

THE NEEDLE

AND THE DAMAGE DONE

As Beach Flats heroin trade grows unchecked, violence and crime are on the rise

By **JASON SCHULTZ**

SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

The story of Jose Avalos, shot to death in a gunfight with police, is tragic but typical, police say.

Develop an addiction to heroin, and there's a good chance it will kill you.

But that can hold true for places, too, and police say they're worried the side effects of rampant heroin dealing in the Beach Flats neighborhood, already a major problem, is spilling into nearby areas.

Police point to these incidents:

■ In May, a man was stabbed in front of a downtown bookstore. Police say the attacker accused his victim of dealing bad heroin to a friend, who was found a day earlier in a portable toilet, dead of a heroin overdose.

■ Residents on the south end of Pacific Avenue complain of prostitutes turning tricks to buy heroin.

■ Police say there has been a rash of auto burglaries on both the Eastside and Westside. They suspect junkies are stealing car stereos to get cash for their next fix.

"People don't understand you can trace so much violent activity back to drugs, especially heroin," said police Sgt. Steve Clark. "These gangs are financing themselves by selling

Heroin's toll

4 Homicides this year in Santa Cruz.

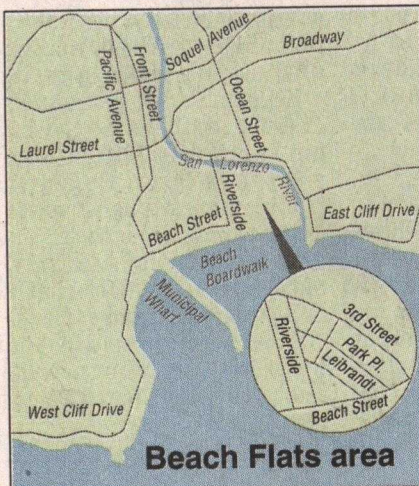
26 Average number of overdose deaths every year in Santa Cruz.

\$1,000 The amount an addict must steal to support a typical \$100 daily habit.

heroin, and they are buying guns and they are shooting and stabbing each other. A heroin addict has to steal \$1,000 to support his habit, and he's not stealing in the Beach Flats, he's breaking into cars on the Westside stealing car stereos."

County health officials back up police claims that heroin use is rampant locally. Ambulances have been called out for 936 drug overdoses in the past four years, said Betsy McCarty, public health chief, and the vast

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JoAnn Kolonick/Sentinel



Dan Coyro/Sentinel file

People pause at a memorial to a Beach Flats man killed in a shootout with police. Authorities say the heroin trade flourishes in the poor neighborhood because residents either tolerate it or are too afraid to challenge the dealers.



Heroin: Beach Flats drug trade becomes more brazen, violent

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majority of those were from heroin. "It's a big problem," she said.

A road to violence

Avalos, 27, a Mexican immigrant, took classes at Cabrillo College, worked hard, had a daughter and tutored neighborhood kids in math, said Sarah Young, a Santa Cruz teacher who knew him.

But he also had a problem, said his former attorney, public defender Lisa McCamey. Avalos had been addicted to heroin since his teens, and little by little it took over his life.

He began to hang with gang members. He tangled with the law. He was eventually convicted of several drug and violent crimes, and he was once deported, only to work his way north again, back to Santa Cruz.

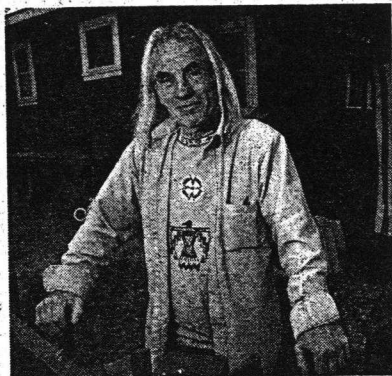
McCamey guesses it was probably Avalos' heroin addiction that had him sitting in an abandoned car in a Beach Flats alley on Aug. 1, with heroin needles and a loaded .45-caliber pistol, when police officer John Pursley approached him.

