

Gang crime up more than 40 percent in Watsonville

Gang

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WATSONVILLE — Gang crime rose more than 40 percent in Watsonville last year, but overall crime was down to its lowest level since 2000, according to 2009 statistics released Monday.

The overall crime rate declined 3 percent last year, including a 1 percent decrease in violent crime.

Still, gang-related incidents in the South County city rose 41 percent from 2008 to 2009. Watsonville Police Chief Manny Solano attributed the upsurge to proactive enforcement — such as officers arresting

suspected gang members for weapons possession and other nonviolent crimes — not a spike in gang violence.

“While it shows an increase, that increase is only because officers are out there identifying who is responsible and targeting those

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who we believe are carrying out the majority of the violence,” Solano said.

However, unrest about gang violence still exists in the community. While police said they took gang members off the street for crimes like knife and gun possession, homes were shot at during drive-bys, a 16-year-old nearly died when he was gunned down on Jefferson Street in December and a Hollister teenager who had no gang ties was fatally shot on a public basketball court in March of last year.

The death of 19-year-old Angel Escobedo was one of four homicides in the city in 2009. Three of the killings were gang-related and arrests have been made in two of the gang slayings.

“People are scared,” said Nelly Altuna, a community leader in the Freedom Mobile Home Park and a member of a police department team that visits neighborhoods after violence has taken place. “They read the paper and they see the news. But I’m not afraid. ... I tell people, ‘You just need to be involved,’ and assure them we can’t hide. We need to work together and when we see things we need to call police.”

Watsonville recorded

AT A GLANCE

2009 STATISTICS

GANG-RELATED CRIMES

These include homicides, robberies, assaults and arrests for possessing weapons.

2009: 203
2008: 144
2007: 135
2006: 120
2005: 67

WATSONVILLE CRIME TRENDS

Serious crimes — including homicides, assaults, rapes, robberies, burglaries and thefts — reported per 1,000 residents.

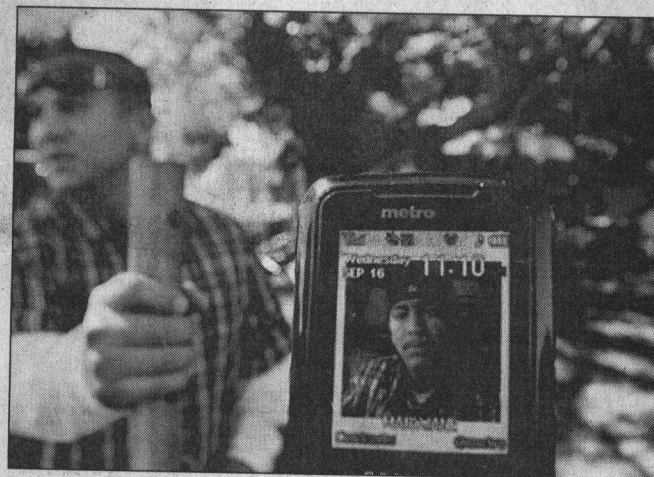
2009: 42
2008: 43
2007: 52
2006: 47
2005: 46

SOURCE: Watsonville Police Department

the same number of homicides as Santa Cruz in 2009, but more than the sheriff’s office, which investigated two killings in the unincorporated area of the county last year. Three of the four homicides in Santa Cruz and one of the sheriff’s office cases also had gang ties.

Neither Capitola nor Scotts Valley recorded any homicides last year.

But unlike other areas of the county, Watsonville saw a decrease in proper-



SHMUEL THALER/SENTINEL FILE

Julian Campos has his slain brother Richard’s picture as the wallpaper on his cell phone on Sept. 16, the day after Richard, a gang member, was killed in a drive-by shooting in Watsonville.

ty crimes in 2009. Those crimes, such as burglary and theft, jumped 20 percent in the sheriff’s office jurisdiction and nearly 50 percent in Santa Cruz last year.

“In spite of the economy and where some would believe crime goes up when the economy goes down, I think we’re working hard to try to not to look at all the challenges we’re faced with,” Solano said. “If anything, it just really gives credit to the employees.”

Solano also said community outreach through the media and Neighborhood Watch groups has increased public participation in crime prevention and intervention. More witnesses are

coming forward which, in turn, helps officers make arrests and close cases, according to the police department.

“What I’ve been able to hear from the response from the community they’re really pleased with that work, to see our police department respond immediately and come up with results,” Watsonville Mayor Luis Alejo said.

This year, the Police Department is introducing a new crime statistics management program that will help them better assess crime trends and assign officers accordingly, Solano said.

Sentinel staff writer Donna Jones contributed to this report.