



Jordan neighborhood resident Dennis Wagner helps a young neighbor by tightening the brakes on his bike. Wagner says the drop in crime means he's able to spend more time fixing bikes and talking with neighbors and less time calling 911. (MPR Photo/Brandt Williams)

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Violent crime in Minneapolis hits historic low

by [Brandt Williams](#), Minnesota Public Radio

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Minneapolis — Minneapolis officials say violent crime is at historically low levels throughout the city.

They say the dip in serious crime is largely due to police officers cracking down on youth violence, illegal guns and repeat offenders. However, in some neighborhoods, crime is down because criminals have had to move out.

Violent and non-violent crime has been on a steady downward slide for the last several years, and Minneapolis Mayor R.T. Rybak said it's not by accident.

"There are a number of reasons for this," Rybak said. "But the number one [reason] is we've kept our goals clear. A safe place to call home is our top priority and it's been our ability to put our money where our mouth is."

The city has devoted considerable resources for public safety, inspections and development into north Minneapolis, which has traditionally seen higher crime rates than other parts of the city. So far this year, violent crime on the northside has dipped more than 40 percent from 2006.

Some northside residents say there's something else at work; the foreclosure crisis.

Jeff Skrenes, the housing director for the Hawthorne Neighborhood Council, said, in his neighborhood, a lot of homes that were frequent sites for crime and other nuisances fell into foreclosure.



Graphic: Crime in Minneapolis

"It's hard to say for sure how it happens," Skrenes said. "Some landlords just need to get somebody in there, so they can pay their bills and so they either don't screen as well as they should or they think they have to get someone in there. They think it's better to get someone in there period, instead of holding out for another month or two to find a good tenant."

Skrenes said he's not blaming renters for causing problems in the neighborhood. He said in some cases the owner's occupants were directly involved in drug dealing and prostitution. But Skrenes can identify several properties where a foreclosure shut the house down faster than the city could.

Police officials say abandoned homes are still magnets for crime. Boarded houses attract graffiti, copper thieves and arsonists. But Skrenes adds that an occupied house that attracts crime can have a more negative impact on a block.

"If you've got an open-air drug dealing or open air prostitution type of situation on a particular block, a prospective owner, or even a prospective renter is going to come along, or drive around the neighborhood," Skrenes said. "They'll take a look at that house they're about to move into and there's this perception - especially if you don't know the area - that criminals run that block."

Skrenes and others say shutting down just one problem house can have an immediate positive effect on the rest of the block. People who once lived in fear to walk down the block, come out of their homes and start talking to their neighbors.

Dennis Wagner lives in the Jordan neighborhood. He said now he's got more time for simple neighborly acts, like helping a young neighbor fix the front brake on his bicycle, than standing vigilant against crime in the area.

"Getting all that heavy duty drug activity out of here, has allowed us to do that community building," Wagner said. "You know, just talking across the back fence."

Wagner agrees that the foreclosure crisis has helped push out some problem neighbors and bring down crime. How much, he's not sure. But more importantly, he said now that residents see fewer problem properties, they're more willing to call authorities if they see

new ones emerge. Wagner said his neighbors have their eyes on two houses in the area they suspect are being used for prostitution.

"And we've been calling, calling, calling; and sooner or later, those places are going to be shut down," he said. "When they get shut down they're going to find out that both of them should probably be condemned. So, maybe the community pressure has made it harder for landlords to rent to these kinds of people."

But others disagree that the foreclosure crisis had much impact at all. Roberta Englund is the director of the Webber-Camden Folwell neighborhood association. She said police work, city inspections and residents calling 911 are most responsible for getting rid of bad neighbors.

"It's not exclusively foreclosure that causes people to leave - people who are perceived as problems and may very well be -- to leave blocks," she said.

Minneapolis city officials want people to move into empty north side homes who will be better neighbors. The city is still offering \$10,000 grants for people who buy a foreclosed home and will forgive the loan if the buyer lives in the home for at least five years.

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