

# Big-city problems and a small-town police force

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SANTA CRUZ — City limit signs say Population: 43,500. They're wrong a good part of the time.

On any sunny weekend the population doubles. On the big weekends — Memorial Day, July 4, Labor Day — the city's population quadruples. Some 6 to 8 million visitors are lured here annually, according to the Convention and Visitor's Bureau. That number is growing every year.

One number that doesn't change is the number of police officers to handle a blossoming number of calls.

The Police Department is authorized 63 sworn officers, including the chief. That number is only 15 percent greater than in 1974, when the department had 55 officers.

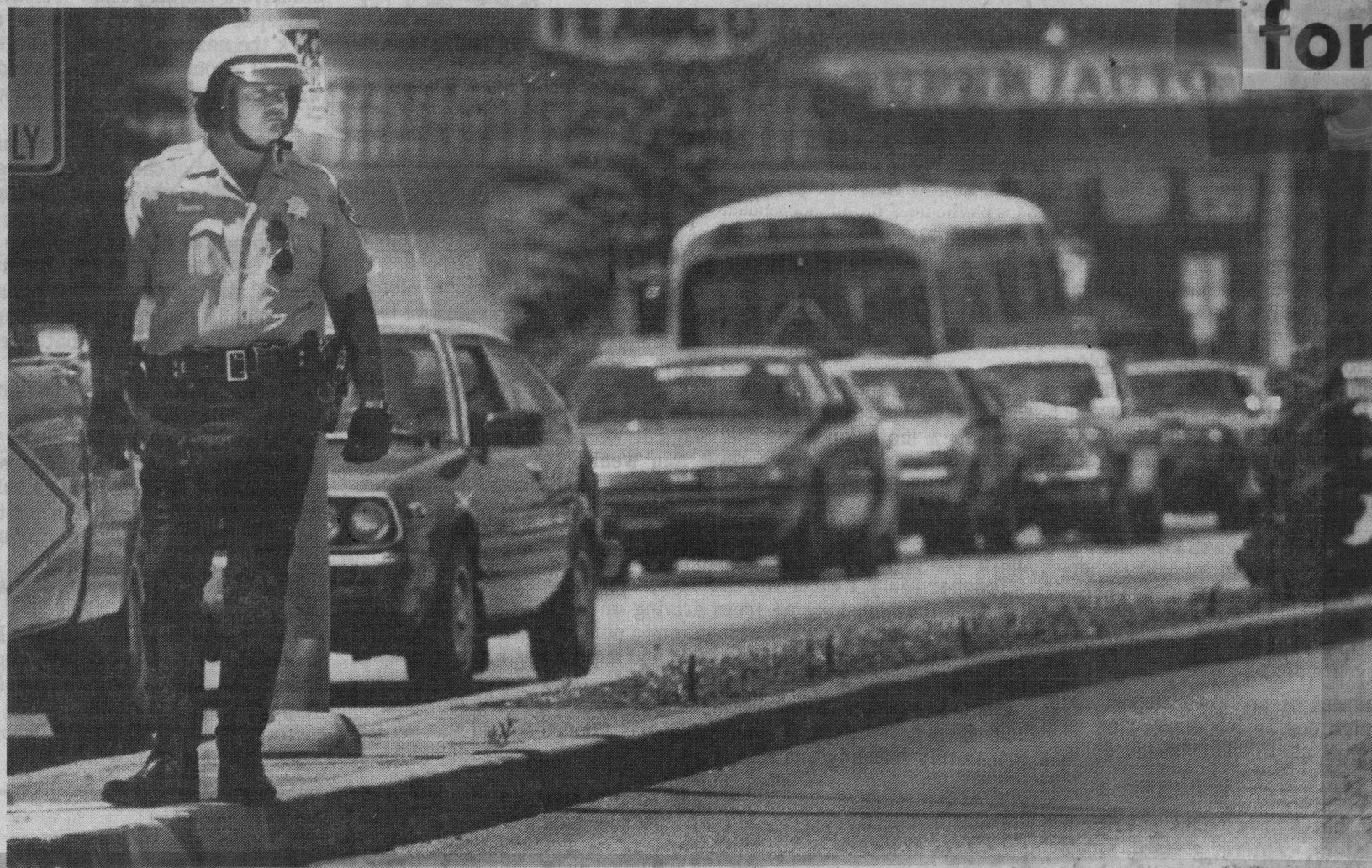
In the same nine-year period the "local" population increased 33.5 percent, according to figures by Attorney General John Van de Kamp.

Felony crimes increased 23 percent and adult misdemeanor crimes increased 122 percent.

Other branches of the local criminal justice system fared better. The number of assistant district attorneys rose 125 percent, the number of defense attorneys jumped 133 percent and even the number of judges rose 50 percent.

Statistics show the city has 15 percent of the sworn officers in the county. Yet, SCPD makes 33 percent of all adult felony arrests and 37 percent of adult misdemeanor arrests, including 77 percent of the arrests for disorderly conduct.

Based on Department of Justice statistics for major offenses, Santa Cruz in 1983 had the highest crime rate in the county and in the Monterey Bay Area and one that is comparable to many big cities.



Police Sgt. Tom Vlassis watches cars streaming into town.

Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

The city's crime rate was within 1 percent of the city of Los Angeles and higher than in the unincorporated part of Los Angeles County.

Figures show the crime rate here is significantly higher than for such cities as Stockton, San Jose and even San Francisco.

Of 452 law enforcement jurisdictions surveyed by the Department of Justice, Santa Cruz city ranks 32 in serious offenses.

In a nutshell, Deputy Chief Steve Belcher says the problem is the Police Department is handling big-city problems and crime problems with a small-town force.

Sixty-three sworn officers, Belcher says, would be adequate if

the population truly were 43,000. Santa Cruz, he says, has a police officer-per-population average of 1.5 per 1,000. A 1.2 to 1.5 ratio is considered reasonable, he says.

But, adding in the tourists, the year-round population averages about 60,000 population, roughly the size of the city of Alhambra, whose police force numbers 86.

That is about the size force needed here, police officials say.

The Police Department has requested 16 new positions for next year, but that number has been pared down to two officers plus six civilians in the proposed city budget.

To meet the demand on busy weekends, when calls average 60 to 70 calls per shift, additional officers are brought in on overtime. "Hardly anybody gets a weekend off during the summer," says Belcher. The busy season, he says, takes a toll on the officers.

The department this year has further been strained by a spate of

seven homicides since the first of the year and by a major demonstration at UCSC and several smaller ones in the city.

The average caseload for investigators is 50 cases a month, double the standard for Santa Clara Valley agencies, according to Lt. Mike Dunbaugh, chief of detectives.

Dunbaugh says he examines about 800 crime reports a month and assigns about 300 of those for followup.

When a homicide occurs, the department employs a task force approach to the case, using all available manpower — five detectives and a sergeant.

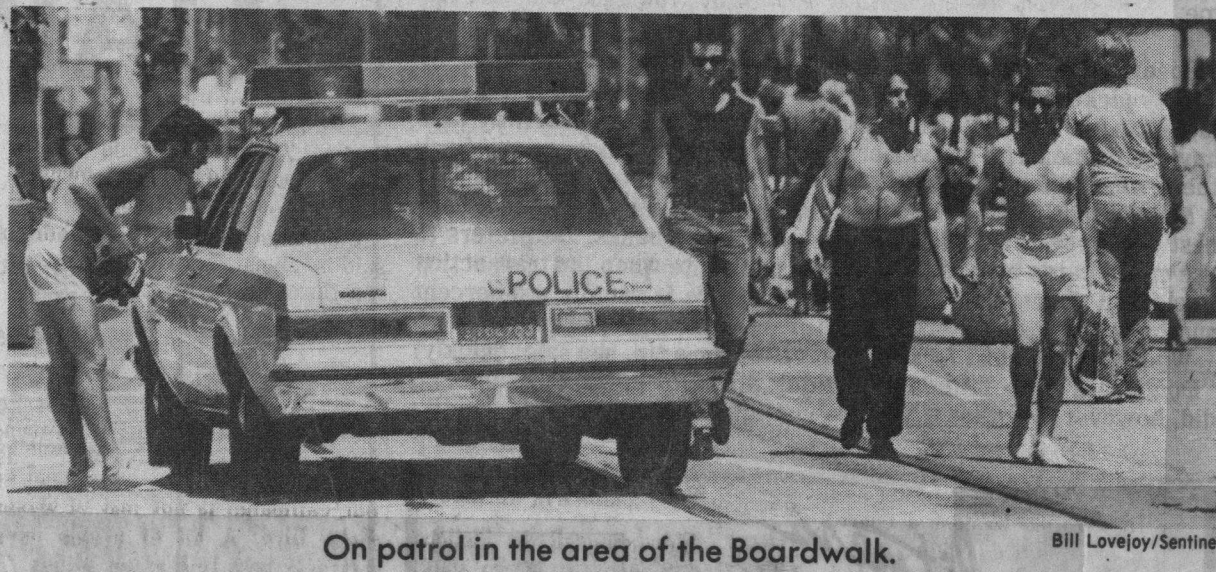
"We try to cover as much ground as possible. It can be very effective, as in the case of the stabbing at the (Seabright) beach." The task-force approach produced quick leads, and arrest warrants were obtained within 24 hours, says Dunbaugh.

"In the case of the murder of Father John, it took the whole investigative section a whole week just

to complete the crime scene," he explains. "That's a whole week's worth of cases and victims who haven't received any attention."

During the homicide investigations, detectives have worked an average of 30 hours overtime a week.

In light of that pressing demand,



On patrol in the area of the Boardwalk.

Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

police officials were less than happy with demonstrations that led to the arrests of 54 persons on Wednesday and Thursday.

Even persons involved in the homicide investigations were pressed into service during the demonstrations.

"Those demonstration have the right — and I'm glad they do — to demonstrate," says Belcher.

"But it puts us in the difficult position of having to tell victims of crime we've had to slow down our investigations to allocate enough manpower for the demonstrations. We have to try to insure everyone's safety," he adds.

Police aren't pointing fingers at tourists or the city's political activists.

They're counting up numbers. "We definitely feel we need assistance. Santa Cruz no longer is a sleepy community," says Belcher.