

DALLAS CRIME - Police battling rise in residential burglaries

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Seated at the head of a conference table inside Dallas police headquarters, Chief David Kunkle listens to his top officers discuss their latest efforts to fight crime.

"It's taking a lot of work, but I think these things we've been doing have helped tremendously," Deputy Chief Jan Easterling says among a roomful of blue uniforms - the collective brain of the department.

But despite their efforts, some of the numbers projected on a screen above them are highlighted in bold red.

Thieves broke into hundreds more Dallas homes through April than they did in the same period last year. Residential burglaries rose 14 percent. Cars and businesses have also been hit hard.

In the wake of these intrusions, thousands of people have been forced to replace valuable possessions and face the feelings of vulnerability that come when strangers violate their homes.

Those who attend Chief Kunkle's command staff meetings each Thursday morning study the numbers like brokers at a stock exchange. They are driven by what sometimes feels like a Sisyphean task: trying to reduce them.

"The first thing I do every morning is pull up my crime stats," said Lt. Malik Aziz, acting commander of the city's northwest patrol area, "... to see if the things that we did yesterday, did they have any effect on what the numbers are today?"

While police often get credit or blame for swings in the crime rate, they're caused by a variety of factors.

Some say the rise in property crime is a product of tough economic times. Others blame the recent troubles on the release last year of hundreds of petty criminals to relieve overcrowding in the county jail.

Even the weather can have an impact. Last year, the heavy rains in May and June may have helped stem crime.

Officials in neighboring cities such as Farmers Branch have blamed illegal immigrants for rising crime, but Dallas police say they aren't a factor in the increase in property crime.

"Most of the folks that we're catching were born right here," Acting First Assistant Chief Charlie Cato said.

Whatever the causes, the recent crime numbers are giving Lt. Aziz a headache. In northwest Dallas, under his watch, residential burglaries jumped 45 percent this year by the end of April.

"What resources do you need in order to turn that around?" he recently asked one of his sergeants about a hot spot near Love Field.

More officers, the sergeant responded.

Unfortunately for Lt. Aziz, he has little control over the number of officers at his disposal.

Dallas has 3,324 officers and needs about 500 more to reach the city's goal of three per 1,000 residents. City officials hope to get there by 2011.

Meanwhile, commanders fill extra needs with overtime. Last fiscal year, the department budgeted about \$15 million for overtime and spent \$20 million. So when the new fiscal year came around in October, commanders started cutting back.

The reduction could be a factor behind the burglary numbers early this year.

Truancy's effect

Police say truancy and burglaries go hand in hand.

"The kids out there running around not in school, they're going to get in trouble," Officer J.D. Stanley said.

Officers at southwest patrol have rounded up more than 700 truants since March 17. That's the day the patrol area's commander, Deputy Chief Rick Watson, restarted the program this year. He ran it all last school year.

Burglaries in southwest Dallas had shot up 48 percent by the middle of March. But since then, Chief Watson has gained back some ground. By last week, the rise over last year was 31 percent.

The same day he started the truant patrols, he assigned other officers to work together as a burglary response team.

The team has arrested about 120 people since March, most for burglary and theft. But about 70 of these suspects are already out of jail and back on the street. The county jail's revolving door is a continuing frustration for officers.

"Once they make bail, they come right back to the same place again, set up shop, and you've got to start the process all over," said Officer Herb Ebsen, one of the team members.

Chief Kunkle sees such repeat offenders as a major factor driving recent increases in property crime. With space in the jail limited, the county has focused on violent criminals - and violent crime for the year was down 8 percent at the end of April.

Meanwhile, "property crime offenders are getting less attention across the board, but they drive our [overall] numbers," he said.

Still, overall crime is flat this year, and police say the numbers are moving in the right direction.

Hottest hot spots

The patrol commander who perhaps finds herself under the most pressure from rising property crime numbers this year is Chief Easterling, who oversees northeast Dallas. Business burglaries there leaped 37 percent by the end of April. Car burglaries were up 33 percent.

With an overall crime increase that leads the city's divisions, the patrol area contains some of the hottest criminal hot spots. Vickery Meadows - a once-promising area just south of Interstate 635 now peppered with low-income apartment complexes - has become a particular concern.

