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## 'We haven't given up on it yet': Antioch, residents show resilience in beleaguered Sycamore area

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### ANTIOCH

On the last day of March, Arianna Rivers sat atop an air-conditioning unit in front of her apartment, munching on a sandwich with her sister, cousin and 2-year-old daughter.

A minivan pulled up to the Sycamore Drive complex. From the back seat, a man stuck out a gun and started shooting.

Rivers said her cousin instinctively hustled her into their home, but her daughter was left outside. To Rivers' relief, the toddler was not hit by the gunfire, which she believes was meant for a neighbor.

"It's just "... scary," she said.

Neighbor Andrewnetia Marion calls the area a "black hole" that attracts crime. Since moving to the area in March, she said, there have been four shootings near her home.

"If I had the money to move, I would," she said.

There have been several attempts to rehabilitate the area over the years, many of them carefully planned. But the longevity of those plans was derailed by dwindling resources and turnover in both residents and property ownership.

That hasn't discouraged people from continuing to try.

"We haven't given up on it yet," said Todd Greisen,

community manager for Contra Loma Estates.

"I'd say 90 percent of the people here are good, hardworking people. There are just a few thugs terrorizing a bunch of good people," added David Rubio, neighborhood watch co-block captain for the Riverstone apartments.

The neighborhood

connected by Sycamore Drive is Antioch's densest in two significant ways. According to police data, 3 percent of the population is housed in the burg that covers a mere third of a square mile, but it accounts for 15 percent of the city's violent crime.

In a one-week stretch in early April, five shootings wounded three people, including a 19-year-old man paralyzed after being shot multiple times and a 23-year-old man shot in the neck. Police said those injuries were an anomaly for the neighborhood, where gunfire -- much of it aimless and meant to sow fear -- has become the status quo.

"There's a shooting every day in this area," Detective Jimmy Wisecarver said. "If nobody gets hit, no one calls."

Pretty soon, one resident said, the street's reputation for violence begets more violence.

"Since the area is known for crime and people hear about it, they come over here. It's comfortable because crime attracts crime," said Jason, a 13-year Contra Loma Estates resident who did not want his last name published to protect his privacy.

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officers from the beat over the past three years, interim police Chief Allan Cantando said. So, in September, police began dispatching special patrol teams to sweep through for drugs and weapons.

On a patrol in late April, a team scoured the neighborhood from dusk into the late night looking for dealers.

Early on, the team searched a man standing along a street behind a complex in the 1600 block of Sycamore -- the site of multiple shootings -- after spotting what looked like a marijuana joint in his ear. The man begrudgingly consented as residents gathered in front of an adjacent building to watch, many with similar faces of disapproval.

"Why you got to check me though? You can't search me!" contested the man, who was eventually let go.

On Lemontree Way, police caught up with a bicyclist who had been riding in alleys between buildings. They found bullets on him, and detained him while they searched the surrounding area for a gun.

Alleyways in the Sycamore neighborhood, along with open carports and exterior laundry rooms, provide nooks and crannies that make it a challenge to spot drug deals, police said. Sycamore Drive itself has become a thoroughfare that out-of-town visitors use as a drive-thru for buys, said acting Capt. Leonard Orman.

Turf wars among out-of-town dealers -- who have divided up the neighborhood -- account for a lot of local violence, Orman said. Those factions comprise dealers from San Francisco, Richmond, Vallejo, Oakland and Pittsburg, he said.

The community knows it can't rely on police alone, so neighborhood and faith-based groups are banding together in hopes of changing the area.

The homeowners association for the 328-unit Contra Loma Estates subdivision recently installed six security cameras and has a private security company. Greisen said six more cameras will be installed over the next two years.

Aside from the hard measures aimed at reducing crime, Contra Loma Estates plans to have more social activities, such as a community garden and a children's playground.

If we show there are more good people than bad people, they'll want to go somewhere else," Greisen told about 16 homeowners at an April neighborhood watch meeting.

Easier said than done, Rubio said.

"If you rent, then you think the landlord is responsible. If you're an owner, you think the city's responsible. That's the saddest part; everybody should be working together," Rubio said. "Home is what you make it."

The Rev. Nicolas Alexander of Do the Word Ministries said he has been working with city and county elected leaders to find job-training opportunities and turn a rundown tennis court at Contra Loma Park into a basketball court.

"A lot of the youth here complain that they don't have anything to do. Idle minds are the devil's workshop," he said.

Greisen has noticed a different type of investor owner in the area since the recession.

"Investors were acquiring properties to flip them. Now, they are buying to create a monthly cash flow, and seem much more concerned about the type of renter they get," he said.

The area of apartments, duplexes and fourplexes, developed in the late 1960s, was the primary market for first-time homebuyers in the city, said Ralph Garrow Jr., who developed it along with his father

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According to the 2010 American Community Survey data, about 70 percent of the 1,328 occupied homes and apartments in the Sycamore neighborhood are rentals.

The conventional wisdom, Garrow said, was that once prices skyrocketed, homeowners either sold at a profit, rented, or the properties were purchased by out-of-town landlords.

The neighborhood's reputation prompted residents east of L Street to rename their segment of Sycamore Drive to William Reed Drive in 1995. Their complaints included difficulties cashing checks and getting food delivered to their homes. Most local pizzerias do not deliver to Sycamore.

On their patrol of Sycamore last month, the officers went door-to-door interviewing neighbors, with one resident voicing his thoughts through the iron security door in front of his apartment.

"It's like any urban city. Always the same," he said. "I don't go outside."

Seeing the extra officers in the neighborhood didn't buoy his spirits.

An employee at the local convenience store was heartened by the presence.

"It's bad here," he said. "But we've got to be here. It's a family business."

In all, the night was calm. Among the larger seizures was meth paraphernalia taken from a probationer along with a set of shaved keys that police believe were used to burglarize older vehicles.

But that lack of action in some ways is the intended effect.

"Before, it was fish in a barrel," Wisecarver said. "In no time at all, we had guns, rocks, eight in custody. They were completely shocked that we were out here. Guys had gotten so bold they didn't hide their dope.

"More and more we have to chase these guys down. They're on the lookout, but we're not making their job easier."