

Crime, while down, and subpar schools pose a challenge.

By AARON DONOVAN

TWO colonial villages, Bedford and Stuyvesant, long ago merged to form one Brooklyn neighborhood, but in some ways, the place that took both villages' names remains two communities, represented by \$500,000 brownstones to the south and public housing towers in the north.

It is a neighborhood with 200 block associations and more than a dozen well-attended churches, but the crime rate, though having dropped dramatically, continues to be higher than in most of the rest of the city. And most of the neighborhood's schools perform below citywide averages.

"Bedford-Stuyvesant is like a tale of two cities in itself," said City Councilman Albert Vann, a lifelong resident whose district takes in most of the neighborhood. "You have college graduates and professors, and people of low income and the indices that they impact: health, lack of educational achievement, unemployment and so forth."

Bedford Stuyvesant's most exclusive blocks, tree-lined rows of century-old brownstones, contrast with Gates Avenue in the middle of the area, which is lined with decades-old low-income housing. "Bedford-Stuyvesant is both middle-income and very poor, depending on what part you happen to experience," Councilman Vann said.

In recent years, the neighborhood's desirable blocks have attracted homebuyers who say they feel that the area has an unduly negative image. "The reputation was that it was a rough area," said Rondai Evans, 32, an ophthalmologist who bought a Decatur Street brownstone a year ago, "but when you actually walk around and actually know people, it's mostly families and homeowners, families who have owned homes for years and years."

The neighborhood's tough reputation stems in part from street crime. While 16 felony assaults were reported for each 10,000 people in New York City this year as of Sept. 7, 41 were reported for each 10,000 in Bedford-Stuyvesant, according to a comparison of data from the Police Department with 2000 census population figures for the neighborhood. While the reports of more serious crimes such as murder, rape and robbery are statistically low and have generally been declining, all have been reported twice as often in Bedford-Stuyvesant as in the city as a whole this year.

The number of major street crimes reported in the 79th police precinct, which covers the portion of the neighborhood west of Marcus Garvey Boulevard, has dropped 16 percent since 1993, while those reported

in the 81st Precinct, to the east, have declined by 61 percent during that time.

With the drop in crime and rising housing prices all over the city, outsiders are looking more closely at the neighborhood. "Bedford-Stuyvesant has been rediscovered by both black and white folks who are looking to purchase and/or rehabilitate," Councilman Vann said. "The trend has always been for people who do well to move out to Queens, Long Island, Staten Island. But for the last 10 years or less, the trend has been reversed."

Among the draws are well-preserved brownstones that cost hundreds of thousands of dollars less than similar ones closer to Manhattan. Along many long blocks of Bedford-Stuyvesant, the three- and four-story row houses — sometimes with limestone or brick facades — seem to continue forever.

Bedford-Stuyvesant's working- and middle-class history makes it more desirable for some. "The Upper East Side went through an affluent change," said Everett H. Ortner, a Park Slope resident who is chairman of the Brownstone Revival Coalition, a preservationist group. "They could afford to modernize the brownstones there, which means gut them and make palazzos out of them. You see so many of them that have been destroyed."

But Bedford-Stuyvesant never had an alteration boom. "The houses have substantially stayed the same," Mr. Ortner said. "Where there are good streets, the houses are really first-quality."

Many blocks in the south of the neighborhood, including those in and near the Stuyvesant Heights Historic District, have well-preserved rows of brownstones similar to those in Fort Greene, Park Slope or Boerum Hill. Farther to the north, scattered fully-intact brownstone blocks are interspersed

among blocks with fewer brownstones and a greater number of smaller buildings, vacant lots, vinyl-sided buildings and one-story commercial structures or garages.

The brownstones are generally three or four stories tall and were built between 1880 and 1910 as single-family homes, said Brenda Fryson, the president of Brownstoners of Bedford-Stuyvesant. Most have been converted into two- to four-family buildings, with owners most often taking the parlor level and basement and renting out the upper floors. And some have been converted to apartment houses with eight rental units.

ORIGINAL detailing is an important factor in determining the price of a brownstone. The more of it, everything from wainscoting to the detailing and quality of the facade, the more expensive the house, said Irsa Greene, who worked for the Corcoran Group in Bedford-Stuyvesant for three years before starting her own company, Broadband Realty, on Halsey Street. Even more important to price is the extent to which the building needs renovation.

Brownstones that do not need work dominate the high end of the market. Two-family buildings can cost \$400,000 to the high \$500,000's, while three- or four-family brownstones can bring \$650,000. Ms. Greene said fixer-uppers usually ranged from \$300,000 to \$350,000.

"Occasionally you'll find a house that's been abandoned that could sell for \$100,000," said Edward C. Atwell, an agent at Atwell Realty on Stuyvesant Avenue. "But you'll probably find it on the market again soon," he added, renovated and priced higher.

