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NATION

Post-Katrina, crime back in Big Easy

New Orleans' struggle to regain its footing is hampered by high murder rate

By James Oliphant

Tribune national correspondent

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NEW ORLEANS

A few blocks but a world away from the French Quarter, Rev. Bill Terry, an Episcopal priest at St. Anna's Church, began compiling a very public and very sobering list this year on a board hanging outside his church doors on Esplanade Avenue.

Terry recorded the name of every murder victim in the city, along with the date, in large black letters. Midway through the year, Terry had to buy a second board. "That was a sad day," he said as he updated the list recently.

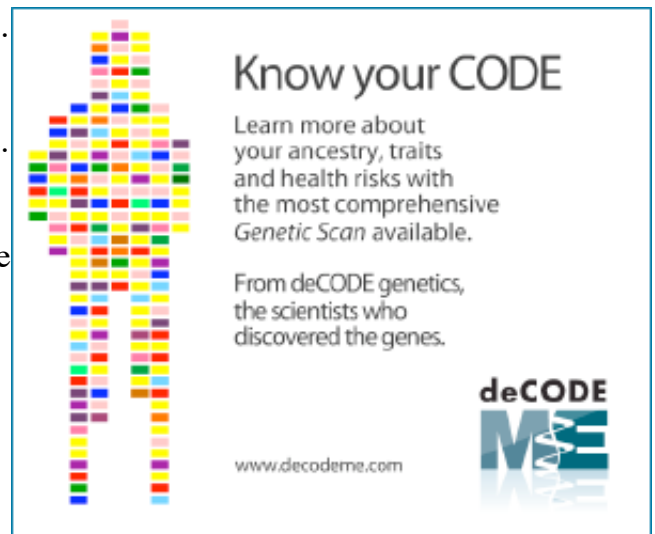
At least 207 people have been murdered in New Orleans in 2007, according to a police count. "A sign like this holds us accountable," the priest said.

In the third year of its recovery after Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans has seen a troubling spike in murder and violent crime. The storm has reduced the population of New Orleans to some 288,000 people, from about 455,000, which means that its per capita murder rate now dwarfs every other large city in the United States, even gang-plagued Compton, Calif.

Criminologist Peter Scharf, who left New Orleans after Katrina to teach in Texas, wonders if a city with such a high a murder rate can remain viable. According to one study, there were 96.6 slayings per 100,000 residents in 2006.

The violence has touched every section of a place that has always been densely packed, a condition exacerbated by Katrina, which has rendered huge swaths of the town uninhabitable. And it has had such an impact on the daily affairs of New Orleans that some long-time residents are asking whether it will jeopardize the city's efforts to rebuild, whether those who committed to staying in the city will ultimately surrender to the rampant crime and flee, this time for good.

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New Orleans native Baty Landis owns a cafe in the Faubourg-Marigny neighborhood of the city, not far from St. Anna's Church. "Anyone who tells you they don't think about leaving," she said, "is lying."

Down the street from Landis' cafe, Jeanne Christie tends bar at a place named Turtle Bay. "It's 100 percent different," said Christie, who lost her coffee-shop business in the hurricane. "Good people go away because they get tired of fighting it."

The crime wave has struck the city at a precarious moment. More than two years after Katrina, it remains essentially a shell of its former self. The tourist areas hop, the streetcars run, the pro sports teams have returned. But travel north and east of the French Quarter and reality reasserts itself. The streets in the low-lying areas close to Lake Pontchartrain are lined with empty, broken homes and abandoned stores.

Over in St. Bernard Parish, FEMA trailers can be found on every lot, parked next to shattered homes. And the flood-ravaged Lower 9th Ward remains a broken-hearted ghost town, despite the best efforts of residents and community groups to rebuild. Today, it looks, quite literally, like a large bomb was detonated in the center of the neighborhood.

Many New Orleans police officers still work out of trailers with little in terms of resources and equipment. The parish district attorney's office has yet to return to its damaged headquarters and remains in a downtown high-rise, its lawyers and staff spilling into hallways.

