Englewood's gain hurting neighbors?

By Jeremy Gorner and Lolly Bowean
December 20, 2012

Whenever a young parishioner asks for a ride home from the Rev. David Kelly's Back of the Yards church or evening basketball practice, he obliges without question. Kelly knows they are just looking for safe passage from one gang territory to another in what has become an increasingly violent neighborhood this year.

But just south in Englewood, a neighborhood notorious for violence, resident and community activist Cynthia Lomax has noticed quieter weekends and fewer sidewalk memorials to slaying victims. She's spotted more uniformed and plainclothes police officers patrolling the streets, their large, boxy vehicles an easy tell.

As a particularly bloody year for Chicago draws to a close, an increased police presence in Englewood has contributed to a reduction in homicides and shootings. But next door in Back of the Yards, gang conflicts and killings are on the rise.

The two neighborhoods are examples of the perplexing and fluid nature of violence in Chicago and how successes in one neighborhood can leave police and residents scrambling to tamp down rising violence in another.

With 12 days left in the year, 490 homicides had been recorded across Chicago as of Wednesday, the most since 513 homicides in 2008. The city also has had about 2,400 reported shootings, 11 percent more than at this time in 2011, police statistics show.

The homicide toll has plagued the department all year, since a particularly violent winter drew negative attention to a city already under a national spotlight for the NATO summit in May. While the force was praised for its handling of the summit-related protests, it faced scrutiny for the rising violence as well as how it deployed resources, particularly during a series of assaults in the Gold Coast.

Despite the spike in homicides, police and city officials emphasize that overall crime is down. They have touted successes in neighborhoods like Englewood and West Garfield Park and celebrated a reported 8.5 percent drop throughout the city in robberies, assaults, batteries, thefts and other crimes.

And while homicides soared in the first quarter of this year, police say efforts they've made slowed increases.
"Those things we were doing to reduce crime are obviously working," police Superintendent Garry McCarthy said at a news conference this week after a class of new police officers graduated from the academy. "The things that we implemented in March and April to reduce violence are also working.

"But it's not an exact science," he said. "We're not going to win every single day."

But Arthur Lurigio, a professor of psychology and criminal justice at Loyola University Chicago, said police have limitations in trying to reduce the homicide rate of any city, more so than in attempts to curb other crimes.

"The superintendent's trying to put the right frame on the data and wanting people to be rational and reasonable about statistics. And he's showcasing the successes, which people are not going to pay as much attention to if we hit the 500 (homicide) mark," Lurigio said.

**Police strategy**

The department's approach to combating crime has focused mainly on flooding troubled neighborhoods. When homicides rose drastically in 2011 in the Englewood police district — which includes Englewood and West Englewood — police in January vowed to increase their presence there to drive down violent crime.

They mapped out "conflict zones" and put more uniformed officers on the street, along with cops from specialized units with the assistance of federal agencies. The result, police said, was a dramatic 29 percent decline in homicides and a 5 percent drop in shootings in the Englewood district this year.

But while police officials have trumpeted that victory, communities on the district's borders have suffered, statistics show.

Through Dec. 9, the Gresham district to the south leads the city with 43 homicides, a 19 percent jump from last year. To the west and east of Englewood, homicides in those districts (Chicago Lawn and Grand Crossing) increased 44 and 24 percent, respectively. And in the Deering district, which includes the Back of the Yards and Fuller Park neighborhoods, homicides rose 46 percent through Dec. 9 to 41 killings, up from 28 in 2011, statistics show. In Back of the Yards alone, homicides are at 25 so far this year, more than double last year, according to a Tribune review of department statistics.

Many officers within the department have argued that the elimination of two "strike forces" largely responsible for tamping down shootings and homicides in past years hurt the ability to fight violence. After McCarthy became superintendent, those strike force officers, who flooded a different gang-conflict area each day, were moved to beat patrols with the thought that they would have more positive interaction with the community.

Many officers have expressed concern about the strategy, saying beat cops in high-crime areas tend to be too busy responding to radio calls, allowing little face time with residents.
Police officers have also blamed the increased violence on the splintering of large street gangs, like the Gangster Disciples factions that run small-scale drug markets. In response, the department has made use of "gang audits" — in which specialized units share gang intelligence with patrol officers — to better prepare them for retaliatory violence.

The unseasonably warm weather, particularly early this year, was blamed by some officers. Others say staffing shortages contributed to the rise in violence.

"You don't have the resources out there to take that comfort zone away from (gang members)," said Dominic Rizzi, police chief in Yakima, Wash., who retired in June as a lieutenant in Chicago's Deering district. "It hasn't been a secret that manpower is down."

Fears persist

In Englewood, the reduction in homicides this year hasn't changed some residents' worries about safety.

"It doesn't feel like we are getting to the heart of the problem," said Debra Thompson, 57, a longtime resident. "We are victims of our neighborhood. We can't really go out. We're still alarmed. You can't walk around in broad daylight."

And in Back of the Yards, the increase in violence has taken a toll, residents said. Children stay in a constant state of alert, carefully watching cars as they drive by and looking around for possible gunmen, said Kelly, head of the Precious Blood Ministry of Reconciliation.

"They are suffering from trauma and havoc," he said. "A kid called me and told me he had just been shot at. He said, 'Father, I feel blessed because I didn't get hit.'"

Residents said there is a gang war in Back of the Yards, one that has made targets of everyone. Cortez Watson, 21, was shot in the neck and arm in the neighborhood in June as he left a local corner store. The young man said he's not in a gang but that didn't matter to his attackers.

"Right now it's a turf war," Watson said last week from his grandmother's Back of the Yards home, where a bullet hole is still visible in the living room window. "Any male back here, any male … you can be probably 14 or 15. If you got height on you, you look grown, you'll get shot at. That's just how it is."

Watson has been shot at numerous times in the neighborhood.

"I still look over my shoulder. ... (I have) flashbacks every now and then" of the June shooting, he said.

Department shake-up

As the end of the year approached, and the homicide toll climbed toward 500, McCarthy shook up the department's upper ranks in December, replacing seven command staff.
McCarthy assigned a new commander, Joseph Gorman, to lead the gang-plagued Deering district. Gorman is a former head of the citywide gang investigations unit and is regarded by many as the department's foremost gang expert.

In an interview Wednesday, Gorman said his strategy will be to have officers "going after the right people at the right locations," saying that will have an impact on crime reduction. He's also ordered his tactical officers to identify five gang conflicts that are driving most of the violent crime in the district, saying there are about a dozen gangs he wants to target.

Even though the Englewood area has received extra help from specialized units this year, Gorman doesn't believe crime in that area has spilled over to Deering. He doesn't want his officers to be dependent on manpower from outside units.

"I'm not going to blame Englewood's successes on why (Deering) is up. It's going to be a work in progress," Gorman said. "I want to be self-sufficient."

Residents said they hope for change but have grown hard to the violence.

Veronica Lopez 58, is a longtime Back of the Yards resident and community activist. Even when standing outside her home, she constantly watches her back. She knows she could be victimized at any time, day or night.

"This is how we live," Lopez said. "Young people don't have much of a chance of survival here. It's hard for them."