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Cocaine crackdown

Cops target 20-block stretch that supplies 95% of drug

By MICHELE MCPHEE

DAILY NEWS POLICE BUREAU CHIEF



Appleton for NEWS

Suspects are lined up outside a Harlem apartment where the NYPD conducted a drug raid.

It was 4:45 p.m. on a Thursday afternoon in the Hamilton Heights neighborhood of Harlem.

A 13-year-old boy stood on the corner of 150th St. and Amsterdam Ave., his skinny arms folded across his chest as he paced in front of a busy bodega, staring at passersby.

Directly across the street, another teen, 17, stood in the same position, his eyes darting up and down the busy block, scanning for las moscas, or the flies — slang for undercover cops.

The teens were lookouts for a cocaine-dealing gang, The 500 Crew, which took its name from the building where it operated: 500 W. 150th St.

Inside the lobby of that building, another man, known as the Crew's manager, took orders for \$20 tins, a half-gram of cocaine slipped to customers by a different dealer in neatly folded foil gum wrappers.

Upstairs, in a third-floor apartment, was the Crew's stash. There an enforcer stood guard, protecting the drugs from both the cops and rival dealers. On this day, he didn't do his job.

Storm building

Before the lookouts had a chance to warn their bosses, a team of 15 NYPD cops from the Manhattan North narcotics division rushed them. They burst into the building, slapped cuffs on the man in the lobby and hurtled up the narrow stairway to the third floor. Detective Jimmy Apostolov hoisted a hydro-ram into the doorway of Apartment 3-A, and after six powerful thrusts smashed in with fellow cops, yelling, "Police! Police! Don't move!"

The scene has been played out thousands of times in Harlem, a neighborhood that historically has been plagued by drug dealers and the addicts the business relies on. Chief William Taylor, the commanding officer of the NYPD's narcotics division, believes the neighborhood is the primary source for drug trafficking in the city — with 95% of the city's cocaine supply bought and sold within a 20-block area in Harlem.

The drug dealers are en-trenched between 135th and 155th Sts. from Amsterdam Ave. to

Riverside Drive, with a smattering of sale spots spread out in the surrounding blocks, Taylor said.

The people living in the neighborhood — many of them middle-class families who bought derelict homes in risky anticipation of eventual gentrification — have tired of the dealers and are appealing to the cops for help. "The residents are held prisoner, to a degree. No more," Taylor said. "We want to be relentless, and we will not be stopping until the [dealers] are gone."

For three months, he and his detectives from Manhattan North narcotics have been crushing the drug trade in the 30th Precinct with an initiative, started by Police Commissioner Raymond Kelly, called Operation Crackdown.

Since the program began April 15, detectives have made more than 2,500 arrests — a number that increases daily. They have recovered nearly \$1 million in cash and seized 63 cars.

Major haul

Detectives have taken 72 pounds of marijuana, 134 ounces of crack, 601 ounces of heroin, 7,678 Ecstasy tablets and 1,762 ounces of cocaine off the streets, according to the NYPD figures.

"We need to attack the narcotics problems, and we are going right to the source. We're looking to dislodge the dealers and send them away," Taylor said as he surveyed the scene outside 500 W. 150th St. last week, watching as Detective Victor LeBron logged the arrests of alleged 500 Crew members.

"We'll have to arrest them. Take their money. Their drugs. Their property. Seize their buildings. Send them away for long periods in jail. Then maybe they will get the message," Taylor said. "We are going to restore a degree of order up here so that someone can send their kid to the corner store for a quart of milk without having to walk through the types of narcotics negotiations that are part of the daily life here."

Operation Crackdown is not the first time the NYPD has tried to eradicate the drug trade in upper Manhattan. The area's easy access to the George Washington Bridge and West Side Highway — coupled with the complicity of a large immigrant population from the Dominican Republic who are reluctant to turn in their countrymen — have made the location a haven for dealers.

Merault Almonor, 40, a city employee, and his wife, Wilma, 36, who works for Verizon, have lived on W. 139th St. for 12 years, raising their two boys, now 7 and 6.

The couple, who are also part-time actors, want to remain part of the community, especially as they watch it change: a Starbucks is opening a block away, and families crowd nearby Riverbank State Park with baby strollers and small children.

But as the couple's sons grow older, there is a palpable fear that the boys may become enticed by the jewelry-laden teens with new clothes and fat pockets.

"There are 20 guys on each corner," Merault Almonor said, pointing to groups of men gathering like a pack of pigeons near his home. "I don't want my boys growing up like that."

The Almonors said they have seen earlier initiatives like Operation Crackdown, watching as narcotics cops flooded the neighborhood and arrested dozens of dealers, only to disappear when crime statistics in the precinct plummeted.

"It's worked before, and even what they are doing now is having an effect," Wilma Almonor said. "But will it last? Next month, will there be flowers and candles on the block for another dead kid?"

Feds pitch in

In September 1996, federal money poured into Washington Heights and the highly touted Northern Manhattan Initiative sent aggressive detectives to the 30th, 33rd and 34th precincts for the sole purpose of investigating large-scale drug rings.

Even then, authorities called the area the cocaine epicenter of the region, the headquarters of some 5,000 drug dealers in about 150 organizations.

That operation saturated the area with 700 cops, and for the first time, personnel from every major federal enforcement agency worked alongside the NYPD.

But, in time, the police presence diminished. And some of the dealers who had tired of the heat from law enforcement in Washington Heights simply moved south to upper Harlem. That's why community activists like John Dooley, president of the 138th Street Block Association and a board member of the Hamilton Heights homeowners group, are leery of the NYPD's promises.

Dooley has declared a quiet war on the dealers who have spread out on his block, urinating on his car, dumping trash on his stoop and, in one incident, tossing a cinder block into his yard from a nearby roof.

"It's like the trench warfare of World War II. The dealers are willing to take an extraordinary number of losses of their sellers, because there is a never-ending series of recruits.

Being arrested is the price of doing business, but the profits far exceed the losses," said Dooley, an executive at the Museum of Modern Art who bought a building on 138th St. and renovated it two years ago.

He said the NYPD needs help from federal agencies, including the Immigration and Naturalization Service and the Internal Revenue Service.

"We are parading our children through this. What if this never does go away? What have we stepped into here?" Dooley said. "In a sense, it doesn't matter how hard the 30th Precinct works. There are times that it feels close to hopeless."

But Special Narcotics Prosecutor Bridget Brennan said Operation Crackdown will work if law enforcement officials stick it out for the long haul.

"It's a different time. There are definite problems in the Three-O we are trying to address," said Brennan, a veteran of the drug epidemic who was appointed special prosecutor in 1998.

"It's not like the late '80s or early '90s when we were deluged with crime and all we could do is put our finger in the dike," she said. "Now we can be much more focused in our efforts, much more thoughtful, because we have the luxury of living in the city at a time when crime is down significantly."

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