

# Residents, merchants feeling squeezed by drug trade on south Minneapolis block

Residents say they need more police help at E. 29th St. and Bloomington Av.

By Libor Jany (<http://www.startribune.com/libor-jany/219430401/>) Star Tribune |

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The saying goes, among those who live or work along the 2900 block of Bloomington Avenue, that you should never mow your lawn without first checking for needles.

Teddi Crowe knows it to be true.

He's gotten used to the open-air drug market that operates more or less around the clock on this stretch in south Minneapolis' Midtown Phillips neighborhood, frustrating residents and business owners alike.

"They're like zombies — you can't talk to them," he said of the junkies who shuffle past the Red Lake Nation Embassy, where he works as an outreach coordinator. "I tell them: 'You know, the Creator didn't put you here for you to be like this.'"

Determined to slow the area's drug traffic, neighbors have started to fight back, picking up discarded needles, shooing away dealers and hanging signs that read, "We care."

At the same time, police have stepped up their patrols there. They also parked a mobile camera at the northeast corner of Bloomington and E. 29th Street — an unblinking electronic eye that they hope will make dealers think twice before setting up shop there.

Every now and then, a black-and-white police SUV will post up across the street, or in a grassy lot nearby, sending troublemakers scattering. But, he said, they usually only migrate a few blocks away, where they wait out the police before returning. And the trouble starts all over again, he said.

For Crowe and others, the struggle to reclaim this block symbolizes the depth of the opioid epidemic that is gripping parts of Minneapolis, particularly the American Indian community.

On a recent day, Crowe sat in the office of the center's director, Muriel Dickenson, airing his frustrations with what he saw as the lack of adequate police protection. Dickenson nodded along, saying her bigger concern was the safety of the neighborhood kids who frequent a playground that sits between the center and a neighboring apartment complex. And, she said, some fearful community elders have stopped showing up for appointments at the center, billed as a one-stop shop of services for city-dwelling members of the Red Lake Band of Chippewa Indians.

"We have elders going in here, we have kids coming in here — we don't want riffraff coming in here," said Dickenson, who like others has started packing the overdose-reversal drug, naloxone, in her purse.

In some ways, the surrounding neighborhood's problems extend beyond the area drug trade. The median household income for a family of four is \$50,954, while more than a third of households are considered "cost burdened," meaning they spend more than 45% of their income on rent and transportation. Prostitution is also rampant, which residents say attracts a changing cast of seedy characters to the block.

Council Member Alondra Cano suspects that at least some of the block's problems are due to its proximity to the Midtown Greenway, which has remained a magnet for drug addicts and the homeless, who find relative safety in the sunken bike path.

“It’s a very disempowered block,” she said of the area, which is home to many East African and Latino working-class families. “It’s a lot of renters, it’s a lot of non-English speakers, and it’s a lot of immigrant families.”

In addition to working to expand affordable housing options in the area, Cano said she has asked the city’s regulatory services division to lean on area landlords to fix up neglected properties.

Julie Bauch, Hennepin County’s opioid response coordinator, argued that the opioid epidemic needs to be viewed through a “public health lens.” While overdose deaths locally have leveled off since their peak in 2016, drug prevention efforts are complicated by a shortage of treatment programs to serve those with an opioid-use disorder, Bauch said.

“We look at prevention, and that’s really the goal of public health, to look at these problems, and try to get ahead of them and to prevent them from getting worse,” she said.

Agencies such as the Red Door Clinic in Minneapolis — which recently received a \$250,000 state grant to hire more staff and increase its hours of service — have tried to fill in some of the gaps in service, by doing needle exchanges and distributing naloxone kits.

Police said they have noticed a jump in drug complaints from area merchants and residents in recent weeks.

Suspected narcotics activity has shifted from nearby light-rail stations to the “core” of the Phillips neighborhood, law enforcement officials say. Court documents filed earlier this year show that several recent police operations have focused on the area; in one, authorities began undercover surveillance of a restaurant around the corner from the Red Lake center that they say is being used to traffic in cocaine, the filings show.

Last month, Minneapolis police, working in concert with state and federal authorities, made three “historic” drug seizures that they say put a significant dent in the city’s drug market, helping to slow a pace of four overdoses a day — if only temporarily.

After averaging 43 overdoses a week over a six-week span earlier this summer, the number dropped to 27 and 31 after the two large seizures, before jumping to 41 and 34 respectively in the past two weeks, according to a police bulletin. Through July 29, the city had registered 967 suspected drug overdoses in 2019 — 42 of which were fatal — eclipsing last year’s total of 954 calls with four months still left in the year.

Over the past few months, many residents say the situation at 29th and Bloomington has gotten almost unbearable.

“These last couple of months have been really challenging for the neighborhood,” said Pastor Patrick Cabello Hansel, of nearby St. Paul’s Lutheran Church.

While he understands the arguments for investing in long-term solutions to the opioid epidemic, he says he thinks the push against increasing police patrols ignores the immediate threats to the safety of people living on the block.

“I agree with that theoretically, but I also think the people who suffer from the problem are already vulnerable folks,” he said. Many are immigrants, he added, wary of calling police even in a time of crisis “given some of the rhetoric from the president on down.”

A few weeks ago, tired of ongoing disruptions at the corner, residents held the second of two recent meetings to vent their concerns — and ask for help from city leaders and the police, Cabello Hansel said.

“It moves from corner to corner, but in some ways it’s almost a containment policy — the city contains it here,” he said. “I mean, they wouldn’t allow it downtown or in a wealthier neighborhood.”

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