

Long-term trend shows falling crime in county

RECENT RISE IN PROPERTY CRIME KEEPS SANTA CRUZ AMONG WORST IN STATE

Crime + Criminals - 2000

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Capitola police officer Pedro Zamora patrols underneath the Soquel Creek Bridge near Wharf Road on Friday afternoon in search of vandals, transients and underage drinkers.

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✓ SANTA CRUZ — Surfboards, backpacks and bicycles didn't get anymore secure in 2012 for Santa Cruz residents and visitors, with the city's already high property crime rate rising even further, according to the latest FBI annual crime reports.

Crime is on a long-term slide. But while the numbers elsewhere in the county have continued to follow those drops statewide and across the nation during the past several years, Santa Cruz has taken a notable turn for the worse.

"I'm not surprised to see that there were increases (in property crime)," said Santa Cruz Deputy Police Chief Steve Clark. "But one year gives you a taste of the recipe, it doesn't give you the meal. You need to look at it in the longer term to know where things are going."

The amount and underlying causes of crime in this idyllic, seaside tourist destination are the sub-



KEVIN JOHNSON/SENTINEL

Officer Pedro Zamora climbs into his patrol car after patrolling Capitola Village on Friday evening.

SEE CRIME ON A4



KEVIN JOHNSON/SENTINEL

Santa Cruz Police Officer Brian Warren patrols along Cowell Beach in Santa Cruz on Friday. Warren was one of the officers assigned to patrol the western end of Santa Cruz in an effort to reduce crime in the area.

CRIME

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ject of ongoing debates, and have placed intense pressure on everyone from police to politicians to a social safety net that some blame as part of the problem, particularly after a Sentinel report earlier this year about sky-high crime that was based on 2011 FBI reports.

Federal crime statistics released last week show that the situation did not improve last year. Reported property crimes in the city of Santa Cruz increased 6.8 percent in 2012 compared with the prior year, and they have gone up 10.8 percent from 2006.

"Looking back on statistics does you no good if you're not thinking of the future," said Clark, the deputy police chief. "You can sit there and bemoan the past or you can use that to improve the future."

In every other city and unincorporated area of Santa Cruz County, property crime decreased from 2006 to 2012.

OAKLAND 'TOPS' LIST

But Santa Cruz no longer owns the top property crime rate for California cities with a population of 35,000 and higher. That mantle was grabbed by Oakland in 2012, where crime is spiking and even television crews reporting on that fact have been forced to hire security to protect their equipment.

Oakland is also top among California cities for violent crime, defined as the number of reported incidents per 100,000 residents. Santa Cruz was 15th among mid-size and large cities, while Watsonville came in at 46th among more than 200 in the state.

Despite a common perception, Santa Cruz's crime rates have exceeded Watsonville's for many years. Watsonville's property crime rate was almost half of Santa Cruz, having dropped a whopping 26.6 percent since 2006: Santa Cruz had 5,886 reported incidents per 100,000 residents, while Watsonville had just 3,044.

"We are much better off in terms of crime than we have been given credit for," said interim Watsonville Police Chief Terry Medina, who credited officers, technology, relationships with other agencies and the public for helping out despite the city's woeful financial picture.

But Medina cautioned that crime is on the rise so far in 2013. The city is debating whether to ask voters for a tax to pay for public safety, and Medina said cutbacks and a lack of maintenance on

SANTA CRUZ CRIME

Crime was up in some parts of the county during 2012, but dropping in others. Here's a look at recent and longer-term trends.

VIOLENT CRIMES

City	Since 2011	Since 2006
Capitola	+67.9%	-29.8%
Santa Cruz	-9.8%	+7.9%
Scotts Valley	+23.1%	+18.8%
Watsonville	-10.3%	-20.6%
Unincorporated	-21.3%	-4.6%

PROPERTY CRIMES

City	Since 2011	Since 2006
Capitola	-9.5%	-72.6%
Santa Cruz	+6.8%	+10.8%
Scotts Valley	+16.5%	-2.8%
Watsonville	-1.3%	-26.6%
Unincorporated	-17.0%	-26.4%

SOURCE: FBI

equipment and infrastructure are likely to take a toll.