Jflex Giovonni lives in an apartment near that area but may not for much longer. Last month thieves kicked in his front door and ransacked his apartment. They hit a neighboring apartment the same way.

"I'm definitely thinking about moving out," Mr. Giovonni said. "I moved into that area because it was cheap and reasonable, and I never had any problems. But now I don't want to deal with it anymore."

Chief Easterling recently began sending officers to walk with apartment complex managers and check vacant units. They issue criminal trespass warnings to anyone they find inside.

"A lot of these people, they just hang around these places," Chief Easterling said. "The problems are coming from the apartments, but at the same time they're not residents."

In battling rising crime statistics, the northeast patrol division faces a problem common to the entire agency: Each year, police commanders compete against the year before. So after four years of steady decreases, last year is proving difficult to match.

Misleading numbers?

For years, bringing the numbers down has been a political necessity driven largely by annual comparisons showing Dallas has more crimes per capita than any other city over 1 million people. Last year, the City Council set a goal of an 8 percent reduction in overall crime for 2008, mostly to keep the city on pace to lose that distinction.

Comparing Dallas to other cities with at least a million people is arbitrary, however, and some say misleading.

That excludes the city of Detroit, for instance, because it has only 900,000, said Tim Bray, a criminologist at the University of Texas at Dallas. "Even though the way it's structured, the socio-economic issues that it has are somewhat similar to us - much more similar than Los Angeles or New York."

He says that when it comes to crime statistics, police are only one part of the equation. Others include prosecutors, judges, jails and schools.

Chief Kunkle likes to say that his department can't simply arrest its way out of the crime problem, and Mr. Bray says he's impressed by that.

"I think as a police department, Dallas has done a tremendous job of not saying, 'Well, we need more cops so we can make more

arrests," Mr. Bray said. "Instead, they are saying we need to find new strategies that involve the whole community in making change."

But that doesn't change the political landscape for Chief Kunkle. As he and his commanders study the overhead screen each Thursday morning, they know they'd better find a way to turn the numbers in bold from red to black.

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Dallas crime in April

While violent crime declined last month, property crime - and burglaries in particular - increased from the same month last year.

No. of incidents % change from April 2007

Murder 19 -18.1%

Rape 42 -7.1%

Individual robbery 433 +4.3%

Business robbery 101 -9.2%

Aggravated assault 416 -19.0%

All violent crime 1,011 -8.3%

Residential burglary 1,336 +14.4%

Business burglary 566 +11.2%

Auto theft 1,107 -2.9%

Theft 3,726 -4.6%

All property crime 6,735 +2.5%

All crime 7,746 +1.0%

SOURCE: Dallas Police Department

Break-ins at homes and businesses

While burglars have struck hundreds more homes in northwest and southwest Dallas this year, businesses are becoming a more popular target in the northeast corner of the city.

Residential burglaries

Patrol division 2007* 2008* % change

Central 249 307 +23%

North Central 548 495 -10%

Northeast 1,073 1,136 +6%

Northwest 375 542 +45%

South Central 716 759 +6%

Southeast 801 872 +9%

Southwest 618 864 +40%

Business burglaries

Patrol division 2007* 2008* % change

Central 238 243 +2%

North Central 176 136 -23%

Northeast 283 389 +37%

Northwest 352 415 +18%

South Central 246 286 +16%

Southeast 396 407 +3%

Southwest 322 351 +9%

* Jan. 1 through April 30

SOURCE: Dallas Police Department

• Caption: PHOTO(S): 1. (TOM FOX/Staff Photographer) Dallas police Officer Herb Ebsen (right) questioned a Kimball High student who was taken back to school by the department's truancy patrol on Friday.2. (TOM FOX/Staff Photographer) Dallas police Officer Herb Ebsen (center) and fellow officers are making a focused effort to reduce burglaries in southwest Dallas with a burglary response team, created in March. CHART(S): 1. Dallas crime in April.2. Break-ins at homes and businesses. MAP(S): (TOM SETZER/Staff Artist) Burglaries on the rise.

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