Within seconds, police say, Avalos had shot Pursley in the side. Pursley and his partner returned 25 shots and killed Avalos.

It was certainly the most eye-opening violence in the troubled neighborhood in recent months, but it was no isolated occurrence. There have been three homicides in the 9-acre Beach Flats neighborhood so far this year, and police say each death stems from the area's growing heroin trade. It's either gang members fighting for control of the trade or junkies violently lashing out, police say.

■ A battle over the heroin trade is suspected in the May 30 slaying of 23-year-old Pablo Lopez Jarquin, who police say was a member of the Brown Pride Sureño street gang. He was shot once in the back of the head at Rosy's Taqueria just around the corner from where Avalos was shot. Another alleged gang member, 19-year-old Gabriel Alexander Garcia, is charged with participating in the killing; another man is sought.

■ On Jan. 1, 33-year-old Miguel Delgado Mendoza was found shot to death in a ditch between Bixby and Canfield streets, just blocks from Beach Flats. Heroin and cash were found in his pockets. Police believe Mendoza was killed by a gang trying to control the



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Beach Flats resident Phil Baer has seen the drug dealing first-hand.

section of Riverside Avenue and Leibbrandt Avenue.

Longtime Beach Flats resident Phil Baer said that's for an obvious reason: addicts don't want to turn off Riverside Avenue and onto any of the nearby dead-end streets, where they would be at the mercy of the dealers if anything went wrong with the transaction.

Addicts usually frequent the same dealer. A dealer gives his customers codes, and an addict will page the dealer with one code to identify themselves and another to denote how much heroin they want.

Dealing is not a one-man operation, though. There's multiple people involved so nobody is in too much danger when the police show up.

Several men act as lookouts, yelling out warnings if they see approaching police or rival gang members. One man is approached by the customer, Clark said, but the set-up man does not have any drugs, money or guns. He sends the customer to a second man, who might take the money and send the customer to another person who actually has the heroin.

Even the actual dealer rarely keeps more than a few small packets of the drug on his person, Clark said. The drugs are hidden under an unsuspecting resident's home or in a bush, where the dealer can get quick access to the packets but not be connected to them if police catch him.

It's the same thing with weapons, police say. Guns are stashed where a dealer can get quick access without the risk of a possession charge.

Neighborhood residents back up police accounts.

In August, property owner Dave

go down there and arrest everybody, it wouldn't do any good. More people would come in."

The problem is complex, police say. Beach Flats is a poor neighborhood, and many of the dealers are illegal immigrants who don't have many opportunities to make the kind of money they do selling heroin.

UC Santa Cruz sociology Professor Craig Reinerman, who has studied drug policy for 30 years, agreed the main cause for drugs and gangs and violence is poverty.

Many of the Beach Flats residents have fled destitution in Mexico and El Salvador. Reinerman said many of the immigrants have no real shot at the American Dream and they know it.

"They have no life except for an endless string of minimum-wage jobs — jobs without dignity," he said. "Their only real avenue toward upward mobility is drugs, and a minority of the poor struggling population take that avenue."

Reinerman said the immigrants who are not involved in the drug trade carry extra burdens. Not only are they oppressed by poverty, they live with the daily threat of violence because of the drug dealing that surrounds them.

Clean-up efforts

The Police Department established a specific Beach Flats patrol-car beat eight years ago.

Police Chief Steve Belcher said he has pushed for years for the resources to start a foot patrol beat in Beach Flats, too, but has had no success.

In the past, city officials have said it's up to Belcher to set his priorities and decide where to assign his officers. Mayor Christopher Krohn said this week, however, he supports establishing a foot patrol in the neighborhood, and he thinks that the time is right for the city to help Belcher start that patrol.

"If the funds aren't there, I think we should find the funds," Krohn said. "I think it's that important."

Belcher said the car patrol has helped but is not solving the underlying social problems that lead to drug dealing in the first place.

"Are things where we want them to be? No. Do we still have a lot of things that need improving? Yes," Belcher said. "It has gotten better but you have to understand that it's a very long yard stick."

