

Local killings swamp system

2006 slayings
most in 20 years

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Murder

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Homicides hit a high in 2006.

Last year — when 17 people were killed, including a mother and her unborn child — was the deadliest the county has experienced in more than 20 years.

The District Attorney's Office has charged 15 suspects in connection with 10 of the deaths.

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■ Complete list of last year's slayings.

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The trial of Leopoldo Alejandro "Alex" Cortes, 18, who is charged in the first slaying of 2006, began Wednesday.

Six homicides remain under investigation; one was ruled a justifiable homicide.

There was no link between the homicides in 2006, law enforcement officials said, though at least two have alleged gang connections.

"Unfortunately, it was something that we couldn't, A, predict and, B, find an underlying thread for," said Lt. Phil Wowak, head of Sheriff's Office investigations. "There's no one item that we could address as a community or through the Sheriff's Office that could have prevented these."

Of those charged with murder, no one has been convicted.

Only five homicides were reported in Santa Cruz County in 2005. In 2001, 16 killings were reported, but prior to that, the number of homicides in the county hadn't surpassed 13 since the early 1990s. Twenty homicides were reported in both 1985 and '86.

"It can be frustrating," Wowak said. "You hate to see that loss of human life."

The rise in killings took a toll

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Killings

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on local law enforcement agencies last summer. The three homicides in the city of Santa Cruz in 2006 occurred during a three-week span in July and August.

"They just all rained upon us," said Lt. Rick Martinez, head of investigations for Santa Cruz police. "It was a huge tax on our resources during the summer."

The Sheriff's Office jumped from no homicide investigations in 2005 to eight last year. The office's 23 detectives worked 2,000 hours of overtime, Wowak said.

The five detectives on the Watsonville police force were perhaps the hardest hit by the increase in violence. There were six slayings in the city in 2006, up from two in 2005.

"The last time we had that many was in 1996, and that was largely because of gangs," said Capt. Manny Solano, head of operations at Watsonville police.

But like the rest of the county, there wasn't one thing linking the Watsonville homicides. Gangs, a botched robbery and seemingly random attacks played a role in some of them, police said. Several victims were homeless men, but investigators did not link their deaths.

2006 slayings

ALEJANDRO SANTIAGO, 32. DIED: OCT. 30.

Santiago, a Watsonville resident, was chased and fatally stabbed on Lassen Way in Watsonville after he, his pregnant wife and his brother encountered two men near Pennsylvania Drive and Clifford. His brother fought with the men; Santiago was stabbed after he stepped into the brawl. He died at the hospital early the next day.

Investigation: No arrests. Police released a sketch of the stabbing suspect in early November and said the attack appeared random.

JOANNA 'ASHA' VEIL, 28, AND HER UNBORN DAUGHTER. DIED: MID-SEPTEMBER. BODY FOUND SEPT. 14.

Circumstances: The 6½-months-pregnant Ben Lomond resident was seen Sept. 9 leaving work at the Ben Lomond Market. Co-workers reported her missing

There was an average of 8.5 homicides in the county each year between 1994 and 2005. 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.

The number of homicides in 2006 also inundated the District Attorney's Office with work. District Attorney Bob Lee said it hasn't been this busy since the late 1970s, when serial killers were being tried for multiple murders and Santa Cruz was dubbed the "Murder Capital of the world."

"Yeah, we're under the crunch," Lee said. "A lot of people are working very, very hard. We want to hold people appropriately accountable."

Several of the suspects arrested for slayings last year have upcoming trials.

The jury trial for Cortes, the Santa Cruz teen accused of fatally stabbing a Watsonville man during a house party in rural La Selva Beach a year ago, began Wednesday and opening statements are expected at the end of the month.

The murder trial for Anthony Dewolf is scheduled for early February. Dewolf, a Santa Cruz transient, allegedly bludgeoned another transient man to death with a shov-

el handle, just off Mission Street in August. Three other trials are slated for March.

To date, no killings have been reported this year, but a half-dozen homicide investigations that carried over from 2006 continue to keep detectives busy.

