Violence soaring in Chicago Lawn District on Southwest Side
By Jeremy Gorner and Lolly Bowean
July 26, 2012

Like other energetic, happy children, Derrick Robateau Jr. once played outside a lot with friends, but that changed in April after the 7-year-old was shot in the leg in front of his grandparents' home on Chicago's Southwest Side.

Now when he visits their residence in the Chicago Lawn neighborhood, he stays inside more, "because they be shooting," the soft-spoken boy said last week on his grandparents' front porch.

Just last December, Chicago police Superintendent Garry McCarthy singled out the Chicago Lawn Police District — whose borders include the Marquette Park and Gage Park neighborhoods in addition to Chicago Lawn — for praise for a dramatic drop in gun violence.

"Here's an example where one district can make a difference in the citywide numbers," he said at the time.

Since then, violence has soared in that district, well above the sizable increases seen across the city as a whole, a vexing example of how murder and shooting rates can change and how difficult it is for police to attack such a surging problem. This year, through July 15, homicides totaled 23, up 156 percent from nine a year earlier, and shootings jumped 39 percent.

More troubling still, the Chicago Lawn District has seen more children wounded in the gun violence than any of the city's 22 other police districts, according to a Tribune analysis. At least 17 youths — all 15 or younger — were shot in the district in the first six months of 2012, the review showed. Three of them died.

And the youngest shooting victim wasn't even Derrick. A 4-year-old boy was grazed by a shot on March 25 as he sat in a car.

On Monday night, Corey Ingram became the latest young casualty. The 13-year-old was shot in his left thigh near 72nd Street and Artesian Avenue in Marquette Park as he headed home from playing basketball at a nearby church.

"I thought he was dead," said Corey's mother, Dennicia Lee, who moved to Marquette Park last year with her four children. "I don't want him outside."

The Police Department declined to make the commander of the Chicago Lawn District available for an interview, but Jens Ludwig, a University of Chicago law professor who specializes in crime studies, said crime rates tend to fluctuate every year for reasons that often are unclear.
Veteran police officers blamed much of the increased violence on conflicts within the Gangster Disciples street gang. By some estimates, the gang has splintered into as many as a few dozen cliques in the district, with monikers like "Rec City" and "The Hit Squad."

"The interrelationships between and within the gangs in the neighborhood might be in flux this year, making members more volatile, uncontrolled and uncontrollable," said Arthur Lurigio, a professor of psychology and criminal justice at Loyola University Chicago.

The Chicago Lawn Police District is the largest geographically and the most populous in the city. Much of it is relatively safe, especially the area around Midway Airport as well as neighborhoods such as Garfield Ridge and West Lawn, where many city, county and state workers live. But the district's east side — home to Marquette Park, Wrightwood, Gage Park and Chicago Lawn — is a different story.