

Serious crimes in county, state drop

22 percent decrease reported in county

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SANTA CRUZ — The number of reported serious crimes dropped dramatically last year in both Santa Cruz County and throughout the state, authorities announced Wednesday.

"We're happy to see that our community may be becoming a safer place," said Santa Cruz County Sheriff Mark Tracy.

The number of crimes reported to the Sheriff's Office went down by a whopping 21.8 percent in 1996, nearly twice the statewide decrease — 12.2 percent — which was the largest one-year drop on record, according to the state Justice Department.

Attorney General Dan Lungren attributed the downturn in crime to "three-strikes" sentencing laws and community-oriented policing programs that stress crime prevention.

The number of crimes reported last year to the state's 70 largest police and sheriff's department jurisdictions, including Santa Cruz County, reached its lowest level since 1968, Lungren said.

Those 70 jurisdictions of 100,000 people or more account for about 65 percent of the crimes reported in California. Crimes reported to smaller police departments, such as Santa Cruz, Watsonville, Capitola and Scotts Valley, were not included in Wednesday's statistics, but they will be included in the California Crime Index, which is scheduled to be released in July.

Wednesday's crime figures included homicide, forcible rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary and motor vehicle theft.

Compared with 1995, the number of violent crimes statewide in 1996 decreased 10 percent, and property crimes, 13.3 percent, according to the report. For the Santa Cruz County sheriff, those numbers are even more striking — a 19.5 percent drop for violent crimes and a 22.9 percent decline in property crimes.

The decreases continued a trend evident since the three-strikes law, which calls for 25-years-to-life for a third felony conviction, took effect in 1994, Lungren said.

While Tracy did not directly attribute the decrease to three-strikes, he did say that tougher sentencing laws have led to a slowdown in property crimes in the county.

He pointed to local law enforcement's recent success in breaking up burglary rings and the effective prosecution of those criminals by the District Attor-

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ney's Office as major factors in the 24 percent drop countywide in burglaries last year.

Tracy attributed part of the 23.8 percent decrease in aggravated assaults to work done by the Sheriff's Office in combating domestic violence.

Tracy agreed with Lungren's assessment that community policing played a role in the overall reduction in crime. But the sheriff differed somewhat from the attorney general in that he said the growing economy of the county and the state were factors in the smaller numbers of crimes. Lungren, on the other hand, said the evidence is overwhelming that the three-strikes law is the major reason for the drop.

"We need to understand the magnitude of what is happening in California. We are not simply tagging along with the rest of the country. We are outpacing it," Lungren said.

The attorney general 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 in the population of the most crime-prone age groups.

But he said that since 1993, the year prior to enactment of the three-strikes law, the state crime index has dropped 23.6 percent overall.

Lungren said the three-year, 30.4 percent decline in homicides statewide was the most important indicator.

"Had the level of homicide since 1993 continued unabated, some 2,100 people would no longer be

alive," he said.

The three-year decline in robbery at the state level was 26.9 percent; and in both burglary and motor vehicle theft, 25.7 percent.

Though the number of violent crimes has decreased, Lungren acknowledged an increase in the viciousness of some of the crimes. He attributed much of the problem to youth becoming desensitized to violence.

In Santa Cruz County, the only crime categories that showed increases were rape, up 7.5 percent, and motor vehicle thefts, up 1,400 percent (there was one reported vehicle theft in 1995 and 15 in 1996).

Lungren acknowledged that the statistics represent numbers, not rates of crime adjusted for population. But he said that since population has not decreased in most of California, he is confident that crime rates also have declined.

Lungren, a candidate for the Republican nomination for governor in 1998, announced similar figures on Jan. 29. Those numbers were drawn from the available statistics at the time, which included the first nine months of 1996, not the entire year.

The decreases in every crime category in the statewide 1996 report, compared to the prior year, were:

- Homicide, 18.4 percent.
- Forcible rape, 4.3 percent.
- Robbery, 10.9 percent.
- Aggravated assault, 9.7 percent.
- Burglary, 12.3 percent.
- Motor vehicle theft, 14.5 percent.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

Santa Cruz County crime

Crime	'96	'95	%
Homicides	1	3	-66.7
Rapes	43	40	+7.5
Robberies	68	69	-1.4
Property crimes	979	1,269	-23.8
Burglaries	964	1,268	-22.9
Vehicle thefts	15	1	+1,400
Violent crimes	503	625	-19.5
Total crimes	1,482	1,894	-21.8

For unincorporated areas
 Source: Sheriff's Office