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## **Drug dealing, gunfire puts village on edge, *Long Island Newsday*, 6/30/12**

Police have rushed to take the offensive against blatant, open-air drug-selling in a Hempstead Village neighborhood after a surge in gun violence blamed largely on rival gang-affiliated dealers put residents in constant fear.

“The dealers all have guns, and it just rains bullets around here,” said Monique Otis, 54, who lives in an apartment building on Linden Place. “The addicts are all over the street trying to [buy] drugs at all hours. It’s like living in hell. I pray they can stop it.”

Battles between rival groups dealing marijuana and crack in the seven-block area of multifamily homes and housing projects near Hempstead High School helped cause an “extreme spike” in firearm-related crimes between January and May, said village police Chief Michael McGowan.

At least eight people have been shot this year, two fatally, in the half-mile stretch running south roughly from Linden Place and Maple Avenue to Martin Luther King Jr. Drive, compared with three shot, none fatally, in the same period of 2011, records show. Police made 59 drug-related arrests in the same area through June 4.

June was the first month of 2012 in which police received no reports of shots fired in the neighborhood, but officials say it is too soon to know whether this fragile peace will hold.

“We’re trying to keep the lid on it [the gun violence],” McGowan said. “We know we have more work to do.”

The rate of shootings and drug sales around Linden Place — and their impact on the village overall — have prompted comparisons to Terrace Avenue, a street one mile north of Linden Place that was home to Long Island’s largest open-air drug market before a major crackdown there in 2008.

“I believe the drug dealing was always going on [on Linden Place], but most of the attention was on Terrace,” Mayor Wayne Hall said.

## **Surge in shootings**

Nassau County District Attorney Kathleen Rice’s office spearheaded a yearlong enforcement effort four years ago that wiped out much of the drug-dealing and violence on Terrace Avenue. Arrests for drug crimes have fallen by 82 percent in that community since the initiative began, Rice said.

One factor in the success was months of community meetings aimed at gaining the trust of residents, Hall said. But village officials said the surge in gun violence around Linden Avenue between January and May was so alarming that they couldn’t wait to lay such groundwork.

“We don’t have that kind of time,” McGowan said.

Michael Watts, 21, a village resident, was shot to death by an unknown gunman Feb. 18 at Linden Avenue and Linden Place — considered the heart of the drug market, police said. A second man was wounded but survived.

Stanley Cater, a 46-year-old carpenter who served time in jail for crimes including drug possession, was killed by gunfire April 26 on Marvin Avenue, two blocks from the drug market. His relatives believe he was trying to buy drugs when the shooting happened. Herber Guzman, 40, was charged with second-degree murder May 3 and pleaded not guilty. He is being held on \$1-million bail.

A teen and another man, ages 17 and 21, were wounded April 1 in a drive-by shooting while walking on Martin Luther King Jr. Drive, police said. Both survived.

## **Police adjust tactics**

Violence involving drug dealers operating on and around Linden Place helped drive up crime in the village as a whole, officials said. Nineteen people were shot between January and May 1 in the municipality — compared with seven over the same period in 2011, according to data compiled by the New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services.

Police last month started beefing up patrols, scanning license plates of suspected drug buyers' cars, working with probation officials to arrest more violators, and focused on making more undercover drug arrests and street busts for open dealing. So far, those tactics have tamped down violence and taken several key dealers off the streets, McGowan said.

Village officials also appealed for help to Rice, who said in a statement the neighborhood was being held “hostage” by criminals, and that her office was working with police to “locate, arrest and prosecute” them. “This community deserves to have its streets back,” Rice said.

## **Gang rivalry fuels violence**

At the heart of the problem is a violent rivalry between dealers affiliated with the Crips and the Bloods gangs on either side of Graham Avenue, law enforcement sources said.

The Crips dealers and their associates control the market for marijuana and crack in the vicinity of Linden Avenue and Linden Place — an area known as the “Linden Triangle” — on the north side of Graham, the sources said. South of Graham, on Martin Luther King Jr. Drive, Bloods-affiliates control a much-smaller drug market in and around the housing projects that line the street.

Young men on both sides were firing weapons at a blistering pace earlier this year, using 9-mm and .45-caliber guns, as well as more-advanced weaponry like semiautomatic Tec-9s, McGowan said.

A hot spot for trouble is a home on Linden Place that doubles as a nightclub where police suspect drugs have long been used and sold. "It's a problem," McGowan said.

Andre Chambers, 23, was shot and killed inside the house in March 2008 — just four blocks from where his father, Stanley Cater, was allegedly killed by Guzman in April, Nassau police said. Betty Cater, a village resident, was Stanley's mother and Chambers' grandmother. Chambers' killing remains unsolved.

"The gunshots, the drugs, the kids running up to your car on Linden [Place] to try and sell drugs to you, it's all so out of control," said Cater, 67. "No one else should have to lose their babies to this war zone."

Despite the new enforcement effort, plumes of marijuana smoke still drift from open windows in the neighborhood. Dealers congregate on stoops and scurry to cars whose drivers pull up to buy drugs. Glassy-eyed addicts stumble through the darkness.

Many residents fear a return of the gunfire, which had become so frequent they wouldn't let their children play outside.

"If you live here, you better be ready to duck," said Jeremiah Carter, 47, a mechanic who moved from Brooklyn to an apartment on Linden Place three years ago. "I wish I'd never come here."

## **Seeking peace in prayer**

Police and prosecutors are not the only ones trying to stem the tide of violence.

Each Friday night just before midnight, a small group of male, middle-aged residents-turned-activists gather to march through the Linden Place drug market, looking for dealers,

gang members and addicts with whom to pray. They join hands with them on the street and inside homes, asking God to protect them.

“We’re not out here to demonize or condemn them — we’re here to serve them,” says the Rev. Kirk Lyons Sr., 51, a Hempstead native who recently began leading the prayer marches. “We want this place to be what it should be — not what it has become.”

Male Timmons, a neighborhood association leader, said he and the other marchers are starting to have an impact.

“It’s always a struggle,” said Timmons, 42. “But they’re starting to look forward to the prayer. Some of the tensions seem to be easing. We’re starting to get through to them.”

A self-described marijuana dealer who met with the marchers one night said afterward he understands their concerns but has not been won over.

“When people do get shot up, that’s painful to me,” he said. “So we got no problem praying. Praying’s good. But this is where we’ll be doing what we do.”