

Crime rates remain high in Asheville public housing complexes

Isolation, low income and access to drugs create dangerous environment, police say.

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Despite relative calm and declining local crime rates this year, criminal activity in Asheville's public housing complexes remains higher than rates in the general population, according to the Asheville Police Department.

"Crime as a whole has been down this year, but crime in the public housing complexes is generally higher than it is in the rest of the city population," said Melissa Williams, community relations manager for the APD. "That is because of the isolated nature, the poverty and the access to drugs in those areas."

More criminal activity occurs in Hillcrest Apartments, a public housing complex, than in most other Asheville neighborhoods, according to statistics from the city government.

"It's been a quiet year over there, but the drug trade is very active in most of our public housing complexes," Williams said.

In the last year, nearly 4 percent of the drug arrests in Asheville occurred in Hillcrest, according to crime data from the city government. One of the two APD homicide arrests in the last year was in Hillcrest.

The APD issued warrants for the arrest of Marcus Austin Thorpe, 18, a resident of Hillcrest Apartments, approximately two weeks ago. He turned himself in several days later, Williams said.

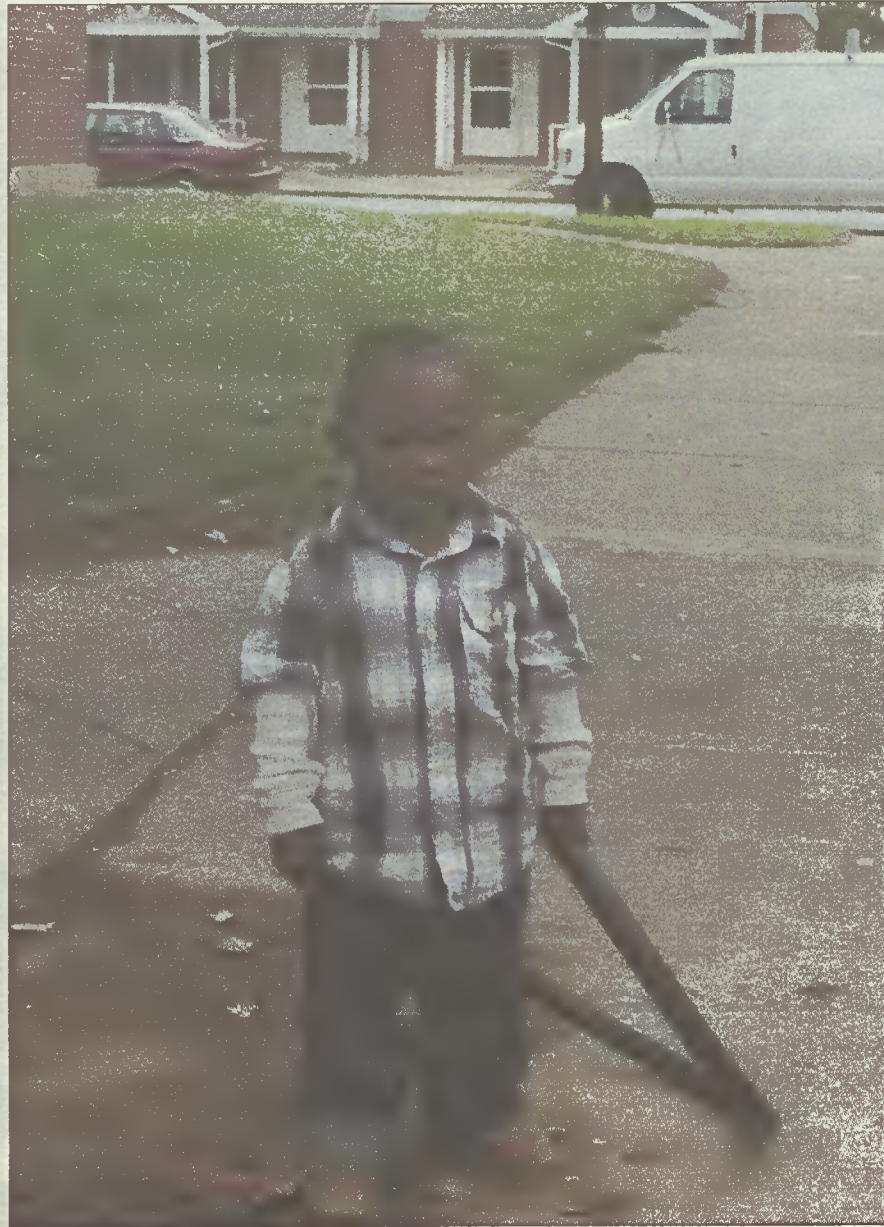
Thorpe is charged with first-degree murder and attempted first-degree murder, according to police.

Asheville resident Andrew Fleming, 49, died in the shooting. Diane Bowditch Logan, 54, of Swannanoa was injured in the shooting, according to police.

"Normally, we don't have to wait on someone to turn themselves in," Williams said. "It's not uncommon, but generally we just make the arrest. Usually, the officers know who it is."

The warrants and corresponding arrest took additional time and resources because of the significant amount of witnesses police had to interview for a positive identification, Williams said.

When the APD interviews witnesses in public housing complexes, they are sometimes met with reluctance, Williams said.



Hillcrest resident J.J. Crawford plays on the sidewalk of the public housing complex where Asheville crime rates remain higher.

"It's a love-hate thing," she said. "When something happens, they want us there. On the other hand, they resent the presence of the police. At the same time, if we don't spend time there they feel like they're being ignored. It is hard for us to balance policing an area that has a high crime rate with people not wanting us there."

Not all residents of public housing identify with anti-police mentality, Williams said.

"A lot of them feel held hostage by the crime that is there," Williams said. "A lot of people who live there work and have

jobs and have kids, but that is the only place they can afford to live."

A focus on continuing education is the best, and often only, way out for children growing up in public housing, Williams said.

"My belief is that if you have education, there's nothing that you can't do," she said. "I know this because I grew up in New York. I was born in projects. I lived in poverty, and I went to college and graduate school."

Thorpe graduated from Asheville High School last spring, where he played foot-

ball. After graduation, he enrolled at Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College, Williams said.

"I did think it was unusual, because this is a kid who actually got his high school degree," Williams said.

There is a concern about all Asheville minorities graduating from high school, especially black males, according to Williams.

Thorpe had no disciplinary problems as a football player, said Danny Wilkins, Asheville High School's head football coach.

Wilkins did not comment on the arrest in detail, but said the charges were a shock. Football and all other extracurricular activities at Asheville High are mediums designed to prevent students from losing structure and educational opportunities, Wilkins said. But these programs can be especially helpful for students of lower socioeconomic status, he said.

"I don't think you can say any city gives more chances to succeed than Asheville," Williams said. "Asheville City Schools have a lot of programs for youths at risk and for kids who don't have support systems at home."

Wilkins and fellow coaches monitor athletes' grades closely, provide tutors if the students are struggling with the 2.0 grade point average requirement and continually reinforce the importance of education, Wilkins said.

"Football is temporary. It is a vehicle to get an education, and to get it paid for at the next level," Wilkins said. "We have a lot of kids that certainly graduated and moved on. We have many enrolled in many universities."

Thorpe's charges are disconcerting, and they highlight a larger problem, said UNC Asheville business student and Black Student Association member Lemar Newsome.

"If you look at percentages, there is an obvious correlation," Newsome said, referring to correlations between race and poverty.

Newsome attributes a portion of the crime problems to failed opportunities, but said racism is tied to inequality.

"Emotions tend to be higher around crime when minorities are involved," he said. "It gets more press."

Ian Shannon - Assistant Photography Editor