

CONFRONTING CRIME
THE BATTLE FOR BALTIMORE'S FUTURE

City is fighting battle against violence — and hopelessness

BY STEPHEN KIEHL (SUN REPORTER)

Dondrea Ross' backyard is no longer her own. It belongs to the drug dealers who stalk the playground behind her house.

They have knocked down the light poles so they can conduct their illicit business in private. They have chased off the children who used to run and play there.

"I can't cook out. I can't hang clothes," said Ross, 44, a single mother. She doesn't confront the dealers for fear of being hurt. She doesn't call the police because she has convinced herself that they wouldn't respond. "The police are scared to come back here, and I know because we don't get regular patrols."

Ross lives just east of Green Mount Cemetery, not far from where the Dawson home was firebombed five years ago, killing seven members of one activist's family. That crime sparked outrage throughout the city and led to promises that violence and intimidation would not be tolerated.

But Ross has another word to describe the feeling she is trying to fend off now: "hopelessness."

The spike in homicides and violent crime in [Please see CRIME, 10A]

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Baltimore this year has disturbed many, but it has not produced the sense of crisis or unity that can be found in other cities facing crime waves — or that once was felt in Baltimore. Now it sometimes seems that the city, so accustomed to shocking crimes and ceaseless violence, shrugs at each new tale of terror.

Criminologists who study Baltimore say apathy, alienation and cynicism have taken root. People have seen the criminal justice system fail to arrest and lock up criminals, allowing gangs to proliferate. They have seen politicians announce crime-fighting plans with great fanfare, only to have results fall short of the rhetoric.

At the same time, many of the positive forces of cohesion from the past have disappeared. Libraries have closed. Neighborhood associations have weakened. The number of recreation centers in the city has dropped from 145 in 1980 to 43 today.

"Over time what you see is a powerlessness — people feeling that they cannot do anything to change their life circumstances, so they put up with it," said Jeffrey Ian Ross, a criminologist at the University of Baltimore.

Ross and others say any effort to turn around Baltimore's culture of violence will take years of sustained work. After all, they say, the city didn't get to this point overnight. Middle-class homeowners, who were the bedrock of neighborhoods and church congregations, began fleeing the city in the 1960s.

"The disinvestment has been taking place slowly, systematically, piece by piece," said Rob English, lead organizer of BUILD, a nonprofit group working to empower communities. "It's unraveling one thread at a time. It's paralyzing people. To act on people's anger, to turn it into hope, they have to see that something is going to change."

But this year change seems to be heading in the wrong direction. The violence considered routine in the city's most desperate neighborhoods is spreading to places once assumed to be safe.

Residents of Charles Village are assaulted and mugged on the street. A Roland Park woman is raped and robbed in her home. Near Patterson Park, a young man is beaten into a coma while walking home from Canton.

"There is a fatalism that worries me very much," said the Rev. William Au, pastor of St. Philip and James Roman Catholic Church in Charles Village. "In the city, you have to be cautious. But now more people are talking about being afraid. When people start talking that way, that's a really serious deterioration."

After such well-publicized incidents of crime this summer, Au said, even people committed to the city are talking about getting out. They're disillusioned, he said, after five police commissioners in eight years and no clear direction from the city when it comes to fighting crime.

"That lack of leadership, together with a sense of great personal threat in your own neighborhood, makes for a whole different mindset," Au said. "Right now it's angry, it's frustrated, it's somewhat panicky. But if something isn't done, it could lead to just giving up on the city."

Several times over the past decade, Sarah Johnson thought of giving up. For years, she was afraid to sit on her front porch on 25th Street in East Baltimore. When she called the police, she said, they didn't always come. The Off the Top gang took over the neighborhood.

"There were murders," said Johnson, 58, "killings in the neighborhood back to back. You just get tired of hearing fireworks and knowing it might be a gunshot, of not being able to sit on your porch, of seeing these gangs walk around and act like they own the street you've lived on since before they were babies."

But Johnson did not give up and get out, and her persistence is perhaps a flickering sign that there are still some who have not completely despaired. Johnson joined BUILD and met with police commanders. She signed up to mentor two teenage girls from

her church. She walked up to the drug dealers on the corner and told them, "If you're gonna stay here, you may as well clean up the street."

