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Detroit crime stats hard to get

David Josar and Christine Macdonald / The Detroit News

DETROIT -- Of the nation's 15 largest cities, only Detroit does not publicly release up-to-date crime statistics -- data routinely used by other police agencies to fight crime by putting neighborhoods on alert.

Detroit Police say they are trying to find a way to post current crime information on the Internet and should have something up early this year.

"We're doing what we can, but we just don't have the resources right now," said 2nd Deputy Chief James Tate, the spokesman for the department. "We're trying to find the best way to get the information up there and trying to determine if this is something we can do in-house or need to get a contractor."

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In 2003, the department reached an expensive agreement with the Department of Justice in which it promised stringent monitoring and revision of how it operates. The agreement covers everything from the way prisoners are detained to how cops use force. The consent decree costs the city millions of dollars each year to implement new procedures and make capital improvements, such as updates to detention facilities.

The most recent crime statistics on the city's Web site are from 2005.

Detroit, like other cities, does release its running total of homicides. As of Sunday, that tally had hit 404, although homicide numbers are preliminary.

One company, which is used by more 25 police departments including New Orleans and San Diego, charges cities \$199 a month to process the information and post it on the Internet with an interactive map.

In New York City, which uses in-house staff to do the job, statistics for every neighborhood are updated weekly and any trends are noted.

In San Jose, Calif., an online database shows not only the monthly crime total by neighborhood, but also the disposition of every police car sent on a run.

Tate said statistics about specific areas are offered at community meetings, and the Kilpatrick administration releases select tallies on crime in six communities being targeted for improvement under his Next Detroit Neighborhood Initiatives.

What is lacking, community leaders say, are ease of access and context, such as when incidents happened and how the number of crimes compares to previous months and years.

"To be honest, I have no idea what is going on in my neighborhood except from what I hear word of mouth," said Regina Broomer, whose community around Seven Mile and Schaefer was hit by a spate of burglaries in December. Residents would jump at the chance to scour the data online, said

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Metro-Crime

Tom Wilson, president of the Northwestern District Police Community Relations Organization.

His group has monthly meetings with police who share the latest updates on break-ins and drug house raids. But typically only about 150 people show up, and many more would be able to access it online, he said.

"You want to know immediately what's happening around you," Wilson said.

That's the approach taken by Wayne State Police Chief Anthony Holt, who uses a team of roughly 40 deputized, armed officers to patrol the university and the surrounding area.

"The best way to fight crime is awareness," Holt said.

Holt is proud that 70,000 people, including university students, faculty, employees and others who work and live in midtown receive a monthly e-mail called "Campus Watch," which gives a detailed breakdown of crimes his officers have investigated, as well as additional updates on crime spikes and special alerts.

Holt underscores the power of being open about crime by telling how a special alert distributed in mid-November led to the arrests of a man and two boys who had been involved in fondling incidents and robberies around Wayne State.

"It's a very effective crime-fighting tool," he said.

In Indian Village, residents get crime statistics in regular meetings with police commanders, said Steve Wasko, president of the Indian Village Association.

But residents go a step further. Wasko said residents keep their own tally of what's going on in their community of 354 historic homes on the city's east side. Homeowners also pay about \$30 a month to have a private security firm patrol the streets and monitor their alarm systems.

"We get help from the police, but it's also important to be proactive," Wasko said.

More police departments are releasing up-to-date neighborhood data online, but it likely isn't as high a priority for Detroit because of other more pressing challenges, such as adhering to the federal consent decree, said Daniel Kennedy, professor of criminal justice at the University of Detroit Mercy.

But distributing the data is an excellent way of communicating with residents. It helps them watch for trends and builds residents' confidence in the department, he said.

"It allows the community to buy in to their police department. Everybody is working from the same page with the information," he said.

The Dallas Police Department began releasing neighborhood-level data in the last several months. Residents are able to view portions of a police report about 20 minutes after it is filed, said Lt. Scott Gerdes. He said the department believes releasing some crime details is important so residents can spot trends.

That is basically the selling point Public Engines Inc., the company behind online data posting in Dallas and other communities, is using, said Greg Whisenant, the company's founder.

Most police departments maintain two databases: one that records 911 dispatch calls and another that records all complaints made to police. Public Engines can manipulate these and then post information on the Internet using Google maps.

"We can set up a department in a few days, and they can determine how detailed they want to be," Whisenant said.

For example, the Metropolitan Police Department in Washington, D.C., the first community the company worked with, posts information from actual police reports to describe incidents.

The San Jose Police Department started putting neighborhood crime data online last summer.

San Jose Officer Jermaine Thomas said putting out the information has helped strengthen the relationship between residents and police. Residents are able to spot trends, take precautions and call in tips.

"We are working hand-in-hand together to basically stop crime," Thomas said.

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