'Crack House' Fire: Justice or Vigilantism?

By ISABEL WILKERSON and SPECIAL TO THE NEW YORK TIMES

The working-class families on Barlow Street here used to hurry their children indoors and huddle under furniture whenever the shooting started at the nearby crack house.

Two of the neighbors got tired of the drug trading and turf wars. They set the house on fire and proudly admitted to it in court. Early in October the two men, Perry Kent, 29 years old, and Angelo Parisi, 28, were found not guilty of arson in a case that has dramatized the frustrations of drug-ridden inner cities and tested the boundaries between self-protection and vigilantism.

While many residents are cheering the acquittal, the case and the underlying sentiments that led to it are deeply disturbing to law-enforcement officials and criminal justice experts. 'A Very Scary Situation'

"It expresses an extreme level of frustration with the perceived ability of police to handle violations of the law," said Dr. Mark H. Moore, a professor of criminal justice at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard. "We're seeing a shift to public justice, and that's a very scary situation."

The case is part of a larger pattern of citizen outrage and activism that has grown with the spread of crack, experts said. In Manhattan, residents have staged undercover drug buys and made citizens' arrests of drug dealers. A Bronx man put tenant guards in the lobby of his building to warn drug customers that if they entered, they might not leave alive.

Increasingly, these efforts are turning violent. Last May a Long Island man wounded a woman when he opened fire with a 12-gauge shotgun on a crowd he believed to be dealing drugs. In Miami, 35 suspected crack houses burned down in a two-week period earlier this year; officials believe that many of the fires were caused by irate residents. And Detroit had as many as 100 drug-related fires last

year, according to testimony in the Kent-Parisi case, the only one that went to trial here.

"This kind of behavior is a form of public communication," said Dr. Gary T. Marx, a professor of sociology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who is author of the book "Undercover: Police Surveillance of America." "It is a bargaining chip for the citizens, who are saying to the authorities, 'Unless you take action, we will.' " A Neighborhood Transformed

That is what Mr. Kent and Mr. Parisi did. When crack dealers took over an abandoned house in their block on the East Side of Detroit in August 1987, their quiet neighborhood of worn frame houses, where people grew azaleas and children jumped rope on the sidewalk, changed to a place where bands of teen-agers shot at each other in daylight, sold drugs from the curb and sneered at people who threatened to call the police.

"They were laughing at the whole neighborhood," Mr. Kent said. "Nobody could sit out on the front porch anymore. The kids couldn't play outside. The police said to wait till something bad happened. Well, we couldn't do that."

That October, they burned the front porch of the crack house. The authorities padlocked the doors. The drug dealers sawed through the locks and resumed business as usual.

"I couldn't take it anymore," Mr. Parisi said. "It didn't look like anything was going to change. I just said, 'This is it.' And we did it."

On a windless day last November, they soaked every floor of the house with gasoline, lit a piece of paper and threw it in the window. They jumped the fence, went home and watched the house burn.

It took the jury just two and a half hours to find them not guilty. One juror said he would have burned the house down, too. Then he caught himself and added, "No - I would have been more violent."

People on Barlow Street say they are grateful to the two men and glad they did it. "I just wish they'd do it to more houses," said a woman who lives a block down from Mr. Kent. Widespread Support

There appears to be widespread support for the action. A call-in poll last winter by The Detroit Free Press found that 87 percent of readers thought the burning of the crack house was justified.

But some people fear for the city, which already leads the nation with a homicide rate of 62.8 murders per 100,000 residents. "What kind of message does

this send to a community that is balancing precariously on the brink of sanity to begin with?" a Detroit newspaper columnist wrote the day after the two men were acquitted.

Such vigilantism could lead to a spiral of crime and retaliation, some experts say. "Criminals hear the verdict and may use it as an excuse for whatever method of problem-solving they see fit," said Dr. Robert Trojanowicz, director of the School of Criminal Justice at Michigan State, who is a research fellow at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard. "And there may be a long-term corruptive effect on conventional citizens, who, while not acting out vigilante-like behavior, may lend support to that kind of conduct."

