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'Younger and twice as violent'

By [Stephanie Vosk](#)

also by [Jake Berry](#)

STAFF WRITERS

December 14, 2009 2:00 AM

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Four weeks after a triple shooting there, LaVallee saw the police running up and down the street, and she knew this was no celebration.

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It wasn't long ago, the police say, when most of the gunshots heard on the streets of Barnstable were actually fireworks.

But in recent years, those explosives have been replaced with an explosion of youthful violence.

Overall, the number of cases that come through Barnstable County courts – for both adults and juveniles – have decreased steadily in recent years. But the severity of the crimes the police are seeing has reached a new peak.

“There aren't more weapons on the street, but it's more of a different mind-set by the individuals out there. They are certainly more willing to use them,” Barnstable police Chief Paul MacDonald said last month.

In the past three months, Barnstable police have responded to at least three shootings in Hyannis, including October's triple shooting on Nautical Way, all involving younger adults and all thought to be drug-related.

“I had no idea that it was going to be this scary,” said Leslie Mathis, who moved to Hyannis from Pennsylvania four years ago. “I visited up here for many, many years. It's beautiful, and I never realized there was this kind of crime on the Cape.”

In June, a 19-year-old was charged with attempted murder after allegedly stabbing a 20-year-old during an altercation in West Yarmouth, less than a mile from the police station. An 18-year-old was charged with shooting a 19-year-old in Dennis last month.

Authorities across the Cape are trying to find a way to address a societal change that is filtering into their seaside communities.

“There's a lot of younger defendants that come in here that show absolutely no remorse,” said Judge Richard Connon, who retired last week after 19 years on the Superior Court bench, a large part of which he spent in Barnstable. “They don't feel compassion for anybody that is suffering.”



State Police crime scene investigators examine evidence at the scene of a triple shooting at 72 Nautical Way in Hyannis on Oct. 24 this year. (Photo by David Curran)

Eighteen-year-old John Viust was out on bail for drug trafficking charges when the police say he shot a 38-year-old during a dispute on Fresh Holes Road in Hyannis a month ago.

Caleb Greeson was 18 when he was charged with stabbing a 22-year-old to death at a Sagamore Beach gas station last summer.

Mykel Mendes and Kevin Ribeiro were 13 in December 2008 when they were charged with murdering Jordan Mendes, Mykel's 16-year-old half-brother. Local authorities say the case was extreme and

unique in its circumstances for Cape Cod, but some experts argue that, nationally, teen murders are becoming more common.

“Beginning in the mid-1980s, we observed a precipitous increase in murders and other serious crimes committed by 13-, 14-year-old boys and we've really almost had to redefine the lower limit of the violence-prone age group,” said Jack Levin, a professor of sociology and criminology at Northeastern University in Boston.

Although statistics show a decrease in youth crime overall, areas where more people are living in poverty tend to have higher crime rates, Levin said.

Across the Cape, 8.4 percent of residents ages 17 and younger were considered to be living in poverty in 2000, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

But in Hyannis – where much of the violent crime on the Cape has occurred in recent years – more than 22 percent of young people were living in impoverished households, according to a report compiled by the Barnstable County Department of Human Services in 2004.

“If you look at the overall picture ... you might conclude that youth crime is no longer a problem. But if you take into consideration a few variables that divide our communities across the country, you might come up with a different picture,” Levin said.

Gang mentality, in particular, is on the rise, Levin said. And it's that sort of way of thinking, pervasive in pockets of the Cape's youth population, that is the driving force behind much of the crime, some authorities say.

“Everyone kinda wants to make a name for themselves,” said Mashpee police Detective Sgt. Scott Carline. “It seems like the tougher and badder you are, the more street credibility you get.”

'Floor is dropping'

Traditionally, criminologists believed the majority of crimes were committed by perpetrators between the ages of 18 and 24.

But that bracket may be shifting.

“That 18-year-old floor is dropping and younger kids than 18 are now fitting into that demographic who are committing more and more crime,” Cape & Islands District Attorney Michael O'Keefe said. “The 18-year-old of my day is, in terms of criminal activity, probably the equivalent of at least a 16-year-old if not a 15-year-old today.”

In Barnstable, the number of violent crimes spiked in 2008 – numbers are projected to be down a bit this year – but the police believe much of the crime traces back to a small group of young offenders involved in drugs.

Investigators have worked for years to clear the high-level, 20-something drug dealers off the streets. The new crew members, mostly in their late teens and early 20s, are generally more brazen than their predecessors, Barnstable police Detective Lt. Sean Balcom said.

“The group that has come in ... is younger and is twice as violent,” Balcom said. “They're shooting people as opposed to threatening (to shoot) people.”

In September, a shooter fired into a crowd outside Pufferbellies nightclub in Hyannis, hitting three people. With nobody willing to identify the shooters, no arrests have been made.

“The place was open for business, A couple hundred people (were) there,” said MacDonald, the police chief. “These shooters didn't care.”

Mitigating factors

Experts say a range of psychological, sociological and legal factors are contributing to the wave of youth violence across the country.



