

Murder Factory, Part 2: Decades of blight leave - Kansas City Star, The (MO) - January 26, 2009 - page A1

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A taxicab, its side windows shattered, sat in the middle of the street with the driver's bullet-riddled body still inside.

Thirty feet away, Merlon Ragland stood on the front porch of the home day care she operates on East 60th Street and greeted parents as they dropped off their children.

Pushing strollers or carrying little ones on their hips, they negotiated a maze of police crime scene tape to reach her.

The scene was nothing new to Ragland and her mother, longtime residents of 64130 -- the ZIP code that has the most killers in Missouri prisons.

Five men, including one of Ragland's relatives, were shot to death in the 1990s in three incidents on the same block. The taxi driver's killing was the latest in a more recent string of violent crimes.

"It's just getting ridiculous," said Ragland's mother, Esther Ragland. "You don't want to open your door to anyone."

Merlon Ragland needed few words to sum up her neighborhood's history.

"White flight, black flight and then you're left with urban blight," said Ragland, who is black.

It wasn't always this way.

A history of decay

Built mostly in the 1920s and 1930s, the area's once-tidy homes were populated by blue-collar white families and surrounded by bustling business districts along Prospect Avenue and other major arteries.

In the 1960s, those families began moving to newer suburban neighborhoods. Black working and middle-class families filtered in. By 1970, the ZIP code was 50 percent black.

Then, fueled by a federal program to help poor people buy homes, and assisted by real estate speculators who steered them to the area, the transformation became a rush -- one that increasingly lured the poor.

That 1970s program subsidized mortgage payments, bringing in families with no home ownership

history. Many lacked money to maintain their homes and yards. Houses gradually fell into disrepair.

A government report described the area's "rampaging deterioration and abandonment of housing" as a serious problem that would drag down the entire city.

It was written in 1975.

Today, that now-entrenched deterioration has plagued families for two to three generations in a ZIP code that has become 94 percent black.

According to the 2000 census, more than one in 10 of the ZIP code's 11,000 housing units were vacant. Area residents say the problem has worsened since then.

On one block today, 12 of 29 homes sit vacant.

The plague of crack

Though poverty and its related social problems alone do not lead to crime, it is what one criminologist calls "the garden in which this stuff flourishes."

And in 64130, crime has flourished for decades.

Even in the 1970s, news coverage showed a public demand that something be done about crime in this part of town.

Then in the 1980s, things grew worse.

A core of highly concentrated poverty became fertile ground for the influx of crack cocaine and related gang activity that tore families and neighborhoods apart.

"It turned a lot of people into monsters," said inmate Kevin Hurley, who is serving a life sentence for killing a shopkeeper during a robbery. "You smoke it and you just stop caring."

Several pioneering crack dealers based their operations in the heart of 64130.

One recruited a large influx of Jamaican criminals in the mid-1980s who dominated the local crack trade, according to investigators.

Another prolific crack kingpin operated out of an East 62nd Street headquarters where someone shot a Jamaican to death in 1986.

Though long gone, Jamaican criminal gangs established the drug-house and street-corner dealing and associated violence that home-grown dealers continue today, said David Barton, supervisor of the Kansas City police drug enforcement unit at the time.

"They are the ones who started it," he said. "And it took off like crazy."

After law enforcement efforts dismantled the Jamaican operations, California drug gangs moved in and introduced their Crip and Blood affiliations.

As one jailed killer from 64130 said, "Guys from my neighborhood were fascinated by them. You'd see it on TV and here it is, in our neighborhood, right here in my face. They just fell right off into it."

Many of today's killers were raised by mothers, and even grandparents, who succumbed to the pull of the crack pipe.

The government's response -- lengthy prison sentences for those involved in the crack trade, disproportionately doled out to the urban poor -- made things worse by taking parents from their children in ever increasing numbers.

The cycle of poverty, drug abuse and violent crime passed to the next generation.

Too much silence

Beyond the blight and drugs, another issue -- one rooted in the city's segregated past -- allowed crime to flourish here.

Historically mistreated by police and neglected by the justice system, some in the black community developed a mentality of not cooperating with police, said local history professor and author Sherry Schirmer.

They felt the system would not protect or help them, so they handled problems on their own, she said.

But that led to more crime within the community.

Even in the 1920s, C.A. Franklin, founder of The Call newspaper, routinely wrote of the black-on-black crime problem then confined to a city sliver where most blacks were segregated, Schirmer said.

Today, police officials attribute much killing to retaliation.

Consider, for example, a late-August incident in which a 30-year-old 64130 resident survived being shot while walking near 63rd Street and Bellefontaine Avenue. He told police he didn't want to prosecute and "would take care of it on the streets."

Other area residents, ranging from grandmothers to teens, also routinely express a mistrust of police and politicians.

And even though cooperating could reduce their sentences, several of the 64130 killers refused to reveal their accomplices.

"The streets taught you not to snitch," explained Hurley, the convicted killer.

Today's neighborhood

Every day, thousands of suburban outsiders cut through 64130 on their way to downtown or the County Club Plaza.

