

youth

PAMPHLET Branciforte Branch Library
230 Gault Street
Santa Cruz, California 95062

Youth crime gets violent

By **MAY WONG**
Sentinel staff writer

AT 12, "Jenny" was an A student in school.

At 13, she started shooting up speed. By the time she was 15, despite several citations and arrests, her criminal life moved from stealing cigarettes to stealing a car at knifepoint.

It's not that Jenny's parents don't care. They do.

And so do a lot of other people. Nearly two-thirds of the local residents surveyed by the Community Assessment Project said they were very concerned about crime. Another third said they were somewhat concerned. And 7 percent said they were not at all concerned.

While Jenny's life (Jenny is not her real name) may not reflect the typical teen-ager, it does reflect an increase in juvenile crime and how those crimes are getting more violent.

"We used to see one or two kids a year for murder or a drive-by," said Judy Cox, the county's juvenile probation director. "Now we're seeing three, four, or five a year for murder or attempted murder."

According to data compiled by the state Department of Justice, the number of juveniles arrested for felonies or misdemeanors in Santa Cruz County climbed from 1,667 in 1990 to 2,640 in 1993. The number of arrests dropped to 2,492 in 1994.

Violent crimes followed the same pattern. The total number of juvenile arrests for homicide, forcible rape, robbery, assault and kidnapping went from 88 in 1990 to a peak of 136 in 1993, then down to 120 in 1994.

The growing problem of juvenile crime spans the nation.

REPORTS from about 75 percent of the country's law enforcement agencies showed that violent crimes committed by youths under 18 skyrocketed by 36 percent between 1989 and 1993, according to the Federal Bureau of Investigation. By comparison, violent crimes committed by adults increased 8.5 percent during the same period.

Jenny's dad wishes his daughter were not included in those figures to begin with but is glad she got caught before she got shot. And he's glad she eventually received the boost she needed to direct her life away from crime.

"We feel very lucky that (Jenny) has turned around," he said.

A successful graduate of the county's Redwoods Program, Jenny, now 16, is back at home and in high school. The innovative residential treatment program for youths at Juvenile Hall raised her self-esteem.

She also realized the destructive sense of power she gained through

drugs and crime.

"I had a lot of counseling (at Redwoods)," Jenny said. "I really looked at myself and at what all of it was about. It had really scared me about how far I had gone. I could see where my life was going. I could see myself in 10 years being in prison, and I knew that was not the kind of life I wanted."

"For a long time, I felt I couldn't have a better life or didn't deserve it."

Such programs don't work for everyone, however.

A couple whose two sons are now spending their young adult years in state prison say they wish helpful intervention had come earlier.

WHEN their son "Daniel" (not his real name) got into deeper trouble with the law at age 15, juvenile probation officers placed him in the Redwoods Program. He escaped. He was caught and placed in another residential youth program near Moss Landing.

But by then, it already seemed too late, his parents said.

He had already had several years experience dealing dope and was a prolific tagger.

His parents admitted they had problems getting him to listen to them from early on. So when he was caught at a younger age for graffiti, his parents hoped he was going to get some help.

It didn't happen, his mother said.

The family sought counseling; they tried group therapy. Yet their son kept running around.

"There's a lot of good people out there helping kids, but you can't get to them until you go through the system first," she said. "Intervention has to be done early, but you couldn't get any help because they didn't do anything super bad."

After Daniel turned 18, he committed a violent assault. He's now in prison serving an eight-year sentence.

He's among the 39 percent of state prisoners across the nation who have juvenile convictions, according to the U.S. Bureau of Justice.

Local juvenile probation officials agree that early intervention is important but say they are hampered by budget constraints.