A group is carded at Pufferbellies on Route 28 in Hyannis in late September more than three weeks after a shooting there left three people seriously injured. (Ron Schloerb/Cape Cod Times)

Developmentally, younger people don't have an understanding of consequences in the same way as adults, making them more likely to act rashly, said Lael Chester, executive director of the Boston-based group Citizens for Juvenile Justice.

“Kids' brains are not fully developed until age 24,” Chester said. “They tend to be much more impulsive than they will be when they mature.”

Many believe the onus is on parents to take a more active role in their children's lives.

“When there are kids (in court) that are 17 and 18 and they have no one with them, that's unfortunate for that kid because they've probably had no one with them for a long time,” Judge Connon said.

Some say violent movies and video games are contributing to the violence on the streets.

Others worry the availability of guns makes it easier for younger people to commit crimes.

In some states, holes in state gun laws allow dealers to buy firearms in bulk, many of which are then sold on the streets, including to minors, according to Mary Vriniotis, a research specialist with Harvard University's Youth Violence Prevention Center.

“Even though Massachusetts is very progressive in gun laws compared to other states, it's very easy for guns to cross state lines,” Vriniotis said.

“We haven't really done enough to shut down gun trafficking,” said Nancy Robinson, executive director of Citizens for Safety Massachusetts. “There's been an arms race that's erupted among these kids.”

The drug connection

Guns may be the weapon of choice, but on Cape Cod drugs most often are the force behind the bullets.

Street shootings are sometimes the result of a drug deal gone bad, sometimes a conflict between drug dealers, the police say. But even the rash of car break-ins and home invasions reported in neighborhoods across the Cape are often perpetrated by users looking for valuables to pawn.



While on patrol in the Sea Street neighborhood in Hyannis, Barnstable police Sgt. Mark Delaney stops to talk with Pam Mallet, center, and Nancy Lee Cormier, who were raking leaves on Oak Neck Road. Homeowners are hoping that if they clean up the area, they'll keep troublemakers out. (Ron Schloerb/Cape Cod Times)

“You don't support a drug habit by working a legitimate job, working at Stop & Shop,” Harwich police Chief William Mason said. “You support a drug habit by breaking into houses, breaking into cars. Things like that.”

In Barnstable Juvenile Court, drugs and alcohol are an issue in nearly every case, said Judge James Torney, who sits in Barnstable and Orleans' juvenile sessions.

“It seems to me that the youth on the Cape are very accepting of marijuana use and alcohol use and abuse as a way of life,” Torney said. “It's not considered any big deal for 12-, 11-, 13-year-olds to be high on a regular basis.”

The juvenile courts deal mainly with youths ages 13 through 16, and they don't see many cases involving severe violence or high-level drug dealing, Torney said. But the courts do see the same offenders over and over. And the crimes tend to escalate as the minors get older, he said.

In general, some of the youths charged with marijuana possession will be among the adults charged with drug dealing. The boy who beats up his sister may be back in adult court for more violent crime years later.

“It's inevitable that someone who has a bad juvenile record is not automatically going to clean up their act when they turn 17,” Torney said. “It's just not going to happen.”

Experts say the availability of prescription pills such as Oxycontin, which produce the same high as heroin but are more accessible, may be reeling younger and younger teens into the world of drugs and violence.

“These drugs are there for the taking in medicine cabinets across the country,” said Susan Foster, vice president and director of policy research for the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University.

Because they are prescribed by doctors, pills often don't have the stigma, or safety concerns, associated with heroin, cocaine and other “street” drugs, said William Lozier, executive director of the state Interagency Council on Substance Abuse and Prevention.

The feeling is “it's just much safer to take a pill than it is to put a needle in your arm,” he said. “Obviously, they're sorely mistaken in that impression.”

Combatting the problem

Across the Cape and the state, efforts are under way to curb youth violence issues at their source.

Over the summer, Barnstable police held a “guns for groceries” exchange, taking almost 150 firearms off the street in less than a month.



During a recent meeting, Leslie Mathis of Oak Neck Road questions Barnstable police chief Bob MacDonald about gun shots in the Sea Street area of Hyannis. (Ron Schloerb/Cape Cod Times)

On Saturday, Yarmouth police and CVS pharmacy joined up to conduct “operation safe medicine cabinet.” They collected in four hours.

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Some area residents are even looking to take control of the problem themselves.

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Right now, the police are operating a 24-hour patrol in the area. The “bad guys” aren't coming around as much anymore, residents said.

But soon the heightened security will cease and it will be up to residents to police their own neighborhood, MacDonald, the police chief, told the neighbors.

Crime in the area has been cyclical, he said, holding up a newspaper article from 1992 about the same streets dealing with drugs and violence to illustrate his point.

But that information did little to ease the fears of residents, who talked about forming a neighborhood watch group and demanding negligent landlords better maintain their properties.

“As long as we have this kind of Brockton-by-the-sea neighborhood,” said Jennifer Cullum, a resident and owner of the Sea Street Market, “we’re never going to be able to reap the benefits of living a quarter of a mile from the ocean.”

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