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IN SUNDAY > 1D



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The fatal shooting of a moped rider on the streets of Forest Hills last month is thought to be gang-related. Crime-scene tape has become a familiar site in Wilmington's inner city, where a steady drumbeat of gunfire was heard this summer. *StarNews file photos*

In Creekwood, a mother who can no longer trust the world

By F.T. NORTON
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This month makes one year since Crystal Lee and her five children moved into a beautifully renovated duplex in the Creekwood neighborhood.

Lee is a concerned mother, one of 190 women who head households in the beleaguered 198-unit neighborhood managed by the Wilmington Housing Authority.

She doesn't allow her children to play outside, not because she doesn't trust them, but because she doesn't trust the world.

"They get mad at me like I'm trying to punish them, but I just want to keep them safe,"

Lee said Thursday.

Even though the playground is only steps from her front door, Lee doesn't let her children play there either. After what police called a gang-related shooting across from the playground Sept. 29, she feels justified.

"My neighbor came running to me because her son was out there. I was glad I didn't let my kids go there," she said. "I love my apartment, I'm grateful for it, but at the same time, I just have to be careful."

"But I feel like at the same time too you can't just judge it on being Creekwood. I mean it's not just Creekwood, it's everywhere."

See CREEKWOOD | 5A



Mothers in Creekwood wait for school buses that were kept out of the neighborhood during a massive search for a man who shot and wounded a New Hanover County sheriff's detective earlier this month. *Photo by Matt Born*

wilmington's

GANG WARS WHAT'S DRIVING THE VIOLENCE?



OFFICIALS SAY EVEN MINOR SLIGHTS SETTLED WITH GUNFIRE. 'IT'S OVER DRUGS, TERRITORY, WHATEVER. IT JUST BUILDS UP.'

By ADAM WAGNER
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Yellow crime scene tape, flashing blue lights and police combing the sidewalks for shell casings while unsettled residents look on are becoming as routine as children playing in the front yards of some neighborhoods.

Local police are chalking up much of the violence to another chapter in the nationwide gang battle between Bloods and Crips, but the reality is less clear. Much of the murkiness stems from the fact that while the violence has mostly been targeted, it's more often a side effect of perceived slights than organized criminal enterprise.

"It's more of a middle-school mentality where they get offended for whatever reason, whether it's over a girl or whether it's over drugs, territory, whatever. It just builds up," said Jonathan Poplin, a member of the Wilmington Police Department's housing and gang unit. "It'll

start as maybe a fistfight or maybe somebody shoots at somebody else, and it has snowballed to where we are now."

Where we are now is a city where the steady drumbeat of gunfire was as much the song of the summer as any top 40 hit, only reaching a crescendo in September after Joseph David Williams was shot in the back and killed while trying to flee a pursuing car.

That killing, which happened on Forest Hills Drive, inexorably tied one of the city's wealthiest neighborhoods to some of its poorest.

A few weeks later, New Hanover County Sheriff's Office Detective Michael Spencer was shot and wounded in Creekwood as he and his partner attempted to approach a suspicious individual, the result of what Sheriff Ed McMahon called "a blatant disregard for authority and for life."

Three days after Spencer was shot, Brandon Devone Smith, the

See GANGS | 4A

MORE INSIDE

Wilmington Police Chief Ralph Evangelous says he has two key gang members in jail, brothers Garry and Rashawn Hines. **4A**

Gunfire has people on edge. **5A**

Violence has spilled into normally quiet neighborhoods. **5A**



R. Hines



G. Hines

INSIDE »



SOME SUN
74°/51°
FORECAST, 12B

Bridge..... **2F**
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WILMINGTON'S GANG WARS | What's driving the violence?

GANGS

Continued from 1A

man accused of shooting the detective, was pursued into a sleepy Wrightsboro neighborhood made up of five dead-end streets before being killed by law enforcement officers in a wooded area.

Linda Rawley, a police spokeswoman, said the department doesn't have readily available gang-related crime statistics because gang-related crimes aren't catalogued separately when they're entered into computers.

