

SAPD SURVEY: Drug crime a top issue in Beat 34

Community comforted by tight-knit feel

By Jennifer Rios

Sunday, July 24, 2011

SAN ANGELO, Texas — Ernie Acevedo jokes that he lives in the barrio.

His house had bars over the windows when he moved in a few years ago, something that has helped deter burglars.

After moving back to San Angelo after years of youth ministry in Los Angeles, he knows he works with a great bunch of kids at St. Mary's Church.

He's also not blind to the obstacles they face, including drugs, violence and a lack of education on how to avoid those pitfalls.

Every Sunday and Monday, Acevedo meets with anywhere from 20 to 120 middle and high school students. Some are experimenting with drugs and alcohol. Others use such substances to deal with problems at home or in their dating relationships.

"It's sad when a teen comes to you and says they can't get out of a relationship because of abuse," he said.

Most times the youths Acevedo works with confide in him after they've handled their problem.

He can't remember the last time he called police, but the next time he does could be to invite an officer to the weekly sessions.

Like other people who live in Beat 34 — an area in the center of the city that runs south to Country Club Road — Acevedo isn't that concerned or fearful about crime in his neighborhood, according to a recent police satisfaction survey.

The survey, conducted recently by the San Angelo Police Department and Angelo State University's Community Wellness, Engagement and Development program, was meant to give residents a chance to voice their concerns, criticisms and compliments and express what they would like to see in the future.

Responses were broken down into six categories measuring residents' concerns, fears, satisfaction with officers, the department, crime prevention techniques and what services they see as essential.

In Beat 34, response was lower than average, and respondents listed drug-related

crime as their top concern. The neighborhood had the lowest ranking for fear.

St. Mary's employees and parishioners on Friday voiced two theories for the low level of fear, the first being that residents accept that crime exists, and the second that the community is so close-knit that residents don't feel threatened.

Sgt. John E. Rodriguez, a San Angelo police officer who has spent the majority of his career in the neighborhood, thinks both are true.

"I think a lot of that is true. The people who have lived in that area for a long time, the church gives them a strong sense of community," Rodriguez said. "They may see crime. ... They come to accept that it happens."

Rodriguez said he has seen proof of that when dispatched to calls in the area. People mention smaller burglaries — of car batteries or jumper cables — from weeks before. In those cases, reports aren't always filed.

When crime becomes a neighborhood problem, such as a fight spilling out into a front yard, people are more compelled to get police involved.

Crime is "going to happen, and everyone has their own tolerance level," Rodriguez said. "Then they seek help."

Rodriguez and his wife, also a police officer, live in the area and attend Mass at St. Mary's, and people know they can call on either for help. Rodriguez said he likes the direction the department is heading with its community-based policing because he has seen firsthand how important it is to have communication between the department and communities.

The Rev. David Herrera said the relationship between the Police Department and St. Mary's Church, where he celebrates Mass, is a great one.

Several of his parishioners are police officers, he said, but his experiences with the entire department have been positive. The last time the church called the department, it was after someone tried to remove the church's tabernacle.

No one was caught, Herrera said, but police responded immediately and "were very helpful."

According to the survey, the neighborhood's favored crime-prevention techniques include more after-school youth activities and increased police interaction with children.

Realistically, some of the teenagers might "blow off" any lessons police officers may offer, Acevedo said. An attitude of "it'll never happen to me" is common until they find themselves in that situation.

If teens are educated more on drug abuse, violence, date rape, family and domestic abuse, Acevedo said, they'll be better equipped to handle themselves if they are faced with it.

"At least the information will be there for them," he said.