of the state comes close. Though its 26,000 residents make up about 6 percent of the city's population, it accounts for 20 percent of Kansas Citians in prison for murder or voluntary manslaughter.

If society set out to design an assembly line for producing killers, it's hard to imagine a model any more efficient than what exists inside its boundaries, stretching from 39th to 63rd streets and bordered by Woodland and Topping avenues. It has become a murder factory that spans generations.

In an unprecedented effort to better understand the destructive paths these inmates chose, The Star sent surveys to all 101 killers who listed 64130 as their home ZIP code with the Missouri Department of Corrections. To compare their experiences with others, The Star also sent surveys to about 270 other convicted killers from across the state.

Thirty-eight from 64130 answered, as did more than 100 of the others. The Star followed up through phone interviews, letters and prison visits -- and also interviewed 64130 residents, city leaders, former inmates, family members of inmates, police officials and beat cops, and local and national experts.

Although the majority of 64130's residents live lawfully, few interviewed said their families have been untouched by the violence. Longtime residents can point out where someone was killed, where drugs are sold or where a neighbor's kid lived before he went to prison.

"It can get rough around here sometimes with all the crime and the peer pressure from older guys," said Arshell Avery, a mother of 16- and 8-year-old sons. "There are a lot of negative things they (kids) can get into. It's easy to lose them."

And nothing separates 64130 from the rest of the metropolitan area. Six out of 10 of its killers committed their crimes elsewhere.

Though each inmate has a unique story, many shared common experiences.

Born mostly into poor families, nearly 60 percent of survey respondents grew up without fathers. As young men they were thrust into a prevailing street mentality that demanded a violent response to any insult. Guns could be obtained as cheaply and easily as illegal drugs. Two-thirds of survey respondents possessed guns as teenagers and nearly three-fourths were regular users of drugs and alcohol.

Once caught up in that lifestyle, there's no easy way out, the inmates say.

"From what I've seen, this is more or less like a trap in the 64130 area," said convicted killer Keith Carnes.

At the time they killed, they ranged in age from 13 to 55. One-fifth committed murder as teenagers. Most already had criminal records when they killed in their 20s and 30s.

Victims ranged from family members to rival drug dealers to innocent bystanders.

Motives varied.

Two teens beat a 15-year-old boy to death with a baseball bat to steal his tennis shoes.

A young robber shot a Scout leader for refusing to turn over his wedding ring.

A robbery gang killed a store manager because he didn't know the combination to a safe.

A 19-year-old massacred four family members, including a 9-year-old half-sister, after fighting with his stepfather.

Sometimes, they killed for no reason at all.

"He looked at me wrong," one assailant told police after killing a man with four shots from a .357-caliber handgun.

Violence and prison

Brothers Joe and Robert Theus, the two youngest of seven siblings to go from the streets of 64130 to prison, exemplify many of the most telling results of The Star's research.

Inmates from 64130 were twice as likely to have multiple killers in their families as those surveyed from other parts of the state.

Sixty percent reported having at least one close relative killed in a violent crime.

And prison terms tended to run in their families, with eight in 10 having relatives locked up at one time or another.

In crimes five years apart, the Theus brothers committed armed robberies that resulted in the deaths of two innocent men and capped criminal careers that began in childhood.

Since their incarcerations, both brothers have endured having sons fall prey to the same streets that spawned them, in examples of the "eat or get ate" mentality that permeates the area.

Someone shot Joe Theus' 17-year-old son and namesake to death in July 2007. The teen's accused killer, also a teenager at the time, lived in 64130.

A prison worker brought Theus news of his son's death. As he had been for most of his son's life, Theus remained locked up while they buried his boy on a midsummer day in south Kansas City.

Theus had tried in vain to stress the pitfalls of the streets to his son.

"I tried to tell him you don't want to come here," Theus said.

While Joe Theus mourned behind bars, Robert Theus sat in his own cell in the same prison, unable to help his son avoid serious trouble. Now his 19-year-old son is serving a six-year sentence for two Johnson County robberies.

"It hurts because I feel I was at fault," Robert Theus said.

### Bad influences

Many who became killers said they had few examples of legitimate success to follow in their neighborhoods.

