

Crime rate trending down

Report: Lowest number of offenses per capita since 2004

By Stephen Baxter

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WATSONVILLE » Watsonville's overall crime rate continued a five-year decline in 2013, with the lowest reported crimes per capita since 2004, according to a report released Monday by police.

Violent crimes — such as rape, robbery and homicide — have dropped steadily since 2007, with 237 violent crimes in the city of about 51,000 people last year, authorities said. There were three reported homicides in 2013, down from four in 2012 and six in 2011.

"The trend over the last several years is promising," Police

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Chief Manny
CRIME » PAGE 4

Crime

FROM PAGE 1

Solano said Monday.

City leaders and police have done more gang intervention programs with youths to try to stem gang violence, and Solano said they have prevented some kids from joining gangs.

"I know it sounds corny, but it really does take a community to address all these issues and turn things around," Solano said. "We still have a lot of work to do."

Reported robberies declined from 87 in 2012 to 71 in 2013. Burglaries and thefts declined as well, but reported forcible rapes rose from 15 in 2012 to 20 in 2013, according to police.

Watsonville police have made strides despite being short staffed. City leaders have authorized 68 sworn positions but there are 63 sworn staff working now, Solano said.

Injuries, retirements and police moving to other law enforcement agencies have caused the gap, Solano said. The smaller staff has meant officers recently were temporarily removed from the Santa Cruz County Gang Task Force and Narcotics Task Force to do regular

WATSONVILLE CRIME STATS

Watsonville police reported the following crime totals for 2012 and 2013

Crime type	2012	2013
Homicide	4	3
Rape	15	20
Robbery	87	71
Aggravated assault	148	143
Burglary	265	218
Vehicle theft	296	266
Theft	1024	824
Arson	9	8
Overall crime rate per 1,000 people	36	30

SOURCE: Watsonville police

patrol. For residents, that means less attention to suspected drug houses and gang houses, Solano said.

"We're currently hiring and we definitely need to have more officers," he said.

He said officers also have been taxed by calls related to mental health patients in apartments in downtown Watsonville. Rather than have officers who don't know each person's mental health diagnosis and medications, Solano said he would like a non-sworn person to be dedicated to those downtown calls for service — similar to what is done in downtown Santa Cruz.

Another concern has been more Watsonville teens arrested for carrying

weapons, according to a report released in December by Watsonville-based Applied Survey Research. Some teens have told police that they are being recruited for gangs, and have carried knives to protect themselves, Solano said.

"It is a concern for us. They sometimes will tell us, 'I'm being heavily recruited' or 'They're leaning on me' or 'I have to walk through this area of town,'" Solano said.

The chief said he wants more officers to patrol in parks and places where gangs might bother teens.

Watsonville Mayor Karina Cervantez on Monday praised police for their work.

"I want to commend our public safety officers for their leadership and investment in community partnerships in early intervention programs with youth as part of their crime prevention efforts," Cervantez said.

"During tough economic times, our officers have been strategic and innovative in reducing crime throughout the city."

Solano said he wants to continue funding for the Caminos Program, which is for first-time youth offenders involved in minor crimes. The diversion program allows them to do community service and get involved in mentorships and sports through the Watsonville Police Athletic League and other groups. The program gets families involved, and early results have been positive with five youths re-offending of the 100 who have participated, police said.

Caminos' funding is expected to end in December, but passage of Watsonville's Measure G would keep the program alive, Solano said. If Measure G passes in the June election, it would raise Watsonville's sales tax by a half-cent for seven years, and 60 percent of the money would fund police and crime prevention programs.