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Crimes of opportunity continue to influence crime rate

An increase in thefts and robberies pushed Oak Park's crime rate up slightly in 2006, and prompted a renewed call from police for residents to be more vigilant about keeping their garage doors closed and locked, not leaving personal items in plain view on car seats and being aware of their surroundings.

The overall crime rate grew about 3 percent in 2006 over 2005, according to statistics just released by the Oak Park Police Department. A significant increase in thefts – primarily from garages and vehicles – was cause for concern for police, Chief Rick C. Tanksley said, as these largely preventable "crimes of opportunity" continue to pose a challenge for law enforcement.

An increase in robberies – 153 in 2006 compared to 130 in 2005 – also was troubling, police said, as criminals looking for a quick score are sometimes emboldened when they see potential targets distracted by cell phones and digital music players, or choosing poorly illuminated shortcuts.

"Much of the crime in Oak Park is preventable," Police Chief Tanksley said. "Criminals just cruise alleys and walk streets looking for an opportunity to grab and run. Residents need to look out for each other and remember a few simple steps such as locking doors, installing lights with motion sensors and not leaving valuables unsecured in plain sight."

Citizens also need to be aware of their surroundings and to think before choosing a lightly traveled route after dark or late at night, according to Chief Tanksley. The Chief reminded residents – especially women – that they may call the Police Department after dark and request an officer to stand by while they park their car and enter their residence.

Thefts, which represented more than two-thirds of all Oak Park crimes, were up about 18 percent in 2006 over the previous year, with 1,365 reported. Burglaries dropped 20 percent to 351 reported in 2006 compared to 437 the previous year. Arrests in both categories were up. Theft arrests climbed 23 percent with 154 made in 2006 compared to 125 in 2005. Police made 38 arrests for burglaries in 2006, compared to 32 in 2005, a 19 percent increase.

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Crime Rates
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The Police Department's continued focus on traffic violations proved extremely effective in 2006, especially arrests of individuals driving under the influence. Nearly 200 DUI arrests were made in 2006, more than twice the 95 arrests the previous year. Traffic remains a top priority, police say, and several officers are being trained specifically to enforce truck safety rules and regulations.

Drug arrests were up significantly in 2006, with controlled substance violations jumping more than five fold. Some 65 controlled substance arrests were made in 2006, compared to 10 the previous year.

Arrests of juveniles dropped nearly 30 percent in 2006, down to 145 as compared to 203 in 2005, a decline Chief Tanksley said he would like to attribute to the effectiveness of School Resources Officers stationed full time in the high school and both middle schools. The majority of juvenile crimes were thefts and possession of marijuana.

Violent crimes in Oak Park continued to be low, according to the crime statistics. No murders were committed in 2006, while the 12 criminal sexual assaults reported was one more than occurred 2005. Arsons declined to two in 2006 compared to the previous year's eight cases.

"Despite the slight increase in the overall 2006 crime rate, Oak Park remains a very safe community – especially when you consider we share a border with the nation's third largest city," Chief Tanksley said. "The trend in crime over the past decade is down overall. But, with the community's help, more can be done. Police simply can't be everywhere, so we need citizens to help. Just by following a few simple, commonsense rules, together, we can make it tough on criminals."

Tanksley said resident involvement is essential to police, too, such as keeping an eye on the neighborhood and not hesitating to call 9-1-1.

"I continue to urge residents to never think twice about calling the police when they see something or someone that strikes them as suspicious. We would much rather respond to a call and discover it was nothing, than to have to come after a crime was committed.

"I also urge residents to attend the monthly RBO (Resident Beat Officer) zone meetings to learn more about what is happening in their particular neighborhood and talk about what they can do to help fight crime in our community."

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