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2002 Crime Drops to Third Lowest Level in 21 Years

The total number of crimes committed in the Village fell to 2,554 in 2002, as compared to 2,640 crimes in 2001, a 3.3 percent decline and the third lowest rate in the past 21 years.

Burglaries and thefts represented more than 80 percent of all 2002 crimes. Thieves mostly targeted garages – often unlocked or open – and took personal items left unattended or on car seats.

Arrests for the same period were up nearly nine percent, a trend the Police Department attributes to increased citizen involvement and a growing willingness to report suspicious activity.

“Citizen involvement is the cornerstone of a successful program to prevent and reduce crime,” said Acting Police Chief Frank Kennedy. “An alert citizen is often all it takes to stop a crime and quickly catch a criminal. That’s why citizens should never hesitate to call 9-1-1 when they encounter suspicious people or incidents.”

Increased vigilance by citizens and police patrols also helped in a long-running battle with intravenous drug users who see Oak Park as a convenient “shooting” stop along the route from known drug selling areas in Chicago. Arrests for possession of hypodermic syringes and possession of drug paraphernalia declined significantly in 2002 as users have begun to avoid Oak Park, police say.

Here’s a brief overview of the statistics:

- Burglaries dropped to 541 in 2002, as compared to 580 in 2001. Burglary arrests reflected the decrease, as 62 individuals were arrested in 2002 compared to 87 in 2001. The vast majority of burglaries in Oak Park are to garages and autos.
- Thefts also were down in 2002, totaling 1,575 compared to the previous year’s 1,694 incidents. Arrests for theft declined to 316 in 2002, down from 350 in 2001. Most thefts in Oak Park are petty, including bicycles, retail shoplifting and items taken from open or unlocked garages and vehicles.

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- No murders were committed in Oak Park in 2002, and arsons declined to seven as compared to the previous year's eight cases. No arson arrests were made in 2002, as compared to seven in 2001.
- Motor vehicle thefts were up in 2002, reaching 218 as compared to 183 in 2001. Arrests for motor vehicle theft also were up, totaling 21 in 2002, compared to seven in 2001.
- Five criminal sexual assaults were reported in 2002, up from two in 2001. However, typically in these types of cases the victim knows the assailant. Arrests in this category were up as well, from two in 2001 to four in 2002.
- Robberies increased to 180 in 2002 from the previous year's 156, an increase that police attribute to the downturn in the economy. Arrests for robberies were up significantly, totaling 133 in 2002 as compared to 55 in 2001.
- Incidents of aggravated assault/battery reached 28 in 2002, up from 16 in 2001. Police say these types of incidents tend to increase when economic conditions create frustrations for some individuals. Twenty-nine individuals were arrested in this category during 2002, compared to 12 in the prior year.
- Drug-related arrests declined overall to 108 in 2002, as compared to the previous year's 194 arrests. Arrests for possession of cannabis grew to 44 from the previous year's 42 and arrests for possession of controlled substances grew to 19 from 15. Arrests for possession of hypodermic syringes dropped to 20 in 2002 from 54 in 2001, and arrests for possession of drug paraphernalia declined to 23 from the previous year's 83.

Kennedy said much of the crime in Oak Park could be eliminated if residents will just take a few simple steps like closing and locking their garages, removing personal property from plain view in their autos and not leaving personal items unattended. As for increases in some violent crimes, he said the actual numbers remain very low in the community, especially given Oak Park's proximity to a major metropolitan area.

Calling Oak Park "a very safe community," Kennedy said residents still need to be vigilant and take precautions when in unfamiliar surroundings or certain circumstances.

"Common sense is a valuable crime-fighting tool. People need to trust their instincts. Just by being aware of their surroundings, whether on foot or in an auto, citizens can do a lot to stop a crime before it happens."

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