

Price of Big City Life

The price of big-city life: As crime rises, some Atlantans say more police needed on beat

Eric Sturgus – The Atlanta Journal Constitution
October 6, 2007

Chikita Cunningham and Cheryl Harms live in opposite ends of Atlanta, but they share several similarities.

They are both registered nurses. They both bought homes in Atlanta seven years ago. And they were both crime victims on the same day.

Burglars broke into Cunningham's three-bedroom, ranch-style home in northwest Atlanta the morning of Aug. 31. That evening, someone smashed the front driver's side window of a 1993 blue Honda Civic parked in front of Harms' home in Kirkwood.

Both women were victims of two types of crime that have risen sharply in Atlanta this year - home burglaries and car thefts. In fact, Atlanta Police Department figures show crime is up in every major category this year except for rape. Homicide, residential burglaries, auto thefts and robberies are on pace for their highest totals since 2003, Richard Pennington's first full year as Atlanta's police chief.

When Pennington took office, he set a goal of reducing crime each year by 5 percent. This year, crime is up 10 percent, police officials said.

"We're going to do our best to get it back to zero," said Atlanta police Deputy Chief Peter Andresen, who is in charge of field operations for the department.

The effort is critical as city leaders continue efforts to encourage more people to buy homes and live in Atlanta. U.S. census figures show the city's population grew by 17 percent between 2000 and 2006, from 416,474 to 486,411 residents.

Pennington believes the city's crime increase is part of a national trend. Police commanders attribute the rise to increased drug trafficking, juvenile delinquency, domestic violence and an unsteady economy.

Some residents and city leaders say crime is increasing because there are not enough cops on the beat.

"There is a frustration that there are not enough police officers and that they're not paid enough," said Mark Turcotte, president of South Atlantans for Neighborhood Development.

City Councilman Ceasar Mitchell introduced an idea this week to put each graduate of the next police academy on foot and bicycle patrols in the city's two highest crime zones for no less than six months.

Life in the city

So is Atlanta unsafe? Two different studies of crime data offer two different conclusions.

Morgan Quitno Press, a private research company, ranked Atlanta the nation's 17th most dangerous city out of 371 cities for 2006. Atlanta was America's third most dangerous city in 2003, according to the company.

Georgia State University criminal justice professor Robert Friedmann and several other criminology experts conduct an annual study of crime in America's 65 biggest cities, using a formula of murders and social factors such as unemployment and poverty. Last year, 50 cities ranked worse than Atlanta.

Police officials concede there is a perception among many homeowners that crime is getting worse. Pennington briefly discussed it with reporters Thursday to announce the arrests of eight young men on murder and other charges. Ormewood Park resident Ken Boff raised the issue with city officials and police at a neighborhood meeting later that evening in south Atlanta.

"The issue everyone wants to know about is we've had an explosion in crime," Boff said. "I can't figure out what's causing it."

Kirkwood resident Harms has resigned herself to a belief that crime is part of life in the city.

"If you choose to live in the city, you choose to live with the percentage of crime you are going to get," said Harms, 55. "That's the price you pay."

Police say there are many efforts in place to make people like Harms feel safer:

- City officials last month approved \$2.5 million for overtime police pay.
- The police department is preparing to roll out a narcotics unit with a new batch of detectives. Pennington disbanded the old unit after undercover officers shot and killed 92-year-old Kathryn Johnston in her home in November during a botched drug raid.
- An auto theft task force is pursuing car thieves.
- Andresen said police are working with the City Council to strengthen its ordinance on businesses buying second-hand copper. Police believe thieves are breaking into abandoned homes, particularly in neighborhoods like Vine City, to steal copper wiring and resell it.

Gains threatened

Some homeowners are taking the initiative to stop crime. In Kirkwood, about 75 people gathered two weeks ago to organize a security patrol. Sean Casey, one of the organizers, said there have been as many as 15 home burglaries in his neighborhood in the past six weeks. Atlanta Police Department Zone 6, which includes Kirkwood, East Atlanta and East Lake, had 79 cars stolen in June. A month later, there were 124 auto thefts in the zone, a 57 percent increase, the largest in the city.

Casey, who moved to Kirkwood 10 years ago, saw the neighborhood as an investment. He envisioned middle-income residents moving to the area, improving their homes, tidying up their front yards. It's happened, he said, but "something like [car thefts and home break-ins] can threaten those gains."

On the other side of the Downtown Connector, in Zone 1, which includes neighborhoods through much of west Atlanta, home burglaries rose from 183 in June to 228 in July, a 25 percent jump.

Cunningham, 32, who lives on a quiet, tree-lined street among many retirees, said she doesn't see much police protection.

"I can't tell you the last time I've seen the police around here," she said.

For years, the police department has had fewer officers than budgeted. Police officials say the department should be at its full strength of 1,783 officers by November, when the next class of police recruits graduates from the academy. However, Andresen warns that the numbers may change as some officers retire. Atlanta has one officer for every 273 residents. New York, which Morgan Quitno Press ranks as America's fourth-safest big city, has one police officer for every 222 residents.

LaSandra McGhee is sensitive to the police department's staffing shortage. But the 43-year-old northwest Atlanta homeowner is still smarting over the second robbery of her home six weeks ago. The thieves stole the flat-screen television set from her bedroom.

McGhee bought a security system with motion detectors that can e-mail her photos of anyone approaching her back deck. Friends have suggested she sell her home and leave the city. McGhee, a computer technical consultant, refuses to go.

"I like staying in the city," she said. "I like the convenience of it."

Cunningham has considered leaving Atlanta. Burglars have gotten into her home three times since she bought it seven years ago. Cunningham thought she secured her home by installing lights at the back door. She tried again two weeks ago: An ADT repairman came to her house to add improvements to her system.

"I thought I was secure enough, but we're all vulnerable," Cunningham said. "Where else do we go?"

HOME BURGLARIES

2,885

From January through June 2007

- 2006: 5,773
- 2005: 5,026
- 2004: 4,971
- 2003: 5,663

AUTO THEFTS

3,100

From January through June 2007

- 2006: 5,878
- 2005: 5,756
- 2004: 5,756
- 2003: 7,235

ALL BURGLARIES

3,737

From January through June 2007

- 2006: 7,401
- 2005: 6,648
- 2004: 6,726
- 2003: 8,065

ROBBERY

1,615

From January through June 2007

- 2006: 2,959
- 2005: 2,861
- 2004: 3,116
- 2003: 3,701

AGGRAVATED ASSAULT

2,054

From January through June 2007

- 2006: 4,308
- 2005: 4,039
- 2004: 4,427
- 2003: 4,360

HOMICIDE

62

From January through June 2007

- 2006: 110
- 2005: 89
- 2004: 112
- 2003: 149