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Neighbors' fear impedes NJ child gang-rape case

By AARON MORRISON (AP) – 6 hours ago

TRENTON, N.J. — Rowan Tower has a bad reputation. Gangs walk the streets nearby, and police are a constant, and some say ineffective, presence at the 15-story apartment building a stone's throw from the Statehouse's golden dome.

A 13-year-old girl was killed last year in a drive-by shooting a block away, and not a single person stepped forward to help police identify the attackers. This week, though, the mothers, grandmothers and children who live in the tower saw crime there sink to a new depth.

The reported gang rape of a 7-year-old girl who police say was offered for sale by her 15-year-old stepsister to a group of grown men has shocked residents and put them in a quandary. If they identify the men responsible, they risk violent retaliation from the street gangs that stalk the neighborhood.

"We are mothers," said tenant Shawntel Abner. "If we aren't here, there is no one to watch our children. You are asking a lot of us. You are asking us to put our lives on the line."

Police said the rape unfolded this way:

The 15-year-old went to a party Sunday with some young men on the 13th floor of the building; her 7-year-old stepsister tagged along because she worried about the older girl's safety.

The 15-year-old sold sex to men in the room, then took money to let them touch the younger girl. Touching turned to forcible sex as at least seven men raped the 7-year-old. The little girl then put her clothes on and left the apartments. That's when two women found her crying and took her home.

The 15-year-old has been charged with promoting prostitution, aggravated sexual assault and other crimes; police have not released her name.

A 20-year-old man has been charged with having sex with the 15-year-old, but police don't know who might have attacked the 7-year-old. Officials say, though, that someone in Rowan Tower does and are urging, even threatening, neighbors to identify them.

"People absolutely know who these men are," Mayor Doug Palmer told The Associated Press on Friday. "If you were there and didn't participate, you really need to come forward. If you don't come forward, then you are going to be charged like you participated."

Rowan Tower sits on a stretch of West State Street near downtown Trenton and is surrounded by blocks of abandoned, boarded-up homes. It's fronted by a well-manicured lawn and features a colorful playground and a basketball court. An American flag hangs from a pole to the right of the front door.

Tammy Blake lives in apartment 13-F, just down the hall from where the rapes are said to have happened. She said that she didn't hear anything but that loud music and raucous behavior are the standard, not the exception, in the building.

"You get so used to the way things are here," said Blake, 47. "We all care because this is where we live."

But fear, she said, keeps people quiet.

"It's hard for us because there's drugs, crime and gangs," she said. "If we speak out, we never know what's going to happen. There could be someone kicking our door in and putting a gun in our face because they heard or saw that we were talking to someone. People here, they're thinking about their lives. It's not that they're being inconsiderate about the 7-year-old girl."

Neighbor William Johnson said police come and go from the tower all the time.

"I don't see how that can happen," he said of the rape. "Where were the adults at?"

Sixty-year-old Frances Claridy has lived in the building for 19 years and said that there are good neighbors and bad — and that the two groups don't socialize.

"Our apartments are good," Claridy said. "It's just some people in this building are not."

Claridy and several other residents were picked up on warrants for minor infractions Thursday

AP Associated Press

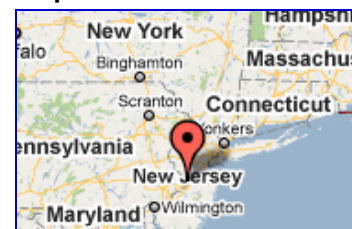
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Rowan Towers at 620 West State Street, in Trenton, N.J., is shown on Wednesday, March 31, 2010. The building was the site of a party where police say a 15-year-old sold her 7-year-old sister to have sex with as many as seven men and boys. Police say the child later put on her clothes and two strangers walked the crying girl home. She was treated at a hospital. Police say the teenager, who stayed behind, also took money to have sex with others at a party in the Trenton apartment on Sunday. The older girl is charged with aggravated sexual assault, promoting prostitution and other crimes. Her name was not released because of her age. (AP Photo/Rich Schultz)



Map



during a police sweep, an effort Palmer says was planned before the report of the March 28 rape. But those caught up in the raid said police clearly had the girl's rape on their minds.

In 2009, the same neighborhood was reeling from drive-by shooting death of 13-year-old Tamrah Leonard during a block party for a City Council candidate less than a block from the tower. Not even cash would draw information out, Palmer said.

"People knew," he said. "They even offered a reward, and no one took it."

The size of Trenton's police force did not budge in 2008, according to data from the attorney general's office, despite an increase in rape and thefts in the city. Law enforcement agencies, however, appeared to be making progress as violent crime overall was slightly down.

The rape case comes as Trenton stands to lose police officers to layoffs if state lawmakers approve a \$42.3 million reduction in aid.

Gov. Chris Christie told the AP he was floored by reports of the rape.

"What happened in Trenton with that young girl is deplorable," Christie said Thursday. "For a parent, it's nightmare-inducing."

Associated Press writers Angela Delli Santi and Beth DeFalco contributed to this report.

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