

Death and fear stalk drug block's neighbors : East-siders endure, pray for escape

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DETROIT -- At first glance, the small, white frame house at 20003 Omira looks like other houses on this troubled, near east-side block.

Like many nearby houses, it's vacant plywood covers the windows. Like many nearby houses, it has numerous bullet and shrapnel holes in its siding. You only notice a difference after walking to the front door.

Up close, you can see the bullet holes are circled and numbered in black pen, the only signs that two days earlier, homicide detectives were here.

But on Omira, a city block choking to **death** on **drugs** and violence, homicide has become part of the scenery. News of the third and fourth killings here since just before Thanksgiving is answered with a shrug.

"We joke about how the neighborhood has gotten," said Al Terry, 47, who has lived on Omira all his life. "But it's hard to joke about **death** There are gunshots every night."

This block -- Detroit's version of the killing fields -- is not unique. Police estimate the city has at least 75 severe **drug** hot spots in its neighborhoods, and homicides in January this year numbered 36, compared in 31 in January 1998.

Though plagued with **drug** dealing for years, the Omira block is not one of the police hot spots and has not been targeted for surveillance -- despite the fact four people have been slain on the block in the past three months.

The latest was Wednesday, when detectives came to the nondescript house at 20003 Omira at 2:15 a.m. and found a mother and her son slain. Apparently a case of mistaken identity, the gangland attack with a .40-caliber handgun and an AK-47 assault rifle left April Jenkins, 27, riddled by bullets. Her 6-year-old son, Dalante, was shot in the back. The assailants threw firebombs in the home and fired more than 50 rounds.

Investigators believe two men tossed firebombs into the second floor and then opened fire into the first floor. Jenkins' husband, Claude, and four other children from his previous marriage were not injured.

Investigators have arrested two men, ages 26 and 27, in the slayings. Police expect to obtain warrants today on murder, attempted murder and weapons charges. Investigators believe the younger suspect thought someone in the house had shot him in the buttocks in September. The Jenkins family did not move into the house until two weeks ago.

Jenkins and her son were the latest victims. The others killed on Omira are: * Taneisha Scott: Police found Scott, 20, shot in the head about 2 a.m. Nov. 18 in front of 20008 Omira. The case is unsolved. Scott is the daughter of a Detroit police officer. He did not want to comment Thursday. * Linda Chambers: She was found by police about 9:10 a.m. Jan. 29 sitting in a chair in her home at 20008 Omira. She had been shot in the face. Police believe Chambers, 47, may have witnessed the Scott slaying and been killed to keep her quiet. Her funeral is today, and the case remains open.

All of the shootings are linked, police believe, to **drug** dealers -- one of the main causes of gun-related violence in Detroit, as witnessed by Thursday's shooting of three people on Pilgrim on the city's west side. Crack invasion

Neighbors, many of whom were afraid to give their names for **fear** of retaliation, said crack dealers invaded the area about seven years ago. As houses were abandoned when elderly owners died, teen-age dealers and users moved in, often rigging the houses with electricity and telephone service for their **drug** operations.

They also brought guns.

"The **drugs** got in here and made it worse," said George Watson, 53, an elder at Mercy Temple of Holiness church who has lived on Omira for 15 years.

Watson said he has grown used to the sound of gunfire. He just hopes he's not hit by a stray bullet.

"I pray to God that it does not come my way. I try not to think about it. I try to block it out."

At police headquarters, Police Chief Benny Napoleon told The News this **drug** activity "preys on the good citizens of this city who work hard, go to work every day and try to enjoy a normal and happy life. We are currently raiding 20 to 25 locations a day in Detroit. We are making arrests. We are confiscating **drugs** and weapons, and we are definitely keeping the pressure on."

But back on Omira, the few **neighbors** still living on the block said police only show up in force when they come to remove bodies. Many hope to move

Doris Smith on Thursday looked out a small window at the Jenkins' bullet-riddled house next door. Smith, 60, said the shootings have convinced her that she must move.

One of the bullets came through her home's outside wall and into a window, then fell to the floor. She still has the slug, wrapped in paper.

"It was scary," Smith said. "My kids tell me I have to get out of here and I agree. But where are you gonna go to? (Violence) is all over."

Other **neighbors** said Wednesday's slayings were the last straw. They plan to move as soon as possible. They said this section of Omira becomes a noisy **drug** mall on evenings and weekends, especially during warmer weather.

They said dealers run from abandoned houses to cars and back again, waving money and bags, while dopers sit on stoops drinking, gambling and playing loud music.

Meanwhile, the street's residents cower in their homes -- and wait for the shooting to start.

"I don't want troublemakers here, but I can't chase them away," Terry said. "There are 16-year-olds with automatic weapons. What do I do? Tell him to go? He'll shoot me." Block once thrived

It wasn't always this way. The block just west of Interstate 75 once was crowded with well-kept, working-class homes. Over time, several homes became vacant, then abandoned, then dilapidated, then were torn down. Today, about a third of the **block's** lots are vacant, some heaped with rotting tar paper and other garbage. Weeds have overrun the lots, tangled with broken whisky bottles, fast food wrappers and discarded household items.

Four houses are bombed out or abandoned. Several others, including the Jenkins' house, are boarded up and vacant. Homeowners on this block do not have "for sale" signs out. No one will buy their property, they said.

Jeanette Clement, 77, has lived in the same house since she was 4 years old. Partially blind, she raised and cupped her hands as she pointed to the street.

"I don't want to know anything about what happens now. But when I was a little girl, it was so nice here. There were trees everywhere. Now I just stay in my house I don't go out."

Terry, Clement's nephew who lives across the street, also remembers the trees. He remembers playing tag and running among the trees with neighborhood children. These days, the children are kept inside.

Frank Milestone Jr., 42, spent Thursday handing out fliers that outlined Saving Our Sons and Daughters battle plan against violence. He is a crisis coordinator with the organization, founded to help parents cope with losing a child to violence.

"I have seen where homicides affect an entire community. It's not just the victims' families. That's why we are here."

Caption: Photo 1: Linda Chambers, 47, was killed Jan. 29 in this home on Omira on Detroit's east side -- possibly because she witnessed another killing in the **drug** -plagued neighborhood. Photo 2: A note posted beside Chambers' front door refers callers to the funeral home handling her burial. James Borchuck / The Detroit News James Borchuck / The Detroit News

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