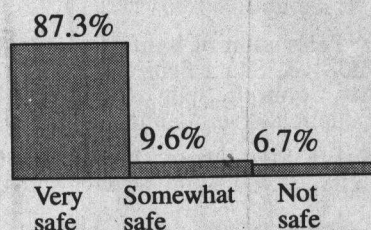
WHILE the annual number of juvenile citations and arrests combined have jumped from approximately 2,000 to 3,600 in the past five years, the number of people handling those cases has stayed the same, probation division director Cox said. The days when a first- or second-time juvenile offender received a face-to-face session with a probation officer at Juvenile Hall are gone.

And personal visits to the child's home? History.

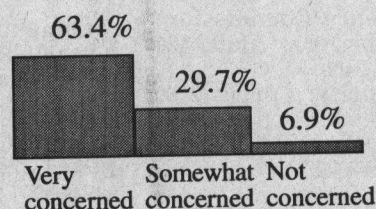
Life in Santa Cruz County

Law and order

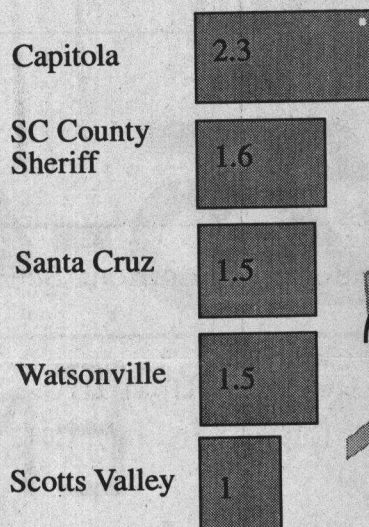
How safe do you feel in your neighborhood?



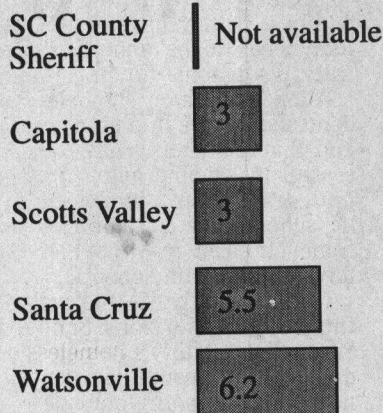
How concerned are you about crime?



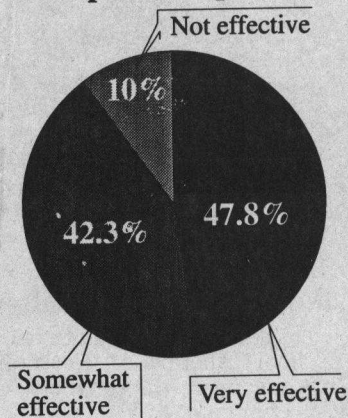
Number of officers per 1000 people



Average police emergency response time in minutes



How effective do you think police response is?



Source: CAP Survey

Chris Carothers/Sentinel

"We have more animal control officers than we do juvenile probation officers," Cox said.

The county Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals has seven animal control officers and three state humane officers.

The county has three juvenile probation officers, each with a caseload of 100 youths, Cox said.

With a short staff and an overcrowded Juvenile Hall, often the only choice probation officers have is to send letters to a child's family. Counseling or any in-person contact is available only for the more serious or violent offenders.

"I'd see a youth come in, open his file and see four or five reprimand letters. This breaks my heart because if I had seen this child and family after the second time, maybe we could have prevented the more serious crime," Cox said.

Acknowledging the rise in juvenile crime, state and local officials have begun to allocate more resources to address the problem.

THE STATE Office of Criminal Justice Planning has given local agencies a \$1.5 million grant for the next three years for gang violence prevention efforts. Most of the money is going toward the multi-agency BASTA program (Broad-based Apprehension, Suspension and Treatment Alternatives), which has been working to stem the increase in gang violence for the past three years.

Because of more intensive contacts by police, probation officers and counselors, gang-related crime declined last year by 48 percent from 1993, according to BASTA crime analyst Linda Peters.

Also, in June, the county Board of Supervisors approved the funds for an additional juvenile probation officer. That officer is set to begin in October, Cox said.

"With that one extra person, we could see twice as many kids now," she said.