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Several major crime categories down in west Oakland communities

by Leslie Shepard-Owsley

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The languishing economy could be a catalyst for crime sprees in the lakes area communities, but fortunately, the volume of the most serious crimes declined overall in 2009 compared to 2008, when major crimes rose in nine of the 11 lakes area communities.

While statistics fluctuate from community to community, stealing (larceny and burglary) in some form or another continues to pose the greatest challenge for local law enforcement officials, with assaults tapped as a close second.

Local police annually compile criminal activity statistics and forward them to the Michigan State Police, which in turn sends the figures to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).

The reported index crimes, formally known as Part 1, or Part A crimes, are considered to be the most severe. They include homicide, criminal sexual conduct (CSC I and II), all assaults, burglary, vehicle theft, arson, larceny, and robbery.

The local crime statistics cited in this special report can be misleading. For example, if a community had two arson cases in 2009, but reported one in 2008, that would account for a 100 percent increase, though there was actually just one additional arson.

The following is a breakdown of 2009 index crime statistics reported by lakes area public safety agencies, and the trends in each community.

COMMERCE TOWNSHIP

According to numbers provided by the Oakland County Sheriff's Department Records Department, there was a 12.4 percent drop in the number of total index crimes reported in Commerce during 2009.

The biggest percentage decrease was in arson cases, which dropped from 13 cases in 2008 to five in 2009.

The number of robberies also fell last year, moving from 13 in 2008 to 10 in 2009. Robberies are thefts that take place with the use of a weapon, which differentiates them from larcenies, which were also down last year in Commerce. There were 565 larcenies reported in 2009, compared to 622 in 2008.

"I'm pleased that the numbers were down, but we have to keep on them," said Lt. Clay Jansson, commander of the Oakland County Sheriff's Department Commerce Township Substation. "We were able to put some extra patrols out there for theft and for traffic incidents this past year. I had some money in my overtime budget."

Motor vehicle thefts were down sharply in 2009, as well. Last year there were 15 stolen cars reported, while there were 37 stolen vehicles in the township in 2008.

There were 15 CSC cases in Commerce in 2009; 14 were forcible, and one was non-forcible. In 2008, there were 20 CSC cases in Commerce, all forcible.

A total of 95 home invasion cases were reported in the township during 2009, with 120 recorded in 2008.

There was one murder in the township in both 2008 and 2009.

All assault cases were down slightly last year compared to 2008. In 2008, there were 221 assaults in Commerce,

while in 2009 there were 212 reported.

"We have some huge hot spots for larcenies and larcenies from autos, and there are some residential and business areas that are having break-ins," Jansson said. "We've got some cars patrolling the areas more frequently."

While Jansson said he was pleased the index crime numbers were down in 2009, he added that he believes they may rise in 2010 because of the economy.

"This January, we lost two officers because of budget cuts," he said. "That doesn't help the cause any."

HIGHLAND TOWNSHIP

Highland Township saw an approximate 16 percent decrease in overall index crimes in 2009. Lt. David Pement, commander at the Oakland County Sheriff's Department Highland Substation, said that can be attributed to patrol deputies and investigators.

"They've done an excellent job following up on larcenies, locating the stolen property, and arresting those responsible," Pement said.

The township experienced a decrease in robberies, assaults, burglaries, and larcenies last year. There were slight increases in forcible sexual offenses and motor vehicle thefts.

"It's important that people really look at the exact numbers and not just the percent change," Pement said. "Murders in 2009 increased 100 percent in the township. That doesn't mean there were 100 more murders than (the previous) year. We only had one (in 2009), so it's important that people don't rely on just percentages — those can get skewed with the slightest increase or decrease."

The most notable decrease was in larcenies. There were 251 in 2008 and 193 in 2009. Pement said this number can continue to decrease with the help of responsible residents.

