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Overall crime rate lowest in three years

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Even with an unemployment rate of 16 percent in September — the highest of any city tracked by the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development — the overall crime rate in Beloit so far this year is the lowest it's been since April of 2008.

In fact, the number of overall illegal activities in Beloit is among the lowest they've been in the past three years, indicating that the tough economical climate does not lead to crime, according to Acting Police Chief Norm Jacobs.

"Today's economy doesn't appear to be creating criminals," he said. "It appears to be creating students. I know that because try finding a parking stall at Blackhawk Tech — it's packed. Good people who are out of work are pinching dollars, not resorting to crime."

Not only have there been more than 1,400 fewer arrests so far this year compared to this time last year, crimes one would assume would be a result of economical woes have actually decreased during this time period as well, according to Jacobs.

For example, gas drive-offs decreased from 24 to two and thefts of less than \$500 decreased from 181 to 104.

Also, disorderly conducts, which Jacobs calls the "catch-all of municipal ordinances," are down to 549 compared to 673, and domestic violence arrests are down from 571 to 474.

The number of suicides, which also could be attributable to people struggling in tough times, has remained even at 11 with this time last year.

The only two categories that have increased are criminal damage and shoplifting, Jacobs said.

Criminal damage is up by 62 incidents, and shoplifting increased from 197 to 231.

The economy also doesn't appear to have an impact in drug usage because the Beloit Police Department has made the exact same number of drug arrests as last year at this time.

Another indicator that the economy isn't increasing crime rates is looking at the types of people committing them.

For example, many of the people arrested in Beloit have prior convictions or their relatives and children have been arrested before, Jacobs said.

"The economy isn't necessarily making it worse for criminals," he said. "They're going to commit crimes if it's bad or not, and that's why it doesn't appear to have a big affect on any of our rates."

Crime rates throughout the country are also down, according to Jacobs, who asserts that could be a result of the behavior of people who currently fall into the age group of 18-25. This group, he said, is the one that has the tendency to create the most crime.

Jacobs also said new developments within the police department could have an impact on lowering the crime rate.

For instance, police officers in April began using the shotspotter system, which is a huge advance in their ability to collect evidence of people using weapons in Beloit.

The most important tool, however, is constant steady pressure on neighborhood crime, Jacobs said. Many crimes aren't preventable, but the officers have good responses to incidents because they maintain constant pressure in particular neighborhoods and homes they believe are prone to crimes.

Crime in Rock County, however, has stayed the same since the past few years, according to Gary Groelle, a police captain with the Rock County Sheriff's Office.

The only two areas that have shown any difference are the "spikes" in sexual assaults and mental health complaints. It's hard to speculate if those are a result of the economy, however, he said.

Sexual assaults do spike from time to time, and the mental health complaints — some of which involve people being too intoxicated to care for themselves — could possibly be an effect of people being depressed because of a job loss, for instance.

Groelle said he's surprised he hasn't seen a bigger spike in the crime rate, but he and Jacobs acknowledge there's always a possibility it could rise in the next six months to a year if the economy worsens.

Or maybe not.

"This economy isn't making good people bad, and it's not necessarily making bad people worse," Jacobs said.

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