They see only the attractively engineered and landscaped arteries named for Bruce R. Watkins and Emanuel Cleaver that intersect on the ZIP code's western edge.

But just beyond those ribbons of asphalt, rows of mostly single-family residences line the streets.

On nearly every block, well-kept homes sit next to trashed and ruined houses stripped by thieves and enveloped by saplings and head-high weeds.

Abandoned tires dot the streets. Huge piles of household furnishings rot on curbs, left by evictees unable to pay rent to absentee landlords.

Bullet perforations in houses are as common as feral cats and unleashed dogs.

Jackie Stovall loves the house that she rents in the 5500 block of Olive Street. But most of last year, every time she backed her car out of the driveway, she had to step out and peek into the street for traffic because her view was blocked by the snake- and spider-infested jungle next door.

The weeds were recently cut down, but the monstrosity of a house that would make a slumlord wince still sits on the lot. Empty about a year, the three-bedroom bungalow yawns open, its front and back doors absent.

Nearly every pane of interior and exterior glass is broken. Debris is scattered throughout. Thieves have stripped it of everything useful, including the kitchen sink.

Stovall has made numerous calls to get the city or the absentee owner to do something.

"It's a blame game," she said. "Nobody takes responsibility."

Pointing up and down the street, she identified five other empty homes on her block.

It is a typical scene repeated block after block. Blue Hills, the area where she lives, has more than 160 vacant properties, according to city records. Patrol officers say criminals use abandoned houses to stash drugs, guns and loot stolen in their far-ranging forays into other parts of the city. Empty garages shelter stolen cars.

"It looks like we are living in a jungle," said Ron Hunt, a community anti-crime organizer who lives nearby. "What do you expect people to act like in a jungle?"

Commercial wasteland

Like a knife stabbing through the heart of 64130, Prospect Avenue mirrors the lives of many who live around it.

Worn down and forlorn, cynically dubbed Suspect Avenue, its occupied residences and small businesses exist alongside boarded homes and shuttered storefronts.

It was once a bustling commercial strip crowded with car dealerships, service stations, grocery stores and professional offices. Today a barber shop here, a restaurant there and numerous car repair shops serve as bastions of perseverance along its downtrodden length.

Sitting back from Prospect at 44th Street behind a barbed-wire-topped fence is the modest headquarters of the Porter Investment Corp. On a recent day, a woman poked her head in the front door to say hello to James Porter.

"How you been?" he asked.

"I've been without," she said, drawing a chuckle from Porter.

Porter knows a whole lot of people around here have been without. He sees them every day passing his wooden shack that serves as his office and a gathering place for a few old buddies.

A couple of times a year someone breaks in. He keeps the window unfixed, covered with plywood, so thieves won't shatter another one.

"This neighborhood," Porter says with a shake of his head. "Man, it's ... I never want to be here after dark."

Though he lives in an adjoining ZIP code, Porter has refused to let troubles in the area drive him out of business on Prospect. "This is my lot. I paid for it," he said.

Every day, Porter sees men amble past his corner sporting sagging pants and oversized T-shirts, the modern uniform of the streets. He knows they are unlikely candidates for legitimate work, even if jobs were available.

Porter put in 30 years on the Ford assembly line and retired with a nice pension. But those opportunities have migrated overseas or to suburbs, along with the people who could afford to move with them.

"There were a lot of places you could go get jobs," Porter said of his younger days. "These guys today got no jobs. They just don't have anything to do."

A violent toll

No part of the city is immune from violence that spills from the streets of 64130. But for its residents, violence is a relentless force in their daily lives.

Jean Lewis has lived in the same house on Garfield Avenue for 32 years. What was once a quiet, neighborly block has degenerated into one where young people drink and do drugs openly at all hours. Gunshots are heard with frightening regularity.

"It's as bad as it's ever been," Lewis said.

On Aug. 26 it got much worse for her.

Someone shot her 23-year-old son, Thomas Lewis, to death outside their home. He had been telling his mother it was time to move, she said.

At a house nearby on Wabash Avenue, a young woman opens the door. Her eyes scan the street before stepping outside to speak with a visitor. She has reason to be wary.

A few nights earlier someone drove by and peppered the house with rounds from an assault rifle. Bullets tore through kitchen cabinets and interior walls. One dented her washing machine.

Nine residents, including 8-year-old twins, a 3-year-old and an 8-month-old, were home. No one was hit.

They say they don't know why it happened.

The young woman's mother joined her daughter on the front porch. The mother was ambushed and shot a few years ago in another part of 64130.

Holes from bullets fired at that time remain visible on the passenger door of her SUV.

"I'm ready to move out of Kansas City and never come back," the mother said. "I refuse to lose my son to this bullshit in the streets."

@ For video, audio and photo galleries about the Murder Factory, go to KansasCity.com.

Part two of a three-part series

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

Today: 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?

Inside

Path to Prison, Part 2: A youngster's bright academic future veers toward a violent climax. | A4

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