

## **Detroit Drug Houses : Out of Control : Neighbors live in terror as drug houses flourish: Raids prove futile as dealers slip back into Detroit communities**

Detroit News, The (MI) - Sunday, December 19, 1999

Author: Wayne Woolley The Detroit News

DETROIT -- **Drug** dealers have virtual **control of houses** in neighborhoods scattered across Detroit, where crime rules, innocent residents are terrified and police are powerless.

Nearly 300 properties in Detroit have been the scene **of** three or more felony narcotics arrests since 1996. But **drugs** continue to be sold in and around many **of the houses** -- at one, even after police made 13 **drug** busts.

A Detroit News review **of** thousands **of** felony narcotics complaints from 1996 to 1998 makes it clear that Detroit officials have taken few steps to address the problem beyond repeated **drug** raids and have often stumbled when they've tried.

The News' investigation further shows that the city has no unified strategy for closing **drug** nuisance properties.

Residents like 75-year-old John Westbrook pay the price.

"The dope man has ruined this neighborhood," Westbrook said **of** the west side area that has been his home for 50 years. One neighborhood **house** has been raided at least five times. An abandoned eyesore a block away has been raided at least a half-dozen times and remains a haven for **drug** users and sellers.

"When I moved here 50 years ago, there wasn't a prettier street in the city. Sometimes, I get so damn mad I can't see straight," Westbrook said.

Detroit Police Chief Benny Napoleon began this year by making narcotics enforcement his department's top priority. This year, police took **drugs** valued at more than \$95 million off the streets -- nearly topping the total **of** the two previous years combined.

But the News' investigation -- which included analyzing thousands **of** crime records, more than 100 interviews and a review **of** land, tax, court and police documents -- shows that repeated crackdowns on nearly 300 **drug** properties often have been futile in a city where landlords are rarely held accountable, abandoned **houses** fester for years and jail is rarely a reality for dealers.

"There needs to be a meeting **of** the minds," Detroit Councilwoman Brenda Scott said. "Viable strong communities are hurt by just one **drug house** , let alone a bunch **of** them."

More than 1,800 properties in Detroit have been the scene **of** at least one felony **drug** arrest since 1996. **Of** the 218 highest-traffic **drug houses** -- places with three or more arrests -- only about two dozen have been demolished. The city **controls** roughly 20 percent **of** the remaining **houses**, many **of** which are abandoned. Most **of** the others are rentals.

The News identified several key areas where strategies in place to shut **drug houses** do not work.

For one, the Detroit Police Department did not use civil forfeiture proceedings to seize a single **drug house** last year or in 1997. In one earlier case where police did seize a **house**, the Detroit Planning and Development Department failed to do its job: secure and sell the property.

Although the police and Wayne County prosecutor's office say the mere threat **of** forfeiture is the carrot they use to persuade absentee landlords to evict tenants, interviews with owners **of** more than two dozen **drug** properties indicate the threat was rarely made, let alone carried **out**.

In addition, the police don't regularly communicate with the city Buildings and Safety Engineering Department, which is responsible for the demolition **of** more than 4,000 vacant **houses** and the Planning and Development Department, which **controls** more than 50,000 properties.

The result: City officials don't know about **drug** properties that should be demolished. In one case, a housing inspector mistook an abandoned **house** being used by **drug**-dealing squatters for a legitimately occupied **house** -- and removed it from the demolition list.

And police often have arrested suspected **drug** dealers at a **house** -- only to return days or weeks later and lock up the same dealer again.

The impact is devastating for a city that still endures some **of** the highest rates **of** violent crime -- even as it shows signs **of** turning the corner after decades **of** decline.

Nearly seven in 10 Detroit neighborhoods has a **house** that has been raided at least once by police narcotics squads over the past four years. The serious crime rate in those neighborhoods is, on average, 90 crimes per 1,000 residents compared to 75 crimes per 1,000 residents in the neighborhoods that have not had a problem with **drug** nuisance properties, a News analysis shows.

The result is that many Detroiters whose neighborhoods have been turned into **drug** bazaars live every day in fear.

"Everyone around here is afraid **of** the dope dealers," said Irene Baker, 77, whose Brightmoor neighborhood has the highest number **of drug** nuisance properties in the city. "These dopers are ruthless. They have no respect for anybody." Police target dealers

There are 218 residential properties in Detroit that were the scene **of** three or more felony narcotics arrests between 1996 and 1998. Police have refused to release 1999 figures in a fashion that would allow for address-by-address analysis.

Deputy Police Chief Nathaniel Topp, who took charge **of** the department's narcotics efforts this year, agrees that "crack **houses** are eroding neighborhoods." But he said the department's current emphasis is on targeting **drug** dealers, not specific **houses** .

