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Growing up in the Tenderloin

3,500 kids must learn to navigate and survive district's rugged streets

By Jennifer Byrd

Ezen bounds into the corner store to pick up a snack after winning a basketball game one recent Friday afternoon. With his baseball cap askew, he looks for all the world like a carefree 13-year-old.

He pays no mind to the knot of people hanging out on the worn corner of Turk and Leavenworth streets in San Francisco's Tenderloin neighborhood. Some street people lean against the stained wall of the convenience mart, checking out people who pass by. One wears a mismatched outfit of sweatpants and a dirty button-down shirt, with scuffed, beat-up sneakers and a doo rag. Another, with a greasy face and dazed look, wears blue jeans and a parka in spite of the warm weather. As they chatter, some yell or raise an arm in the air to emphasize a point.

Ezen breezes through the motley crew. He says hello to the clerk and a couple of customers who recognize him. Wearing an oversize Kobe Bryant jersey, each ear pierced with a bit of bling, he boasts what could almost be called a swagger.

This is his neighborhood.

The Tenderloin, 56 blocks roughly framed by Market, Post, Van Ness and Powell streets, is a clash of cultures. There are immigrant families working very hard to make a life for themselves. They live here because rents are more affordable than elsewhere in the city. There are down-and-outers who come to the neighborhood just to deal and do drugs. There are the prostitutes, homeless people and a population of other people with vacant stares. And jobless people who are just down on their luck. There are also social workers, cops, bar owners and proprietors of small shops.

And then there are the children of the Tenderloin.

Midge Wilson, executive director of the Bay Area Women's and Children's Center, says there are more than 3,500 children living in the Tenderloin. The center's 1998 Tenderloin Kids Count Survey found that 60 percent were Asian and Pacific Islanders. The remaining were 20 percent Latino, 8 percent white, 7 percent black and 5 percent Native American or mixed.



Photo by Theo Rigby / Special to The Chronicle

Daragh, 7, walking on Turk Street, calls the homeless people he sees "out streeters."

Unlike what children encounter in more predictable and protected neighborhoods, kids living in the Tenderloin have to live with crime, prostitution and sex shops on almost every corner. Liquor stores dot the landscape. Unsettling odors waft from the sidewalk, junkies stagger by and a brisk daily drug trade is carried on. And despite some well-staffed and cared-for recreation areas, there is still a lack of safe places to play outdoors. No backyards here.

The Tenderloin has the highest rate of drug crime and prostitution in the city and the highest concentration of parolees, police statistics show. It also has 76 registered sex offenders — an average of more than one per block in the 94102 zip code, according to the Megan's Law Web site.

In 2004, police made 878 arrests in the Tenderloin for major crimes, which include robbery, burglary, assault and rape. Although it's one of the city's smallest police districts, the Tenderloin had more arrests than any other, except the much larger southern police district south of Market. The homicide rate was twice as high as for the city as a whole.

Children need to be tough to live here. But they also need to be resourceful and creative.

"The kids in the Tenderloin become pretty independent at a young age," says Sam Soun, program coordinator at the Indochinese Housing Development Corp.

Ezen, whose family moved to San Francisco from Nepal two years ago, illustrates Soun's point. He says he isn't fazed anymore by the unruliness of the neighborhood around him. He is too busy playing sports and studying in order to achieve his goal of attending Stanford University in four years. One of his cousins is a student there.

"I'm not scared of living in the Tenderloin," he says. When he first got here he decided to be friendly with everyone as a survival mechanism. Yes, he says he felt scared when he would "hang around with people when they (did) bad stuff. But, I'd rather be friends with them and not do bad stuff. I figured that out when I got here that that was the way to be." But then he worried that he might find himself in a compromising or dangerous situation, so he recently decided to stop hanging out with the people who seemed more inclined to make bad choices.

When he's not in school or at home with his family, Ezen plays basketball at an outdoor court surrounded by dirty brick buildings at a local community center. He also goes bowling and spends time at friends' apartments.

Having her son out and about in the Tenderloin makes Ezen's mother a little bit nervous. He has a 5:30 p.m. curfew, and if he's out later he's under strict instructions to call and let her know where he is and what he is doing. "Nothing bad has happened," says his mother, Lalita, who is as matter-of-fact about being Nepal's first woman soccer coach as about living in the Tenderloin. "But I don't like my son staying out late in the street. I like to know where he is." She said that in Nepal kids don't stay out after dark.

When the family moved here, people asked them why they chose the Tenderloin. They weren't aware of the crime before they began living here, and while they would like to leave the neighborhood, both parents are working hard just to make ends meet, so they can't move just yet to a pricier neighborhood.

This spring, when Ezen was still in school — he recently graduated from Marina Middle School with a 3.8 grade point average — he would take the Municipal Railway's 38 Geary and the 22 Fillmore to arrive early and practice basketball. He is going to George Washington High School in the fall.

Unlike children in the suburbs, kids in the Tenderloin face moments when the city seems to close in around them. There is a lack of safe, grassy parks here for a reason. The inviting greenery might hide a used drug needle or broken glass from a beer bottle.

But the street people are a different story. People who live and work in the Tenderloin say there is an unspoken code here that when street people are dealing or doing drugs, they try to hide evidence of any wrongdoing until the children have passed safely by.

