Criminals attracted by prosperity, growth

By Laura Heck
Target Team Staff Writer

Lafayette ranked below the national average in violent and property crimes, according to a Money Magazine report in early September.

Yet, overall crime in the City of Lafayette, particularly assaults and thefts, has been increasing over the past five years, Lafayette Police Dept. statistics indicate.

Law enforcement officials attribute the increases to several factors, the most prevalent being that the city has been growing—and where there’s more people, there’s more potential for offenders and victims.

"As Lafayette prospers from the establishment of new business and industry, it can be expected that there will be more reported incidents of crime," said Sgt. Ned Ewing, spokesman for the Lafayette Police Dept.

Ewing said for the most part the public has been reporting more crimes because they are more confident in the police department’s ability to solve crime.

But citizens of Louisiana said they are reporting more crimes also because it is their top concern and they are fed up with the state ranking first in the country for the number of violent crimes per capita.

"I’m not naive about the crime situation," said Lorraine Savoy, a retired Lafayette resident who formed a Neighborhood Crime Watch group when her Southwestern Village neighborhood saw an increase in burglaries and arson several years ago.

"Awareness is the best fight for crime," Savoy said. "If you notice something unusual, you should report it."

The number of arrests made over the past five years, which Ewing said have increased proportionately with reported crime, suggests residents are reporting such activities.

Ewing also said the increase in arrests from 2,881 between January and July of 1994 to 3,532 during the same time period in 1995, indicates the police department has been successful in keeping pace with the increase in criminal activity.

On the parish level, assaults between January and June of this year went up from the same time period last year, while murders, rapes, robberies, burglaries and thefts went down.

Although auto thefts remained the same on the parish level, they more than doubled within a year’s time within the city.

Ewing attributed this increase, which is a nationwide phenomenon, to the demand created by the increased resale value of used auto parts.

Sgt. Tom "Sarge" Warren, who works in the city, also said many people take their chances at stealing a vehicle because the incident is "only a misdemeanor in this state."

Ewing added stolen cars are frequently used to transport illegal drugs and are taken specifically for that purpose.

"There have also been several cases of persons, out of desperation, trading their vehicles for drugs and then later reporting their vehicle stolen," he added.

Warren said crack cocaine is the most popular, and most addictive, drug in the city because it is cheap, and the penalties for a crack-related offense are not as severe as other drug-related crimes.

Ewing and Detective Lt. Michael Savoy with the Lafayette Parish Sheriff’s Dept. said drug-related crimes remain popular.

"It is safe to say that drugs, particularly crack cocaine, are the motivation for many burglars and robbers," Ewing said.

"It is likely that property crimes, such as burglary and theft, will continue to be affected by the high level of drug usage."

"Typically, almost all drugs eventually reach a point where it becomes necessary to steal and rob to support their addiction," Ewing explained.

But drugs are not the only motivation for criminals, said Ewing.

"Criminals vary in their motivations," he said. "For example, some homicides result from family disputes, while others are related to bad drug deals."

Warren said most violent crimes, both nationally and locally, are committed by someone the victim knows.

The police department has also noted consistencies in the times when certain crimes are most likely to be committed, Ewing said.

He explained residential burglaries occur more frequently during the work day when a home is less likely to be occupied, while business burglaries are committed at night.

"Juvenile crime seems to increase during the summer months when youths have less supervision," he added.

Above: A suspect is handcuffed for questioning after drugs were found near him.

Officers found over $600 in cash but no drugs on him, so he was let go.

Left: An officer checks the socks of a suspect for drugs during a stop.