

April 29, 2007 - Atlanta Journal-Constitution (GA)

Besieged By Crime, Afraid Of The Police

Police Deceit in Fatal Shooting Puts Spotlight on Neighborhood's Mistrust

By Ernie Suggs, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

It's not even 9 a.m. Saturday, but the neighborhood where Kathryn Johnston led a quiet life and met a violent end is already active. Dozens of people are outside. Some walk the streets. Some ride bicycles. Others are busy repairing cars.

Most of them have stories to tell about the Atlanta Police Department and the men and women who patrol -- some say terrorize -- their streets. It's a neighborhood still shaken by the latest developments in the investigation of Johnston's death.

Thursday, two narcotics officers admitted to using planted drugs to bust a man suspected of dealing. They said they pressured him to point out another address where illegal drug activity was taking place. That man, they said, identified the house where Johnston lived.

The officers told federal authorities they lied to obtain a necessary warrant. The 92-year-old woman was shot dead during their raid on her house. Then, the officers said, they planted drugs when they didn't find any. "We knew all along that the police are not here to protect and serve us, and I don't feel that there is a comprehensive effort to clean [the police department] up," said Tracy Y. Bates, executive director of the English Avenue Community Development Corp. "People don't have a high opinion of the police, but on the other hand, we need them. We call them all the time." Therein lies the neighborhood's Catch-22.

Parts of the northwest Atlanta neighborhood at times resemble an open-air drug market. Blocks are peppered with vacant or burned out homes that have been all but abandoned by the property owners and now serve as drug stashes and crack houses.

The area is so infested with drugs and crime that it is one of the few in metro Atlanta targeted by local and federal authorities under a program called Project Safe Neighborhoods, which brings increased drug and gun enforcement.

Last year, the English Avenue community, Vine City and Johnston's Neal Street neighborhood reported nearly 400 assaults and generated more than 650 drug-related incident reports.

"It is a comprehensive problem. Layers and layers of problems," said Bates, who spent Saturday helping to monitor the renovations of homes through Rebuilding Together -- Atlanta, a volunteer organization that refurbishes homes. "The vacant houses. The drugs everywhere. It is a continuous battle." Saturday morning, dozens of green-shirt clad volunteers were working to fix

19 houses belonging to elderly people in the neighborhood, using part of a \$300,000 grant from the city.

Several homes are getting complete makeovers -- partly to make them look better, partly to cover up bullet holes.

"This area is not well thought of," said Christina Baxter, a spokeswoman for the volunteer group. "It is the true epitome of a few bad apples spoiling a bunch. But the people here want to have pride in their homes and age gracefully and safely."

Lack of Trust

The crime used to be worse. In 2002, APD officers joined forces with Fulton County prosecutors, the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms agents and FBI agents to form Project Safe Neighborhoods, intended to crack down on violent crime and drugs along English Avenue, in Vine City and surrounding communities.

Since the program started, more than 750 properties have been inspected for code violations, with more than 400 being cited. About 50 buildings -- some havens for drugs and other crimes -- have been demolished. Under the program, people who commit violent crimes, or are charged with serious and repeated drug offenses, are prosecuted in federal court. About 200 felons in the area also have been prosecuted on federal gun possession charges. But while the community needs and depends on the police department, there is almost a universal sense that the police can't be trusted. "I think the community would like to cooperate, but people are afraid to call the police. People are afraid of the cops," said L.V. Hilliard, on his way home from the store. "They talk the talk, but they don't seem concerned about people. The police need policing."

Gary Barber, who has lived in the area 34 years, said the police rule by intimidation and are prone to jumping out of their cars, frisking people and moving on. "They can whip out right now, and the first thing they do is grab you," Barber said. "If you have a gun and a badge, you can do anything. We want police out here, but you can't have them abusing us." Several people on Saturday were afraid to talk -- not because of the criminal element but because of police retaliation.

The latest developments in the Johnston case, Andrea Young said, have only heightened community mistrust of law enforcement and the justice system. "A lot of people are trying to get together how something like this can happen and people get away with it," said Young, 34. "Now, you don't know who to trust anymore." Willie Williams, 47, said the guilty officers shouldn't be allowed to hide behind their badges.

"They are criminal. Not us," said Williams. "They should be jailed like another individual would be. That's what's wrong with the system." Ivory Young, the Atlanta City Councilman who represents the area and lives in Vine City, said he is disturbed by that perception but understands where it comes from. Young, who lives in Vine City, said he stands behind APD Police Chief Richard Pennington, while noting that everyone is "anxious to move forward with the healing."

"There has to be a higher degree of communications between the police and the community," said Young, who spent Saturday morning fixing a house. "We have a lot of good police, and we depend on them. But there has to be trust both ways. The police have to have trust in the community, and the community has to have trust in the police."

Crime and Punishment

Thursday, Gregg Junnier and Jason R. Smith pleaded guilty to charges reduced from murder to voluntary manslaughter and federal civil rights violations stemming from the Nov. 21 raid on Johnston's home.

Junnier and Smith were part of an eight-member narcotics squad that went to Johnston's house with the warrant. When some of the officers entered the house, the elderly woman apparently thought she was being burglarized and fired a revolver. The officers fired 39 shots at her and handcuffed her as she lay bleeding.

According to federal authorities, Junnier and Smith said they were pressured by police brass to reach certain goals, which they tried to do by repeatedly lying to obtain search warrants, barging into homes and sometimes restraining innocent people.

Junnier agreed to a sentence of 10 years in federal prison, Smith to 12 years, seven months. Both will cooperate with the ongoing probe. "There is no room for the kind of violations that have been uncovered," said Atlanta City Councilman Caesar Mitchell. "Being the son of a cop, I understand the pressures, but there is no excuse for this." The family of Johnston, who was black, has filed a notice with the city seeking a financial settlement.

"If it were a white lady and some black cops shot her, they would have hung them," Barber said.

Young said prosecutors might have acted too quickly and with too much compassion for the police officers in coming up with what he considers a lenient plea agreement.

"I am watching the empathy of the prosecutors, and it makes me concerned about how objective they can be in sentencing," Young said. "What I also need to hear is that they are going to mete the punishment that fits the crime." In a community that already had a tense relationship with the police, the pleas were, in a way, not surprising.

"It's a big joke. They just got caught. It is not like it hasn't happened before," said Dina Canada, who owns several properties in the area. "This happens on a regular occurrence. Everybody here is outraged."