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Falling crime statistic deceptive

By Marius Meland
Oregon Daily Emerald

Eugene's crime rate is down from last year, but police claim the statistics are deceptive and want more officers to handle serious and increasingly violent crimes.

"In the last 10 years, the nature of crime has changed in Eugene," police Lt. Vic Mann said. "Societal change and drug use have brought about big-city problems that aren't reflected by the absolute numbers of the crime rate. Meanwhile, the number of officers has been reduced."

According to statistics released by the Eugene Department of Public Safety, the number of reported crimes has been reduced by 10 percent since last year. The crime rate in Eugene is now at its lowest point since 1988.

"But these numbers don't mean much," Mann said. "To understand what's going on in Eugene, you have to go out in the streets and observe for yourself. You have to see dilapidating neighborhoods, drug deals in the streets, and kids being knifed down."

To meet what they see as an aggravation in the nature of crime, the Eugene police now want to increase the number of officers after a decade of cuts in staffing. Mann is in charge of writing a request for a federal grant that would give Eugene nine of the 50,000 additional police officers that President Bill Clinton has promised to put on the street.

The number of sworn police officers in Eugene has dropped from 161 in 1981 to 147 last year. Eugene now has 1.25 officers per 1,000 citizens, considerably lower than the Oregon municipal average of 1.56 and the national average of 2.2.

Non-sworn civilians called community service specialists have taken over some of the duties previously handled by police officers in a money-saving measure. In a plan to use more community resources, public safety also cooperates with White Bird's CAHOOTS van, which takes care of people who are severely intoxicated or undergoing a mental crisis.

"Our budget has increased during the past years, but less money has been allocated to police staffing," finance manager Carol Calkins said. "By employing more community service specialists, we've tried to save money, increase productivity and free officers to do more major police work."

But police say that although these workers have relieved them of some minor police work and routine paper work, they have not compensated for the increased pressure.

"We're losing ground when it comes to responding to calls," Public Information Director Tim

Birr said. "In 1981, we responded to 55,000 calls. Last year, with considerably fewer officers on the staff, we had to respond to as many as 80,000 calls."

Birr believes the apparent drop in the crime rate can be attributed to the incapacity to respond to the increase in calls.

"Basically, fewer officers means fewer crimes are being reported," he said. "The best way to attain a zero crime rate would be to shut down the police station."

Mann said the police have stopped registering some crimes because of understaffing.

"For instance, we don't investigate bad checks and minor fraud any longer," he said. "That means that such crimes don't show up in the crime rate."

Mann said the police need more research to understand the relation between the crime rate and actual crime.

"There's a difference between the crime rate and the victimization rate," he said. "The victimization rate measures the number of victims of crime, regardless of whether they reported the crime to the police."

The proposal to increase the number of police officers is part of a long-term strategy of creating a more pro-active police force through "community policing."

"Right now, police work has become increasingly reactive," Birr said. "The rate of officer-initiated activities is down to an all-time low of 4 percent. Officers are bouncing around from call to call, applying band-aid to immediate problems, taking little time to talk to citizens."

Leonard Cooke, Eugene's police chief, has indicated that he believes community policing is the way to meet the changing nature of crime in Eugene.

"We do need more officers," Cooke recently said in a speech to Eugene's Kiwanis Club. "We need officers who have the skills to work with citizens and community groups to develop creative solutions."

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