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## Columbia: Violence down, property crime up

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Violent crime in Columbia dipped to its lowest level in 14 years in 2008, but property crime was up 14 percent compared to the previous year, partly because of the economy.

The result — a 7 percent increase in crime overall.

There were 342 fewer violent offenses, which include homicides, rapes, aggravated assaults and robberies, Columbia Police Chief Tandy Carter said Thursday.

There were 12 homicides, four fewer than in 2007.

Aggravated assaults dropped 32 percent — the largest decrease in any violent crime category.

“When we reduce violent crime in our community, we reduce the fear factor in our community,” Carter said. “That gives people a lot more hope. They feel a lot better about their police force and are more willing to work with you.”

Of all the violent categories of violent crime, robbery was the only one to increase. Robberies were up 6 percent.

The 14 percent increase in property crime, which includes burglaries, larcenies and larcenies of motor vehicles, could partially be a result of the economic downturn, Carter said.

Larcenies of motor vehicles were up 17 percent and other larcenies increased 16 percent.

But Carter is not going to let the economy become an excuse for the spike.

“We’re trying to buck that trend,” he said.

Police are offering workshops, teaching people how to start Neighborhood Watch groups and prevent property crime.

In half of all car break-ins, the cars are left unlocked, Carter said.

The chief, who was sworn in last spring, wants to cut crime in half in five years.

He recently outlined an \$8.9 million plan that would add 94 patrol officers and investigators, new cars and other equipment and training programs.

City Council is trying to obtain federal stimulus dollars to pay for most of his program.

Carter recently has been praising patrol officers for their work reducing violent crime.

Sgt. Kenny Hite, a community response team supervisor, said officers have been looking at where and when violent crime is occurring, then flooding that area with officers.

For instance, on a Friday night, between 10 and 25 officers will go out and stop people on the street for drinking and drug dealing and drivers for speeding.

Recently targeted areas include Two Notch Road and Colony apartments and Bethel Bishop Chappelle apartments.

“The honest people are sitting inside looking out their windows and they’ll see us out there,” Hite said. “That does instill confidence in the community towards the Police Department.”

Tige Watts, president of the Columbia Council of Neighborhoods, is encouraged by the drop in violent crime, but says property crime is affecting almost all neighborhoods.

“To be honest, the rate of increase is not as high as I thought it would be,” he said.

He’s encouraging people to set up Neighborhood Watch groups and to call 911 without hesitation if they see suspicious activity.

“Criminals will take advantage of people when they’re most vulnerable,” he said. “They’re smart and the community just has to be smarter in return.”

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