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HEAD: Area's crime problem scaring off developers Many believe southern sector isn't a safe bet; police plan to increase their visibility
BYLINE: **TANYA EISERER**
CREDIT: Staff Writer
SERIES: LOOKING SOUTH: DALLAS AT THE TIPPING POINT
ART: PHOTO(S): (1-4 Photos by DAVID LEESON/Staff Photographer) 1. Authorities stand by as a 15-year-old girl is examined by paramedic Noe Delcampo after a domestic dispute at her southern Dallas home. 2. Dallas police Officer Nick Eaton speaks through a screen door to the mother of a 15-year-old girl as Officer Bryan Spearman provides backup. The girl called 911 after a fight with her mother. 3. Barbara Edmondson, who owns Fair Park townhomes, complained about drug dealing and prostitution and was told to hire off-duty officers. But her neighbors didn't have the funds. 4. Dallas police Officer Nick Eaton searches a boy who ran when Officer Eaton drove through a convenience store parking lot in southern Dallas. Officer Eaton took his name and warned him. CHART(S): 1. HOW THE NEWS ANALYSIS WAS CONDUCTED. 2. HOW MUCH DOES CRIME COST? 3. (TOM SETZER/Staff Artist) POLICE, CRIME AND GEOGRAPHY. 4. ABOUT THIS SERIES.

TEXT:

Third of five parts

Norman Henry sells houses in a West Dallas neighborhood where thieves regularly drive off builders. Barbara Edmondson hires an off-duty officer to videotape drug dealers around her Fair Park townhouses. Debra Reed looks out her window in east Oak Cliff to see crack addicts and prostitutes living in an abandoned house across the street.

"It's a disgrace," she says. "As soon as I get my degree, I'm out of here."

Everybody knows that crime is bad - very bad - in portions of southern Dallas. But what's often overlooked is how residents there and citywide pay an economic price as well.

Even as City Hall talks up the southern sector as the linchpin for the city's future, a Dallas Morning News analysis shows how public safety issues have helped derail development there for years - and threaten to continue doing so.

The murder rate in southern Dallas is twice as high as in the rest of the city. Assaults are nearly twice as likely in the south as in the north. Business or home burglaries are one and a half times higher in the south than in the north.

Police response times are slow citywide by national standards - and they're worst in the highest-crime areas. And the officers patrolling those neighborhoods are the department's least experienced, The News' analysis found.

One harsh judgment: "We've abandoned the people and the neighborhoods."

That was Police Chief David Kunkle, commenting after a speech marking the dedication of a new subdivision in the St. Philip's neighborhood in South Dallas.

Chief Kunkle, who started work in June, inherited a department pinched by budget cuts in the 1990s and into this decade that quietly reduced Dallas' police presence even as city leaders declared crime-fighting to be a high priority.

"I know what I'm going to hear before I come into the room: concerns about long-unaddressed chronic problems, lack of police visibility and poor response times," he said in a later interview.

"For Dallas to grow and have a good, strong economy, we have to have neighborhoods that people want to live in, spend their money in and most of their social and political capital."

His assessment of the crime-and-development link echoes the City Council's current No. 1 goal: economic development, especially in the southern sector. With northern Dallas essentially built out, the city must capture economic activity in the south - or see it go instead to the suburbs.

But the violent nature of crime in southern Dallas poses yet another stiff challenge for an area saddled with problems and long shunned by developers.

Won't touch it

Home builder Bill Hood said he doesn't even consider projects in southern Dallas.

"I can't afford to do it. I won't go there. There's just too much risk," he said.

Those who do invest in southern Dallas do so with care.

"We watch crime very closely," said Jeff Dworkin, president of the Dallas operations of Los Angeles-based KB Home, which is building hundreds of single-family homes in the region, mostly along Dallas' southern periphery.

"If the statistics say there is an extremely high crime rate - felonies - we'd rather not go there," he said. "We won't go there."

Add up enough of those decisions to avoid parts of the southern sector or stay out altogether, and the consequences are huge: Residents have fewer options for places to live, work and shop. And all Dallas taxpayers feel the pain from a slow-growing tax base.

A senior Los Angeles police commander reminded U.S. police chiefs at their national convention last month how even the most peaceful urban neighborhoods foot the bill for crime elsewhere.

"In the safer parts of a city, where they're not experiencing crime, there's sometimes an unwillingness to accept that there's a problem and, more importantly, to put resources there to deal with the problem," said George Gascon, an assistant chief in Los Angeles.

"The problem is the economic impact that crime has, and certainly crime impacts the whole city."

Data mask details

To be sure, southern Dallas is not an island of crime in an otherwise tranquil city. In per capita terms, the overall crime rate in northern Dallas is roughly the same as southern Dallas'.

