Division keeps evolving: Once dangerous, diverse Mid-City area now slowly 'headed in the right direction'

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When Guy Swanger was a police rookie on the beat in the core of San Diego, there were plenty of streets where a cop wouldn't go alone.

Federal Boulevard, Pentecost Way, Winona Avenue, to name a few.

"If there was a fight, you waited for backup," Swanger recalled. "Twenty-three years ago, it was a very dangerous place."

Now Swanger is a captain, and he runs the Mid-City Division, one of nine divisions in the San Diego Police Department. Headquarters are at Landis Street and Fairmount Avenue in City Heights.

He has seen the division go from bad to worse to better. "Now there's not one neighborhood I wouldn't go to alone," Swanger said.

Redevelopment in the late 1990s and continuing today has given Mid-City an economic boost and face-lift that has translated to greater community involvement and cause for optimism, he said.

The Mid-City Division's nearly 170,000 residents live in 23 multiracial neighborhoods bounded by Interstates 8 and 805, state Route 94 and La Mesa. They include the College Area around San Diego State University, upper-class Kensington, City Heights, with all of its redevelopment, and the El Cajon Boulevard corridor notorious for prostitution.

"This command has it all," Swanger said. "What other neighborhood has so many mosques, temples and churches; prostitutes, large drug markets; two high schools, old communities?"

Immigrants have settled there from Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan, Mexico, Russia and Thailand.

Patrol Sgt. Randy Eichmann said each division has its own personality. And within the division, there are vastly different communities. In City Heights, for example, "one of the differences is women wearing burqas, driving cars.

"You won't see that in other areas," he said.

Patrol Officer Robert Minton, an 18-year San Diego police veteran, said the the Mid-City assignment is like boot camp for junior officers.

"A lot of trainees from Northern or Southern (divisions) have never made an arrest. Come
here, you make three or four a day," he said.

Mid-City has the highest rate of domestic violence and the largest portion of gang-related violence in the city. But the biggest category of calls for service stem from noise, not violence.

The sprawling college campus and surrounding student housing contribute heavily.

"We have 23 percent of the city's noise disturbance calls," Swanger said. "It's our number 1. Number 2 is domestic violence, then burglaries. I think those three drive our command. Robberies and assaults are not even in the top 10."

Crime took a sharp rise in parts of Mid-City in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Swanger said. Prostitution and robberies topped the list for police priorities.

"All of a sudden, it was the busiest place to work," Swanger said. "We'd have 60 officers on duty and still 50 calls (for service) holding. It's still the busiest command."

Community pressure

Sgt. Jorge Duran worked in Mid-City when he moved from Houston and joined the San Diego Police Department in 1987. He learned to handle domestic violence, auto thefts, shootings -- sometimes all in one night.

"Crack cocaine was a lot cheaper then, and the homicide rates higher," said Duran, who now runs the gang suppression team of patrol officers.

Homicide numbers peaked citywide in 1991, with 167. They have dropped since then, to 58 last year, with 16 of those in Mid-City.

Duran said when houses on 40th Street through City Heights were condemned to make way for state Route 15 in the 1990s, criminals moved into the boarded-up homes.

Community pressure to reduce crime led the city to open the Mid-City station in 1996. The homes condemned for freeway construction eventually were demolished and the freeway section opened in 2001. That year also marked completion of the City Heights Urban Village project, with a new park, library, elementary school, community college, housing and retail mall all near the police station. In Rolando Park, south of University Avenue and bordering La Mesa, the Salvation Army Ray and Joan Kroc Corps Community Center opened in 2002 with a gymnasium, library, community meeting rooms, swimming pools, ball fields, ice rink and other facilities.

"Things changed a lot," Duran said. "Slowly it's headed in the right direction."

The head of one agency that has played a role in Mid-City redevelopment agreed.

"There've been a few bumps in the road but I think it's continually improving," said Jay Powell, executive director of the City Heights Community Development Corp.
The development agency's purpose, Powell said, is to build and manage quality rental housing. It has also sponsored police-landlord-tenant meetings, held neighborhood cleanups and operated computer centers for young people until it ran out of funding this year.

"My sense of it is, you have to continue to make those investments. I think it can slip back faster than you can imagine," Powell said.

Not enough police?

Through the different neighborhoods within Mid-City, views vary about the direction things are going.

In Webster, which is bordered by state Route 94 to the south, 42-year resident Lee Wright said crime is less of a problem than speeding cars, lack of parks and poor road maintenance.

Maria Cortez, president of Teralta West Neighborhood Alliance and a computer-lab teacher at Franklin Elementary School, said people still worry about gangs.

"They say they don't feel as safe as they used to," Cortez said. "Parents at Franklin have a lot of concern about crime."

Jim Baross, chairman of the Normal Heights Community Planning Group, said he thinks the city is not investing in enough police to protect residents.

"I think there is a level of deterrence to crime, to have police visible in neighborhoods, and that isn't happening," Baross said. "It starts to hurt a community down the line and we're starting to see that."

Linda Pennington, a 25-year resident of Azalea Park, east of Interstate 805, said, "I see things as getting better and better."

She is project manager for FaceLift Event, which organizes volunteers to paint, clean up and landscape rundown homes.

Al Stasukevich, 60, moved to the City Heights neighborhood of Cherokee Point, south of University Avenue between Interstate 805 and state Route 15, in 1988.

"Generally, things are way better now, because of partnerships between residents, police and parks and recreation," Stasukevich said.

"I don't sit on my garage roof anymore, taking down license plate numbers and descriptions of people selling drugs in the alley. They aren't there anymore."

Swanger said he believes City Heights is safer than it was 15 years ago and will be even better in five years. He summed up his vision for Mid-City: "The ability to walk down University Avenue at 11 o'clock at night with my family, with no gun. That's my goal."
1. San Diego police service Officer Hung Nguyen (left) interviewed Oanh Hoang Nguyen, who was holding her son Jimmy, in the conference room at the San Diego Police Department's storefront in City Heights.

2. San Diego police Sgt. Ernesto Servin responded to reports of a fight on 54th Street in Mid-City. The division has the highest rate of domestic violence and the largest portion of gang-related violence in the city.

3. Mid-City Division demographics -- RACE -- AGE -- EDUCATION -- HOUSEHOLDS -- CRIME

4. Muktar Hirsi (left) and Asad Mohamed, both police service officers, worked at the front desk of an SDPD storefront in City Heights.

5. Mid-City police station -- San Diego Police Department's Mid-City Division

Correction: FOR THE RECORD A story on the front page of Our San Diego on Jan. 31 about the Mid-City police division incorrectly identified gang Lt. Jorge Duran as a sergeant. The Union-Tribune regrets the error. (Feb. 9, 2008, CZ-2)