



June 4, 2003, Wednesday

Vista crime rate jumped 24% in '02; Faltering economy cited as contributing factor

Shanna McCord

VISTA -- The mayor blames the economy. Sheriff's officials say it's a glut of shoplifters. Townsfolk say a sharp spike in crime here last year can be due to many factors, ranging from too few deputies to too many delinquents.

Criminologists for years have been warning that a variety of factors -- including a boom in the teenage population and a bottoming out of falling rates -- would lead to higher crime. But no city saw an upswing as pronounced as Vista, where the crime rate rose 24 percent last year, when compared to 2001. Property crime, including auto theft, burglary and theft, rose nearly 30 percent.

Countywide, the crime rate rose 1 percent, according to a report recently released by the San Diego Association of Governments. The property crime rate rose 2 percent.

"This is a difficult time for this to happen," Mayor Morris Vance said, referring to the city's strapped budget. "We definitely cannot afford more police officers right now. With the budget it's hard to keep what we have."

Vance, like many, lays part of the blame on the faltering economy, which would explain why rates rose sharply in other cities in the region. In Solana Beach, the crime rate rose 18 percent. In Oceanside, the rate was up 16 percent.

With an unemployment rate of 4.8 percent, Vista is suffering, the mayor said. Unemployment for the county, on average, is 4.2 percent.

"I think there is a segment of our population hurting economically," Vance said. "There are people without and just not doing well."

Sheriff's Lt. Grant Burnett said he knew the increase was coming. He cited the constant stream of shoplifters arrested at Wal-Mart, one of the city's largest retailers, as a major contributor.

"Wal-Mart brought in its own loss-prevention people and that added tremendously to the amount of burglary arrests for shoplifters," Burnett said.

Other factors may be at play as well.

"Crime isn't a crime until it's reported," Vance said. "Maybe we're doing a better job of getting people to contact police."

Vance doesn't necessarily see last year's numbers as alarming. Crime fell dramatically from 1998 through 2001, and even with last year's spike, the rate is

lower than it has been in years past.

The falling crime rates, he said, were "too low to sustain." They had to go up.

"It was an anomaly in 2001," Vance said, referring to the crime rate of 28 per 1,000 people. "We knew that was extraordinarily low. Maybe now we're coming back up to normal."

Last year's rate was 34.6 crimes per 1,000 people, still significantly lower than 1998's rate of 40 per 1,000 people.

The top crime in Vista, by far, is vehicle theft.

"They're taken daily," said Burnett, a 27-year veteran of the Sheriff's Department.

Vandalism and theft at the business park in south Vista also rank high on the list.

A 37-year-old property manager who has lived here for 20 years said cars are broken into near his South Santa Fe apartment complex and the coin-operated laundries are ripped off constantly.

"Definitely the laundries have been hit hard," he said.

Other residents, such as Amber Ayub, 42, who moved here 14 years ago, say crime is an issue everywhere. She's unfazed by the higher numbers.

"You have to be careful wherever you go," Ayub said. "You can get into trouble anywhere, I don't care if you're in Beverly Hills."

City leaders say they want to get to the root of the problem so the numbers don't climb higher.

"It does concern me," the mayor said. "but the next step is to have a clear understanding why (crime is) going up and attack that."

Shanna McCord: (619) 293-1255; shanna.mccord@uniontrib.com