"You can't leave your cars unlocked or laptops, GPS systems and other valuables in plain view," he said. "It's like baiting a fish — if you leave it there, it will get taken. The people stealing things from cars look for the easiest way to get to what's inside, and that's through an unlocked door. We've only had one instance where a person was going around and breaking windows. Just remember to lock your cars and homes, and to bring in your valuables. It could save us all a lot of time and hassle."

MILFORD TOWNSHIP AND VILLAGE

The Milford Police Department's 2009 index crime statistics indicate relatively minor fluctuations in the numbers of serious crimes reported.

"Our major crime numbers for 2009 were lower or stable (compared to 2008)," said Milford Police Chief Wayne Walli. "Our injury crashes were lower at 46, our arrests were down by 150, and our calls for service decreased by 20 percent over the last two years."

Larcenies reported in 2009 totaled 107, a drop from 121 in 2008; while burglaries reported in 2009 totaled 39, down from 28 in 2008.

There were three arsons reported in 2009, after four were reported in each of the three previous years.

There was a slight increase in auto thefts last year, to five in 2009, up from three in 2008. Five were reported in 2007.

Assaults decreased to four in 2009, after seven were reported in 2008 and 11 were recorded in 2007.

CSC cases remained constant in 2009 with three reported, the same number as in 2007 and 2008; while there were two robberies reported last year, up from one reported in each of the previous four years.

The first homicide in Milford since 2006 occurred last year, in which officers found the bodies of Joseph Peter Valentino II, 61, and Lucille Champoux Valentino, 60, in their home on Brisol Court, on Nov. 15.

Walli quoted an article in the Wall Street Journal indicating crime is down across the nation. He said effective policing and longer incarceration terms are crucial to maintaining the trend.

ORCHARD LAKE

Overall index crime figures declined in Orchard Lake Village last year by about 34 percent, with only domestic assaults increasing, from nine in 2008 to 13 in 2009.

"That's only three more than the previous year, so in the big picture, you can beg the question, 'Did domestic violence really go up?'" said Police Chief Fred Rosenau.

There were two incidents of felonious assault reported in 2009, one more than the previous year.

Non-aggravated assault, and assault of a police officer, remained steady in the last two years. Six non-aggravated assaults were reported last year, the same number as 2008. Similarly, one assault of a police officer was reported last year, the same as in 2008.

In 2009, there were no CSC incidents reported, as was the case in 2007 and 2006. One CSC case was reported in 2008.

Larcenies decreased from 41 in 2008 to 22 last year. Burglaries also dipped by one. Three were three reported last year, compared to four in 2008.

"I am surprised that larcenies and burglaries, nor fraud, have gone up due to the economy," Rosenau said. "I hope it's not the quiet before the storm."

No robberies were reported last year, compared to two in 2008.

WALLED LAKE

Statistics show that Walled Lake's index crimes were up slightly overall in 2009, with assaults increasing nearly 20 percent. In 2008, there were 143 assaults, compared to 171 in 2009.

"We attribute the assault increase to the economy," said Acting Chief Paul Shakinas. "There are more people off work, and in many cases that means both parents who are stressed out, making up more domestic incidents. In addition, there are more adult kids moving back home, which is another stressor. We're trying to get officers at the scene quickly to stop these assaults before they escalate."

Likewise, burglaries rose in the city last year, going from 30 in 2008 to 35 in 2009.

The number of larcenies decreased marginally from the previous year. In 2009, 124 were reported, compared to 131 in 2008.

"The last few months, we've been pressing the officers to get out in the community to do neighborhood checks and get with businesses to find out what's going on," Shakinas said.

The overall rise in index crimes, while nominal, is a byproduct of the economy, and according to Shakinas, could have been much worse. He credits his department's operational merger with Wolverine

Lake's as one reason why crime has not surged higher.

"We're getting used to the community and what each one needs," he said. "We're putting more officers on the street and working together. The merger has really made a difference."

There were seven vehicle thefts reported in Walled Lake during 2009, down by two from the previous year.

