

Crime rate declines in Pittsburg

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Pittsburg reversed a jump in violent offenses as the total reported crime in the city fell for the third consecutive year in 2008.

According to police data, Pittsburg's violent crime fell 17.3 percent in 2008 compared with the previous year — the fourth time in five years that such offenses declined. Violent crime — mostly robberies — spiked at 12.1 percent in 2007.

Nonviolent property crime dropped 1.8 percent, and overall the city's Part I crime, or the composite of violent and property crime, was down 3.2 percent.

Pittsburg had three homicides in 2008, compared with eight in each of the previous two years. Robberies fell to 130 after reaching 159 the previous year. In other violent crime categories, the number of aggravated assaults fell by six, to 68, and the number of rapes declined by three, to four.

Nonviolent property crimes declined in two of four categories: Burglaries fell by 17, to 439, and auto thefts fell by 118, to 578. Meanwhile, thefts increased by 87, to 1,337, and arsons rose by five, to eight.

Several factors have contributed to the overall decline, including increased community involvement, police Chief Aaron Baker said. That has allowed police to target specific areas and reassess where to disperse officers.

Pittsburg police saw calls for service jump 10.8 percent in 2008.

"It's a huge component," Baker said. "Whenever the community gets involved, crime rates are going to go down. We can't do it without the people."

Pittsburg police respond to every call and write detailed reports, Baker said, adding that "not every city does that."

Among those collaborations is the Business Watch program, formed by police and the Pittsburg Chamber of Commerce. Monthly meetings started in 2004 as a way to alert police Lt. Ron Raman of crimes such as shoplifting, loitering, disorderly conduct and other issues at retail centers, said Jess Leber, the chamber's membership services director.

"What we try to get across is, if there are problems, businesses shouldn't ignore it, and let the police know," Leber said.

Robert Berger, owner of the Pittsburg Towne Center on Railroad Avenue, said police had "not really been that active in terms of controlling" suspicious activity there in the past. Recent patrol efforts and attention have made a big difference, he said.

"I think we're starting to see the fruits of that labor and how cooperative the police have been," said Doug Messner, president of Sierra Pacific Properties.

Sierra Pacific manages and owns five Pittsburg shopping plazas, including Atlantic Plaza, where Mary Lou Ruiz owns Pittsburg Florist. Ruiz, who has owned the shop for 25 years, said police "are always patrolling around" and seem "more readily available than before."

Pittsburg police made 849 more arrests in 2008 than 2007, a 22.8 percent increase. That broke down to 4,214 adult arrests in 2008, compared with 3,441 in 2007, and 365 juvenile arrests, compared with 289 in 2007.

Baker also said Pittsburg's code enforcement, redevelopment and building staff have helped long-term police efforts to remove the "roots of problem areas." Security cameras around town have also helped deter crime, police said.

Like fellow city leaders, Mayor Nancy Parent said she is "thrilled" about recent figures, particularly that police are enforcing more warrants and that vehicle theft fell. She said the data shows outsiders "that Pittsburg's crime, in general, is moving in the right direction."

"Bad people don't want to commit crime where they get caught," she said.

Though the trend is promising, police say there are still some problem areas. They must continue to stay vigilant in 2009, as crime rates tend to increase when the economy weakens, Baker said.

"It's something we can't let up on," he said.