The action has already emboldened other citizens. Last May, as the fire on Barlow Street gained attention, a band of residents took pipes and baseball bats and stormed a crack house in their southwest Detroit neighborhood. They attacked three reputed drug dealers, chased them out of the house and scrawled the words, "Get Out Now," on the front porch. Then they threw furniture out the windows to the applause of a chorus of onlookers and the honking horns of celebrating motorists. 'We Have to Be Vigilantes'

The next week they burned the place down. "Sure it was a lynch mob," said a neighbor shortly afterward. "But what are you going to do? We have to be vigilantes."

No one was arrested or charged in the case, and that worries officials, too.

"If people are allowed to get away with this and it catches on, then you have anarchy on your hands," said William R. Coonce, special agent of the Drug Enforcement Administration in Detroit.

Dr. Marx said that such cases are "episodic occurrences that speak to a primitive notion of justice." He likened the current anti-drug sentiment to "the old hatreds - race and red-baiting" that fueled vigilante behavior in earlier decades.

There are indications that people are increasingly turning to themselves or to private agencies for protection rather than to the police. Public police forces have been losing ground to private security forces since 1970, when they were roughly equal at 400,000 members each, according to figures from the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Now, there are 1.2 million private security guards, as against 675,000 state and local police officers in this country, Dr. Moore said.

"Public resources would be better spent improving the public justice system rather than punishing vigilantes," Dr. Moore said. Warning by Prosecutors At the

trial of Mr. Kent and Mr. Parisi, prosecutors argued that the defendants had alternatives to arson and that an acquittal would lead to more lawlessness.

The defense lawyers, Barry Adler and David Steingold, said their clients were under duress and acted in self-defense.

It was an unusual defense for a property crime, and John O'Hair, the Wayne County prosecutor, voiced frustration that it was permitted at all. "What was the immediate threat to these people?" Mr. O'Hair asked. "Self-defense requires immediate jeopardy, not possible jeopardy a month from now."

The judge in the case, Craig Strong, was out of town and unavailable for comment on why this defense was permitted or on his instructions to the jury.

Alan Dershowitz, a law professor at Harvard, denounced the outcome as the work of "a vigilante jury" that "fell for a clever defense."

But criminal justice experts explained that juries tend to look for the equities in a case and may justify a defendant's action if the action seemed "deserved."

Indeed, the jurors may have been the arsonists' biggest supporters. "These people were pushed to a point where they felt they had to take action," Ray Bandemer, a juror, told reporters shortly after the verdict. "The police couldn't stop the crack dealers. Would it have been better if they shot them?" 'Condoning Mob Rule'

Some are finding parallels between residents living under the threat of armed drug dealers and battered women who kill their abusers in seemingly justifiable responses to violence. But some lawyers say that interpretation of the law can go too far. "Lawyers should get very frightened by the prospect that we might be condoning mob rule," said Michael Dowd, a Manhattan defense attorney who has represented battered women.

The defense attorneys in the arson case say that people who criticize the decision and predict anarchy do not live in neighborhoods controlled by crack dealers.

"What is occurring in the streets now is anarchy," said Mr. Steingold, who represented Mr. Parisi. "Should you just let criminals prey on your kids and shoot guns in the middle of the day until the police get around to it? No one is going to buy that. It's a sad commentary on our society if people have to do this."

Mr. Parisi has since left the neighborhood. His old block is quieter now, although there has been some suspicious activity at a couple of houses down the street. Mr. Kent, who still lives there, said that, while he would not encourage

others to do what they did, he is not sorry about it.

"I'm glad we got rid of them," Mr. Kent said.

Others in nearby communities, however, are asking, at what cost? "Burning a crack house just leaves a monstrosity sitting in your community," said Agnes Mary Williams, who leads a neighborhood group on Detroit's crack-ridden East Side. "I thought we had gotten away from lynchings. I thought we were more civilized than that."

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