

City residents feel grip of crime - Public safety is a key concern for voters as they get ready to cast ballots in mayoral primary.

Detroit News, The (MI) - Friday, July 15, 2005

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DETROIT -- Ronald Jackson isn't ready to leave the two-story white house where his wife, niece and two young children were gunned down one winter morning while he was at work.

On Dec. 18, 2004, his wife, Alicia Jackson, called 911 to report a man with a gun in the house. Ronald Jackson was told that officers showed up and knocked on the door. When no one responded, the officers turned away.

Life in Detroit is defined by such stories. Despite more than a decade of falling crime, Detroit remains one of the most violent cities in America, and residents say their neighborhoods don't feel safer. Residents' growing discontent has made crime a key issue in the upcoming mayoral race.

"I thought they should have kicked my door down," said Jackson, 26, a former U.S. Army private. "They probably would have caught him in the act. They probably could have saved one of my kids. I could have at least had one of them."

According to preliminary FBI statistics, Detroit's overall violent crime rate dropped 14 percent between 2003 and 2004 but the murder rate went up nearly 7 percent. Among major U.S. cities only Baltimore scored worse.

Incumbent Kwame Kilpatrick's opponents say the mayor has been more interested in maintaining an ostentatious lifestyle than working to protect residents.

The mayor counters that violent crime has fallen to a 41-year low. Administration officials tout a recent study showing that the downtown area is safer than many other downtowns across the country.

"It's not a statistic you can readily overlook," said Deputy Mayor Anthony Adams.

Crime is on voters' minds

For voters like Jackson, public safety will be a top concern when they head to the voting booth Aug. 2 for the mayoral primary election. Although a staunch Kilpatrick supporter, Jackson says he's not certain the progress being touted by the mayor is visible in his east side neighborhood. About two months ago, Jackson held a neighbor in his arms as he bled to death from a shooting.

Murders in Detroit rose to 385 in 2004 from 366 in 2003, Chicago dropped from 598 to 448 as did New York, 570 compared to 597. Philadelphia dropped, too, from 348 to 330. Los Angeles rose slightly from 515 to 518.

The Detroit Police Department reported 171 murders for the first six months of this year, but declined to release other crime statistics.

Experts say Detroit's decline in violent crime won't necessarily continue in a city with double-digit unemployment, few prospects for new jobs and budget stress requiring hundreds of police layoffs. Robert Homant, a professor at the University of Detroit Mercy who studies aggressive behavior, said the situation in Detroit is aggravated by population loss, particularly as wealthy and middle-class residents flee for safe suburbs.

City Councilwoman Sharon McPhail, who is running for mayor with former police Chief Benny Napoleon, has suggested the city has been underreporting crime. She says internal police documents obtained by her campaign show that in the first six months of the year, more than 26,000 crime reports had not been investigated.

While some reports of crime may be false, Napoleon called that figure "too high" to ignore. McPhail has vowed to reduce crime 50 percent by the end of her first term and challenger Freman Hendrix, deputy mayor under Dennis Archer, pledges to get tough on crime by building coalitions with the community and he has won the endorsement of the police officers union.

Kilpatrick says he has a winning track record in crime-fighting.

He says his administration reduced absenteeism in the police department, beefed up patrols in criminal hot spots, and rounded up 53 guns through a cash-for-guns campaign. The police department also confiscated \$85 million worth of illegal drugs, up 3 percent from last year.

Such progress can't be dismissed, officials say. Crime has dropped despite economic stagnation, a high illiteracy rate, and fewer college-bound students, said police spokesman James Tate.

"We have bucked the national trend," Tate said.

U.S. urban crime down

Declining urban crime is a national phenomenon. Criminologists and law enforcement attribute the drop in part to America's aging population and a shift from a manufacturing to service-based economy.

"Any mayor in any city can say crime is down. That's not much of an accomplishment," Homant said.

As Detroit's population declines, it is also aging. According to the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments, the 18-34 age group makes up 25 percent of Detroit's population, compared to 28 percent in 1990. Meanwhile, the proportion of people between ages 35 and 64 has gone up 3 percent.

Though the numbers don't show it, neighborhood activists say drug and gang activity appears to be on the rebound. "It's come from the east side mostly. They've complained the most," said Carolyn Chambers, who is on the board of the Detroit Community Justice Partnership, a nonprofit volunteer group.

The problem, Chambers says, isn't isolated. "In my neighborhood (of Grandmont), we're starting to see some gang activity," she said.

Drugs and prostitution have even encroached on peaceful communities like Warrendale, bordering Dearborn. Residents like Barry William say police regularly raided a nearby crack house until it burned down a month ago, leaving an eyesore of broken windows and charred furniture in the front yard.

"There was so much traffic the cops would come to bust it," William said. "Everybody's tired of it making the block look bad."

Chambers blames inconsistencies in the police priorities. She said there has been less community outreach at her police precinct. "One minute (community outreach is) an important unit to the commander or chief. Now we're being told we might not even have a unit at our next meeting," she said of her local community relations council.

Low police morale cited

The city's financial problems have also affected police morale.

Detroit's new budget for the year that began July 1 casts new doubt on the city's ability to maintain public safety. After the City Council pushed through a tighter budget with \$65 million in cuts to police and fire departments, Kilpatrick announced a 45-day restructuring period to calculate the number of officers and firefighters who will have to be laid off.

Police Chief Ella Bully-Cummings has previously warned that as many as one-third of 2,665 police officers could be laid off. In addition, 120 firefighter positions might be lost.

"Morale in the police department is at the lowest in my history," said Officer Reggie Crawford, who has served 24 years in the department. "The officers feel like there are political games being played. They've been lied to by this administration."

Crawford, who is supporting McPhail, said some officers have lost respect for their superiors.

At age 51, Crawford questions whether residents feel as safe as they did in 1963 as the mayor suggests.

"In 1963, we could sleep with our front and back door open, park your car with the windows down. There was no drug dealing on the corner and very few homicides. If you feel as safe as you did in 1963, I submit to anyone to try doing that tonight," the officer said.

Deputy Mayor Adams says the police department has improved its rate of solving homicides, but officials acknowledge the city's budget crisis poses unwelcome challenges for a police department that is already under the watch of a U.S. Justice Department monitor for a wide range of violations of standard law enforcement procedures and policies.

"I don't want to say anarchy will happen because I believe in the citizens of this city, but it's definitely going to have an impact," Tate said.

Meanwhile, police investigators still occasionally call on Jackson for information about his family. **Luther Thomas Jenkins**, the boyfriend of his niece, is scheduled to go to trial in October. Jackson believes **Jenkins** shot his niece in a lovers' quarrel and then his family because they could identify him.

Jackson would like a leader who will bring peace back to his block of Dickerson. But if it weren't for the memories of his family in his house, he might already be gone.

"If I go, it's like I'm letting them all go," he said.

Caption: Detroit Ronald Jackson's wife, niece and two kids were gunned down in 2004. Trash and debris are strewn about the yard of this house in Warrendale, near Barry William's home. Barry William says he's sick of a burned-down house making his neighborhood look bad.

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Company Name: #keywords2#

Index Terms: DETROIT ; CRIME ; MAYOR ; ELECTIONS

Dateline: DETROIT

Record Number: det21962403

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