Anecdotally, though, Rawley and other law enforcement officials have said the surge in violence since June is being perpetrated by New Hanover County's 323 validated gang members and their counterparts.

Gangs with names such as Double ii, Westside Rolling 60 Crips, the 1090 Boyz, Billys and 720 Gangster Disciples, among others, are responsible for Wilmington's recent violence, said Poplin, who's called "the gang guy" by other officers.

Making the situation more difficult for law enforcement, Poplin added, are constantly shifting memberships and frequent name changes of groups.

The violence stemming from gang conflicts has led to law enforcement and political leaders taking steps to make sure residents feel secure.

"Wilmington is a safe community and this county and this region is a safe region. It always has been," said Woody White, chairman of the New Hanover County Board of Commissioners, at a news conference Monday. "But recent circumstances have called into question whether that's still the situation."

At the same news conference, at which it was announced that 32 police officers and 32 sheriff's deputies who normally work in non-uniform roles would be working patrol shifts, Wilmington Mayor Bill Saffo said the city and county are battling a severe criminal element.

"They have a total disregard for the law. They have a total disregard for themselves and for the entire community," Saffo said. "When we have people shooting each other in the middle of the day or shooting people's homes or at somebody's house with a little child in there, we've got to band together and work together."

What led us here

The causes of some of the recent violence became slightly clearer Monday.

"Within (the Bloods and the Crips), certain sects are battling over women, drugs and territory," Police Chief Ralph Evangelous said. "They also launched an effort to retaliate against witnesses in one of our gang-related cases."

The retaliation effort was based on a witness list given to a defendant during the discovery period of a trial, Evangelous said. The defendant then put the list on the street and it was used to retaliate against the witnesses.

Police have remained tight-lipped about the trial and the witnesses who may have been intimidated, saying only that they believe it may have led to some of the back-and-forth violence.

Traditionally, gang presences in Wilmington have included what Poplin called "a big old golf umbrella" of sects of Bloods and a "little old lady, keep it in the Crown Vic umbrella" of Crips.

Thus, much of the violence has been Bloods battling other Bloods, he said.

A void created when Blood lead-



A New Hanover County sheriff's deputy patrols at Creekwood after a detective was shot during a traffic stop. Law enforcement officials say gangs, with names such as Double ii, Westside Rolling 60 Crips, the 1090 Boyz, Billys and 720 Gangster Disciples, among others, are responsible for Wilmington's recent violence. StarNews file photo

"They have a total disregard for the law. They have a total disregard for themselves and for the entire community. When we have people shooting each other in the middle of the day or shooting people's homes or at somebody's house with a little child in there, we've got to band together and work together."

BILL SAFFO, WILMINGTON MAYOR

ers were arrested, though, has left the door open for Crips and Folk Nation, a Crip-aligned sect, to become more involved in the action, Poplin said.

Crips, typically, live in Creekswood, while Bloods usually live in Houston Moore, Rawley said. That doesn't mean a Blood won't spend time in Creekswood or a Crip won't spend time in Houston Moore, though, because of things like relationships and family ties.

Who are the gangsters?

The people involved in gang violence are typically males - some as young as 13 or 14, and others as old as their mid- to late 20s, Poplin said.

"There comes a point in their late 20s when either they're locked up, they're dead or they realize one of those is gonna happen if they continue, and most of them will get out of the game," he said.

Another reason some decide to leave their gang years behind is what police say is a steady esca-

lation in the willingness of young people to commit violent crimes.

"We'll get out with people who four, five years ago we interacted with frequently in that gang capacity and we get out with them now and talk with them and they'll be like, 'Dude, these kids are crazy. It's not worth it, I've got kids, I'm doing what I can for my family,'" Poplin said. "And they have a good point. The kids that are doing it now, they are crazy - they don't care who they shoot."

There are a multitude of reasons young people get wrapped up in gang life, said Kristy Williams, a youth violence intervention specialist and the program director for the Elements Youth Violence Intervention Program.

Elements, which operates under the New Hanover County Sheriff's Office but is not a law enforcement organization, is a program designed to identify and help at-risk children ages 9 to 13.

Williams spoke to one man who had entered the program as an at-risk kid and used it to turn his life

around.

