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Safe in the city

Portland crime hits a 40-year low, a drop attributed to everything from Measure 11 to more 'good people'

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Murder and mayhem may be on the rise in a number of big cities across the country -- but not in Portland.

This week the FBI released its latest national report, which said murder had sharply increased in cities of more than 1 million people. But in Portland and across the nation, crime has been falling. The rate of crimes such as robbery, rape and murder now stands at a 40-year low.

The trend has accelerated in the past decade as violent crimes plummeted 56 percent in Portland. Property crimes have decreased as well, falling 33 percent since 1996.

Why the dramatic drop?

Many would like to take credit, starting with Measure 11 proponents. But social scientists and law enforcement experts say it is impossible to attribute success to any one reason because many factors influence the crime rate. The drop in crime is so sweeping, no single city can claim the winning strategy.

"What I call it is 'the something big that nobody knows what it is,' " said Pamela Donovan, an assistant professor of criminal justice at Bloomsburg University in Pennsylvania.

Still, everyone has an opinion.

As high-end real estate and businesses move into the city, the extra eyes, ears and sense of community help.

Mike Reese, commander of Portland Police Bureau's central precinct, said he's seen downtown transformed since his childhood days, when the area would empty out at nights.

"Now, you walk downtown, there's people -- good people," Reese said.

"People are more engaged in their community. They're not willing to tolerate criminal activity."

Lynnae Berg, assistant chief of operations of the Portland police, cites a constellation of factors, including police work oriented to problem-solving, a healthy economy and new laws controlling chemicals used to make methamphetamine.

Age is a factor

One major theory for the change, nationally, is demographics:

"A lot of crime is probably simply due to the prevalence of youngsters in our community," said Kris Henning, an associate professor of criminology and criminal justice at Portland State University.

Young men are much more likely to be the victims and perpetrators of crimes than people of other ages.

The echo effects of the post-World War II baby boom led to larger groups of young adults in the 1990s.

Criminologists say that spikes in homicides were fueled by gun violence between young male drug dealers and gang members. Some local experts plan to study how demographics have changed locally and how they have affected crime rates.

And everyone who discusses crime rates in Oregon mentions Measure 11, the 1995 state law that mandates minimum prison sentences to violent offenders.

Howard Rodstein, policy analyst for Crime Victims United, a group instrumental in pushing Measure 11, sees the law as the most significant change over the past decade to impact crime rates.

Rodstein points to a 2007 report by the Oregon Criminal Justice Commission, a state agency that analyzes crime issues. The report attributes every 2.6 percent drop in crime rate to every 10 percent rise in incarceration rate. Oregon's incarceration rate has risen 38 percent since 1996, the report said.

Local efforts in Multnomah County include the creation of a unit of officers to address livability issues downtown, the funding of private patrol officers and improved strategies for keeping offenders from committing more crimes.

The Portland police street crimes unit targets such trouble areas as drug dealing in front of businesses or aggressive panhandling.

The officers think they have had a big impact on drug-dealing and gun-carrying, just by consistently being downtown and watchful, said Sgt. Chris Davis.

Cleaner streets, literally

Police also are supplemented downtown by security officers paid for by the Portland Business Alliance, which also employs downtown cleanup crews as a countermeasure to crime.

"If you don't take care of the little things like broken windows and grass and weeds . . . then the criminals start looking at the neighborhood like nobody cares," said Mike Kuykendall, the vice president of downtown services for the alliance.

About a decade ago, Multnomah County corrections workers began using a research-backed plan for evaluating ex-convicts and matching them to the job training or the alcohol and drug treatment they may need.

Since then, the county's rates of criminals who reoffend have dropped more steeply than the state's, said Robb Freda-Cowie of the Multnomah County Department of Community Justice.

The county in 1993 also opened the Donald H. Londer Learning Center, which teaches reading, computer and job skills to those returning home from prison.

While Portland's population has continue to climb and the number of police officers has failed to keep pace, the city's homicide count fell last year to 23 -- half of what it was a decade ago.

Even as news coverage of crimes highlights the bizarre and frightening, particularly random acts of violence, the fact remains that most victims of violent crimes have some kind of relationship with the attacker.

Still, crime statistics only account for reported crimes, and some critics say that citizens weary of property crimes, for example, may have simply stopped bothering to report them. A neighborhood plagued by persistent car prowlers or burglars may well not feel much comfort by an overall drop in the crime rate.

Berg, the assistant chief, said the police bureau is cautiously optimistic and must continue to work on preventing problems.

"The demand on our resources has only grown," Berg said.

In the meantime, more people like Jinny Shipman are opting to call downtown Portland home.

Shipman, 52, has lived in the Portland area for 30 years and moved to the Eliot Tower in downtown Portland from Cedar Mill in August.

She said her perception of more vibrancy and increased safety downtown influenced her decision to

relocate.

"This is almost becoming a residential community now," Shipman said.

"When you have people downtown who own homes, they care . . . and they're the kind of people that you want walking around."

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