But The News' analysis shows how violent crime in particular - homicide, rape and assault - occurs at much higher rates in the south.

A much higher incidence of auto burglaries, a nonviolent crime, pads the northern sector's rate and creates a misleading appearance of geographic parity in overall crime, the analysis found.

Dallas' highest-crime neighborhoods also tend to draw paroled criminals. Four of the five ZIP codes with the most parolees are in the southern sector, according to The News' analysis of records from the Texas Department of Criminal Justice.

The confluence of crime, poverty and other social ills in southern sector neighborhoods puts a premium on strategic policing, experts say.

That means paying prompt attention to nuisance crimes as well as maintaining a visible presence of streetwise cops. Those hallmarks of success have all been in

short supply in the southern sector, though Chief Kunkle vows to make them a high priority.

Police records show that the worst response times to emergency calls - stabbings, shootings and robberies in progress - come from south of the Trinity. Responding to those calls takes an average of more than 10 minutes at the southeast patrol station, which covers Pleasant Grove, South Dallas and parts of Oak Cliff.

"That's a long time - too long," said Tory Caeti, a policing expert with the Police Executive Research Forum in Washington. The citywide average was less than 8 1/2 minutes, and less than seven minutes in Far North Dallas.

The News' analysis also showed that the city's least-experienced patrol officers work at the southeast and southwest stations, which cover most of the southern sector.

A City Council-commissioned efficiency study determined that one-third of the southeast station's evening shift staffers had less than three years' experience, which "places the department at some risk if a particularly difficult situation arises."

And how does Dallas keep tabs on the concentration of parolees, a population more likely to commit fresh crimes? The Police Department receives the data but didn't begin tracking them until earlier this fall.

Those shortcomings may be emblematic of the problems in a department that had, according to the efficiency study, lost "its commitment to excellence."

Most big cities increased the number of police officers per capita during the last decade. Dallas went in the other direction, despite promises of a boost. The city's per capita police presence fell by 16 percent.

Bad as all of that is for Dallas as a whole, it's been worse for southern neighborhoods.

"Dallas has not served the southern sector with a comprehensive strategy," said Mr. Henry, head of Builders of Hope Community Development Corp. in West Dallas. "We have let the southern sector run down."

Or listen to how Patricia Watson sized up her decision to leave her once-tidy Oak Cliff neighborhood after 32 years.

While attending church one Sunday morning in late October, she received a call from a neighbor saying that burglars had smashed through her back patio sliding glass door. They carried off clothes, jewelry, a vacuum cleaner, a DVD player

and three televisions - and Ms. Watson had to wait more than four hours for police to arrive. That's far outside the department's goal of a 15-minute response time for such calls.

"If they could get the area straightened up, we could stay," said Ms. Watson, 60, who is widowed. "I know you can't run from stuff, but you can do better."

Security for hire

If the city doesn't have enough officers on the street, what can residents do?

They can pay for their own cops.

The city allows neighborhoods to hire off-duty officers to patrol their streets. The vast majority of these private-patrol arrangements are found in more prosperous northern Dallas.

Appearing before the City Council this fall to discuss the police efficiency study, Chief Kunkle acknowledged the disparity.

"If our basic level of service is not viewed as adequate to protect a neighborhood, then North Dallas can pay it through taxing themselves. People in the southern sector can't afford it, the chief said.

Deputy Mayor Pro Tem Don Hill, whose council district snakes from southeast Dallas to southern Oak Cliff, commented: "That makes you drop your head. That's just painful because it is the fundamental responsibility of a city to provide public safety."

Floyd Simpson, deputy chief of the southeast station, had to deliver a we're-doing-all-we-can message to Mrs. Edmondson, the owner of the Fair Park townhomes.

Mrs. Edmondson had been begging police in letters and phone calls for help in fighting the drug dealing and prostitution in her neighborhood. In early September, she met for two hours with Chief Simpson and several subordinates. The chief promised action but couldn't provide specifics.

If she wanted to be sure of sufficient police protection, Chief Simpson suggested, she'd need to organize her neighborhood and hire private patrols.

"We need to take the neighborhoods back," he told her. "Right now, we're losing. The apathy that I'm fighting is amazing."

Neighborhood residents couldn't come up with the money to hire off-duty officers for security patrols. The prostitutes and drug dealers remain.

Mixed signals

Although law enforcement alone can't reverse a neighborhood's decline, it's also true that lawlessness can accelerate it.

"The way you reclaim a neighborhood is you create an integrated unit of city services. If a cop sees an alley that's cluttered, they can call somebody and they will do something about it," said Lawrence Redlinger, executive director for strategic planning and analysis at the University of Texas at Dallas.

Signs of both progress and decline can be found in southern Dallas.

City Attorney Madeleine Johnson, a former federal prosecutor who joined the city five years ago, has created a community advocacy division dedicated to confronting blight and tackling quality-of-life issues.

