

Greenwich Village: crime takes over

By Tom Mathews
Newsweek Feature Service

NEW YORK—Once, the great outpost of the permissive society was Greenwich Village, an entrancing area of Manhattan bounded by Houston Street, 14th Street, Broadway, the Hudson River and a touching belief in the sanctity of the lawbreaker.

But through the years, the great-granddaddy of all street crime waves has engulfed the live-and-let-live atmosphere of the old neighborhood. So of late, Village liberals, and radicals as well, have begun to react just like any other citizens who safety and property are menaced.

Villagers are forming block associations to fight back against the muggers, robbers, rapists and occasional murderers on their streets. They are talking of organizing vigilante groups. They have even gone to the extreme point—for people who once equated the law-and order issue with backlash—of supporting their local police.

"The community is coming around," says Inspector Salvatore Matteis, commander of the local precinct. "The first sign of change came when we started getting more reports of crime. In the past, these people just wouldn't report crimes very much. Now we're getting so much cooperation it's amazing."

Last year, the rate of robberies in the Village increased by a thunderous 89 per cent. This year, there have already been more than 700 robberies, 1,500 burglaries, some 25 reported rapes and six murders.

With the crime wave has come a change in life-style for many Villagers. Old people, who know that they are the easiest targets for robbers, no longer sun themselves in Washington Square Park. Shopkeepers, who used to stay open for the lively evening crowds, now close up and barricade their stores at sundown. Middle-class parents do not allow their children to walk home from school alone.

"My son has been held up and robbed three times in the past year," says a Village dentist who has lived in the area for 20 years. "When I first moved here, this was the nicest place in Manhattan to bring up children."

Drugs are the major source of the problem. But even without the thievery of the addicts, the drug culture brings its own deterioration.

Take the case of the Haven, a Sheridan Square after-hours spot which billed itself as "the ultimate teen-age club." Originally, the site of the Haven was occupied by the Downtown Cafe Society, a well-known club of the postwar era. According to one lady who has lived a few doors away for the past 20 years, it has been all downhill ever since.

"When Cafe Society left, Murder, Inc., took over the place," she says. "Even they were better than the Haven. As least they were quiet. Then there was an off-Broadway theater, then a discotheque called Salvation and finally the Haven."

"Nuisance is a euphemism for what the Haven was. It opened at 9 p.m. and stayed open until noon the next day. The kids would come in from Westchester and New Jersey. They had money and fancy cars, and in the morning we would see them all zonked out."

"It was a horrible sight. They used the vestibules in the neighboring buildings for johns. In the morning, you would come down and find urine, feces, vomit, glassine envelopes and maybe a hypodermic syringe in your hall."

After a collection of 300 signatures on a petition, intercession by the local congressman and an investigation by the state Attorney General, the place was finally closed down this summer. But it took a year of hard pressure to get it closed. And there are still similar, if smaller, clubs operating in other parts of the Village.

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