

7-17-03

# Future's grim for neighborhood 'destroyer'

By **JIM SMITH**  
smithjm@phillynews.com

The feds say that Maurice Lewis "destroyed" the neighborhood around 8th and Allegheny.

From 1989 to 1998, Lewis recruited teenagers to work at the corner for his prosperous cocaine business, authorities say.

Business was so bustling that on Sundays, a crowd of young men lined up on the corner, many of them day- and night-shift workers in Lewis' drug ring, all waiting for their weekly pay — plus a bonus when sales were high.

On Lewis's orders, lookouts held walkie-talkies and shouted "Frankie" to warn of approaching cops. They monitored police radio calls and kept a cache of weapons within reach, ready to use.

Drug orders came in over a nearby pay phone. Buyers arrived in cars and by foot at all hours.

Those who failed to follow orders were fired or their pay was docked. Those who worked hard got rewarded.

Some days, Lewis's operation grossed between \$40,000 and \$60,000, workers have testified. In one four-month period in early

1998, evidence showed sales of the tiny \$10 bags of cocaine totaled more than \$1 million.

Neighbors who complained were threatened with violence.

"I'll come down tomorrow and tell her to pack her s— and move. I'll whip her a—," Lewis said of one neighbor who called the cops, unaware the FBI was taping him.

For more than a decade, FBI agents contend, this was the scene at 8th and Allegheny, a poor North Philly neighborhood.

Lewis, 34, was indicted and arrested two years ago, along with 19 underlings. He was charged with conspiring to sell cocaine and employing kids to sell drugs. He's been in prison since.

In April, he entered a "conditional" guilty plea to all charges. He is to be sentenced today. Federal prosecutors want him put away for life.

Lewis, who used drug profits to try to become a rap-music promoter, once operated Northeast Auto Sport, a parts store on Bustleton Avenue near Harbison.

But his preoccupation was drugs. Even a five-year prison stint didn't stop him. Lewis, formerly of Stiles Street near 30th, was arrested and went to jail for five years starting in 1991 for selling drugs on the corner.

Throughout his incarceration, using intermediaries, he continued to direct drug sales from Graterford prison, prosecutors say.

The FBI spent years gathering evidence against Lewis and his minions. Using traditional law-enforcement techniques, including informants and surveillance, agents garnered only "a skeletal understanding" of Lewis's drug ring. U.S. District Judge Stewart Dalzell noted in a ruling earlier this year.

Agents secretly placed a video camera on a nearby rooftop to record the goings-on, installed a wiretap on the corner pay phone, tapped Lewis's cell phone and cloned his pager.

The drug workers eventually learned of the rooftop camera and stole it, but the ongoing electronic telephone eavesdropping numbered Lewis's free days.