The city, meanwhile, has done some

quickly in the neighborhood. Belcher said he is confronted by new faces at every community meeting he attends.

That makes building relationships with residents — a vital piece in cleaning up any neighborhood — especially difficult.

Officers say many residents clam up after a shooting or other violence. One reason is that many residents are not in the country legally, so they are afraid to call attention to themselves.

The U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service does not do random sweeps of illegal immigrants anymore, said spokeswoman Sharon Rummery and has not done any operations in the Santa Cruz area for some time. And even when they did do them in the late '80s and early '90s, many residents protested, urging the INS to stay away.

Caught in the middle

Asuncion Dorres, 32, is a carpenter from Mexico who has lived in Beach Flats for 10 years. He said he has adopted a live-and-let-live policy with the gangs, not because he endorses what they do, but out of a feeling of fear and helplessness.

"If I see something, unless it's a shooting, I wouldn't call police," Dorres said. "I try to live. I just want to work and lead a peaceful life. I don't want to be shot."

Thomas, the Beach Flats property owner, said the drug dealers have intimidated much of the immigrant community into silence, but he added that he also sees a disturbing culture of tolerance for the drug dealers from some family members and neighbors.

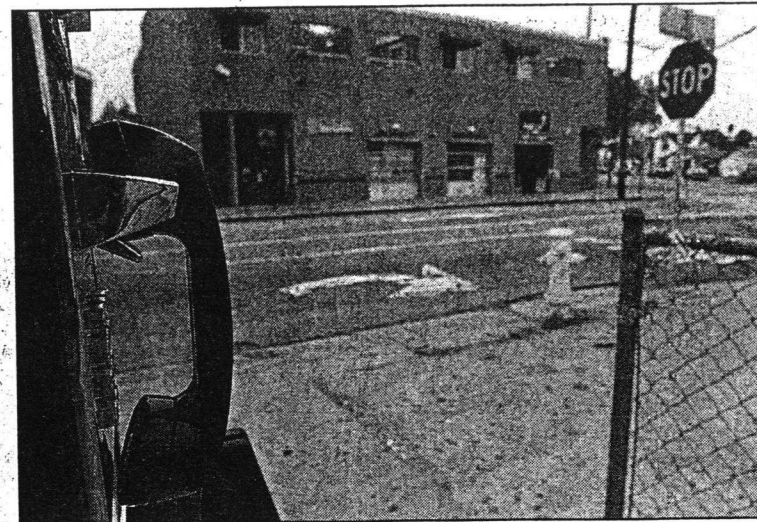
"It's like a wink, wink, and I wish you wouldn't, but look-the-other-way kind of thing," Thomas said. "It has to come from within each family down here to say this isn't cool. If every family came out on their doorstep and told these guys to get the hell out of here, imagine what kind of neighborhood this could be."

Problems leak out

But the damage the drug dealing causes is clearly not isolated to the Beach Flats neighborhood, and that has police worried.

In May, police charged transient Michael McClelland with stabbing another man in a fight near the Borders bookstore, because McClelland thought the man had sold his friend a bad batch of heroin.

Residents on the south end of Pacif-



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

A pay phone at Riverside and Second streets is used by drug dealers.

'Black tar' heroin offers a cheap, potent high

By JASON SCHULTZ
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

SANTA CRUZ — Manny Solano was a rookie beat cop in Santa Cruz in the late 1980s. He worked the Beach Flats area, and watched as heroin use in the city grew.

Solano, now a Watsonville police captain, was witnessing the start of an alarming boost in heroin use statewide over the past decade, according to the federal Drug Enforcement Administration. The spike followed a decade of declining use in the late 1970s and 1980s, DEA spokesman Richard Meyer said.

The feds point to a particular type of heroin, a refined form of opium, as the culprit of California's growing problem: black tar.

Meyer said while most heroin sold on the East Coast is highly refined white powder, called "China white" on the streets because it mostly comes from Asian countries, most of the heroin sold in Northern California is a dark, sticky, unrefined heroin called "black tar."