"He was very easy at this point in his life to be able to say, 'I didn't feel like I had a family, I didn't feel like I had a family that cared about me,'" Williams said. "He had a mom and a dad in the home, but he didn't feel like they cared about them, so he went and sought out another family."

Other reasons Williams and Craig Kelly, another intervention specialist, have heard for gang involvement are the presence of a father or big brother figure, the thrill of it and a sense of protection if they're being bullied.

Validation

If young men become too involved in gang activity, they could end up in a statewide database of validated gang members.

To become validated, a gang member must fulfill two of 12 criteria on a checklist. Included on the checklist are indicators such as admitting to being a gang member, having tattoos or markings, frequenting gang areas, affiliating with gang members and displaying gang hand signs or writing graffiti.

Validating gang members is a time-consuming process, with officers compiling a file on each person, including supporting materials such as photos, videos, field interviews and criminal histories.

Those files are routinely at least an inch thick, Poplin said.

Officers are careful about who they choose to classify as a gang member, in part because of the amount of work that goes into it but also because of the effect being wrong can have on their credibility.

"If you validate someone that's not a gang member, you lose the faith of the community," Poplin said. "Say we validate your son. You know he's not a gang member, so you're gonna say they're a bunch of fools, they don't know what they're doing. So you lose that trust."

Poplin added that labeling someone a gang member in front of a judge without sufficient evidence could damage the judge's opinion of the officer.

For that reason, Wilmington Police Department officers often locate at least a third piece of evidence that a person is active in gang activity.

Poplin said the investigation used to validate gang members can often help police develop a better understanding of someone's associates or activities.

Keeping the files updated - which must happen every five years - will be one of the responsibilities of the Wilmington Police Department's new gang investigative unit, Poplin said. The city council approved the formation of the unit, which will consist of four officers, a sergeant and an intelligence analyst, during Tuesday's regular meeting.

Law enforcement challenges

Officials have taken a multitude of steps to solve the area's criminal problems, with WPD's gang investigative unit being one of four new efforts within the past year, three of which have been announced or approved in the past week.

In addition to the gang unit, there is the 64-person WPD and New Hanover County Sheriff's Office task force and the seven deputies added to WPD's housing unit.

After the city council approved the gang unit Tuesday, Evangelous said, "I think that we're tooled up. Now we've gotta produce. Now we've gotta show what we can do."

Even though they have all the tools they've asked for, police still have to face challenges, not

the least of which are an ongoing manpower shortage and convincing people who see crimes happening to say something.

The police department has had a 30-officer shortage for several months, as officers routinely leave the department to take higher-paying jobs elsewhere. As of Monday, the department was back to full staffing, but most of the newly hired officers hadn't passed field training school or been approved for road duty yet.

"It takes us a year, sometimes over a year, to recruit, hire, train and get someone through field training. Then they're not very effective for another year or two years, sometimes," Evangelous said.

To partially combat the problem, the city council on Tuesday signed off on the department adding 10 "over-hire" officers to help anticipate members leaving the force and minimize their impact.

Evangelous used a presentation in front of the council to, in part, make the case for increasing pay.

"Why hire people if they're gonna leave?" the chief said. "If we continue to have the issue of vacancies occurring, we need to keep our people. Our good people leave. Our people will make more money in other locations. Let's pay them competitively, let's pay them fairly."

The manpower shortage also takes a toll on the department's officers, with many of their working overtime shifts or having their schedules shifted to provide the maximum possible coverage.

"They're tired - they're tired, they're really are. And a lot of them are being forced to work overtime, and you can do that short term, but you can't do it long term," Evangelous said. "It's a stressful job to begin with, and now with the violence that we're seeing out there, it's even more stressful for them."

Poplin, the housing officer, said, "This summer there were a couple months where we didn't even make it to the office. As soon as we checked on the radio, we were on our way to some kind of fiasco."

Law enforcement officials are hopeful that increasing the number of police in uniform on city streets will help decrease the number of events and also help increase the amount of trust the public has for law enforcement.

Part of that, Sheriff McMahon said, is getting past the idea that talking to police is "snitching."

