

Haight rocked by three murders in one week



PHOTO: PIA TORELLI

STREET SCENE: Haight Street near Stanyan has long been a gathering spot for homeless people, especially homeless youths. Three murders last month involved homeless people as victims, suspects, or both.

HAIGHT ASHBURY

Tensions between housed and homeless may be a factor, some say

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Since last month, when three people were murdered in the Haight Ashbury within the span of

the murders involved homeless people either as the victim, the suspect, or both, and some residents think the spurt of violence might be the inevitable result of long-festered — and perhaps recently exacerbated — tensions between the people who live in the Haight's streets and parks and those who live in houses and apartments.

"If you have three murders in a week, you have to wonder what's happening," said neighbor and Residents Against Druggies president Joe Konopka. "I don't care who you are. You shouldn't get killed on our sidewalks."

Eloise Magenheimer of the San Francisco Neighborhood Safety Partnership said she thinks the problems stem from a lack of understanding between residents and

homeless youth, whose lives seem to seldom intersect. "There's very little interaction between the two realities," Magenheimer said.

Tensions have built lately, Magenheimer said, as a result of an increased homeless population in the neighborhood and rising frustrations among neighbors in regard to filth and drugs in the area.

Donna Gouse of the Haight Ashbury Neighborhood Council said that though she considers the murders random events, lately there has been much vocalization of the antipathy some residents feel toward homeless youth in the neighborhood. At a recent park station meeting, in fact, some residents complained about the presence of homeless people in Haight Ashbury and even suggested that the city constantly run sprinklers

in the end of Golden Gate Park at Haight and Stanyan streets, a spot where many homeless young people gather, in order to deter homeless people from congregating and sleeping there.

But Gouse, a longtime Haight resident, said she thinks the tension is an old and ongoing problem.

"As long as there will be homelessness in the Haight Ashbury, there will be some antagonism among some residents," Gouse said. "There are people who just want to get homeless people out of the neighborhood."

Ironically, she said, often the people who feel disdain toward homeless young people in the Haight are the same people who

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want to remove from the neighborhood many of the social service agencies that attempt to help them.

Climate of fear

Though the neighborhood has the highest concentration of human services in the city, the organizations don't reach all homeless people in the Haight — many of whom don't seek help. Magenheim said many young people living in the parks are runaways who are so afraid of being sent back to the homes they left that they seldom seek aid. Such fear, she said, recently resulted in the death of a teenage boy, who refused to get treatment for a mouth abscess until his friends took him to the Haight Ashbury Free Clinic; by then the infection had spread through his body. Similarly, she said, homeless teenage girls who are sexually assaulted are reluctant to report the crimes or get medical or psychological treatment because they fear their parents will be contacted.

"Marginalized communities are much more vulnerable to violence," Magenheim said.

Hundreds of people in the Haight go without the shelter, substance-abuse treatment, and mental-health care they need and, in some cases, become hostile and violent, tired of the harassment they endure from police and residents every day. An August Western Addition story on the murders reported that one homeless man considered the homicides "park justice."

But in the midst of drug dealing and use, public urination and defecation, and loitering on sidewalks, some Haight residents and merchants are equally hostile.

"There's definitely a deterioration here," Konopka said. "People see other people defecating on the street, and that's the image they get of Haight Ashbury."

Improvements suggested

To make a dent in the squalor that seems to have overtaken parts of Golden Gate Park, some neighborhood organizations are proposing that the city install free toilets

in parks and hire homeless people to serve as attendants for them, making sure the bathrooms stay clean. Such a move, proponents say, could decrease the amount of human excrement on sidewalks and in parks and would improve life for homeless Haight Ashburians, thus easing tensions all around.

Konopka and other residents have appealed to Mayor Willie Brown to address safety and clean-

liness issues in the neighborhood.

Meanwhile, Magenheim is involved in surveying homeless youth in the Haight in the hope of determining what can be done to help them and to quiet the clash between homeless youth and residents.

"It's a very, very complex issue," she said. "And there's no conversation going on in which solutions can be proposed."