The Storm This Time: an Outburst of Crime

New Orleans' Central City, which was spared some flooding, has more residents than before -- but among them are 'the ones you don't want.'

Los Angeles Times

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June 23, 2006

NEW ORLEANS - As cars trundle through a maze of narrow potholed residential streets, they are followed by the watchful eyes of youths gathered on corners outside small shops and on stoops of dilapidated buildings and houses.

Two miles from the downtown New Orleans business district, the Central City neighborhood has long been the scene of drug traffickers' turf wars, but since Hurricane Katrina, it has emerged as the epicenter of an increase in crime.

Gov. Kathleen Babineaux Blanco dispatched 100 Louisiana National Guard members and 50 state troopers to New Orleans on Tuesday after five teenagers were shot to death here last weekend. Another youth was slain in the same area and a second critically wounded Tuesday.

There have been 54 homicides in New Orleans since the beginning of the year, 37 of them since April 1. About a quarter of the homicides were in Central City, according to police.

A large part of the neighborhood escaped the flooding that ravaged most of New Orleans, so it was inhabitable much sooner than other neighborhoods. Although the overall population in New Orleans is down by more than half, community leaders estimate that Central City's population has swelled from around 19,000 residents pre-Katrina to between 25,000 and 27,000 today.
Jim Singleton, a former City Council member who grew up there, attributed some of the neighborhood's current problems to newcomers and outsiders who use Central City as a drive-through drug mart.

"Central City gets a bad name because people bring their dirty linen into our area and they want to wash it in our area," said Singleton.

But there were troublemakers who terrorized the neighborhood before the storm, and Singleton said they are "the ones you don't want to come back. But they are the ones with the resources."

"The thugs came back first to take advantage of other people," said Craig Cuccia, executive director of Cafe Reconcile, a nonprofit group that provides young people with on-the-job experience in restaurants.

Multicolored, box-shaped wooden shanties, abandoned since the storm, line block after block of Central City, together with vacant lots.

On other streets, close-standing, dilapidated shotgun-style homes are perched on raised brick piers, with front porches and stoops that jut out against the sidewalk or street.

Nearby are sprawling barracks-style tenements that today stand empty, windows broken and boarded up. C.J. Pete and B.W. Cooper, two such multistory public housing complexes, have been scheduled by the federal housing authority for demolition. For now, however, they make attractive lairs for illicit activities and squatters, residents said.

On LaSalle Street, the once-famous Dew Drop Inn and Hotel, which hosted stars like Ray Charles during the days of segregation, is a derelict shell next to an abandoned hip-hop fashion shop and a shuttered grocery store.
Winnie Rainey, 43, a cook at Cafe Reconcile in Central City, said: "The gangsters have nothing to live for. All they know is to sit on the corner and sling dope. They can't go and sit inside and have a meal and watch TV like normal children, so they go out on the street corner."

Stanley Meyers, director of the Central City Housing Development Corp., said that before the storm, there were at least three high schools in Central City.

Today, they are all closed, and the only public education facility for children is an elementary school.

Playgrounds have become trailer parks. And the neighborhood's few parks - grassy fields devoid of trees, flowers or benches - have become off-limits for leisure, community leaders said, because drug dealers and gangsters had made them their domain.

Teenagers and young adults gathered on the streets of Central City said they had nowhere else to go and nothing else to do.

"We just be chilling," said Dwayne Holmes, a heavysset 16-year-old who sat on a stoop outside a house near the Discount Supermarket. "We don't be selling nothing. We just be hanging on the corner."

"You don't have to be selling nothing to be sitting in front of the store," an indignant Eric Johnson, 18, hastened to add. "It's just a misconception. That's how society feel about you."

Holmes and Johnson were joined by four other youths, all dressed in black pants and white shirts or T-shirts. Their chatter was constantly interrupted by the rap lyrics and buzz of their cellphones.
The teenagers said they attended McMain High School, a magnet school outside of Central City. They said they were familiar with the crime epidemic but it didn't scare them.

"I'm not afraid; been around too long to be scared," said Johnson.

A few blocks away at the corner of Oretha Castle Haley Boulevard and Jackson Avenue, a young man who gave his name as Derrick Sam sat perched on the curb.

He said he and his friends had no choice but to hang out at the street corner each day.

"They took our park and put trailers in it," said Sam, a small-framed 16-year-old with short twisted hair, referring to A.L. Davis Park, Central City's primary recreation center before Katrina. "You ain't got basketball, football or swimming. That's it. Nowhere to go."

Central City was settled by Irish, German, Italian and Jewish immigrants in the 1800s. It gradually became racially mixed, but today most of its residents are African American, according to city officials.

Meyers, of the Housing Development Corp., recalled that when he was growing up in Central City, many of the neighborhood's black families were homeowners who held steady jobs as teachers, longshoremen and postal workers.

White flight to the suburbs began in the 1970s. In the 1980s, many financially able black families followed, and the neighborhood rapidly declined.

By the 1990s, blighted properties became the area's defining feature.
Neighborhood elders remember how in the old days, many black-owned insurance institutions and healthcare centers specifically for African Americans once called Central City home.

Its commercial corridor, along historic Dryades Street, today renamed Oretha Castle Haley Boulevard, was a thriving, racially mixed business district.

Businessman Sharif Nadir, 59, who was raised in the C.J. Pete housing projects, lamented the get-rich-quick, "don't want to work for nothing" attitude of many of the neighborhood's youngsters, which he attributed largely to poor upbringing.

"I don't think it's a lack of opportunity," said Nadir, whose day care center on Oretha C. Haley Boulevard has been burglarized three times in recent years. "The old had the will, but no way. This generation has the way, but not will.

"This generation has misplaced priorities."

And they lack respect for their elders, said community organizer and youth worker Bertrand Butler.

"Back then, neighbors had your mother's permission to spank your behind," said Butler. "And a person a certain age could discipline you.

Even the drug dealers had discipline. They wouldn't sell in front of you.

"Now, they call the kids to them."
During the day, the blast of boom-box music permeates the air on certain neighborhood side streets. At night, it is the sound of gunfire that often dominates, residents said.

"They even shoot at the cops," Jeffery Vannor, 17, said of the neighborhood gangsters. "There's no respect."

New Orleans Mayor C. Ray Nagin has proposed reintroducing a citywide juvenile curfew, and city officials have begun work on a holding facility for violators.

Anxious about the effect that the surge in violence and the National Guard deployment might have on visitors, including attendees of this weekend's first major convention in the city since Katrina, tourism officials have distributed hundreds of fliers to hotels, assuring tourists that only certain areas of the city should be considered no-go zones.

The one-page advisory also states that the presence of the National Guard in outlying and sparsely populated neighborhoods will allow New Orleans police to enhance protection in tourism areas that already enjoyed a "good safety record."

Developers have been vying for land in the Central City, whose proximity to downtown New Orleans makes it prime property, said Audrey Browder, chair of the Central City Partnership, one group involved in efforts to revive the economically depressed neighborhood.

A team of developers recently won a bitter battle over 5 acres of Central City land, where it plans to build a condominium complex of about 600 moderately priced units.

The recent crime surge "is going to cause a lot of people to think about whether to come back to this area," said Browder.