There are those times, though, when the two worlds collide.

Once a drug dealer who was being chased by the cops ran through one of the social services facilities, and another time a dealer tried to use a children's program to hide from an angry customer to whom he sold fake drugs. Another dealer walked into a youth program brandishing a weapon. But because social workers know the dealers, they talked to those involved and were able to prevent these kinds of things from happening again.

Sometimes Tenderloin kids find themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time. Jocelyn, 7, was walking down the street recently with her mother when they passed a rowdy group of street people. She was hit by an arm suddenly flung to the side, and her shoulder was bruised. Daragh,

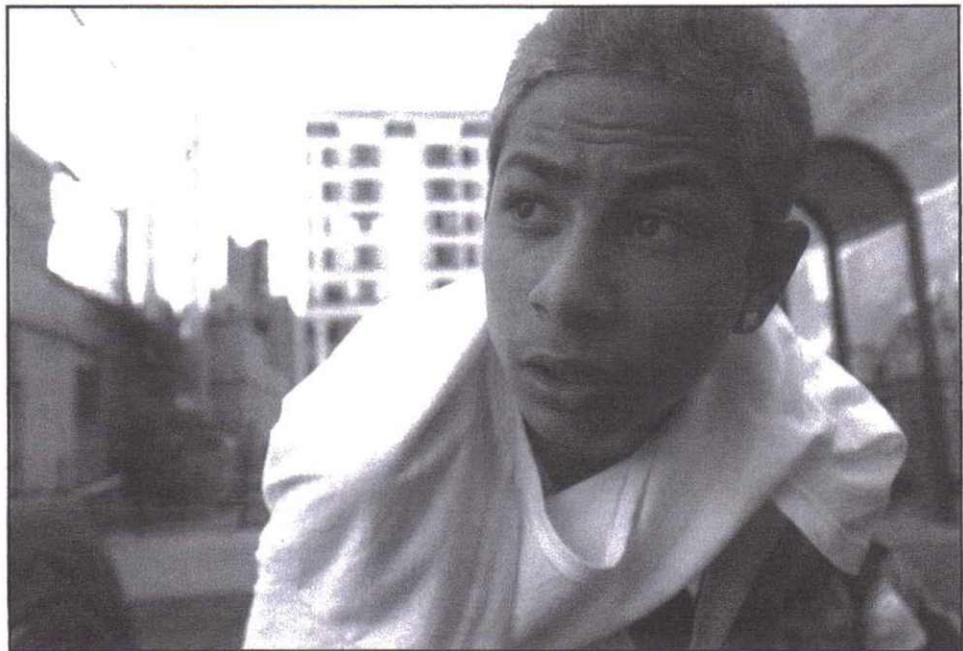


Photo by Theo Rigby / Special to The Chronicle

Ezen leads a group stretch before playing.

7, was walking with his mother when they heard gunshots, but he says he wasn't scared. Still, he doesn't talk to street people, whom he calls "out streters," because they might have guns or knives. If he starts to get scared walking in the neighborhood, he plays a game: He starts talking to a nearby dog or even a bug.

Many of the Tenderloin's street population and its children have grown used to each other. When a group of children and youth workers from the Tenderloin Community School were walking to a community center recently, they passed by the corner of Turk and Leavenworth. Some street people spending time on the corner greeted the children with smiles. "Here they come," said one. Another joked, "Oh, they're giving me a headache."

Street people sometimes take on a protective role.

"While we hear on occasion about kids being at the wrong place at the wrong time, those are isolated incidents," said Wilson of the Women's and Children's Center. "Many of the adults we see on the sidewalks are parents themselves. They get it that kids need to have a childhood and need to be left alone."

Older children appear to understand the circumstances of the neighborhood they live in, but younger ones don't take heed and are more focused on having fun, and, well, being kids.

One recent afternoon, Maher, 7, was excitedly talking about the new "Star Wars" movie. "I have a light saber!" he shouts. Another young boy, Mauricio, 8, was more excited showing off the

empty spaces in his mouth where he lost his baby teeth than in talking about the weighty issue of how he likes living in the Tenderloin.

Jennifer Arens, Tenderloin youth ministry director for the Salvation Army, describes an incident in which a child who attends her after-school program was walking with a group of kids and youth workers. The boy had been given candy by a person on the street. "He cried when we took his candy away," Arens said. "The younger kids don't understand about drugs, and it doesn't really occur to kids that someone would do bad things," Arens said. "We talk a lot about the fact that there are no bad kids — only kids who make bad choices. But we do explain that there are bad adults who want to hurt you."

Tenderloin kids have to learn how to get along with unpredictable people on the street. On their way to the corner store, they are more likely to encounter a parolee or a sex offender than a suburban mom parking her hybrid SUV. But life goes on, and it is the only life they know.

"Like any living situation, we learn to adjust to what's going on around us," said Wilson of the women and children's center. In the end, she added, the children of the Tenderloin figure out "how to live with the things that are difficult — and to appreciate the good parts."

Ezen says the same thing, his way: "It's cool here."

Jennifer Byrd is public relations director for the Salvation Army's Golden State Division, covering an area from San Francisco to Bakersfield. Contact us at insight@sfchronicle.com.