

Assaults on rise in downtown, Inner Harbor - Victims report attacks by bands of young people

By Justin Fenton, Baltimore Sun, May 31, 2009

An increasing number of Baltimore residents and tourists have been victims of random, unprovoked attacks in the downtown area over the past month by roving groups of young people, even as police beef up their presence around the Inner Harbor.

Many of the assaults, which have been reported in areas within walking distance of the harbor, follow a similar pattern. The victims report being attacked from behind while they walk, punched and kicked in the head and upper body by groups of males and females. Items are rarely taken, and few, if any, words are spoken.

Not even police are immune from the attacks: An off-duty officer from New Jersey said he and his girlfriend were beaten in the downtown area last weekend by males and females who he believed were gang members.

"In the past, we have never felt unsafe in your city, but we most certainly do now," George Williams, a 35-year-old patrol officer from Brick Township, N.J., wrote in a letter to Mayor Sheila Dixon. "Your office, as well as your police command staff, has an obligation to keep all citizens living in and/or visiting the city safe and that is simply not happening."

The attack involving Williams comes after several other violent incidents recently:

- About 9:30 p.m. April 25, a double stabbing and fight involving teens among a huge Inner Harbor crowd caused some businesses at the tourist attraction to close early.
- Three people were beaten in separate incidents May 9 in Mount Vernon, including a man who was knocked unconscious and lost two teeth about 11 p.m., and a woman who was assaulted from behind by a group of girls at 11:30 p.m.
- At 9:30 a.m. May 6, a 34-year-old man was attacked by three teenage boys as he walked in the Otterbein. The teens said nothing and took nothing, according to police, who believe they were all students.
- About 4 p.m. May 20, a man walking west of the Inner Harbor was accosted by 10 juveniles walking toward a light rail stop who took his BlackBerry. Police believe local high school students are responsible for the crime.

Such assaults are not restricted to Baltimore's upscale communities, but they come at a time as the city is working to restore confidence in its downtown areas after the stabbing. There are about 40 officers now working the waterfront most nights - up from a typical complement of 12 - and foot patrols have been increased in outlying areas.

Officials note that despite the rash of incidents, the downtown area remains among the safest in the city, particularly during peak business hours.

"Keeping residents and visitors safe in Baltimore is the highest priority for the mayor and this administration, and Commissioner [Frederick H.] Bealefeld [III] has assured the mayor that there will be increased visible presence and enforcement in the downtown area," said Dixon spokesman Scott Peterson.

Because assault and robbery statistics each encompass various types of attacks, the numbers do not capture the specific type of incidents seen recently. But police acknowledge anecdotally that there has been a rash of random attacks in the downtown area, and they have mobilized resources in response.

But privately, they are struggling to figure out how to prevent random attacks committed by juveniles who show no apparent motive. The problem, coupled with violence they say is associated with some downtown clubs and bars, is stretching police resources thin, with neighboring districts forced to lend officers to downtown areas.

"I don't know what's going on, but it's very clearly a behavior problem," said Councilman William H. Cole IV, whose district includes the downtown area. "I don't know how you can explain the phenomenon of randomly attacking someone. I also don't know how you search for it, if you're the police."

One of the women attacked in Mount Vernon said the teens gave no warning before accosting her and her boyfriend.

"My boyfriend said he heard someone say, 'Finish them off' a split second before it happened," Cristina Homa wrote in an e-mail to The Baltimore Sun. "I was punched in the back of the head, turned around and there was a mob of kids yelling at us and calling us names."

An area resident, who did not want to give her name, said she saw teens clutching a video camera one night as police worked to disperse a large, unruly crowd around the Belvedere hotel. The teens tossed the camera around as an officer tried to recover it, she said. Police were unable to confirm the incident.

Williams, whose New Jersey jurisdiction was ranked in 2006 as America's Safest City by a national publication, was visiting the city with his girlfriend, Marisa Parish, 29. He recounted how they were attacked on Lombard Street, not far from an area of bars and clubs, by four males and three females.

One of the males pulled a knife and put it to Parish's face as a female held her from behind. Two of the males started punching and kicking him, throwing him to the ground in a struggle. He said the males started kicking his head, neck and upper body, and one said, "You're dead."

Parish broke free and protected her boyfriend's head with her body, and was knocked unconscious. The attackers then scattered.

"They were using my head for a soccer ball - back and forth, back and forth," Williams said in an interview.

Williams, who is white, said he believes race played a factor, with one of the attacking teens, who were black, accusing him of shouting a racial epithet, which he denies.

But Williams said he was especially disturbed by what he described as a strong gang presence. He said he was told by city police officers that gangs had been moving into the area the past few weeks, and that not enough police were on duty to combat the problem. Williams said that officers told him there had been 11 similar assaults that night alone and that police believed the attacks were related to gangs.

Central District Maj. John Bailey rebutted those claims, saying police have stepped up their presence and that there is "no indication of any gang affiliation with any of this stuff."

"They don't come here wearing red and blue," Bailey said, referring to colors often associated with Bloods and Crips. "They're wearing normal clothes. I think these kids just become empowered by being in large groups. They're showing off for one another."

Police sources not authorized to comment agreed that the attacks could be juveniles simply acting out, but that gang initiation rituals have in the past been blamed for similar incidents.

Cole, who has recently been venturing out at night with police to observe the area's problems, said the department is doing an "outstanding job putting resources in place to nip whatever trend may be out there in the bud."

"I think the word is out that if you want to come down and act like a jerk, you can do it downtown, and we need to send a clear message that we're not going to tolerate it," Cole said.

Bealefeld and Dixon have spoken out about police shouldering too much of the blame and parents not controlling their children.

"Everybody thinks it's someone else's job to do everything," Bealefeld said on a recent radio appearance. "People have to step up and be accountable. Who's paying attention to these [kids]?"

Neighborhood activists in Mount Vernon believe several recent attacks there were related to a BYOB "bottle club" located in the basement of the Belvedere. The club has "Teen Takeova" nights on Saturdays, which sometimes have attracted hundreds of young people. Police and residents say the club has been the catalyst for a double shooting and a

host of assaults and other complaints. They are pushing for the club to be shut down.

Robert F. Cherry, a former Baltimore homicide detective who heads the city's Fraternal Order of Police lodge, was jumped in that area last fall. A group of eight to nine young men stole his hat, then turned on him after he attempted to get it back. He was able to fight them off and was not seriously hurt.

Cherry confirmed the incident but declined to comment further. The union has been speaking out about deficient patrol strength downtown after off-duty officers were prohibited from working outside bars and clubs, and Cherry said he did not want to exploit the incident in which he was attacked.

In South Baltimore, police believe at least some of the attacks have been committed by area students. In an e-mail to residents, Southern District Maj. Scott Bloodsworth said additional officers have been assigned to the Inner Harbor during evening hours, and extra officers now patrol in Federal Hill and the Otterbein to assist with crowds and robbery prevention on Fridays and Saturdays.

Williams, the New Jersey officer, said that police "can only work with the tools they're given" and that he wrote to Dixon because he believes the city needs to provide more resources.

"They need to swamp the area with police officers, and that's not happening," Williams said in an interview. "When you wait for something to happen, this is what's going to happen."