Parade termed visible effort at fighting crime

By JOANNA CARROLL
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A parade of people with hand-painted signs filled the streets of a midcity neighborhood Thursday to protest crime and tell residents to clean up their neighborhoods.

A youth service organization, SERVE! Mid City, picked a 67-block area around Atkinson and Laurel streets to kick off Thursday's Walk Against Crime.

"We are trying to get neighbors and children to stand up against crime in their neighborhoods. This walk is a very visible way to let the residents know that crime is being closely watched," said Elizabeth "Boo" Thomas, executive director of Mid City Redevelopment Alliance Inc.

The neighborhood is one of many in Baton Rouge that does not have an organized Neighborhood Watch program, Thomas said.

"Neighborhood Watch programs are among the most effective ways people can reduce crime in their neighborhoods," said Bessie Reed, project site coordinator for SERVE! Mid City.

Beatrice Bradford, 70, said Laurel Street has had a crime problem since she moved there in 1979.

"It has gotten a little better but there is always room for improvement," Bradford said.

"We should all be concerned where we live. I want to be able to walk my streets and not fear that I will be gunned down. I am hoping after today that criminals living in this area will see that we will be watching," she said.

Park Elementary students were among more than 100 marchers, carrying construction-paper signs with messages against guns and violence.

Gerald Wallace, 18, a first-grade teacher's assistant at Park, said many midcity children have been exposed to crime, especially drugs.

But, the students in Wallace's class rarely talk about what they have seen or heard.

"We try to teach them, regardless of what is going on, that education is important. As long as they stick with school they will hopefully have a good chance of not becoming involved with crime," he said.

Group members, wearing green shorts, marched several blocks behind drummers.

Many residents, young and old, lined the streets, which were littered in places with beer bottles and broken glass.

Erica Holmes, 20, does not live in the neighborhood, but she said crime can eventually creep into other areas if not controlled.

"We want to set an example for the younger children, while they are young, that something, even as simple as walking, can fight crime," she said. "I am surprised at how many marched today and came out to watch. I think it had an impact on those people."

The march ended at Donaldson Chapel Baptist Church on Gracie Street, where participants were given drinks and hot dogs. Representatives from the Community Policing Program were on hand to sign-up Neighborhood Watch participants.