

**THE DRAMATIC DROP IN CRIME FRESNO'S NUMBER OF WILLFUL HOMICIDES HAS DROPPED DRAMATICALLY IN THE PAST FIVE YEARS. COMMUNITY, GOVERNMENT ACTIONS CREDITED FOR MAKING THE CITY SAFER**

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Pete Mehas dismisses the notion that Fresno was going to hell in 1993 and 1994 because of rampant crime.

The situation, says the Fresno County Schools superintendent, was actually much worse.

"What do you mean "going?" " Mehas asks. "We were already there."

If so, then Central California's largest city is finally emerging from the netherworld of skyrocketing lawlessness and homicide. Fresno Police Department crime numbers told the tragic story in 1993 and 1994, probably the most violent two-year period in city history, and they tell the more hopeful story today:

\* The number of murders (excluding justifiable homicides) dropped from a record 87 in 1993 to 27 last year, the lowest total since 1975.

The U.S. Department of Justice bases its surveys on murders per 100,000 population. In 1993, the national average was slightly fewer than 10 murders per 100,000 population, less than half of Fresno's average.

Six years later, Fresno had 6.5 murders per 100,000 population. The national average was 6.8 murders per 100,000 population in 1997, the most recent statistic available.

Using the Justice Department's yardstick, Fresno police officers say, they can't recall a lower murder rate than in 1999's.

\* Total violent crimes -- murder, rape, robbery, aggravated assault -- hit a record 6,199 in 1994. For the first 11 months of 1999, they had dropped to 3,720.

Fresno police are still compiling statistics for the full year, but the trend points to a total of about 4,058 violent crimes in 1999, a 34.5% decline.

\* Motor vehicle thefts, perhaps the most maddening crime faced by Fresnans because it can happen anywhere and to anyone, hit a record 13,580 in 1994. For the first 11 months of 1999, the

total was 4,230. That works out to an estimated 4,615 car thefts for the year, a two-thirds drop in five years.

No one familiar with these trends suggests crime has disappeared from Fresno. This can still be a cruel, violent city. One murder, one rape, one domestic assault victim is one too many, city and community leaders say.

And there is no doubt that crime levels are dropping dramatically nearly everywhere in the nation. Just in California, murder totals were cut almost in half in the past five years.

Yet, Fresnoans on the front lines of crime-fighting and prevention say something amazing happened here in the late 20th century. In a city too often (and perhaps unfairly) lambasted for its collective shortcomings, people from all walks of life decided to try to solve a seemingly out-of-control social plague.

"Back in 1993, when it was so bad, I think the people in the community realized that if we don't join hands and work together, we're all going down," Mehas said.

Crime statistics may follow a cyclical pattern, says California State University, Fresno, criminology professor Jerome Jackson, but people acting of their own free will have the biggest impact, for good or bad, on the problem.

"We're not just idly skipping along the yellow-brick road. We all have to make concerted, concentrated efforts if we are to reduce crime," Jackson said.

Anyone not living in Fresno in the early and mid-1990s will find it hard to grasp just how bad it was then.

Folks focused on the growing murder rate, and their fears were justified, crime experts say. Statistics show that murders often involve people who know each other, yet the Justice Department adds that homicide is a reliable barometer of a city's overall violent-crime scene.

People were already on edge when 1993 arrived. Barely a year earlier, Robert Luecke of Lindsay had been killed by a stranger in a Fresno mall parking lot while Christmas shopping. In the summer of 1992, 18-year-old Kimber Reynolds was killed in front of a popular Fresno restaurant by an ex-con. The year ended with 81 homicides, a 75% increase from 1991.

It only worsened in 1993. Yes, drug wars and gang battles and domestic violence and explosive anger all played big roles in the year's mayhem. But the utterly senseless and random stranger-on-stranger murders were what frayed people's nerves.

A 14-year-old boy was shot to death after buying candy at a convenience store. A man was shot to death while selling ice cream. Patrons and employees at a Fresno bar, seven of them, were murdered in the worst mass killing in city history.

"What is happening to this town?" The Bee asked in an eight-part series on Fresno crime. The city's social structure, some answered, was imploding.

Yet, six years later, crime has fallen so dramatically that it may not even be an issue in the upcoming mayor's race.

What happened? The short answer: There's a bunch of answers, both big and small.

