

City crime falls by 21 percent

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WATSONVILLE — The city's crime rate last year dropped to its lowest level since 1981.

Watsonville's overall crime rate plunged 21 percent in 1998, dropping from 74 crimes per 1,000 people in 1997 to 59 crimes per 1,000 people last year.

In the annual crime statistics, released each year to the FBI to

compile the nation's Crime Index, the Watsonville Police Department reported a 24-percent drop in property crimes and a three-percent drop in the violent crime rate.

In the category of violent crime, which includes murder, non-negligent manslaughter, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault, all offenses went up except for robbery, which is defined as the taking of property using force or fear. Only

63 robberies occurred in 1998 as opposed to 93 in 1997.

Arrests occurred in almost 69 percent of all violent crimes. In 1998, 12.7 violent crimes were reported per 1,000 people.

Three reported homicides occurred in 1998, as opposed to none in 1997. The first was Ralph Fuentes, 29, who was stabbed in a fight outside Cesar's Bar on March 8, 1998. Fuentes' death was ultimate-

ly ruled a justifiable homicide.

The second homicide was limousine driver David Douglas, 56, who was shot on March 22, 1998, at Crocker's Lockers storage facility. Stefano Alamillo, 26, pleaded guilty to the crime on Monday.

The last homicide was the Oct. 4, 1998, murder of Benita Baxter, 78, whose husband Cecil Baxter, 82, allegedly shot her before killing himself.

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Rapes accounted for four percent of violent crimes, with 17 reported for last year, up from 11 in 1997.

Robbery accounted for 13 percent of violent crimes.

Aggravated assault comprised the biggest chunk of the violent crime rate and rose by three percent from 1997 to 1998, accounting for 82 percent of all violent crime. Calls related to domestic violence were responsible for 46 percent of the aggravated assaults. Out of a total of 388 reported assaults, 180 were related to domestic violence. The rate of domestic violence where an assault occurred dropped from 8

crimes per 1,000 people in 1997 to 7 crimes per 1,000 people last year.

Gang motivations accounted for 13 percent of all aggravated assaults last year. Officers arrested suspects in 73 percent of all cases of aggravated assault.

In the category of property crime, which includes burglary, larceny, motor vehicle theft, and arson, 1,710 crimes were reported in 1998, which amounted to 46 crimes per 1,000 people. The number of burglaries fell 22 percent to 305 reported in 1998 as opposed to 393 in 1997 — the lowest number reported for burglaries in Watsonville since 1981.

Auto burglaries saw a sharp drop in 1998, with only 518 reported as opposed to 702 the year before — a 26-percent decline in the rate with

14 crimes per 1,000 people. Vehicle burglaries still comprise the largest amount of reported larcenies at 36 percent.

Vehicle theft also dropped by almost 31 percent, from 215 reported in 1997 to 149 reported in 1998.

Larceny, which includes shoplifting, pick pocketing, purse-snatching, bike thefts, or auto thefts, comprised 73 percent of all property crimes. The total number of larcenies also fell 22 percent to the lowest recorded rate since 1981 — 1,250 larcenies were reported last year as opposed to 1,602 in 1997.

The sharpest drop in any one sub-category of crime was in arson — 14 were reported in 1997 as opposed to six in 1998, resulting in a 57 percent drop.

The Watsonville FBI Crime In-

dex, which is composed of violent and property offenses and is used to gauge fluctuations in overall volume and rate of crime reported annually by law enforcement agencies, fell from 2,703 in 1997 to 2,181 in 1998.

State of California index, which are selected offenses used to gauge statewide crime trends, also dropped from 1,087 in 1997 to 925 last year.

Last year, Watsonville police officers responded to or self-initiated 60,191 calls for service. This year, there were 1.5 officers per 1,000 people in Watsonville, down from 1.6 in 1997. Though the number of officers employed held steady at 57, a rise in population caused the drop in ratio. According to Department of Finance statistics, population rose from 36,632 in 1997 to 37,165 last year.