Black tar is mostly made by drug cartels in Mexico, Meyer said, and smuggled into California by low-paid, often illegal immigrants, called "mules" by drug smugglers.

Because black tar heroin is so cheap, with kilograms selling for as little as \$1,500 in Northern California and single hits selling for as little as \$5 on the streets, according to the U.S. Department of Justice, teens and sometimes even pre-teens are buying it.

Younger addicts are in part of what is fueling the demand for heroin.

Santa Cruz County has seen that

overdose in Watsonville. He had been struggling with addiction for years. In September 2000, 16-year-old Dustin Arwine of Aptos also overdosed on heroin.

In response to their son's death, Tyler's parents, Tom and Jackie McClellan, helped set up what has come to be known as Tyler House, a recovery unit geared to young users.

The Tyler House reports that in the past two years, it has treated 23 juvenile heroin addicts, 85 percent of the total number of juvenile drug treatment cases the 15-bed facility has handled.

"Kids are using it because it's cheaper than any other drug, and it's easier to get," Jackie McClellan said. "We have a nice home. Tyler had nice clothes, and we drive nice cars. But you should have seen the way he would look when he would come home. His clothes were all unwashed for days. He was sleeping on the streets. That's where it leads you."

Police Sgt. Steve Clark said heroin dealing and addiction is proving to be deadly in Santa Cruz County.

Four homicides in the Beach Flats area so far this year have been linked to the drug, Clark said. In addition, at least one person dies of a heroin overdose in the city every two weeks, Clark said. In September four men died of heroin overdoses in two weeks.

Clark said a big part of the problem is the lack of consistency in the strength of the heroin being sold on the streets. Many dealers "cut" the heroin with dangerous chemicals. In other instances, doses are close

with participating in the killing; another man is sought.

■ On Jan. 1, 33-year-old Miguel Delgado Mendoza was found shot to death in a ditch between Bixby and Canfield streets, just blocks from Beach Flats. Heroin and cash were found in his pockets. Police believe Mendoza was killed by a gang trying to control the drug trade in that area, Clark said. No arrests have been made.

■ Also in January, police charged two Kaye Street residents, 30-year-old Paula Burnson and her 43-year-old boyfriend, Robert Charles Beckwith, with strangling Burnson's mother, and trying to burn and dump her body near Boulder Creek. Clark said both defendants were heavy heroin users, and that the slaying of 64-year-old Elvira Burnson of Gilroy was motivated to get control of a trust fund so the couple could continue to support their habits.

In September, meanwhile, a man who confronted a group of men he believed to be drug dealers near Third Street just outside Beach Flats was chased by the men and stabbed repeatedly in the leg with an ice pick.

The heroin trade

In Santa Cruz, the drug trade is controlled mainly by gangs that make their money selling small rocks of black tar heroin, Clark said.

They sell to high school kids, homeless addicts, businessmen and anyone else who drives down Riverside Avenue in search of an 0.08 gram hit of the drug, which sells for \$20 to \$40.

The trade is actually pretty sophisticated, and is run on pay phones, cell phones and pagers, Clark said.

Most of the dealing — and resulting gang violence — centers on the inter-

where the dealer can get quick access to the packets but not be connected to them if police catch him.

It's the same thing with weapons, police say. Guns are stashed where a dealer can get quick access without the risk of a possession charge.

Neighborhood residents back up police accounts.

In August, property owner Dave Thomas was renovating a home on Raymond Street, one block from where the police shooting occurred, when one of his workers found a loaded .22-caliber pistol someone had hidden in the crawl space under the house.

Thomas said it's not the first time he has found guns or drugs on his properties.

During a tour of the Raymond Street house, Thomas pointed to a grate he had bolted to the house. He used industrial bolts because drug dealers kept prying off the grate to stash drugs inside. At another house he owns nearby, he pointed to missing siding, where he said a drug dealer had stuck a stash of heroin, then ripped the siding off to get to the drugs in the middle of the night.