Fresno Mayor Jim Patterson was elected in 1993 on a law-and-order platform, and City Council members increased the Police Department's size 64% over a six-year period to 693 officers. Citizens and criminals were seeing blue uniforms where they'd seldom been seen before.

"There is a direct correlation between a 64% increase in police officers and a 70% decrease in murder," Patterson said. Reduced crime "is a precondition for everything else we want to accomplish."

Ed Winchester, who became Fresno police chief in the summer of 1993, changed crime-fighting tactics. One of the most successful, police say, was when the Violent Crimes Suppression Unit (essentially the department's SWAT team) began patrolling full time in high-crime areas.

Police also point to a program called Problem Oriented Policing, or POP, in which officers develop crime-fighting solutions in neighborhoods making a lot of service calls. And the addition of three helicopters has just about eliminated high-speed chases while leading to more captured suspects, police say.

Lee Pointer, associate minister at St. Joseph Baptist Church, said he and the children in his west Fresno neighborhood once were afraid to go outside even in the afternoon because of all the gunfire. Not anymore.

"[Police] have the attention of the gang-bangers and the drug dealers now," Pointer said. "They're not stupid. When they see the police coming around the corner all the time, they lie low. That has improved life abundantly."

In the past six years, the state legislature also passed tough sentencing laws for convicted criminals such as Three Strikes and 10-20-Life. Three Strikes was pushed by Fresno

photographer Mike Reynolds, the father of murder victim Kimber Reynolds.

These laws are attacked by many who applaud the jailing of violent criminals but question the wisdom and justice of putting nonviolent repeat offenders in costly prisons for decades.

Yet, no matter how one feels about Three Strikes and 10-20-Life, experts say, they probably had an impact on crime reduction if for no other reason than keeping more career criminals off the streets.

An improving economy helped, too. Fresno's unemployment rate averaged 13.9% in 1993; it was 11.5% last November.

Those are some of the big, high-profile answers to Fresno's declining crime rate. But it's the less-publicized but equally effective answers that cheer local leaders the most. This is partly because they point to a communitywide, grass-roots response (often targeted at youths) that could be permanent.

For example, every Fresno high school campus has a team composed of a Fresno police officer and a Fresno County probation officer. They not only keep the peace but also ensure that at-risk students tread a narrow and ultimately productive path.

The program started in 1993. In 1992-93, 49 Fresno students were caught taking firearms to school; in 1998-99, the number was zero.

"Just having them [police and probation officers] on the campus, being visible and working as a team, has had a tremendous impact on crime," Bullard High Principal Tim Belcher said.

Patterson said much of the credit must go to places of worship, schools and service/youth-oriented organizations that tackle crime prevention daily at the most basic human levels. Combine them with government leverage, then get them all working on the same page and their crime-fighting power is magnified a thousandfold, the mayor said.

House of Hope for Youth has three Fresno sites that provide a variety of education and counseling services. Many of the children she helps, says founder Susan Bechara, are Southeast Asians who have lost sight of their heritage and their futures.

Her task is not easy or always successful, Bechara said. But trying beats any alternative.

"We takes risks all the time, and there's bound to be problems," Bechara said. "But the risks pay off because I'm not willing to give up."

Ken Quenzer, president of Boys & Girls Clubs of Fresno County, has seen membership triple to 12,000 youngsters in the past 10 years. They come to play, get help with homework, use a computer or just talk with someone who cares.

The one-on-one relationships that develop may be the biggest crime-fighter, Quenzer said.

"The most valuable thing we offer kids is a positive adult in their life," Quenzer said. "Kids need to know somebody cares about them."

Finally, there is the future.

"The best we can do is manage crime. It's always there," criminology professor Jackson said.

But no one knows how low that threshold is until they try, he added.

Which brings up the Fresno mayoral election March 7. Will crime be a key plank in the candidates' campaigns?

Council members in the hunt -- Garry Bredefeld, Chris Mathys, Sal Quintero and Dan Ronquillo -- have concentrated on job-creation and land-use issues so far.

It remains to be seen what they and other candidates will do with the crime issue.

"We're not going to step back in that area since we have a program that is achieving results," said former Fresno Mayor Dan Whitehurst. "But other priorities are looming larger on the public's list, and they're saying, 'Let's change those things.'"

But actor Alan Autry said crime, education and jobs rank equally in his campaign. He said he feels a sense of complacency about crime prevention among Fresnoans: "We just can't forget where we were six years ago."