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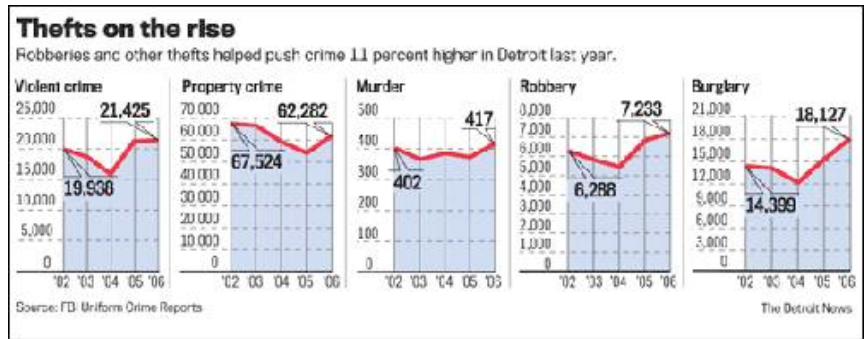
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Rise in crime tied to ailing economy

Detroit sees 11% jump; property crimes, murders up sharply.

Ronald J. Hansen and Norman Sinclair / The Detroit News

Advertisement

DETROIT -- With Michigan's economy sputtering last year, robberies and other thefts soared in Detroit, fueling a slight rise in violence and a steep increase in overall crime in 2006.

Robberies went up 6 percent and overall property crime climbed 15 percent in Detroit last year, according to the annual crime report. Those crimes helped push overall crime up 11 percent. In the sharpest rise in a decade, murders rose by 44 to 417 for the year.

On Monday morning, a Detroit man was electrocuted while stealing copper, another sign of desperation in the troubled city.

Nationally, violent crime was up a second straight year, ending years of declining totals, while property crimes declined nearly 3 percent. In Detroit, violent crime increased more slowly than the national trend.

Violent crime rose 13 percent in Flint, but most of Michigan's other large cities, including Warren and Sterling Heights, saw little change to their usual crime totals.

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The rise in Detroit's property crimes led some to suspect the region's long-battered economy in the surge in thefts.

"Unemployment leads to stress, drinking and fights based on economic pressures," said Daniel Kennedy, a criminal justice professor at the University of Detroit Mercy who follows the city's crime issues. "These kinds of stresses can lead to interpersonal spats and violence.

Property crimes are more sensitive to economic conditions."

Kennedy said it would take a closer look at the city's crime reports to completely explain the spike in violence.

Whatever the cause, it is unacceptable for Tony Charles Sims, whose 91-year-old father was seen beaten and carjacked on a security video that made national news.

"This situation with my dad, I have to fight off a feeling of hopelessness," Sims said. "The thing about it that is so sad is that there are still many good things going on in the city and the area but everything is overridden when something crazy like this happens."

This year, Detroit Police are reporting a 17 percent drop in shootings and an 11 percent drop in slayings, offering hope that a two-year spike in crime may be abating.

Still, cost-cutting measures by the state's prison agency are expected to send more felons back to Detroit, a situation that could add to the city's crime and economic problems, said James Tate, a spokesman for Detroit Police.

"The state of Michigan is hurting right now and we seem to bear the brunt of it more than other cities because of our industrial background," Tate said.

Violent crime and property crime fell in Grand Rapids, Michigan's second largest city. Still, that city saw an alarming rise in homicides, jumping from 12 in 2005 to 22 last year.

Violent crime in Detroit went up 0.7 percent compared to the 1.3 percent rise across the country.

A 12 percent spike in slayings hurt the city's crime totals, but 6 percent more robberies accounted for most of the increase. Reported rapes and aggravated assaults were largely unchanged in the two years.

Burglaries, larcenies and car thefts all went up in 2006, creating the largest increase in property crimes since at least 1993. The rise looks worse when compared with the 3 percent national decline in property crime last year.

The 18,127 burglaries -- crimes where homes were entered -- in Detroit last year were the most since 1999. The 22 percent increase in other larcenies was the largest single-year jump since at least 1990.

In a year marked by thousands of layoffs and buyouts in the auto industry, the news was also grim on the economic front.

For the sixth year in a row, Detroit ranked last among the nation's 50 largest cities with a 13.7 percent jobless rate, according to the U.S. Labor Department. By comparison, Fresno, Calif., was the next worst at 7.5 percent.

Violent crime in Sterling Heights dipped 9 percent last year to 282 incidents. Robberies fell from 46 to 30. There were two slayings in Sterling Heights, which had none in 2005. In one, police say a 7-Eleven clerk was shot to death in an argument over the price of a taco in August.

In Warren, overall violent crimes declined from 865 to 842, but reported rapes and robberies increased slightly.

"Most crimes are crimes of opportunity. That's the basic premise and it still seems to be true," said Warren Police Chief Jere Green. "Opportunity and drugs are bigger motivators for the crimes than the economy is right now."

But Green acknowledged his city has seen a rash of thefts of air conditioners, a crime that could be influenced by the economy.


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