In many respects, the storm simply laid bare core problems that were already manifest. And certainly not everyone is packing up; there remains a core of residents, fiercely loyal to the city, who says the crime issue is overblown and mostly centered on certain areas. "It isn't as out-of-control as people believe," said Mary Beth Romig of the city's Convention and Visitors Bureau. "It is, unfortunately, largely targeted drug crime."

The X factor

The escalating violence, on the one hand, has become the X factor, the force that threatens to break the city's rehabilitating spirit. At the same time, citizens' groups are fighting back, taking active roles in the day-to-day framework of the government and the criminal justice system in an effort to save the city before it once more comes under siege and empties.

Residents point to July 2006 as a turning point. That's when 19-year-old Michael Anderson allegedly murdered five teens in a flurry of bullets in the impoverished Central City neighborhood. Since then, the body count has been rising steadily, past all expectations. The city now has the same number of murders it had in the late 1990s, when it was nearly twice as large.

Anderson became infamous in another way earlier this year, when then-District Atty. Eddie Jordan announced he was dropping all five murder counts against him for lack of evidence, blaming both the police and the failure of witnesses to come forward. That led to calls for Jordan's resignation.

The prosecutor, who is black, already had come under criticism when his office fired more than 40 white employees. That action resulted in a \$3.7 million judgment against the district attorney's office for racial discrimination. Jordan quit in November but the plaintiffs moved to collect the judgment, going so far as to seize assets in the office and threatening the office payroll before a settlement was reached.

It fell upon acting District Atty. Keva Landrum-Johnson to clean up the mess. "Losing our building -- that was a tremendous hardship," she said in her sparse, makeshift office in the Central Business District.

She pointed to a violent offender unit the office established this year as a response to the growing crime threat. She said most of the violence in the city "revolves around the drug situation." And, she added, there's a lack of jobs, a lack of a positive school system. She also mentioned a rise in domestic violence after Katrina, due to the conditions some residents have had to endure. "None of this is normal," Landrum-Johnson summarized.

Her first order of business, she said, "is restoring the public's trust in this office, letting them know we are working hard. There's been a breakdown in the public's trust of police work."

'Misdemeanor murder'

After Katrina, the term "misdemeanor murder" entered the street's lexicon. Coined after Rule 701 of the Louisiana Code of Criminal Procedure, it required the authorities to release any prisoner who hadn't been charged with a felony after 60 days of imprisonment. The statute has since been amended, but scores of potentially violent offenders were released because police and prosecutors could not build cases in time.

Attorney Billy Sothern represents convicted murders on appeal. Nonetheless, he said, "There is a crisis of crime here. People are scared." And he cited public distrust of the police and of the district attorney's office. "If you don't believe there is any chance of apprehension, detention or prosecution, that's a bad deal," Sothern said.

Rick Prose, an activist who works in the Lower 9th Ward, said the Louisiana National Guard keeps the peace there, not the police. "The NOPD is practically non-existent in our neighborhood," Prose said. "If you want quick response to a situation, our volunteers are trained to call [the guard] first, 911 second, and then we make bets on how long after the Army shows up that NOPD makes it across the bridge."

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Some citizens are fighting back

Almost a year ago, filmmaker Helen Hill was shot not far from Baty Landis' cafe in New Orleans. It was days after Landis' friend, Dinerral Shavers, a drummer in a brass band known as the Hot 8, was also killed.

"Everyone knows somebody who has been murdered," Landis said.

In response, Landis helped form a non-profit group, Silenceisviolence, and organized a march on City Hall. About 3,000 people showed up.

"It just seemed like we're being played," Landis said. "No one was doing anything about protecting our safety."

When the district attorney's office dropped charges against Shavers' alleged murderer, Landis' group essentially managed the case for the prosecutors. The suspect was eventually re-indicted.

It was part of a trend. The business community organized the New Orleans Crime Coalition, which has demanded reforms to the criminal justice system. And a group of attorneys rebuilt the city's public defender system.

"The good news is there is citizen engagement out there like there's never been before," Landis said.

But even she wonders if it will be enough to stem the tide of violence.

"I still think about leaving every day," she said. "Every day."

-- James Oliphant

joliphant@tribune.com

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