

Watsonville stays gang violence

Crime holds steady

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Flat is fine, the police chief says, when talking about last year's crime rate.

The city's overall crime rate remained the same in 2002 as it was in 2001, according to annual statistics released by the police department this week.

The leveling off compares to an increase in crime statewide.

"I'm a lot less worried this March than I was last March, when the crime rate began to rise and I didn't know if that was going to be a trend," Chief Terry Medina said.

"But we still don't know, because it takes four or five years before a trend really becomes a trend."

The city's long-term crime history looks good, at least before 2001.

The rate decreased steadily from a high of 131 crimes per 1,000 people in 1985 to 42 in 2000. It then jumped to 47 in 2001 and 2002.

Last year, property crimes fell 1 percent and violent crimes jumped 3 percent.

And though burglary and other property crimes are rising statewide, Medina said he'd like to see property crimes take an even bigger dive, especially thefts from cars, which "drive everyone crazy."

Violent crime is a concern, he said.

Two troubling Watsonville statistics show leaps in rape and gang-motivated aggravated assaults.

Gang-related assaults rose from 42 in 2000 to 47 in 2001 to 59 last year. Such assaults peaked in 1993 at 74 and hit a low of 24 in 1997.

Forcible rapes were up from 19 in 2001 to 23 in 2002, the highest number in 20 years.

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Capt. Kim Austin said the higher number might be deceiving. More education in schools and elsewhere can lead to increased reporting of such sex crimes, she explained.

More citizen involvement in neighborhood watch groups and other areas have helped officers overall, she added.

Crime analyst Linda Peters said last year's gang assault number

is somewhat skewed by a three-day rash of gang crime in May that resulted in a nine-count spike.

"But it's something we are absolutely going to keep an eye on," she said.

Medina said the department had four officers dedicated to gang-related crimes until last year,

when two were lost due to recruitment and budget challenges.

He plans to replace those officers as soon as possible.

"We are in tough budget times," he said, "and that doesn't help any of these specialties."

District Attorney Bob Lee said the prison gang Nuestra Familia has been recruiting vigorously

after a sting in Santa Clara and Santa Rosa counties put a dent in its numbers.

That gang recruits Norteños gang members, who have a significant presence in Watsonville, he said, and they seem to be drawing in younger kids.

"It's scary when little kids become entrenched in crime," he

said. "They are recruiting a whole new generation and by (age) 18, some real violent crimes happen."

Watsonville police are part of a gang-prevention task force along with the District Attorney's Office, the Probation Department, school officials and others, Peters said.

Domestic violence accounts for 59 percent of the city's aggravated

assaults, and it decreased slightly last year.

"That's excellent news," Medina said. "That is the first time that has happened."

There were no homicides in the city last year.

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