

2006 shaping up to be very deadly year

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✓ *Murder*
SANTA CRUZ — The number of killings is climbing.

It's not a return to the "Murder Capital of the World" era, when two serial killers ran loose in the county, but with 13 homicides already this year, 2006 could become one of the deadliest since the mid-1980s.

"We're on pace to have a very busy year," sheriff's Lt. Phil Wowak said.

The Sheriff's Office has investigated six homicides in unincorporated county areas since the Jan. 28 stabbing death of 23-year-old Chris Carr at a La Selva Beach house party. Santa Cruz police have arrested four people suspected in three homicides in the past month, and Watsonville police have recorded four homicides so far this year. No killings have been reported in Capitola

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or Scotts Valley.

Police see no connections between the homicides — there have been stabbings, shootings, gang-related killings and a body found charred beyond recognition — and they are not willing to speculate why there has been a sharp increase over 2005 when there were five homicides. One thing they will say, however, is that the increase in killings has them pulling resources away from other crimes such as burglaries and car break-ins.

"I don't think it's an understatement to say we're overwhelmed," said Ariadne Symons, head of trial operations in the county District Attorney's Office.

The District Attorney's Office has charged 14 suspects in connection with nine of the deaths; investigators say they have leads on suspects in two other killings and another homicide has been ruled justifiable. There have been no arrests in three of the killings.

"There's no common thread that we see between all of the homicides," Wowak said.

Police in Santa Cruz and Watsonville echo his observation.

"There doesn't appear to be a trend," Watsonville police Capt. Eddie Rodriguez said.

At least two murder investigations handled by those two city police departments allege gang connections. Investigators suspect another Watsonville killing was a botched robbery. Suspects in other deaths across the county were apparently using alcohol or drugs when the killings occurred.

"This year is a perfect example of how you can't predict the homicide trend in the county," Wowak said.

His office investigated no homicides in 2005, but has had six killings this year, including the stabbing death of a 51-year-old man

in a Felton mental health facility Aug. 11, the county's most recent homicide.

The past month has been particularly deadly with four homicides since mid-July. By contrast, there have been an average of 8.5 homicides in the county each year since 1994. Most were considered criminal homicides, when a person purposely, knowingly, recklessly or negligently causes the death of another. A few during that time, including officer-involved shootings, were later ruled "justifiable" by the court and no charges were filed against the suspects.

In three of the past 12 years, including last year, there were five or fewer homicides. And in three of those years, there have been more than 10.

It has been bloodier.

Killings spiked in 1985 and '86 when 20 deaths in each year were ruled homicides. But the heyday of deadly crime in the county occurred in the early '70s when serial killers struck fear in the hearts of county residents.

Edmund Kemper and Herbert Mullin killed nearly 20 people in the county back in 1972 and '73. Those murders, coupled with other homicides in the county in '73 brought the total to 27, according to the state Department of Justice. At that time Santa Cruz was dubbed the "Murder Capital of the World."

Recent years have seen fewer killings. The Capitola and Scotts Valley police departments routinely see years pass between homicides — in fact, Scotts Valley had its first homicide in nearly 20 years in 2005 — and data shows it's not unusual for larger agencies in the county to go without a homicide every few years.

"We usually average a handful or less every year," said Lt. Rick Martinez, head of Santa Cruz police investigations.

Watsonville police usually handle one or two homicides a year, Rodriguez said, and the Sheriff's

2006 county homicides

■ CHRISTOPHER CARR, 23; DIED: JAN. 28

Circumstances: Carr, a Watsonville resident, died after he was stabbed 13 times in the chest, back and torso — including wounds that punctured his heart and left lung — during a fight at a house party on Spring Valley Road in rural La Selva Beach.

Investigation: Leopoldo Alejandro "Alex" Cortes, 18, is being held in Juvenile Hall awaiting an Oct. 17 jury trial. His attorney has said Cortes was acting in self-defense when he stabbed Carr; Cortes pleaded innocent.

■ ANTHONY ORTEGA CARDENAS, 31; DIED: FEB. 18

Circumstances: Cardenas of Watsonville was shot in the abdomen multiple times during an argument with several men on Locust Street near Second Street.

Investigation: Jose Enrique Resendiz, 21, of Redwood City remains in custody. He pleaded innocent Aug. 10 to shooting Cardenas and also denied two enhancements — that he committed a gang-related murder and used a gun in the commission of a crime resulting in death. His next court appearance is Sept. 19 to set a trial date.

■ JOSE CABRERA, 40; DIED: MARCH 13

Circumstances: He was gunned down on Larkin Valley Road near Buena Vista Drive.

Investigation: Oscar Cabrera, 29, is suspected in the shooting death. The two men were not related but had known each other for years and shared friends, deputies said. Sheriff's detectives believe the suspect has fled the state.

■ JULIET ROUNCE, 50; DIED: MARCH 14

Circumstances: Her body was found in the charred remains of the Soquel mobile home she and her husband, John Rounce, were occupying. An autopsy later determined she died from multiple stab wounds before the fire started.

Investigation: Sheriff's deputies arrested John Rounce, 47, the week after his wife's death on suspicion that he stabbed her then used an accelerant to burn down the mobile home. He pleaded innocent.

■ UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN IN HER EARLY TO MID-20S; DIED: UNKNOWN, BODY FOUND MARCH 18

Office typically investigates two to seven killings a year.