CSC cases also declined. In 2008, there were nine reported. There were four in 2009.

No arsons or homicides were reported last year.

WATERFORD TOWNSHIP

Waterford Township realized an overall decrease of 2.5 percent in index crimes last year. Waterford Police Sgt. Scott Good said he attributes the drop off to an outstanding police force and up-to-date technology.

Some of the cutting edge technology now employed includes high-end devices the size of a cell phone that an officer can use to fingerprint a perpetrator on site, rather than carting the person back to the police station.

"If a person is driving without a license, or is a person of interest in a suspicious activity and is playing the name game with us by giving us bogus information, this device can link to the officer's car computer and can identify the person instantly, while providing us with information such as if an outstanding warrant has been issued," Good said.

Software and hardware can also streamline the reporting process on the road, vs. completing it at the police station, as can a GPS mapping program.

"The reporting feature gives the officer the tools and time to keep perpetrators off the street," Good said. "The mapping program allows the officer to access large map areas or dense neighborhoods vs. the conventional process of looking at hard maps."

The greatest advantage of new technology, according to Good, is information sharing. Now officers can communicate with others in multiple jurisdictions, which becomes crucial if a string of crimes is being committed across community borders.

"The level of sophistication has evolved and grown to greater capability," Good said. "Now we have a full blown working computer and high-speed Internet and data links."

A countywide radio system is the primary way of communicating between agencies, which are transitioning from an analog system to digital.

"If we are initiating a pursuit on a fleeing felon, it's crucial the officers and surrounding agencies hear and monitor what's going on — with the new system, dispatch can cross patch information instantly," Good said. "In times when we're trying to do more with less, certain technology is a real benefit."

The greatest change in Waterford's index crimes was in forcible sexual assaults and vehicle thefts, which each dropped by nearly 25 percent last year. In addition, larcenies declined by nearly 7 percent, with 1,686 reported in 2009, compared to 1,811 in 2008.

"Larcenies are one of the more prevalent crimes in all communities," Good said. "As things get tough and people struggle, larcenies typically go up, so it's encouraging our stats are down."

Notable increases came in burglaries and robberies. Burglaries rose by 10.3 percent from the previous

year. There were 478 burglaries in 2009, compared to 433 in 2008; while 74 robberies were reported in 2009, compared to 61 in 2008.

"It's safe to say that during tough times, some of the petty thefts and retail frauds go up," Good said. "People in desperate times do desperate things, but we're doing all we can to combat crime."

Assaults rose by 3 percent, with 1,317 reported in 2009 vs. 1,278 in 2008.

"It's hard to qualitatively measure the whys of the statistics, but we make ourselves visible and work with retailers and neighborhood groups and incorporate as many crime prevention measures as possible," Good said.

There was one murder reported in the township in both 2009 and 2008. Arsons were down to 12 in 2009, from 14 in 2008.

WEST BLOOMFIELD TOWNSHIP

According to statistics provided by West Bloomfield Police, the township's 2009 index crimes dropped by 13 percent. The biggest decrease was in larcenies, of which 576 were reported last year; a drop of 107 from 2008's total of 683.

"It's a shock to me in this economy," said West Bloomfield Police Lt. Carl Fuhs. "I'm hoping that's a trend, but I'll hold off on judgment until next year.

The township saw an increase in forcible sexual offenses, with 23 reported last year, up from 13 in 2008.

"Sex offenses doubled, but the number is so small, you can't really read anything into it," Fuhs said. "It's encouraging when they drop and discouraging when they rise."

The township saw a drop in vehicle thefts, with 19 reported in 2009, down from 39 in 2008; along with 181 burglaries reported in 2009, down from 187 in 2008.

There were also 24 aggravated assaults reported last year, down from 22 in 2008. Eight robberies were reported in 2009, down one from 2008's figure.

There were no homicides reported in West Bloomfield in 2008 or 2009.

"Everything else is kind of in line," Fuhs said. "Overall crime is down, and it's encouraging, but it's only one year."

