



Tarmo Hannula/Register-Pajaronian

Watsonville police officer Alex Rodriguez issues a warning to a motorist in downtown Watsonville Tuesday for talking on a cell phone while driving.

Police report: Gang crime

up 41 percent

Violent crime, overall crime rate in Watsonville decreased in 2009

By TODD GUILD

OF THE REGISTER-PAJARONIAN

A few years ago, gangs and crime had so infiltrated River Park in downtown Watsonville that families rarely took their children there.

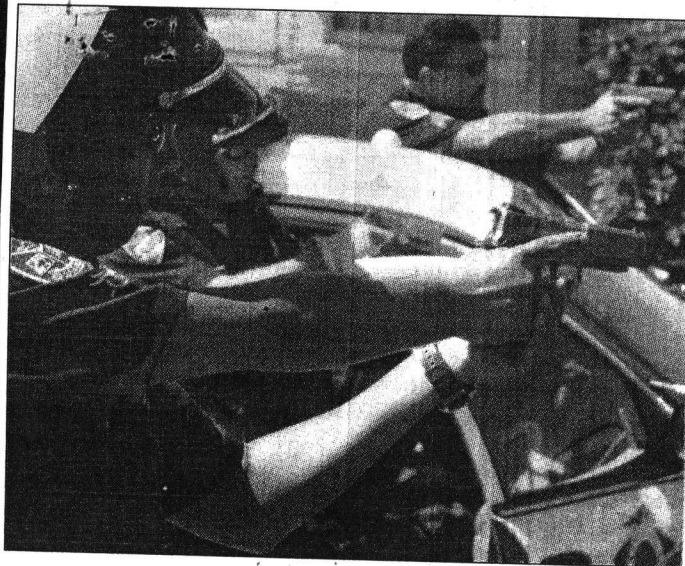
But that has changed, thanks to proactive police activity coupled with a growing willingness from the community to cooperate with police, Watsonville police officer Alex Rodriguez said.

On Tuesday afternoon, dozens of children and adults were in the park, running, playing and laughing.

"There's a lot of families who live here, and this is their park," Rodriguez said. "It's not the gang members' park."

Community involvement, Rodriguez said, is key to law enforcement officials' efforts to fight crime.

See CRIME, page A2



Tarmo Hannula/Register-Pajaronian file

Watsonville police officers Julio Romero and Lee Katich and Sgt. Brian Ridgway keep their handguns trained on a man in a car on Sudden Street in September 2009. The man was reportedly involved in an armed robbery.

CRIME

From page A1

In 2009, the overall crime rate in Watsonville showed a 3 percent decrease and violent crime showed a 1 percent decrease, according to a report released Monday by the Watsonville Police Department. However, violent gang-related crime saw a jump of more than 40 percent from 2008 to 2009.

Police Chief Manny Solano attributed the jump not to an actual increase in gang crime, but to "aggressive enforcement and proactive measures" that target gang crime and known gang members.

In 2009, the WPD put full-time officers on the street to focus on gang members and street-level suppression, Solano said.

Additionally, the WPD has begun to employ a system that allows it to use data such as crime statistics gathered by police to better target crime-ridden areas.

Solano praised community efforts to fight crime, such as Neighborhood Watch programs. He also said programs that focus on keeping young people out of gangs are causing the crime rate to drop.

"We've been able to focus on steering kids, especially early offenders," he said. "We take them and show them positive activities and help them stay in school and get along with their families."

While the increased enforcement — which includes increasing officers' visibility on the streets — has helped in terms of driving down gang activity,

Rodriguez said it is the willingness of witnesses, victims and community members to work with police that helps their efforts.

"I think people are tired of the violence," he said. "They're coming forward more often, and that's what helps us out."

Joyce Wagoner, who has been living in the Bay Village neighborhood for more than 25 years, said she's noticed an increase in crime all over Watsonville.

"Bay Village used to be a real quiet, peaceful place to live," she said.

She pointed to an increase in car break-ins, theft and other crimes that now plague the senior community.

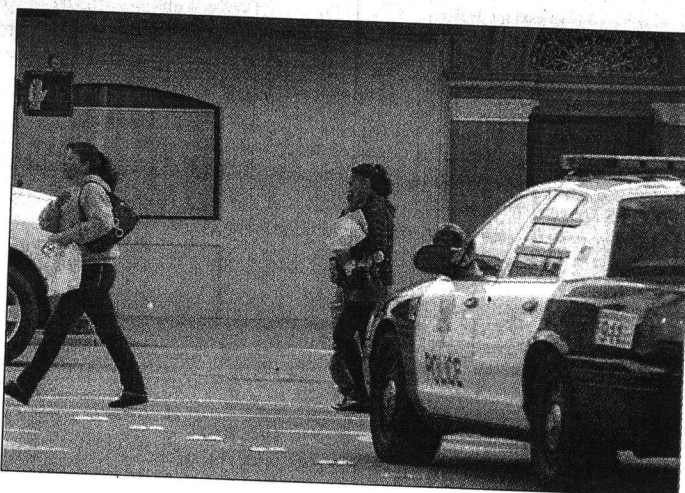
One problem in the Bay Village neighborhood, which is restricted to people 55 and older, is that many residents don't often go outside and are unaware of what's going on around them, Wagoner said. She said she often warns her neighbors to be vigilant.

"You see people driving up and down the streets looking and you wonder what their business is here when they obviously don't belong," she said.

Still, Wagoner said police respond when called, and have been proactive in dealing with potential problems.

"I'm very pleased with our police department," she said. "(Solano) is doing a good job, considering what he has to deal with."

Also according to the report, aggravated assaults were down about 5 percent, but accounted for 69 percent of the city's violent crime. Of these, 33 percent were gang-motivated.



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Watsonville police make their rounds in downtown Watsonville Wednesday.