

Los Angeles Times

5 Slain in Homeless Encampment

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Nov. 3, 2008

Five people were found shot to death early Sunday in a makeshift homeless encampment covered by thick brush near the 405 Freeway in Long Beach, police said.

The crime upset neighbors and puzzled police, who had no suspects and struggled to comb the rugged terrain surrounding the crime scene near the freeway's intersection with the 710 Freeway.

An anonymous caller tipped authorities Sunday morning about a slaying in an area near the 1500 block of West Wardlow Road. When Long Beach police arrived, they found two women and three men dead, some with multiple gunshot wounds, authorities said.

"We don't know who did this, not yet at least," said Long Beach Deputy Police Chief Robert Luna.

The victims, who were pronounced dead at the scene, have not been identified. Luna said he did not know whether any of them were homeless or only visiting the encampment. "They were residents of Long Beach, at least last night," he said.

Residents in a nearby apartment complex on West Wardlow Road said they heard several gunshots and shouting early Sunday morning.

"It was so many, it sounded like fireworks," said Leticia Walker, who said she was in her apartment about 12:15 a.m. when she heard the noise.

Another resident, Tippi Briggs, said that about the same time, she heard a woman scream and then a man shout "Get in the car! Get in the car! Let's go!"

The homicides came three weeks after a homeless man in the Pico Union district of Los Angeles was doused with gasoline and burned to death in a high-profile killing that outraged his neighbors.

Residents and shopkeepers in the diverse neighborhood west of downtown tried but failed to save John Robert McGraham, a onetime bellman at the defunct Ambassador Hotel. No arrests have been made.

In the Long Beach case, police are trying to find the male tipster who they said called from a pay phone and knows more about the crime. On Sunday, police tried to send a message directly to him in the hope of solving the killings.

"If you are listening to me out there, please come forward ... for the sake of their families," Luna said.

Police also are questioning other people in the area about the slayings, including those staying beneath an overpass about 200 feet from the encampment.

The crime scene is east of Santa Fe Avenue near Tanaka Park, on property owned by California that is sandwiched between the 405 Freeway and Kohler Rental Power, a commercial building on the north side of West Wardlow Road that rents diesel generators and other power accessories.

“We have had no problem there” in the past, said Sgt. Adam Christin of the California Highway Patrol.

Walker, the West Wardlow Road resident, said homeless men sometimes use outlets in her apartment building’s laundry room.

“If we clean up our apartment and throw out a couch, it ends up across the street,” she said.

One problem for investigators has been the encampment’s terrain, which is tough to navigate because of heavy brush that was muddied by overnight rains.

The vegetation is so thick that the encampment cannot be seen from a helicopter.

“We are having some challenges with the crime scene,” Luna said.

Anyone with information about the slayings can contact Long Beach police at (562) 570-7244.