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Police intervention tames East Nashville's mean streets

Neighborhood sees crime, drugs fall

By Nicole Young
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Jimmy Perkins remembers when drug dealers hung out across the street, prostitutes strolled past his Treutland Avenue home, and the sound of gunfire was considered normal.

He's thankful those days are gone.

"Now you see elderly people out walking, kids playing in the streets, and people out working in their yards," said Perkins, 65, a recent retiree and lifelong Nashville resident.

"Before, you never saw that. It's a lot different, and it's all for the better."

It took two years for change to come to Perkins' East Nashville neighborhood. In 2007, Metro police launched the East Nashville Intervention Project, or ENIP.

They began increasing patrols and targeting drug dealers in and around the 800 block of North Second Street just off Dickerson Pike.

In April 2008, at the end of a yearlong operation modeled after similar projects in other states, police had videotaped 55 drug buys and arrested 26 dealers. Twenty of them were sent to jail, but six were offered a second chance, an opportunity to change.

"They were all scared," said the Rev. Michael Joyner, pastor at Greater Faith Missionary Baptist Church and a lead counselor in ENIP.

"They thought it was a trick at first."

In the beginning, Joyner said, the dealers attended weekly counseling sessions.

As the program progressed, the time between meetings grew until they eventually ended.

"We wanted to make sure they adjusted to a regular life," Joyner said. "But, after so long, it gets to the point where you don't want to remind them of their pasts."

"They were all very kind, very friendly and very respectful. They just made mistakes."

Since "graduating" from the program, only half of the dealers have managed to remain drug-free and off police radar, said East Precinct Cmdr. Bob Nash.

Those who found their way back to the county lockup were rearrested on charges such as theft, burglary and robbery. Drug charges from the original ENIP operation were reinstated.

"The program isn't meant to be a get-out-of-jail-free card," Nash said.

'It's a work in progress'

Offering a second chance to dealers is just a small piece of ENIP. The project also works to stop crimes before they happen, and it is here, police say, that the success is evident.

An independent study by Southern Illinois and Michigan State universities concluded that the project was effective in reducing overall crime in the area of North Second Street.

Citing crime statistics from a four-year period from March 2005 to April 2009, the study found that after police launched ENIP, the area saw a 47.6 percent reduction in drug-related offenses.

In the 800 block of North Second Street, violent crime dropped 23.6 percent and property crime dropped 28.4 percent. In the adjoining area, violent crime dropped 24 percent and property crime went down 25.6 percent.

Nashville firefighter David Brugman has been stationed on Meridian Street, two streets away from North Second, for 11 years. He said the turnaround in crime is most apparent in the number of calls the station gets.

"We used to have a couple of shootings or stabbings a week," he said. "Now, we have a couple a month, if that. The neighborhood tries to rear its ugly head every now and then."

The lower numbers are a beginning for Nash, who says the neighborhood still has a long way to go.

Courtney Couch, a two-year resident of North Second Street, agrees.

"It's a work in progress," Couch said. "They're making some good progress, but it's not over."

Couch said dealers used to gather in a field near her home. Drug sales were booming and transactions were usually made on the fly, with money quickly changing hands.

"They would never come and deal in front of our house," Couch said. "Probably because they knew my mom would come out and slap them."

A year later, Couch says the dealers are gone, replaced by patrolling police cars.

One street away, Perkins has noticed the increase in patrols. Until a year ago, the Vietnam veteran wouldn't walk his dog without a weapon, much less sit on his porch after dark.

"Thank God for the police," said Perkins, who has lived in the neighborhood for six years. "It was a shame that I couldn't enjoy the neighborhood before now."

New operation launched

Nash said crime control efforts continue in the North Second Street area, but for the past three months, officers have been working on a new operation. They are confident that this second large-scale project will be as successful as the first, perhaps more so.

"So far, we've recorded 20 buys off of 12 suspects," said East Precinct Lt. Danny Driskell.

Driskell and Nash hope to wrap up their latest ENIP project in October. They aren't sure if any of the dealers identified in the current project will qualify for intervention.

"We're not close enough to the point where we evaluate each dealer yet," Nash said.

"We've been working on it in earnest for about three months, but I think once we can demonstrate that we can help, the relationship between the police and the community will strengthen and we'll be able to give people some empowerment."

Perkins can relate.

Once the operation on North Second Street took off, he started speaking up.

"One time I was sitting on my porch and I saw a couple of hookers walking down the street," he said.
"And I told them to get off my street. Of course, they gave me the bird, you know, but it felt good."