"We want the little old lady to be able to walk to the store without having to pass a bunch **of** guys selling rocks," Topp said. "We're trying to get a handle on it."

But a closer look at the properties that have been plagued by **drug** -dealing in years past makes it clear that once a property is used to sell **drugs** , it often continues to be used to sell **drugs** .

More than half **of** the properties where police made at least one felony **drug** arrest last year were the scene **of** at least one arrest in 1997.

Life is never easy for the people who live near **drug houses** .

"When those people come to your neighborhood, it's not yours anymore," said Mary Ward, 65, a retired assembly line worker from Ford who lives near a **house** on Faust that was used by **drug** dealers and prostitutes for more than two years.

"They walk around like the world is theirs alone and no one is allowed to participate."

Police made six felony narcotics arrests at the **house** over two years, records show.

"The **drug** dealers and the prostitutes used to change shifts like I did when I was working at Ford," Ward said. "I'd never seen anything like it in my life."

Ward repeatedly called City Council members and the police department's anonymous **drug** tip line.

"Do you know how many times a day I have to listen to that address?" an exasperated tip line operator asked her once.

The police did show up. They raided. And they made busts.

But the dealing continued.

Earlier this year, it stopped. City records show that the property changed hands. A new owner bought the **house** and moved in. The old property owner -- who was on the property during at least two **of** the **drug** raids -- moved **out** . Problem solved.

But Ward is still angry about four years **of** deadbolting her door, **of** watching her car, **of** dropping to her floor every time a car backfired.

"We all went through hell until that **house** closed," she said. Few properties seized

The Detroit Police Department's forfeiture section works with the Wayne County prosecutor's office to seize properties where **drugs** are sold regularly.

Under the law, police can begin forfeiture proceedings against a property if they can prove that narcotics were sold regularly at the **house** . For **houses** valued at less than \$50,000, the police need only give the owner notice that they intend to seize the property. If the owner does not respond within 20 days and post a bond to cover court costs, the **house** is turned over to the city's Planning and Development Department, which is supposed to sell the **house** . Proceeds from the sale are to go to the police to pay for more narcotics enforcement.

For **houses** worth more than \$50,000 and in cases where the owners **of** less expensive **houses** have posted a bond and plan to challenge the seizure, the Wayne County prosecutor's office forfeiture section sues in Wayne Circuit Court to claim the property.

But it rarely happens.

No properties were seized last year or in 1997. So far this year, proceedings have been initiated to seize three **houses** .

"It's just not done enough," said Wayne County Assistant Prosecutor Nancy Alberts, who oversees forfeiture efforts.

Communication breakdowns between police and prosecutors have led to some missed opportunities for property seizures, she said.

Lt. Claudia Barden, who runs the department's forfeiture section, said that record-keeping is hampered by a cumbersome filing system composed entirely **of** index cards. She expects improvements in tracking **drug** properties and forfeiture proceedings with the help **of** a new \$470,000 computer system, which has been approved, but not installed.

About 40 percent **of** the city's **drug** properties are rentals. The properties are difficult to seize because Alberts' office must prove that the owners knew about **drug** activity but did nothing to stop it, she said.

"What we do is try to hunt the owner down and tell them what happened and tell them that if it gets raided again, they won't be considered an innocent party," Alberts said.

But owners don't always get hunted down. The News contacted more than two dozen owners **of** **houses** that were the scene **of** three or more felony narcotics arrests between 1996 and 1998. Only three said they had received letters warning them that a **drug** arrest had been made.

There have been other problems.

Take the forfeiture case involving the **house** at 19203 Albany. Wayne County Register of Deeds records show that the prosecutor's office initiated forfeiture proceedings in 1991.

Floyd Jones, a convicted **drug** dealer killed shortly after forfeiture proceedings began, had owned the **house** .

But the City Planning and Development Department never took possession **of** the property after the forfeiture, police and prosecutors say.

Instead, the dead man's mother turned the **house** into a rental property. Gloria Jones got a city permit to rent the **house** and the city continued to send tax bills, which she paid.

Jones didn't realize the **house** had been seized until this year when she tried to sell the it and discovered a lien, said Rudy McPhaul, the real estate agent representing her.

She sold the **house** for \$21,350 in June, records show. McPhaul said Jones turned the sale proceeds over to the city in exchange for a refund on the \$2,100 she'd paid in taxes.

But McPhaul said the city gave Jones no credit for the years she paid for improvements on a **house** that belonged to the city.

"The city gave the woman a permit to rent the property -- after they'd seized it. They continued to send her tax bills even after they'd seized it," McPhaul said. "They screwed up and they screwed us up." Communication breaks down

Abandoned **houses** are at the forefront **of** the city's war on **drugs** . More than two dozen **of** the **houses** where police have made three or more felony **drug** arrests between 1996 and 1998 are abandoned.