Before the division was created, legal snarls had virtually stalled the demolition of dilapidated homes. Today, the city demolishes about 300 houses a year. Using grant money, Ms. Johnson has dispatched prosecutors to work in the more troubled areas of the city and established a community court in South Dallas in October.

The city's once-troubled code compliance department also has swung into more vigorous action after a shake-up that led to more than 30 firings this spring.

"We had supervisors who weren't taking care of business - and it follows that if they weren't, their employees weren't, either," said director Kathleen Davis. "They wrote citations, but they told us they were doing double or triple."

Still, trash heaps, abandoned homes and litter-strewn roads and lots remain common sights in the southern sector. Residents wait for more evidence of change.

Carol Archer, who lives in a close-knit, well-kept community of late-1930s bungalows in west Oak Cliff, repeats a familiar complaint: Code enforcement officers nitpick on illegal garage-sale signs and other small fare, but largely ignore blight-producing problems such as a tarp covering part of one neighbor's house.

Last fall, "a code enforcement lady drove by and introduced herself. She said they were going to work harder," Mrs. Archer said. "I haven't seen her again."

One problem: The McKinsey and Co. report on code compliance concluded that the department's "overall field efficiency is reduced due to the flow of e-mails/calls from City Council." These requests bypassed the city's 311 help hotline.

Mr. Henry, the builder in West Dallas, says the city's code enforcement efforts take a squeaky-wheel approach, starting with the priorities of the council member and then addressing issues raised by residents who complain the most.

"It's not strategic code enforcement. It's sporadic code enforcement," Mr. Henry said.

'A big chasm'

To see the linkage between city policy and crime-fighting, ride along with Officer Nick Novello.

En route to his West Dallas beat the other morning, the officer had barely rolled into the neighborhood when he got a radio call.

The dispatcher sent him miles away to answer a burglar alarm on Regal Row. Then he had to take a report on a lost driver's license on Lemmon Avenue. Later, he was routed to a traffic accident on Stemmons Freeway. During five hours spent with a reporter, only one call took the officer to West Dallas.

"They send us everywhere," said Officer Novello, a 22-year veteran. "There is no beat accountability. There's a big chasm between what we actually do and what the chief would like us to do."

So went another typical shift in a stretched-thin Police Department.

As police staffing fell behind Dallas' growth in the 1990s, the city largely abandoned "beat policing" - the practice of officers patrolling specific geographic areas so they can get to know the good guys and the bad guys. Instead, the department shifted more and more resources into specialized units.

"Over time, the patrol guys got busier and busier and had less time to do anything on patrol beats," Chief Kunkle said. "Patrol became a less desirable place to work because it was hard to do anything but answer calls."

Today, officers answer calls all over a patrol division. Dispatch procedures also tend to work against a beat-policing concept, according to officers and the efficiency study, because dispatchers are graded on speedily dispatching calls, without regard to an officer's proximity to the call.

Suffering the most from these changes, police say, are the troubled southern sector neighborhoods, where developing personal relationships is critical.

"When there were problems ... you don't have the kind of commitment and presence that most of these areas need on a continual basis," Chief Kunkle said.

The buildup of poverty and decay that created the problems in those neighborhoods didn't occur in a day. Neither will the solutions, city leaders caution.

"Our crime rate is unacceptably high because we emphasize what we emphasize," said Mr. Hill, the deputy mayor pro tem. "So we've got to deal with it. And I think Kunkle is a guy that's thoughtful, and I think he's going to give us the type of improvements that we're expecting, and we're going to give him the tools to do it."

That includes making good on the long-ago promise to increase Dallas' police presence per capita by hiring more officers.

City officials plan to add 50 new officers in this budget cycle. They also are adding more civilian positions to the department, returning desk-bound officers to the streets. But Chief Kunkle said internal staffing models show that the department needs about 300 additional officers.

"We've got to have somebody that owns every piece of geography in the city," he said.

The city also is building a south-central substation to better respond to crime in the southern sector, much as it did years earlier with the north-central substation on the city's northern fringe.

The \$13 million facility, scheduled for completion in late 2006 or summer 2007, is being built on developer-donated land near Interstate 20 at the corner of Camp Wisdom and Lancaster roads.

"The police station is going to be in the middle of the southern sector," said interim City Manager Mary Suhm. "Clearly, that answers some of the response-time questions."

Those types of law-and-order investments will have to continue, Mr. Hill said. After years of neglect and worse, the southern sector needs more than just a few subdivisions, strip centers and business parks.

"In southern sector communities, when you get a developer that goes into an area and makes a substantial investment in that area and then you don't undergird it in some way, with some type of focus from the standpoint of city services: code enforcement, sanitation, police ... then ultimately, the development will fail."

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