Two-bedroom rentals, typically in brownstones that have been converted to multi-family dwellings, have stagnated in the last year at just over \$1,000, said Charles Atwell, owner of the agency, while one-bedroom rentals most often bring \$850 to \$900.

Real estate agents say that buildings are often sold by word of mouth. "The market is a seller's market," said Edmund Anthony Sadio, owner of Century 21 Achievers in East Flatbush, "but people are holding on. The listings are few and far between."

That can mean long searches for outsiders seeking a brownstone. Dr. Evans and his wife, Cora Daniels, 31, a writer for Fortune magazine, spent more than a year searching for the right house. They started out looking for a fixer-upper, but eventually settled on an 1890 two-family brownstone in move-in condition for \$540,000.

"We had a lot of deals fall through," Dr. Evans said, "so we closed on it quickly."

For area residents with children, finding the right school can take time. "Parents who are aggressive and can devote time to it can certainly find a good school in Bedford-Stuyvesant," said Clara Hemphill, the director of insideschools.org, which rates New York City public schools.

At only one of the neighborhood's 16 public elementary schools, Public School 21 on Chauncey Street, do students perform above the citywide average on math and English standardized tests.

"The neighborhood schools are uneven," Ms. Hemphill said, "but there are options if your child passes an exam to get into a gifted program — and at middle school and high school the options broaden." There are seven middle schools, all of which reported scores below the citywide averages, but one of the three combined elementary and middle schools, P.S./I.S. 308 on Quincy Street, reported test scores above the citywide average. Neighborhood children most frequently attend Boys and Girls High School on Fulton Street or the Benjamin Banneker Academy for Community Development in Clinton Hill, Ms. Hemphill said.

The neighborhood also has a number of parochial schools, including St. John the Baptist, a Catholic school serving 525 students in pre-kindergarten through eighth

grade for a tuition that ranges between \$980 and \$3,000 per year; Bridge Street Preparatory School, which has 64 students in kindergarten through sixth grade and tuition of \$3,000 per year; and the Concord Baptist Elementary School, which has 55 students and serves children up to the sixth grade with tuition of \$3,000 per year.

For all the charm of the brownstones, many neighborhood residents say that Bedford-Stuyvesant's friendliness and strong community ties are a greater asset.

Monique Greenwood, 43, a former editor of Essence magazine who moved to Bedford-Stuyvesant from Fort Greene in 1989 and now owns a bed and breakfast on MacDonough Street, described a place where neighbors say hello on the way to work.

"It's almost like a Norman Rockwell picture," she said. "You have kids talking in the street, church bells ringing every hour. The lady across the street is like a grandmother to my daughter."

Ms. Greenwood and her husband, Glenn Pogue, bought a two-family brownstone on Macon Street for \$125,000. Two years later, they bought a second brownstone around the corner for a similar price, and sold it this year for \$375,000.

Most people consider the neighborhood's boundaries to coincide with those of the area served by Brooklyn Community Board 3, which is defined by Classon Avenue on the west, Atlantic Avenue on the south, Saratoga Avenue on the east and Broadway and Flushing Avenue on the north.

There are 11 public housing projects in the neighborhood, all but one north of Monroe Street. They house about 22,000 people, according to the New York City Housing Authority, or about 15 percent of Bedford-Stuyvesant's overall population.

The neighborhood's hyphenated name, which came to be commonly used by the 1940's, comes from its history, said Pamela Green, executive director of the Society for the Preservation of Weeksville and Bedford-Stuyvesant History, which operates a museum and seeks to teach people about the centuries of African-American history in Brooklyn. The village of Stuyvesant, toward the east of the neighborhood, was more affluent, while the village of Bedford to the west was a larger but less prosperous enclave, she said.

The neighborhood became primarily black during the 1930's and 1940's, Ms. Green said, but there were free black communities in the area dating to the 1700's. The Civil War draft riots, in which blacks were attacked in many parts of Manhattan, were a seminal point in the area's history.

"People came to Brooklyn for safe haven," she said. "That automatically implies that within Brooklyn there were communities of African-Americans that were established enough that people knew they would be safe if they came here."

Now, Bedford-Stuyvesant is the most populous predominantly black neighborhood in the five boroughs. Ms. Greene, the real estate agent, said her white clients sometimes sheepishly asked her how neighbors would feel if they moved in. "There will always be someone who's against it," she said she tells them, "but for the most part you'll find warmth."

As more people seek housing in the neighborhood, many hope that it will shed its tarnished image. "A lot of people rely on very old negative stereotypes of Bedford-Stuyvesant," said Ms. Greenwood, the B&B owner, "and it's so far from that." ■