

5-1984

# Watsonville crime rate takes sharp dive in '82

WATSONVILLE — The crime rate in this city dropped a dramatic 8 percent in 1982 — the largest single reduction in serious crimes for any city or area in the county.

At the same time that crime declined, the number of narcotics cases worked here rose 117 percent, said Capt. Terry Medina.

All seven of the "part 1" crime categories showed a decrease, said Medina. The largest single drop was in murders, which were down 74 percent. Medina said there were only two murders in 1982, compared with seven the year before.

The more significant statistics were in the areas of robbery, assault and burglary, reported Chief Ray Belgard.

Robberies declined 46 percent, assaults dropped 27 percent and burglaries (which traditionally rise) dropped by 6 percent, said Medina.

These crimes are indicative of the crime problem in Watsonville, said Medina. "They reflect the pulse of the crime picture in the city."

Medina said several reasons have been suggested to explain the heartening drop in crime.

"In general, there are fewer people in the age group of 16 to 25," said Medina. "This group is the largest single age bracket committing crimes, so a reduction in numbers there means fewer people committing crimes."

Also, the poor economy has drawn fewer migrant farm workers to Watsonville, thus reducing the numbers of victims in robberies and assaults, said Medina. Statistics have shown that the farm laborers fell prey to thieves at an alarming rate.

Medina credits the overall performance of the department under the year-old leadership of Chief Belgard as the single greatest contributing factor in the crime picture.

"We've concentrated on individual officer needs, such as improving report writing and sending more officers to school for specialized training," said Medina.

One of the biggest factors is that morale has improved, he noted. "You measure morale by whether people are happy to be on the job. Watsonville has turned around in the last year, and now it's a real sought-after place to work, despite the lower pay," said Medina.

The department has made an effort to work more juvenile and narcotics-related cases, said Medina.

Juvenile arrests rose from 36 to 42 in 1982, said Medina. A detective has been added to youth services and police have taken a renewed interest in maintaining contacts with parents and schoolteachers.

Medina said the biggest increase in police performance came in narcotics cases, which rose 117 percent. The number of actual arrests rose from 33 in 1981 to 85 in 1982.

One of the biggest cases last year was the arrest of eight men on heroin-trafficking charges. All but one were sent to state

prison, and that one defendant received a year in County Jail, said Medina.

Another factor in reducing crimes was the initiation of foot patrols in the downtown area. Medina said an effort to stop all crimes — everything from petty misdemeanors to big felonies — has sent a message to the community that no illegal behavior will be tolerated.

In addition to the reduction in the above crimes, auto thefts dropped 16 percent and larcenies remained the same, according to Medina.

Watsonville will stress more service-oriented work in the future. To that end, the department saw an increase of 4 percent in the number of incidents to which police responded.

Watsonville's overall reduction in crimes was twice that reported in Santa Cruz, which saw a 4 percent reduction last year; and was better than the unincorporated part of the county, which saw a drop of 3.7 percent overall.

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