

FEARFUL WITNESSES RELUCTANT TO TELL WHAT THEY'VE SEEN

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A dozen pairs of eyes might have seen a Detroit police reservist shot to death and his moped stolen on the east side one bright June morning, police say. But no eyewitness came forward, so murder charges against a suspect were dropped last week for lack of evidence.

Police say as many as 100 people saw someone shoot and seriously wound reputed Young Boys Inc. gang leader **Raymond Peoples** on a street corner last week. But few will talk.

"They're not beating down our door," said Detroit Police Homicide Inspector Gilbert Hill. "Some cases in particular stick in our craw. We know people saw what happened, but they don't come forth."

Silent witnesses and victims -- who don't make police reports or who refuse to testify in court -- are a serious problem in Detroit, law enforcement officials say. The Wayne County Prosecutor's Office, in fact, has a program to help ensure the courtroom appearances of witnesses whose resolve to testify is tempered by apathy, hatred of police, social pressure or fear of retribution.

UNREPORTED CRIME is a national phenomenon. An annual U. S. Census Bureau survey indicates about two thirds of all crimes go unreported. A study by the Vera Institute of Justice, a non-profit New York research foundation, estimates victims or witnesses are intimidated in one out of every four criminal cases nationwide.

Similarly, "fear of reprisal" is cited in a federal study as the most common reason witnesses refuse to testify.

Recorder's Court Judge David Kerwin, who last week dismissed the case against the man charged with murdering police reservist Keith Pryor, termed the lack of witnesses part of "a disquieting trend toward non-involvement.

"It's going to result in a deterioration of life in the community," Kerwin said. "It's essentially resulting in letting criminals and thugs get control of the streets."

ALONZO DIXON, 57, owner of Dick's New Deal Barbershop near the Detroit medical center, has found his shop burglarized several times in the last four years. Each time the burglar entered through the front door and took the tools of Dixon's trade.

"It's a fact, (neighbors) could see it from across the street," Dixon said. "There were witnesses, but there were none that would come forward and tell the police. Now I'm used to being broke into. Now I take my tools home with me and get a good night's sleep."

Reluctant witnesses often live in crime-ridden areas where the lessons of grade school civics class -- that good citizens report all crimes they witness -- are lost.

As one Detroit homicide detective put it: "If you were a good citizen who lived at the corner of John R and Wilkins, you'd be on the phone to the police 24 hours a day."

SOME WITNESSES fear the retribution of criminals whose threats are conveyed through techniques ranging from ominous phone calls and letters to shark-eyed stares at court hearings.

But other witnesses would rather not face the prospect of spending weeks on call to testify in court or hours counting cracks on a precinct station ceiling.

Detroit Police Homicide Sgt. Roy Awe said one woman who witnessed a murder was summoned to testify 16 times while the case dragged on for several years

"If you were her and you witnessed another crime, how likely would you be after all that to be a good citizen and report what you saw?" Awe asked.

When crimes are committed by one outlaw against another, nobody might file a report, police say.

Some witnesses consider police their enemies and follow the so-called rules of the streets -- that it's OK to break the law to get what's owed you and that nobody loves a snitch.

"I HAVE witnessed crimes, too, but I wouldn't report them," said one middle-aged Jeffries project resident. Last year, on their way to the grocery, her two young children saw one man beat another to death with a baseball bat on the street. The woman said she phoned police, but didn't leave her name or those of her children.

"I would be afraid to give my name to the police," she said. "The information about who talks to the cops gets out through the grapevine. People who talk to the police here -- usually they have to move."

Others said they don't report crimes because they don't think the police would do anything about them. Margaret Formolo, 33, a Cass Corridor resident who works at the Cass Food Co-op, said she doesn't report the numerous prostitutes and drug dealers she sees on the streets.

"They want to help but they can't," she said of police. "I guess they feel like their hands are tied."

Opinions differ about how serious the problem is in Detroit. Although Kerwin feels witness non-cooperation is growing, Awe said, "I think it's getting better. I think people in this town are finally realizing that the policeman is their friend -- that we all want the same thing."

PROGRAMS EXIST to encourage reluctant witnesses to co- operate. The Wayne County Prosecutor's Office's Victim/ Witness Assistance program arranges to take witnesses to court, and tries to time proceedings to fit schedules of busy witnesses. The program also has obtained obstruction of justice warrants against suspects who threaten witnesses.

As a result, program director Charles Marr said, the percentage of no-show witnesses has withered from 35 percent when the program began in 1975 to seven percent of all called last year.

The Detroit police crime prevention section also encourages witnesses to appear in court, according to Inspector James Humphrey. He said television police dramas help perpetuate a myth -- that those who report crimes often regret it.

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