"You need to realize that we're not talking about snitching that somebody took a cookie or somebody cheated on a test or somebody did something," he said. "We're talking about taking people's lives. We're talking about serious violent crimes."

It's difficult for police to develop intelligence on gangs because of their family-type nature. For that reason, it's especially difficult for an undercover officer to infiltrate a gang. Also, law enforcement is dependent on the community's help.

"These guys are close-knit as a community. They've grown up with everybody in their group," Poplin said.

He added that people are encouraged to talk to law enforcement officials if police have already built a type of personal rapport with them or if they become "fed up" with the activity taking place around them.

"It has taken a lot of bad stuff to get that far, but I believe we're finally getting to that (fed-up) point," Poplin said, "and either way the issue we have is that mentality of don't talk to the police. We have to break that."

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Chief: Power vacuum spurred violence

BY ADAM WAGNER
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Police officers involved in gang investigations pointed to the arrest of some gang leaders as creating a power vacuum and leading to turf wars in Wilmington.

Last week, the extent of that vacuum became clear when Wilmington Police Chief Ralph Evangelous twice said there are 125 validated gang members in the New Hanover County jail.

"Because of such a great job our guys were doing when we've taken down some leadership positions within these gangs, what has occurred is ... a free-for-all out there going on where ... one

side will retaliate against another or their associates," Evangelous said.

While law enforcement officials have repeatedly refused to identify the gang leaders who may have created the vacuum, Evangelous hinted at the identities of some of them Monday.

When asked if the arrests of the Hines brothers, one of whom Evangelous had labeled "one of Wilmington's worst offenders" this summer, had contributed to the power vacuum, the chief paused for several beats before saying, "There's a strong likelihood."

The older brother, Garry Orlando Hines, 20, is charged with murder in the May 2011

shooting death of Cornelius Blanks, 23, outside Club 609 on Market Street. A trial is set for Dec. 2.

While Hines was out on bond on Sept. 4, he was arrested and charged with 11 counts of selling and delivering heroin. He is in the New Hanover County jail with bail set at \$1 million.

Younger brother Rashawn Hines, 19, who was called "one of Wilmington's worst offenders," is in Foothills Correctional Institute with bail set at \$500,000. Rashawn Hines' projected release date is Sept. 19, 2014, but his next custody review is set for April 1, 2014.

A judge revoked Rashawn Hines' probation on drug

possession charges after he pleaded guilty to resisting arrest in connection with the shooting death of Jeffrey Henry, 17, in July.

Wilmington police Detective Kevin Tully said in court he considered Rashawn Hines a "suspect" in the Henry killing.

The Hines brothers are two of nine siblings. They have another brother, Al'Quon Flowers, 18, who went missing in July 2011. Some speculate Flowers' disappearance was in retaliation for the Blanks killing. Flowers has never been located.

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SHOTS, INJURIES UP OVER LAST YEAR

SHOTS FIRED REPORTED JAN. 1-OCT. 1, 2012: 501
SHOTS FIRED REPORTED JAN. 1-OCT. 1, 2013: 686
Increase: 37 percent

INJURED BY GUNFIRE JAN. 1-OCT. 1, 2012: 62
INJURED BY GUNFIRE JAN. 1-OCT. 1, 2013: 74
Increase: 19 percent
Source: Wilmington Police Department

WHAT'S BEING DONE

5-MEMBER GANG INVESTIGATIVE UNIT: Members, including a sergeant, will conduct long-term surveillance projects of the area's gangs. Will be operational in four to six weeks.

14-MAN PATROL IN PUBLIC HOUSING: Adding six New Hanover County Sheriff's Office deputies and one sergeant to the six Wilmington Police Department officers and sergeant already patrolling housing areas.

64-MAN PATROL FORCE: 32 non-uniform WPD officers and 32 non-uniform sheriff's deputies will be used to provide expanded patrols.

12-OFFICER MOBILE FIELD FORCE: The unit, including a six-person surveillance team, began on May 28. It has netted 52 felony arrests, 167 misdemeanor arrests and 53 citations.

Source: Wilmington Police Department