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Shootings ravage city neighborhoods

More than four people a day are shot in the city. Most shootings take place in a few notorious areas. But no one seems to be able to do much about it.

**By Nathan Gorenstein, Barbara Boyer and Rose Ciotta
Inquirer Staff Writers**

Last year there were only 11 days when no one was shot in Philadelphia.

On average, more than four people a day were struck by bullets. About one in six died. On one day alone - Oct. 22 - 19 people were shot, one fatally.

It's a toll of injury and death that falls most heavily on the same few neighborhoods year after year: North Philadelphia. West Philadelphia north of Market Street. The southwestern edge of South Philadelphia.

Police know it. City Hall knows it. The residents of those neighborhoods certainly know it.

Those same neighborhoods were well-represented again in the last two weeks, as the city experienced another breathtaking spree of violence that saw 22 people killed by guns in 11 days. Among them was 9-year-old Wander DeJesus, who died while sitting in a van.

Others died after arguments over drugs, women, and even a stolen cell phone. Some were victims of robberies. Half were carrying firearms. Nine of the 22 were young African American men.

Police argue that just knowing how and where the violence occurs is not necessarily enough to prevent it.

"Are some areas more prone to violence than others? Yes," said Deputy Police Commissioner Patricia Giorgio-Fox.

"Do we recognize that? Yes. Do we deploy in those areas? Yes. But we cannot be at all of them all of the time."

The number of shootings - even after months of intensified policing and antiviolence rallies prompted by the killing of 10-year-old Faheem Thomas-Childs in a schoolyard last year - has dismayed many Philadelphians.

"People have done lost their minds. I can't put it any other way," said Mary Cousar, a veteran neighborhood activist who has helped run the Youth Violence Reduction Partnership, one of the city's most effective antiviolence programs.

"What do you do, get up in the morning, brush your teeth, grab your guns? It's absolutely ludicrous."

Simply counting killings misses the level of gun violence permeating the city neighborhoods that suffer the most.

"The hidden story is shootings," said Charles Branas, a University of Pennsylvania researcher who is studying shootings in Philadelphia and their causes. For every homicide, several other people get shot and survive, he added.

From 2001 through March 15 of this year, 6,265 people were shot in Philadelphia. Seventeen percent died.

"This past weekend and this past month may be a little higher than usual," said Branas, "but it's nothing out of the ordinary."

What keeps the death toll from zooming higher is the hard-earned expertise of Philadelphia emergency-room doctors. Victims struck with two or three or more bullets can now be saved with quick and sophisticated emergency care.

At Temple University Hospital, between March 4 and March 13 of this year, 21 people were brought in with gunshot wounds. Ten died. The others all survived "life-threatening gunshot wounds," said trauma surgeon Amy Goldberg.

Some gunshot victims were rushed to the operating room. In other cases, doctors cut open their chests right in the emergency room in a desperate attempt to stop the bleeding.

"People get shot in North Philadelphia night after night," Goldberg said. "This is not just an occasional occurrence."

Half of victims under 25

The Inquirer analysis of police crime data shows that between 2001 and 2004, 50 percent of victims were under age 25, most African American males.

City officials knew this in 1999 when they created the Youth Violence Reduction Partnership. Staffed with police officers, probation officers and youth workers, the program set up shop in two North Philadelphia neighborhoods, Kensington and Fairhill, that stretch between the Delaware River and Broad Street.

They sought youths age 24 and under, whom they had identified as in danger of killing someone or being killed. Criminal records, family background, and previous contacts with police were factors weighed.

Each youth was given intensive supervision, counseling, remedial education classes, and job-placement assistance.

There was a subsequent drop in youth shootings and homicides that convinced law enforcement to expand the program into Southwest Philadelphia in 2002.

But plans to expand it again - this time to the high-crime areas on the west side of North Broad Street - were dropped when the Justice Department cut federal funding, which was used to finance a third of the program's \$5.4 million annual cost.

State funds obtained by local state legislators - originally earmarked to hire more staff - were instead used to keep the existing program alive.

Now, any future expansion will have to depend heavily on city funds, said State Rep. Dwight Evans (D., Phila.).

"The mayor and Council set the priorities. Why would you not set priorities for that program?" said Evans.

District Attorney Lynne Abraham's office estimates that the expansion would cost \$3.2 million.

Mayor Street's office did not return a call seeking comment.

But the program is no panacea, said John Delaney, the assistant district attorney who helps run it.

Officials face the nearly intractable task of halting a cycle of despair and violence that is fueled by poverty, drug-dealing, broken families, and a popular culture that glamorizes narcotics and gunplay. Almost any teenager can buy a gun from an illegal dealer, say police.

"Some of them see no future," Delaney said of the youths in his program.

"You and I conduct our affairs to avoid situations that would place us in grave danger. A lot of these folks don't... . If you don't think you are going to live past tomorrow, why would you do that?"

The violence is also driven by "a street culture that puts a premium on gun ownership as proof of manhood," said Deanna L. Wilkinson, a Temple University professor of criminal justice.

"Regardless of what prevention we throw at it and how early we intervene, that is still the most attractive game in town... to gain status and respect. Basically proving your manhood by being violent and tough."

Cousar said police alone cannot solve the problem. "No one wants to live in a police state," she said. "It is either going to have to be the neighborhood community, or the religious community, but someone has to come up with something."

Addressing surges in crime

Police are intimately familiar with the pattern of shootings in Philadelphia and deploy officers specifically to combat surges in crime, said Giorgio-Fox.

When Faheem Thomas-Childs was killed in North Philadelphia last year, Giorgio-Fox assigned special units to flood the area. Similar tactics have been used for the last year in other areas with a high incidence of shootings.

"But there's only a finite number of citywide resources," Giorgio-Fox said.

Pointing to a map showing the locations of shootings that occurred from 2001 through 2004, Giorgio-Fox noted that they are spread across hundreds of corners spanning several miles.

The cost of pinpoint-policing can be prohibitively expensive.

Operation Safe Streets, for instance, was designed in 2002 to shut down 300 open-air drug markets. It required tens of millions of dollars in police overtime. It has since been scaled back.

And unlike drug-dealing, which police can readily trace to specific corners, shootings - even in high-crime neighborhoods - are random and unpredictable.

Police Commissioner Sylvester Johnson, for one, said the recent surge in homicides does not mean that crime is out of control. As of last night, there had been 81 homicides this year, 12 more than in the same period last year.

"We had a bad week," Johnson said. "But it's not at a point where I'm panicking. I'm very concerned, but I am always concerned about homicides."

Contact staff writer Nathan Gorenstein at 215-854-5983 or ngorenstein@phillynews.com. Inquirer staff writer Susan FitzGerald and graphic artist Ben Koski contributed to this article.

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