WHITE LAKE TOWNSHIP

White Lake Township experienced a 1.4 percent decrease in overall index crimes, with the most notable decrease in larcenies. In 2008 there were 482 larcenies reported, and in 2009 there were 448, resulting in a 7.1 percent decrease.

White Lake Police Chief Ron Stephens said that statistic will continue to drop if residents lock their car doors and homes.

"It's a crime we experience in every municipality and is highly preventable by homeowners," he said. "I can't stress how important it is to remember to lock your doors and not leave valuables in plain sight."

In 2009, the township saw decreases in murder, forcible sexual offenses and larcenies. Robberies, assaults, burglaries, motor vehicle thefts, and arson all saw slight increases.

Stephens said the increases in burglary/homes invasions and assaults can be attributed, in some part, to the economic climate.

"We see a lot of instances where people have lost their jobs, have a lot more time on their hands, and (may) spend more time drinking," he said. "Sometimes the assaults occur at the bar and other times they occur at the home. A lot of those assaults are domestics."

WIXOM

The number of index crimes reported in Wixom rose by 8.35 percent last year, according to information provided by the Wixom Police Department.

"While many crimes increased from 2008 to 2009, they were still less (in 2009) than in 2007," said Wixom Public Safety Director Clarence Goodlein. "Each and every crime is serious and we watch the incidents as they arise. We target patrol to address all crimes — sometimes in certain areas more than others. We give special attention to vulnerable areas, and it's not altogether fair to say the trend is an increase in crime. Although I'm not trying to minimize a crime when it occurs, crime is still down by 13.6 percent from 2007."

Larcenies and vehicle thefts showed the greatest change last year. There were 284 larcenies reported in 2009 compared to 249 in 2008, indicating a shift of 14 percent. Likewise, vehicle thefts rose from 29 in 2008 to 38 in 2009, a 31 percent increase.

There was one homicide in Wixom in 2009 compared to none in 2008. Criminal sexual conduct also increased by one, with 11 reported in 2008 to 12 in 2009.

Robbery and burglary incidents are also on the rise in Wixom. Six robberies were reported in 2008, compared to the 11 in 2009. Likewise, 68 burglaries or home invasions were reported last year, compared to 64 in 2008.

"Some areas are seeing an increase in robbery cases, and we're trying to prevent these by continuing our aggressive patrol," Goodlein said. "Sometimes it's effective and other times not as much, but we do clear most of our complaints brought to us through arrests; or if there isn't enough evidence to proceed, the information is valuable to us and gives us an edge on the people responsible. It allows us to put them under more scrutiny, so we are actually successful at a later date in time."

Two index crime categories that decreased in the city during 2009 were arsons and assaults. One fire was attributed to arson in 2009, whereas two were investigated in 2008. Assaults declined by nearly 8.5 percent — 130 were reported in 2009, compared to 142 in 2008.

WOLVERINE LAKE

There was an 18.2 percent rise in Wolverine Lake's total index crimes last year, with larcenies topping the list. In 2009 there were 69 larcenies reported, compared to 33 in 2008.

"Larcenies are big everywhere," said Wolverine Lake Police Chief Joe George. "There's no place escaping it."

George said the bulk of the larceny cases stem from young people looking for unlocked vehicles between midnight and the early morning hours.

"Normally it's younger people looking at unlocked cars in driveways or side streets," George said. "GPS systems are huge and will be snatched up. People need to be more responsible and lock their cars. Occasionally we'll find smashed out windows if there's an easy take in the car, but for the most part it's open cars they're targeting."

Assaults declined in 2009, from 48 in 2008 to 37 last year.

Other crime categories declined marginally.

"I don't get too excited if there are a few more or less," George said. "We're OK and staying in the ball game, especially with times as tough as they are. While we always want crime to be less, we still need to be realistic."

Staff writers Lisa Brody, Brooke Meier, and Michael Shelton contributed to this report.