

# Crime rises for first time in 7 years

## Ten homicides help raise overall rate

Crime & Criminals - 2015

By Stephen Baxter 4-10-15

sbaxter@santacruzsentinel.com  
@sbaxter\_sc on Twitter

**WATSONVILLE** » Ten homicides in Watsonville in 2014 helped raise the city's crime rate for the first time in seven years, Watsonville police reported this week.

Reported violent crime increased 9 percent and reported property crime such as car thefts rose 12 percent, police said. While the year's results might seem concerning, Watsonville police Lt. Saul Gonzalez said the year could be a blip in the long-term picture because crime had been declining from 2007 to 2013.

"As we get more officers, hopefully we'll be able to bring it down," Gonzalez said of the city's crime.

More officers are coming with Measure G, a half-cent sales tax increase that started in September 2014 after city voters approved it in June.

Seven more officers are expected to join Watsonville police in the next seven years, which will bring its sworn staff to 75. Two new officers are on patrol and one is in training, Gonzalez said.

In recent years, Watsonville police officers on the Santa Cruz County Gang Task Force and Narcotics Task Force have been pulled off those units to cover routine patrols because of a lack of officers.

With the new officers, task force members can now rejoin those units and pay closer attention to Watsonville gangs and drug houses that cause nuisances for neighbors.

A new crime analyst produced the annual crime report and was hired as part of Measure G. A "diversion specialist" was also hired to help first-time offenders, and a "police service specialist" starts Monday who will respond to low-level crime such as vandalism, car burglaries, thefts and missing person reports. That way, patrol officers can skip those reports and respond to violence and more serious crimes, Gonzalez said.

Measure G so far also has added three new patrol cars of the seven that need to be replaced, as well as 17 new Tasers.

Watsonville police leaders said it is not clear what prompted the rise in overall crime in 2014, but they noted that crime across Santa Cruz County also ticked up in that time.

Watsonville police Crime Analyst Suzanne Fulton said she

CRIME » PAGE 3

FRIDAY, APRIL 10, 2015

## 2014 WATSONVILLE HOMICIDES

**Feb. 9:** Ryan Michael Dean, 19, was dropped off at Watsonville Community Hospital about 3:15 a.m. Feb. 9, police said. Dean was shot once in the upper torso and pronounced dead at the hospital. No one has been arrested in his death, and police said weeks later that it was still unclear where he was killed and who left him at the hospital.

**March 12:** Jesus "Jesse" Ventura Vazquez, 11, was hit by a car while riding his scooter across Riverside Drive near Main Street in Watsonville, and suffered a critical brain injury. Brenda Alcala-Velador, 19, of Prunedale was charged with vehicular manslaughter after the boy died of his injuries in October.

**May 4:** Lorenzo "Lencho" Colimote Avalos, 51, a homeless man from Watsonville, was found stabbed to death on the Pajaro River levee in Watsonville after two teens tried to rob him, authorities said. Police arrested a 16-year-old Watsonville boy, a documented

gang member, on suspicion of homicide. Avalos had been a field worker.

**July 13:** Hilario Ramirez, 44, of Watsonville, was found shot in the neck in an apartment building at 30 W. Beach St. in Watsonville about 9:30 p.m., police said. No one has been arrested in his death.

**Sept. 20:** Rogelio "Roger" Botella, 59, died 12 days after he was beaten by three men inside and outside the Villager Bar on East Lake Avenue in Watsonville. Three suspects were arrested.

**Oct. 10:** During an argument in a parking lot in Watsonville, 4-year-old Jaelyn Marie Zavala and 33-year-old Ramon Rendon were fatally shot. Rendon was shot multiple times and was the intended target, police said. Jaelyn was in an office at the back of a restaurant during the shooting and was caught in the crossfire, police said. Michael Angelo Escobar was arrested on suspicion of double homicide and gang crimes.

**Nov. 26:** Jason Reyes, 15,

was shot multiple times while riding his bicycle near Ross Avenue and Airport Boulevard in Watsonville around 6:20 p.m. Reyes, a self-identified gang member, staggered across traffic trying to find help before firefighters at the Watsonville Fire Station on Airport Boulevard found him. Reyes was taken to Watsonville Community Hospital and airlifted to a Bay Area trauma Center but died in transit.

**Dec. 19:** Ivan Avila, 24, was shot in a drive-by shooting on Freedom Boulevard near Sudden Street in Watsonville. The case is believed to be gang-motivated.

**Dec. 28:** An 18-year-old Watsonville man was fatally shot in the head during a drive-by shooting at Maple Avenue and Marchant Street in Watsonville. Police believe the incident, less than two hours before a planned peace vigil for Ivan Avila, the previous homicide, was not gang-motivated and unlikely related to other shootings.

Source: Watsonville police

## Crime

FROM PAGE 2

believed that better crime analysis and recent city initiatives will, "help us prioritize outreach strategies and ensure that we are using our resources to their fullest potential."

Because Watsonville police and every other law enforcement agency must report their statistics to the FBI, Fulton noted that the city had eight rather than 10 homicides by the FBI's criteria. A vehicular manslaughter in March and an attack that led to a homicide in September officially did not count.

In 2014, thefts and vehicle thefts were on the rise in Watsonville.

Reported thefts in the city rose from 824 in 2013 to 937 in 2014, police said.

## CRIME STATISTICS

Crime	2013	2014
Homicide	3	8
Rape	20	14
Robbery	71	85
Aggravated assault	143	158
Burglary	218	190
Auto theft	266	362
Theft	824	937
Arson	9	6
Violent crime	237	265
Property crime	1,317	1,495

Source: Watsonville police

Reported vehicle thefts also increased from 266 in 2013 to 362 in 2014.

About 52,000 people live in Watsonville, according to recent census figures.

Watsonville police for years have tried to reach children and youths and educate about the dangers of crime and gangs — even by making presentations in elementary schools. Measure G money also is going to the

Police Activities League and the police's Adelante program, which provides case management, behavioral therapy, counseling and mentoring to at-risk youths and their families.

Gonzalez noted that so far in 2015, violent crime has dropped 22 percent and property crime fell 56 percent.

"We're off to a really good start," he said.