

Area thefts up in '05

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■ Statistics at a glance.

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SANTA CRUZ — Theft was on the rise last year in Santa Cruz County, from cars to bikes and in homes, as compared to 2004.

That's according to preliminary crime figures for 2005 from local law enforcement agencies. Watsonville was not included in the tally as police there are still analyzing 2005 numbers.

Burglaries, defined as unlawful entry to a home or business, rose in Santa Cruz, Scotts Valley and in the county sheriff's jurisdiction, which includes areas outside the four incorporated cities. Burglaries dipped slightly in Capitola.

Robberies, a more serious offense that involves stealing from a person using force or fear, nearly doubled in the sheriff's jurisdiction, from 23 in 2004 to 44 last year. Robberies also rose 17 percent in Santa Cruz, but decreased in Scotts Valley and Capitola.

Sheriff's Sgt. Fred Plageman said the "prolific use of methamphetamine" may explain the increase in burglaries and robberies in areas patrolled by the Sheriff's Office.

The Sheriff's Office began tracking crimes related to methamphetamine last year, and a comparison to 2004 is not yet possible.

Comparing overall crime figures between 2005 and 2004, authorities note, shows only part of the big picture.

In Scotts Valley, where the number of burglaries more than doubled, Police Chief Steve Lind declined comment on the jump, saying he was working on an analysis to present to the City Council.

Santa Cruz had a noticeable

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Thefts

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increase in auto theft, which jumped 32 percent, and which rose in Capitola and Scotts Valley as well.

However, Deputy Chief Kevin Vogel of Santa Cruz Police Department said a five-year analysis found no consistent upward trend. But, he said, vehicles can be an easy target, as people often leave their keys in the car or nearby.

Also, according to Sgt. Bernie Escalante, who supervises theft investigations for Santa Cruz police, a good percentage of missing-car reports involve lending that goes astray.

"We'll get some underlying story like 'I let this gal I just met use my car and she went to the convenience store while I waited in the motel room and then she just never came back,'" he said. "Imagine that."

Capitola Police Chief Richard Ehle said auto thefts continue to be a growing problem in the state. Ehle recently attended a police chiefs' conference and said he was looking at automated license plate scanner devices mounted on or in patrol cars that can analyze 50 to 60 license plates per minute.

"It's a lucrative crime that carries minimal criminal liability," he said. "We always say crime doesn't pay, but unfortunately sometimes it does. As long as we have these unscrupulous body shops willing to buy these cars for pennies on the dollar, it will continue to happen."

Police countywide continue to spend a lot of time coping with drug and theft-related crimes, and stealing items from cars and theft of bikes continue to plague residents in several areas of the county.

There was a definite bright spot in Sheriff's Office statistics for last year, however, as there were no homicides. Sheriff's

2005 hike in theft

BURGLARY

(Unlawful entry of a structure.)

■ The Sheriff's Office, which covers areas outside the four incorporated cities, saw burglaries rise from 730 in 2004 to 844 in 2005.

■ Santa Cruz burglaries increased from 531 to 573.

■ Scotts Valley saw a rise in burglaries from 35 in 2004 to 79 last year.

■ Burglaries dipped slightly in Capitola.

ROBBERY

(Stealing from a person using force or fear.)

■ Robberies rose in unincorporated areas of the county from 23 in 2004 to 44 last year.

■ In Santa Cruz, robberies rose from 82 to 96.

■ Robberies remained relatively unchanged in Scotts Valley and decreased in Capitola from 17 in 2004 to 10 last year.

AUTO THEFT

■ Santa Cruz auto thefts

increased from 188 vehicles in 2004 to 249 last year.

■ In Capitola, auto thefts rose from 34 to 48 and in Scotts Valley, from 10 to 15.

■ Auto thefts slowed in the Sheriff's jurisdiction from 18 in 2004 to 13 last year. (The California Highway Patrol handles most stolen cars in the county's unincorporated areas.)

LARCENY

(The unlawful taking of property. It is the category with the highest number of incidents.)

■ In the county's unincorporated areas, there were 1,827 larceny reports in 2004 and 1,944 last year.

■ There were 2,317 reports of larceny in the city of Santa Cruz last year, compared to 2,234 the year before.

■ In Scotts Valley, larceny reports rose from 220 in 2004 to 257 last year.

■ In Capitola, they rose from 823 to 827.

Source: Local law enforcement agencies.

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RICHARD EHLE, CAPITOLA POLICE CHIEF

analyst Susan Rosario said the last year there were no homicides in their jurisdiction was in 1996.

"It's a real credit to the community," Plageman said.

Santa Cruz police had two homicides last year; there was

one in Scotts Valley and two in Watsonville.

Watsonville police are working on an analysis of their statistics, which they compare to other county agencies, and plan to release that information soon, Chief Terry Medina said.