Thomas said he had to remove some brick walls near his homes after he discovered someone — he suspects dealers and addicts — kept breaking the bricks loose to use in fights.

"Everything we build has to be planned around this," Thomas said. "This is a battle zone."

A bigger problem

Police say they are trying to clean up the streets, but admit results have been mixed.

"We can't arrest this problem away," Clark said. "Even if we could

Belcher said the car patrol has helped but is not solving the underlying social problems that lead to drug dealing in the first place.

"Are things where we want them to be? No. Do we still have a lot of things that need improving? Yes," Belcher said. "It has gotten better but you have to understand that it's a very long yard stick."

The city, meanwhile, has done some things to help. It established the Beach Flats Community Center in 1992 to help children in the area and to bridge the gap between immigrant residents and city government by providing social services and translation.

Center director Reyna Ruiz said children growing up in the neighborhood feel a great deal of pressure because of the gangs and heroin they see around them.

"We try to provide positive mentoring and a lot of outings," Ruiz said of the center. "The center is really a pretty safe and neutral space. People are very respectful of the center."

Also, for three years police have been funneling an \$18,000-a-year state grant into youth outreach efforts in the Beach Flats and lower Ocean Street areas.

Last year, police teamed with the county narcotics team and agents from the federal Drug Enforcement Administration on a major surveillance operation in Beach Flats that led to dozens of arrests. In November, the county's drug task force arrested seven people on suspicion of dealing after finding a dealer's pager in the Beach Flats area and setting up deals with people who were paging the number.

Belcher said getting help from the community has been an uphill battle. A big difficulty is that tenants change

But the damage the drug dealing causes is clearly not isolated to the Beach Flats neighborhood, and that has police worried.

In May, police charged transient Michael McClelland with stabbing another man in a fight near the Borders bookstore, because McClelland thought the man had sold his friend a bad batch of heroin.

Residents on the south end of Pacific Avenue, meanwhile, are complaining about prostitutes near Laurel Avenue turning tricks for cash to buy heroin.

Santa Cruz also have seen a rash of car burglaries in residential neighborhoods and in downtown parking garages in recent years, most of which police attribute to addicts supporting drug habits.

Clark, of the Police Department, said many addicts steal or engage in prostitution to support their habit.

A typical heroin addict has about a \$100-a-day habit, said Clark. He said that for every \$10 of stolen property a person can usually get about \$1 of value on the black market, so to get \$100 to support a habit, an addict needs to steal about \$1,000 worth of car stereos or other property.

Because black tar heroin is so cheap, with kilograms selling for as little as \$1,500 in Northern California and single hits selling for as little as \$5 on the streets, according to the U.S. Department of Justice, teens and sometimes even pre-teens are buying it.

Younger addicts are in part of what is fueling the demand for heroin.

Santa Cruz County has seen that first-hand. In April 1998, 15-year-old Tyler McClelland died of a heroin

addiction, at least one person dies of a heroin overdose in the city every two weeks, Clark said. In September four men died of heroin overdoses in two weeks.

Clark said a big part of the problem is the lack of consistency in the strength of the heroin being sold on the streets. Many dealers "cut" the heroin with dangerous chemicals. In other instances, doses are close to pure, which can also be fatal.

Police also see a connection between gang bangers in the Beach Flats selling heroin to businessmen and addicts, and behavior problems the city faces in the downtown area.

Clark said many city residents have a permissive attitude toward marijuana dealing downtown, but most of those dealers are taking the money they make selling pot to hippies and going down to the Beach Flats to buy heroin from gang members, who then take that money and buy guns and drugs for themselves, he said.

Police worry the cycle is getting harder and harder to break.

Two months ago, police were inves-

tigating gang members in the Beach Flats area when they saw a 9-year-old boy arrange a heroin deal. When officers stopped the boy, he not only swore at them, officers discovered he was carrying a switchblade knife, Clark said.

That is how many of the dealers start, Clark said, as young boys working as go-betweens for dealers. By their teen years, they are dealing, packing guns instead of knives.

"These are people that are in perpetual desperation," Reinerman said.

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