

GOVANS: From a Storybook Past to a Troubled Future

Crime and violence increase, as does the gap between affluent and underprivileged

These days, crime isn't big news for Govans.

The neighborhood, located in Baltimore City's Northern District, has seen its fair share of disturbances in recent months, especially along the York Road corridor. With 6 larcenies from vehicles, 3 aggravated assaults, 1 burglary and 1 stolen vehicle just between February 17 and March 3, theft and violence is a major concern. But more than property is at stake – of the 57 homicides in Baltimore City since January, three have been in the Govans area.

Reports of gang activity have also heightened fear among the residents, as some youth have claimed ties to the Bloods and Crips. In the Northern District of Baltimore City Police, a special unit has been established in the past seven months to deal with this problem. These gangs have left graffiti tags throughout the area, which has been an indication of increased organization. The special gang units' leader, Officer Quinn Gooden, has recently identified 25-30 Crips and 30-40 Bloods. This is part of a city-wide uprising, in which the Mayor, Shelia Dixon has noted that, "All communities need to be aware there is a gang problem."



The main source of income for gangs is drug distribution, which is a prevalent issue in the Govans area. However, it is not only gang members who

bring drugs into the area. Glenwood Life Drug Abuse Treatment Program, which is down the block from Loyola senior housing – namely, Aquinas and Gallagher Court – is one of the largest methadone clinics in Baltimore City. According to Officer John Walters of the Baltimore Northern District Police force, there are around five hundred methadone users who visit the facility every day for detox. Many of these addicts leave the clinic still drugged and addicted to methadone. These patients can be seen wandering along York Road any time of the day.

Officer Walters also commented on the desperate state of not only the methadone users, but also of the young children who reside in homes that border York Road. These children are as young as twelve years old and are raising themselves, which is usually a result of absentee parents. According to Officer Walters, this group of children accounts for around 10% of the residents in this area, many of whom reside in government-funded housing. The gravitation towards organized crime is not a surprising resort for these children, who lack the self-esteem and support to find other means of survival.

Just past the York Road and Cold Spring Lane intersection, a blue light serves as a reminder of the vigilant watch that Baltimore City Police have struggled to maintain. Some residents, such as Ms. Cloris Hooker of 1307 Ready Avenue, believe that additional foot patrol by police officers would greatly improve the situation.

"It makes me mad to see two police cars parked next to one another when just down the street drugs are being sold," explained Ms. Hooker, who has lived in the area for ten years. She recalls a time when she did not hear gun shots down the block or witness strange cars circling the area in search of what appears to be drugs.

In reality, it will probably take more than additional rounds and more officers on

the street to improve the bleak situation in Govans. Active community organizations, coupled with an after-school hangout for teenagers and the revitalization of abandoned homes, would provide a solid foundation for improvement. Sadly, there is currently no effective recreational center or government-funded after school programs to aid the situation. Officer Walters commented that he feels “bad” for kids who have no place to play other than in the streets. It is only a few blocks from these broken homes that affluent Govans residents live, many of whom send their children to expensive private schools in the area. These well-off families, who are in the majority – that is, White and Christian – have little to no interaction with the predominantly Black and poor residents within a mile radius. It appears that there is a distinct barrier between races and economic statuses within the Govans area.

But this was not always the case. In the past, Govans was once a united community. Old timers refer to the Govans of the 19th century as if it were a Utopia, a fairy tale of sorts that time locked with old photos and black and white memories. The “kingdom” of Govans was scattered with the summer estates of various residents, whose social status and monetary worth was comparable to that of lower ranking British royalty. Their summer dwellings were built with cool marble encased in soaring ceilings, which provide an airy, fresh atmosphere that was a welcomed alternative to the cramped inner city. Like any royal blood, there stomachs were much smaller than their eyes. Compared to the “commoners” – those from the middle or lower class – this elite group had an unjustly large amount of the property and excessive material possessions. Their fertile land was rather untouched, immaculate and covered with peach trees and bubbling streams. Their names are still recognized in modern society, for they are names of college buildings, such as Jenkins

Hall at Loyola, and art museums such as the Walters.



With the turn of the centuries, there also was a rotation of residents in Govans. After the Second World War, the area had become populated with middle class citizens, which consisted of blue color workers and their families. The summer estates were torn down, for advances of technology also advanced their owners’ radius of travel. The new Govans members were less concerned with leisure and luxury, and more so with family and group dynamics. This was a rather homogenous group of white, middle class and primarily Christian families. They each took pride in their plots of land lined with white picket fences and homes that modestly provided all necessary means for living. The residents were within a short walk of the main street, which included all necessary stores and shops. The air was filled with a sweet aroma, for Govans used to be the largest distributor of flowers to the South. There was no crime, doors were left unlocked and young children were undaunted to stay out past dark. The children were all acquainted; the police officers knew their names. Doors were left unlocked, and houses were communal. It was a thriving community of content residences, the type of pleasant atmosphere that one would image to be the American dream. Any outsider, with financial means, would be eager to raise a family in such a bubble of sanitation and security.

During the 1970's, in urban centers all through America, walls were literally built to separate families of different color. This was a time referred to as "the white flight," in which suburbia was developed in order to provide refuge for white inhabitants, who previously lived within the borders of major cities. When the well- off Caucasian families moved out of Baltimore City, so did their thriving businesses and developed organizations. Within Govans, this left a stream of abandoned stores lining York road and countless houses without residents.



As the Govans metamorphosis continues, the future seems uncertain. Projects such as the redevelopment of Belvedere Square and the recent rescue of the Senator Theatre from the clutches of bankruptcy offer glimmers of hope for the area – but will this progression continue, or will Govans continue to drift further and further away from the picturesque land of country estates it once was? Will there be any light in the darkness other than the blue light at Cold Spring Lane? Or will Govans face even more crime and violence in the days and years to come? Only time will tell.