"We can't keep doing this. It's like our motor is operating at 5,000 rpms and we're doing really well, but we can't keep it up without some help," Medina said.

Though it dropped in 2012, Capitola's property crime rate nearly matches that of Santa Cruz, and violent crimes there jumped by two-thirds. In Scotts Valley, violent crime jumped 23.1 percent — from 13 incidents to 16 — while property crimes were up 16.5 percent.

The populations of both cities are very low, however, making their crime statistics subject to wide variations.

CAUSE AND EFFECT

Clark said Santa Cruz's 2012 increase is partly because of vehicle and catalytic converter thefts. Police broke up a few of those vehicle theft rings last year.

Reported arsons — a property crime — also rose from 12 in 2011 to 21 in 2012, he noted. Another driver of increased property crime was that CVS Pharmacy on Front Street started to report and prosecute shoplifters in late 2011. In the past, officers sometimes were called to the business three times in a day for shoplifters — but businesses did not always file police reports in 2011, Clark said.

Also, an online system called Coplogic that started around 2008 in Santa Cruz has added roughly 1,800 reports each year for smaller crimes such as stolen cell phones and bikes.

Some simple precautions could go a long way, Clark said.

"Some of the most effective things people can do is reduce their vulnerability — like locking their car and house and not leaving the garage door open all day," Clark said. "There's a lot of smaller things that can be done to not make us such an

easy target."

Santa Cruz police leaders are considering geographical changes to their patrol beats to put more officers where crime happens. Predictive policing also has been a tactic to reduce property crime. It uses an algorithm and historical data to try to foresee the time and location of property crime and put officers at those places.

LONG-TERM PROGRESS

Santa Cruz police leaders have said the city is a crime "outlier" in part because of the crush of seasonal tourists, the university, the historically permissive drug culture, the county seat, entertainment hub and traditionally tolerant view of homeless and drug use.

In the Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Office jurisdiction — which borders the city — property crime has fallen about 26 percent from 2006 to 2012.

Violent crime, in that same period, dropped 4.6 percent, according to the FBI.

Sheriff Phil Wowak said that although the number of reported crimes dropped, the number of calls for service has increased in the past few years to about 100,000 annual calls in the patrol unit alone.

Calls for service also rose to an all-time high of 104,946 in the city of Santa Cruz in 2012 — although police said about 10 percent of those calls were self-generated by predictive policing checks.

Yet in Live Oak and other unincorporated areas of the Sheriff's Office jurisdiction, property crime has been declining in the past six years.

"This is a nationwide trend, it's not just Santa Cruz County," Wowak said.

"I think the economy contributed to it a little bit. I also see our partnership with the community as a contributor

to the reduction in property crime," Wowak said.

Wowak said it might seem like violent crime has risen in the past few years in the county because of social media and mainstream media — which now has faster access to police reports, court records and jail records. For instance, a bank robbery or other police activity on the police radio is now tweeted or posted on websites immediately.

"There's not necessarily that much more violent crime. It's that you get to hear about it in real time," Wowak said.

Santa Cruz police said they hoped to take the statistics and use them to make changes.

NEW FOCUS

The Santa Cruz City Council has been looking at the issue, passing new laws making it easier to remove troublemakers from parks, bolstering park patrols with private security and even looking at crime suppression program in schools and after-school programs, said Councilman David Terrazas, who chairs the city's public safety committee.

The council also formed a Public Safety Task Force, which has held a series of ongoing meetings that have tended to focus on institutions involved in criminal justice. The task force is expected to issue a slate of recommendations in November.

"The council has made public safety its highest priority," Terrazas said.

But Erik Bovee, a local technology investor who has been sounding the alarm about the city's crime problem for years, isn't convinced. The quality of the conversation around crime has been poor, he said, with people unable to agree on basic facts. He also criticized the city for failing to set numerical targets for reducing the crime rate, or pursuing them with concrete proposals.

"I don't see that. I don't even see that being injected into the discussion," Bovee said.

He also said the discussion is getting sidetracked, even among those critical about Santa Cruz crime, and wonders if the right city leadership is in place to tackle the problem. He said issues such as needle disposal, garbage on beaches and human waste are all peripheral to the central problem of stopping people from victimizing each other.

"I don't see a cohesive message," Bovee said. "People just aren't on the same page at all."

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