Instead they were drawn to the fast life of hustling, stealing and dealing drugs. Jewelry, wads of cash and flashy cars, often displayed by older family members, lured them.

"We have to open their minds to something besides bling-bling," said convicted killer Charles Muldrow. "There's the setup. Everybody wants some bling-bling."

Again and again, 64130's murderers said the area offers little in the way of positive alternatives.

"They don't have nothing to do," Muldrow said. "That's why they go out there and terrorize."

Broken homes, domestic violence and absent or drug-addicted parents also affected their upbringing.

Mothers who tried to raise boys alone say the necessity to work and support their families prevented them from watching their children as closely as they wanted.

"I did everything I could," said Ernestine Smith, whose son, Keith Smith, is serving life without parole

for killing a minister and his elderly housekeeper.

Latanya Haywood, another single mom, moved far away from 64130 to get her son out of the environment -- yet saw him return to the area and become involved in an altercation that led to a shooting death and a voluntary manslaughter conviction.

"He really needed a male figure," Haywood said. "He wouldn't mind a woman."

But even when two adults were in the home, many of the ZIP code's killers experienced harmful influences. For example, more than half of the survey's respondents said they witnessed domestic violence growing up.

Children who experience at-home violence have a significantly higher risk of engaging in violent behavior, experts say.

At least 15 of the 64130 killers were convicted of domestic violence homicides.

"Growing up, you're conditioned to think that a physical fight will at times take place between two people who love and care about each other, especially when you see them continue to stay together," said inmate Benjamin Franklin Jr., who was 22 when he stabbed his estranged wife to death.

The home turf

Single-family residences dominate 64130, a ZIP code that many outsiders see only when they zoom through on Bruce R. Watkins Drive or Emanuel Cleaver II Boulevard.

Pockets of middle-class stability -- such as Sheraton Estates and the Citadel Center development -- have the look and feel of typical Johnson County suburbs.

But vacant houses, trash-strewn lots and weed-choked yards plague many blocks. A large percentage of residents live in poverty. Decades of relentless violence have left too many feeling under siege and cut off from the wider community.

As one community leader said at a public forum on violence, when you take the neighbor out of neighborhood, all you're left with is "hood."

Today, the killers who once roamed 64130 are scattered across Missouri in 13 prisons, from minimum-security dorm-type camps to the cinder-block maximum-security facilities where coiled razor wire sits atop fences humming with high-voltage electricity.

Two of the inmates, Michael Taylor and Roderick Nunley, are condemned to death. They shook the entire community with the 1989 kidnapping, rape and murder of a teenage girl snatched from her driveway as she waited for the school bus.

At least 18 of the killers have been sentenced to life without parole and likely will die in prison. At least 24 others received life sentences that offer at least the possibility of parole someday.

The others drew sentences ranging from 10 to 80 years. Most will return to the same neighborhoods and the same problems that existed before they left.

Many think things have only gotten worse.

"I'm scared to get back out there," Joe Theus said, despite the fact he won't be eligible for parole until 2037. "These youngsters are way out of control."

Except for two whose cases date to 1968 and 1977, all of the 64130 killers entered prison in the 1980s, 1990s or this decade. The social dysfunction and violence that swirled around them continue today.

In the last two years, prosecutors have charged 18 more of the ZIP code's residents with murder. Most still are awaiting trial.

Just this month, David N. Briggs joined the roll of 64130 killers occupying a prison cell.

A judge recently sentenced Briggs, who just turned 20, to life without parole for the January 2008 shooting death of Aaron J. Ponder outside his apartment in southeast Kansas City, several miles from 64130.

Briggs shot and wounded the 51-year-old Ponder as he tried to run.

When Briggs caught up, he saw that his victim was still breathing. So he fired several more bullets into his body.

Part one of a three-part series

Today: Stories of killers from ZIP code 64130 highlight social factors that plagued their lives.

Monday: The Star profiles the murder factory known as ZIP code 64130.

Tuesday: What should be done to close the factory that has ruined so many lives?

@ For video, audio and photo galleries about the Murder Factory, go to [KansasCity.com](http://KansasCity.com).

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