With two police departments and the Sheriff's Office dealing with multiple homicides and making arrests in a majority of the cases, this year's killings are consuming investigators' time and energy. Other cases are pushed aside when homicides and other violent crimes, such as attempted murders, sexual assaults and armed robberies, occur, investigators say.

Circumstances: The woman's badly burned body was found behind a Dumpster at Greyhound Rock State Park north of Davenport. Sheriff's investigators have not said what caused her death.

Investigation: Open, but no leads on who the woman was or who killed her.

■ JOHN BELTRAN, 61; DIED: MARCH 29

Circumstances: A janitor from the Towers office complex discovered Beltran's body in his truck in the office parking lot, next to the Northgate apartments in Watsonville. Beltran and several of the suspects lived in the apartments.

Investigation: Police believe Beltran died in a botched robbery. Moises Bireles, 25, his 17-year-old brother Uriel Alexander Luengas, Maria Fernanda Sanchez, 21, and Juliana Zuniga Garcia, 19, all pleaded innocent to charges of murder, attempted robbery and conspiracy.

A fifth person, Jessica Zuniga Garcia, 24, the sister of Juliana, also pleaded innocent to charges of aiding and abetting after the shooting by allegedly helping to hide evidence.

■ JESSE RODRIGUEZ, 47; DIED: MAY 8, HIS BIRTHDAY

Circumstances: Rodriguez of Watsonville fell during a fight with another man and hit his head. Emergency crews found him lying on the sidewalk on Stoessers Way, an alley behind a municipal parking garage at Rodriguez and West Beach streets. He died six hours later from head injuries suffered in the fall.

Investigation: The death has been ruled a justifiable homicide; no charges will be filed.

■ JAY BLOOMBECKER, 61; DIED: JUNE 14

Circumstances: BloomBecker's girlfriend, Lisa Gonzales, found the body of the workers' compensation attorney in his Live Oak office. BloomBecker apparently died of a gunshot wound to the head.

Investigation: Angus Macintyre, a disgruntled former client, turned himself in to court security the day after the shooting. He pleaded innocent to murder and remains in custody. A preliminary hearing is scheduled for early September.

■ BENJAMIN AVILA, 42; DIED: JUNE 25

Circumstances: Teens talking with Avila began to walk away after a short conversation on Western Drive in Watsonville, but one boy apparently came back and hit Avila

in the head on June 23. Two days later, Avila, a Watsonville resident, died at a hospital from his injuries.

Investigation: The investigation remains open and police say they're homing in on a suspect, but wouldn't elaborate.

■ LARRY ALLEN BURROW, 24; DIED: JULY 16

Circumstances: Burrow of Fresno was fatally shot when he stopped his Cadillac near Riverside Avenue and Third Street in Santa Cruz. Burrow's uncle, who was in the vehicle, also was injured by gunfire.

Investigation: Suspected gunman Antonio Gonzales Hernandez, 18, and 20-year-old Cindy Diego Garcia, who police say directed the alleged gang-related slaying, face charges of murder, attempted murder and a gang enhancement. A preliminary hearing for the two Live Oak residents is set for Sept. 5.

■ RAFAEL HERNANDEZ, 45; DIED: JULY 27

Circumstances: Hernandez of Santa Cruz was flown to a San Francisco Bay Area hospital after being stabbed near the Boardwalk. He had been in critical condition for a week before family members decided to remove life support.

Investigation: Pedro Ramos, also known as Rene Fuentes, was arrested shortly after the stabbing and has been charged with murder. He pleaded innocent and is being held in County Jail.

■ MICHAEL WHEELER, 40; DIED: AUG. 4

Circumstances: Santa Cruz resident Wheeler died at Dominican Hospital a day after he was beaten with a wooden shovel handle and kicked repeatedly on the Westside of Santa Cruz.

Investigation: Anthony Louis Dewolf, 40, pleaded innocent Aug. 8 to a murder charge. A preliminary hearing is slated for Sept. 11; he remains in County Jail.

■ STEPHEN CLINE, 51; DIED: AUG. 10

Circumstances: Cline's roommate at Rose Acres Rest Home in Felton allegedly attacked Cline with a kitchen knife, fatally stabbing him. A female caregiver at the home also was injured.

Investigation: Sheriff's deputies arrested the roommate, Cesar Ojeda Hernandez, 31, shortly after the stabbing. Hernandez was arraigned Tuesday on charges of murder and attempted murder. He is being held in County Jail.

"We really put everybody on high-priority and violent crimes immediately," Wowak said. "Lesser priority crimes suffer."

Watsonville police have five detectives on staff, Santa Cruz police have 10 investigators and the Sheriff's Office has 23 investigator positions, 20 of which are filled.

"One homicide strains our resources," Rodriguez said.

The rise in killings this year also

impacts the District Attorney's Office, prosecutors say.

"We're just getting inundated with these cases," Symons said.

She is personally juggling seven of the cases and sometimes appears in court on more than one case a day.

"This office normally doesn't have this many homicides," Symons said.

It was almost February before the county's first homicide occurred,

but the pace picked up recently, as four killings in the last five weeks were ruled homicides.

Investigators, though, won't speculate about how the year will wrap up.

"We like to say we're always prepared to investigate them and bring them to a successful conclusion," Wowak said.

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