

# Watsonville follows California in drop in crime rate

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**WATSONVILLE** — Despite six murders in the city last year, the overall crime rate took a turn for the better in Watsonville and around the state.

In Watsonville, rapes, robberies, auto thefts, larceny and arson were all down by an average of 23 percent from 1995. According to the FBI crime index, Watsonville's overall crime rate declined by 13 percent.

Across the state, crime has dropped to its lowest level since 1968, Attorney General Dan Lungren said. He credited three-strikes sentencing laws and "community-oriented policing" programs which stress crime prevention.

Offsetting Watsonville's numbers

were six murder cases, the highest number since 1990. Between 1985 to 1995, there was an average of 1.8 murders per year within city limits.

"Clearly this year's been an exception," Watsonville Police Chief Terry Medina said.

Medina said residents might think all of the 1996 murders were related to gang crime, but that only three of the homicides were gang-related.

Medina said gang activity in the city is up, despite the improved overall crime figures. He said that trend is evident in the increased rate of aggravated assault, up eight percent.

Demographics are exacerbating the problem, Medina said. Experts say the prime years for criminal activity across the nation is 16 to 26 years old. Watsonville's population is nearly 30 percent youth, he said.

Lungren, in his annual "State of the Public Safety" address Wednesday, said crimes reported to the 69 largest police jurisdictions in California during the first nine months of 1996 were down 12.3 percent from the same period of 1995. They were 20 percent lower than 1994, when the three-strikes law took effect, he said.

Those 69 jurisdictions account for 58 percent of the state's population. Final statewide figures will not be available for several months, but Lungren said every indication is that they will closely mirror the rates in the nine-month report.

Lungren said the crime statistics show an accelerating pace of crime reduction over the past four years

— down 0.3 percent in 1993, 6.5 percent in 1994, another 7.0 percent in 1995 and 12.3 percent in 1996 — and that for the first time there was a decline in every major crime category.

His report said homicides were down 13.4 percent, forcible rapes were down 3.4 percent, robbery dropped 9.9 percent, aggravated assault declined 9.1 percent, burglary dropped 12.8 percent and motor vehicle theft was down 15.2.

Lungren acknowledged there are critics of the three-strikes law who attribute reduced crime rates to other factors, including the improved economy and demographic changes such as the declining percentage the population in the most crime-prone age groups.

But he claimed the evidence is overwhelming that the three-strikes law, which calls for 25-years to life for a third felony conviction, is the major reason. He also gave credit to community-oriented programs aimed at preventing youths who commit minor offenses such as truancy and graffiti from graduating to more serious crimes.

"In 1994, this state enacted the toughest 'Three strikes and you're out' law in the nation ... (which) explains California's double-digit reduction in crime," he said.

"When you have double-digit reductions in crime never before seen, and it coincides with tough laws like three strikes, the burden of proof is not on those of us in favor of such policies," Lungren said. "The burden of proof is on the non-believers to show that tough laws like these are having no appreciable effect on the falling crime rate."

Lungren focused especially on the decline in the homicide rate

since 1993, the last year before three strikes took effect.

"The drop in crime is so dramatic that California suffered at least 1,600 fewer homicides in the last three years than would have occurred had the 1993 homicide rate prevailed," he said.

Lungren, a candidate for the Republican nomination for governor in 1998, used his annual crime statistics address as the basis of a broader philosophical platform of educational and economic improvements and a recommitment to family values and high moral principles.

In that context, Lungren challenged contentions by many Democrats that increased prison populations caused by the three strikes law are diverting money from schools to prisons.

"There is a false dichotomy promoted by some that says government cannot serve both priorities," he said. "Both are indispensable obligations."

City of Watsonville crime index

Crime Category	1996	1995	1994	1993	Percentage of change 1996 - 1995
Willful Homicide	6	1	1	1	500%
Forcible Rape	10	18	14	12	-44%
Robbery	86	98	83	128	-12%
Aggravated Assault	447	412	286	347	8%
Burglary	373	359	357	399	4%
Motor Vehicle Theft	153	189	174	199	-19%
Larceny	1379	1747	1839	1729	-21%
Arson	7	9	8	11	-22%
FBI Index	2461	2833	2762	2826	-13%
Violent Total	549	529	384	488	4%
Property Total	1912	2304	2378	2338	-17%
CA Index	1075	1077	915	1086	0%