"Our team has been so hard-working and they've taken such pride in what they do," Wowak said. "I just hope we don't have that kind of a year in 2007."

BENJAMIN AVILA, 42. DIED: JUNE 25.

Circumstances: Teens began to walk away from Avila June 23 after a short conversation on Western Drive in Watsonville, but one boy apparently came back and hit Avila in the head. Two days later, Avila, a Watsonville resident, died at a hospital from his injuries.

Investigation: The investigation remains open. Police have said

Homicides by year

2006:	17
2005:	5
2004:	7
2003:	13
2002:	7
2001:	16
2000:	9
1999:	5
1998:	12
1997:	4
1996:	9
1995:	8
1994:	7

Source: Santa Cruz County Community Awareness Project, local law enforcement agencies.

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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. His case will go before a jury in March.

JOSE CABRERA, 40. DIED: MARCH 13.

Circumstances: He was shot 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

FOUND DEAD
Circumstances: The 6½-months-pregnant Ben Lomond resident was seen Sept. 9 leaving work at the Ben Lomond Market. Co-workers reported her missing Sept. 12, and a woman walking a dog discovered Veil's body Sept. 14 on Love Creek Road.

Investigation: No arrests have been made nor have any suspects been named. Questions about how Veil died and who fathered her child have not been answered.

**NORMAN LEE ELDRIDGE, 52.
DIED: SEPT. 12.**

Circumstances: Eldridge, a transient, was beaten to death with a metal chair along the railroad tracks near Kearney Street in Watsonville. His body was discovered the next morning.

Investigation: Luis Antonio Aguilar, 25, also a transient, was arrested by Monterey County sheriff's deputies two days after Eldridge's death and charged with murder. He pleaded innocent. In mid-December, a judge ruled there was enough evidence to hold a full trial.

**STEPHEN CLINE, 51.
DIED: AUG. 10.**

Circumstances: Cline's roommate at Rose Acres Rest Home in Felton allegedly fatally stabbed him with a kitchen knife. 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 on charges of murder and attempted murder, but a judge found him unfit to stand trial in October. He was sent to a state mental hospital.

**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 jury trial is slated for Feb. 5; he remains in County Jail.

**RAFAEL HERNANDEZ, 45.
DIED: JULY 2.**

Circumstances: Hernandez, of Santa Cruz, was flown to a San Francisco Bay Area hospital after being stabbed near the Boardwalk. He was 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 returns to court on March 22.

**LARRY ALLEN BURROW, 24.
DIED: JULY 16.**

Circumstances: Burrow, of Fresno,

apparently came back to Watsonville in the head. Two days later, Avila, a Watsonville resident, died at a hospital from his injuries.

Investigation: The investigation remains open. Police have said they have a suspect but have declined not elaborate.

**JAY BLOOMBECKER, 61.
DIED: JUNE 14.**

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

Investigation: Angus Macintyre, a former client, turned himself in to court security the day after the shooting. He pleaded innocent to murder and remains in custody. A jury trial is scheduled for mid-March.

**JESSE RODRIGUEZ, 47.
DIED: MAY 8.**

Circumstances: Rodriguez, of Watsonville, fell during a fight with another man and hit his head. Emergency crews found him lying on the sidewalk on Stoesser 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 was ruled a justifiable homicide; no charges will be filed.

**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, pleaded innocent to charges of aiding and abetting after the shooting by allegedly helping hide evidence. They are scheduled to return to court in February.

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

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, with no leads on who the woman was or who killed her.

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; a warrant for his arrest has been issued.

**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 awaiting a jury trial. He has pleaded innocent 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.

**CHRISTOPHER CARR, 23.
DIED: JAN. 28.**

Circumstances: Carr, a Watsonville resident, died after he was stabbed 13 times in the chest, back and torso during a fight at a house party on Spring Valley Road in rural La Selva Beach.

Investigation: The jury trial for Leopoldo Alejandro 'Alex' Cortes, 18, began Wednesday. His attorney has said Cortes was acting in self-defense; Cortes pleaded innocent.

Source: Local law enforcement, Sentinel archives.