But the people who bust dealers in the vacant **houses** and the people responsible for tearing down abandoned **houses** don't always communicate.

Geni Giannotti, director **of** the city's Buildings and Safety Engineering Department, said that she gets no information from police that would help her decide which **of** the city's estimated 4,300 vacant structures should get demolition priority.

"If it's an attraction to criminals we would want to know about it," Giannotti said.

The **house** at 15733 Wildemere -- with rotted porch, plywood-covered door and open window -- has been a powerful lure to criminals, police records show.

Police made three **drug** arrests at the **house** several days apart last December as well as at least one in 1997 and one in 1996.

The people who live around the **house** say that it's been vacant for at least five years. Neighbors' complaints led to the **house** being placed on the city demolition list in 1995. But the **house** was removed from the list last May, records show. A city inspector apparently determined that the **house** was legally occupied.

"I don't know what happened there. We'll send someone back **out** ," Giannotti said.

John Westbrook, the retiree who lives near the **house** , says he'll probably throw a party if the **house** is ever torn down.

"I don't know what it will take for them to bring it down. I hope it doesn't take somebody getting killed there," Westbrook said. Police are frustrated

No one appears to have ever been killed at 15733 Wildemere. But one man arrested at the property posed a clear threat to two police officers, police records show. John David Preston, 53, was armed with a loaded M-1 carbine assault rifle and was in possession **of** heroin when he was arrested in the vacant **house** last Christmas Eve.

Preston had been arrested in the same **house** 10 days earlier and charged with possession **of** 45 rocks **of** crack cocaine. He was freed from the Wayne County Jail within three days **of** the first arrest due to apparent overcrowding there, police prisoner processing records show.

And he walked free again after his second arrest in exchange for a \$250 bond. Preston -- who was also arrested on felony **drug** charges in 1996 and 1997 -- was sentenced in April to life on probation after pleading guilty to charges stemming from the incident with the assault rifle, court records show.

The fact that Preston had the ability to be free to sell more **drugs** almost immediately after being arrested for serious felonies is the rule, not the exception in Wayne County's court system, police say. And they are clearly frustrated.

"We can only arrest people," said Cmdr. Harold N. Cureton **of** the narcotics support division. "We can lock people up, which we do time and time again. But we can't stop them."

Cops like Cureton are discouraged and residents like Baker, the Brightmoor woman surrounded by **drug houses** , are frightened.

Baker said that she's planning to move to Canton Township from the neighborhood where she has lived since Franklin Roosevelt was president.

She said her fear **of drug** dealers overrides any optimism she might feel about efforts to rebuild as many as 200 **houses** in her neighborhood.

"I've had enough," she said.

Detroit News Staff Writer George Hunter contributed to this report. What The News found \* Forfeiture was used only six times in the past five years to seize **drug** properties. \* **Drug** suspects are sometimes arrested more than once at the same **drug** site. \* Vacant **drug** properties are not given priority for demolition and at least one was removed from the demolition list because it appeared to be occupied. Coming Monday

**Drug house** owners: Rental properties make up about 40 percent **of drug** -nuisance properties and the city **of Detroit controls** or owns more than one in 10 **of** the properties.

Yet there is little planning when it comes to shuttering such **drug** locations and legislation to increase enforcement power has been stymied in the past, frustrating area residents. Public meetings

Are you worried about **drug houses** in your neighborhood? The Detroit News will work with community groups and individuals to hold meetings on the issue. Call us: (313) 962-1020, ext. 3903. **Drug houses** in Detroit \* 69.5 percent **of** Detroit's neighborhoods have had at least one property with a **drug** arrest in the past four years. \* **Of** 1,844 **drug** arrests from 1996-98, 37 percent **of** the locations had repeated arrests. \* Neighborhoods without any **drug** arrests shared some characteristics. They had higher median incomes, higher homeowner rates and residents had more years **of** education.

Detroit News analysis **of** crime data and **of** demographic projections from Claritas, Inc. The demographic data are projections based on 1990

Census information. Calling for help

To report **drug** activity in your neighborhood, call the the Detroit Police Narcotics Section's hotline at 224-DOPE. All callers will remain anonymous.

Caption: Irene Baker, 77, keeps a loaded .22-caliber rifle near her front door for protection in her Brightmoor neighborhood, which is infested with **drughouses** and dealers. "I've had enough," Baker said. She's moving to Canton Township.

Steve Perez / The Detroit News

Edition: Final

Section: Front

Page: 1A

Dateline: DETROIT

Record Number: det7711968

Copyright (c) The Detroit News. All rights reserved. Reproduced with the permission of Gannett Co., Inc. by NewsBank, inc.