
Crime rates down in 2016, but officials warn of imminent spike

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Crime rates in the High Desert generally declined last year in comparison to 2015, according to statistics from the San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department, but officials warn the trend likely will not continue this year as the effects of recent criminal justice reform begin to fully materialize.

The Sheriff's Annual Crime report shows that crime rates generally decreased across the board throughout the county, including the High Desert region. All six sheriff's stations serving the area recorded decreases in both Part I and Part II crimes — loosely defined as violent and property crimes, respectively.

Nevertheless, some increases were recorded. Most stations throughout the county recorded a rise in rape reports from 2015 to 2016, with local stations recording the sharpest spikes.

Apart from the Victorville Station, all High Desert sheriff's stations recorded steep rises in rape reports from 2015 to 2016. Adelanto had the highest spike, with its rate rising 75 percent from 2015, according to the report.

Other notable jumps include a 48 percent increase in robbery reports for Apple Valley — which also saw a 25 percent hike in aggravated assault — and the Barstow/Trona station recorded a sharp spike in grand theft auto reports. That station, which patrols one of the largest yet most sparsely populated areas of the county, saw GTA reports increase by 84 percent in 2016.

The overall report, however, mainly shows decreases in all crimes reported throughout the High Desert from 2015 to 2016. All High Desert stations recorded decreases in their total of crimes reported for the year. Hesperia had the largest decrease, with crimes dropping by 21 percent across the board.

Sheriff John McMahon touted several efforts the department has taken in the last three years — primarily in response to criminal justice reform measures such as Proposition 47 and Assembly Bill 109 — as factors in the overall drop in crime rates last year. The department refocused its efforts toward criminal street gangs, assigning personnel from the Narcotics Division to regional gang teams.

The restructuring apparently worked, as the Gang Unit made 835 arrests — 606 of which were felonies — and removed 290 illegally possessed firearms from the streets, according to the report. The department also added a fifth Homicide Team to its ranks, while working with the Board of Supervisors to gain greater public safety funds for the 2016-2017 fiscal year.

“These efforts were efficient, and we saw immediate results,” McMahon said in the report.

But these efforts, however successful, may not be enough to stem the ripple effect from criminal justice reforms enacted in the last three years. McMahon offered a grimmer view during his remarks at the Valley Morning Insight meeting held in Victorville on July 5, where the Sheriff said violent crime rates were experiencing a steep rise this year.

“Overall in the whole High Desert it’s up over 20 percent in the first six months of the year,” McMahon said. “That’s murders, robberies — robbery of a house, not just a business — as well as assault with a deadly weapon. That’s all up.”

Even more disturbingly, McMahon said the 2016 statistics don’t necessarily reflect actual changes in crime rates, as recent changes in reporting requirements can make some categories appear better or worse than they actually are. The sharp spike in rape reports, as an example, can be attributed to these changes, as sex crimes previously within their own category are now listed as rape as well.

Conversely, the stats on property crimes seemed to have remained static year over year — thanks to the department pulling “5,000 reports out of that category” because of these changes. Property crimes actually rose in that period, McMahon

said.

Statistics for the first half of 2017 are still forthcoming, with Sheriff's officials expecting preliminary reports by the end of July. But a Daily Press analysis, based on crimes this newspaper has reported on this year, seem to show a rise in crime in the first six months of this year.

From January to July 15, this newspaper has reported on 20 homicides throughout the High Desert. This number is equal to the yearly numbers for murders for both 2015 and 2016, suggesting that murder, at the least, is on the rise in the High Desert this year.

As the pendulum seems to swing, officials say they're committed to combating the rise by ensuring offenders don't become career criminals. McMahon lauded the department's efforts in reducing recidivism by creating better opportunities for inmates, such as apprenticeship programs, that help lead released inmates in a new direction.

"When inmates can find gainful employment and support their families, it significantly reduces their chances of returning to custody," McMahon said.

In addition, the department is continuously looking to add to its ranks to effectively patrol the quickly growing region. He said 133 deputy sheriffs were hired in 2016, including 10 that serve the unincorporated areas of the county.

The department is also reaching out to the public. McMahon will participate in a Facebook Live meeting specifically addressing the spike in violent crime in the region — co-sponsored by Victorville businessman and Victor Valley College Trustee Joseph W. Brady, District Attorney Mike Ramos and the Daily Press — at 3 p.m. Aug. 11.

"We will continue these efforts to build opportunity and trust with the public we serve," McMahon said. "We all need to work together to help reduce crime and improve the quality of life in our communities."

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