

No murders reported for 1997

A year after six murders, Watsonville has gone without a single killing

By DAVID PACINI

STAFF WRITER

WATSONVILLE — Add this to your list of things to be grateful for this Thanksgiving: there has not been a single murder in Watsonville for 13 months. The last killing took place on Oct. 26 of last year.

And with the holiday season quickly approaching, the Watsonville police department is holding its collective breath in hopes that the city makes it through the end of the year with no homicides.

Look for update on solved and unsolved 1996 murders in tomorrow's newspaper

Part of the authorities' anxiousness comes from the fact that the holiday season tends to see increases in the levels of stress and desperation in every community.

"The holidays are a time that we have to be aware of increased domestic violence and pay attention to restraining order violations," said

Watsonville Police Chief Terry Medina. "We have to work with Defensa de Mujeres and have a lot more communication — domestic violence is what I think we're going to have to put as much focus on as we currently have with gang violence."

A murder-free 1997 would provide a stark contrast to last year's six fatal attacks and seems to offer support for the effectiveness of recently-imposed tougher sentencing laws and local intervention programs.

It would also coincide with nationwide trends, which have seen a general decline in serious crimes in the first six months of 1997, according to FBI reports. Those reports show a five percent decline in the West. Nationwide, murder and robbery each dropped nine percent from the first six-month period in 1996.

Similarly, the national murder rate dropped about 10 percent in 1996 compared to 1995 levels.

City murders

Here are the numbers of homicides in Watsonville per year since 1982:

Year	Murders
1997	0
1996	6
1995	1
1994	1
1993	1
1992	0
1991	2
1990	6
1989	2
1988	2
1987	1
1986	2
1985	0
1984	3
1983	1
1982	2

Statistics from the FBI's 1996 Uniform Crime Reports showed that the biggest regional drop, of 14 percent, took place in the West. Those statistics also demonstrate that nationwide at least 51 percent of murder victims knew their attackers. About 30 percent of murdered women were killed by their husbands or boyfriends. Three percent of male victims were killed by wives or girlfriends.

Last year's rate of six homicides was the highest number Watsonville had seen in at least 14 years, matched in only one other year in that period: 1990. Two years in that period — 1985 and 1992 — saw no intentional killings within city limits.

Watsonville Police Chief Terry Medina said no single program is responsible for this year's relative peace.

"It's a combination of a number of things," Medina said. "You never

know which one carries the most weight at any particular time."

Medina said that he believes tougher sentencing laws, such as the three-strikes law and stiffer punishment for violent crimes, are having an impact — if only because offenders are spending more time behind bars. Violent criminals can't re-offend while still in prison.

Medina also said that harsher sentences and tougher laws are likely deterring criminals from carrying lethal weapons.

"We're finding a lot less people using guns than in the past and I think that's attributable to weapons enhancement charges," Medina said.

But punishment, meted out or only threatened, represents only one piece of the puzzle, said Medina. The "carrots" in the equation are the increasingly successful intervention programs that teach offenders to turn their lives around and teach kids to avoid self-destructive lifestyles.

"The Parks and Recreation Department and community-based organizations are working to be more successful in intervention and breaking a lot of the cycles of violence," Medina said. "It seems we're having more people willing to get out of the gang lifestyle."

Medina said anti-violence marches helped focus community attention on the problem and the tragic consequences of violence. He added that a range of programs has helped to redirect the energies and behaviors of those likely to offend.

"The youth center, YMCA and YWCA, and (anti-gang) BASTA are doing a good job in relation to providing more structured activities," Medina said. "And then (there are) programs like Si Se Puede and Teen Challenge that are long-term in-house programs that take a long-term strategy to help people get out of the mainstream of crime and violence."