City Heights hails progress against crime
San Diego Union-Tribune - Wednesday, August 2, 1995
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A year ago, a volunteer crime-fighting patrol in City Heights set its sights on driving out drug dealers along Polk Avenue between 37th and 39th streets.

Now the drug peddlers are gone from that section of Polk, but they've relocated a few blocks away.

That hasn't dissuaded Levina Houck, chairperson of City Heights on Patrol. Like the urban farmers toiling in the City Heights Garden just down from Polk Street, Houck understands that a single application of water, weed killer and insecticide doesn't ensure a bumper crop.

"We'll just keep moving them," Houck said. "My concentration is on City Heights. If I have to push them into another neighborhood, that's fine. I keep telling them Rancho Bernardo is nice."

City Heights on Patrol, a 2-year-old organization, tackled the drug problem along Polk Avenue as its Project 365, a program conceived by National Night Out Against Crime organizers to keep communities involved in crime fighting throughout the year.

Last night, City Heights residents marked this year's National Night Out with five walks that culminated in a community celebration at City Heights Park and Recreation Center.

Residents in other parts of the county -- and across the nation -- held similar gatherings or simply turned on their outdoor home lights to signify unity in fighting crime.

At the City Heights center on 44th Street, several hundred neighbors gathered to socialize, hear speeches and then walk through the neighborhoods.

"I see things getting better, but it takes a lot of community involvement," said Karen Manley, a neighborhood activist carrying a sign that read: "Drug dealers are scum."

Two new public schools and a police substation are planned for the area, and the City Heights Town Council has been created over the last year, Manley pointed out.

"This is needed," said Julia Sepulveda, who lives near the recreation center. "The criminals need a very big boot."

Sepulveda had her son, Sergio, 7, and watchdog, Zorra, along for the walk.

"If we can stay together, we can make it a better place," said Sepulveda, who has lived
in City Heights three years. "I'm afraid a lot of these people will go home after tonight and we won't see them again."

After being mugged a couple of times, Steve Trunk, a homeowner, said, it was time to become active.

"This will have a psychological effect on crooks," Trunk said. "When the word gets out, they know a lot of people are watching them."

Houck said this year's Project 365 for the 90 or so members of the citizens' patrol will concentrate on the blocks of 47th Street and Menlo Avenue just south of University Avenue.

Patrol members work in teams of two or three and use their personal cars as they try to monitor the dealers, who do most of their trade between 9 p.m. and midnight.

Making their observations from a distance, the volunteers jot down car license numbers and descriptions of buyers and try to find where dealers stash their drugs, primarily crack cocaine and heroin. The information is turned over to the police.

Officer Carlton Hershman, who has worked in City Heights eight years, said patrol members serve as important eyes and ears for the Police Department.

"You get a black and white (patrol) car in there and the whole street changes," Hershman said. "You get me in my private car and I'm going to see a whole lot more. I know the citizens' patrol sees a whole lot more than we do."

During the first six months of this year, Hershman said, police received 209 narcotics-related calls and made 43 arrests for drug sales or possession in the blocks of Polk and University between 37th and 39th streets and the one-block area of 38th that connects the avenues.

"That's extremely high," he said. "It's blatant there."

During the drug dealers' heyday on Polk, Houck said, many of the bungalows along the avenue stood vacant because property owners could not rent or sell the homes with drug sales right outside their doors.

The dealers favored Polk because it is a narrow, one-way street, making it easy for them to run from approaching police cars. It also is among busy thoroughfares: El Cajon Boulevard, University Avenue and 40th Street.

"It was out of the way," Houck said. "It was easy to shop from dealer to dealer."

Now most of the homes are occupied, although bars on the windows and doors are visual proof that the area is hardly free of crime.