She gave them trash bags, and they cleaned up the street. They didn't leave the corner, but Johnson thinks they got the message that they're responsible for the neighborhood, too.

"We haven't had a killing in a while," she says now. "It's sad to think that's a sign of progress, but it's the truth. We're more watchful than we used to be, and we're not taking it anymore."

Several neighborhoods like Johnson's have organized, but citywide unity and coordinated action are hard to discern. Communities tend to hunker down and protect themselves, observers say, pointing to upscale Guilford hiring its own security force. The business community hasn't made a major contribution to crime-fighting efforts since 2001, when \$500,000 was raised for surveillance cameras.

Contrast that with the response in Newark, N.J., last month after three teenagers were killed execution-style in a school playground. Political rivals came together, gang members pledged to put down their guns, and within days the corporate community raised \$3.2 million for a surveillance system.

Talk of a "crime wave" gripped Boston when 16 people were killed in the first three months of this year, up from 10 during the same period last year. Those numbers would thrill Baltimore, but in Boston they were cause for alarm. Massachusetts' governor responded with \$6.2 million for summer jobs and other crime-fighting programs.

In the early 1990s, when crime in Baltimore began to surge and the city first passed 300 in annual homicides, rallies and demonstrations often drew hundreds of people. On a cold January day in 1991, more than 3,000 people gathered outside the Eastern District Court. The next year, 300 rallied at the Canton waterfront to protest the violence.

But this year, with homicides already surging past 200, Corene Myers had trouble finding people to come to an anti-crime prayer vigil scheduled for tomorrow. The intent is to put women on street corners across the city for two hours of prayer starting at 10 a.m.

Myers, a facilitator at the city's Department of Social Services, distributed dozens of fliers promoting the vigil. She didn't even get five responses.

"I don't think the passion is there," said Myers, 56 and a resident of Ashburton. "I think that we have given up. We have children and young people and old people dying every single day, and there's no outcry."

Bishop Douglas I. Miles of Koinonia Baptist Church acknowledges that churches — black and white — have not done enough to provide programs to get youths off the street and to organize their members. But he said no one is without blame.

"It can't be placed on any one person," Miles said. The corporate community, churches, foundations and neighborhoods all have failed in their own ways, he said. But he points to a deeper problem that keeps many from calling police to turn in criminals: With so many young black men in the city involved in crime in some way, few families are untouched.

"If your 10- or 12-year-old is being paid \$500 a week to watch out for police, and you need that \$500, how do you turn that person in?" he said. "Young people should get their first paycheck from legitimate employment, not from a drug dealer."

In Baltimore this year, Comcast, Colgate and the Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation contributed a combined \$120,000 to help pay for 6,500 summer jobs. (Boston, by contrast, provided 9,430 summer jobs and Washington 12,500.) The Greater Baltimore Committee is considering three proposals to target crime, including one from the Police Department to study more effective law enforcement techniques.

The projects are the first major crime-related efforts by the GBC in several years. GBC President Don Fry said the committee had been waiting for proposals from the police and the city.

"I don't know that there has been a specific request of late to the business community," Fry said. In the past, though, the GBC took the initiative on anti-crime measures. For example, in the mid- to late 1990s, it developed a community court to handle nuisance crime offenders and offer social services to help criminals break the cycle of crime. The GBC raised \$2.5 million for the project.

"Businesses are usually willing to make investments if they know there is going to be some positive return on the investment," Fry said. "But we have got to see a coordinated effort from all the different levels [of the criminal justice system], and I think that's one thing that has been lacking."

Dondrea Ross says she is beginning to see some change. A year ago a tenant council formed in her rowhouse community on Aisquith Street. A city councilman came to her home to hear her concerns. She joined BUILD, which is working to demolish the vacant homes near her. And with neighbors she organized block parties to show drug dealers they don't own the streets.

But her backyard is another matter. The light poles have not been fixed nearly a month after they came down, their exposed yellow, red and black wires presenting yet another reason for children to keep away.

"We have been promised so much in the past," she said, "and when no one delivers, that's where the sense of hopelessness comes from. The people look forward to change, and it doesn't happen. So the good people move out and the bad people stay, and the neighborhood deteriorates."