

Lincoln crime rates fall; violent offenses climb

By Matthew Beermann

Staff writer

Crime rates fell in Lincoln for the fourth year in a row, the city announced Tuesday.

Property crime fell 6.3 percent, and overall crime fell 5.6 percent. Sexual assault dropped about 22 percent. At 61.7 offenses per 100,000 people, this year's crime rate is the city's lowest since 1985.

"Two groups need to be credited for it: the citizens of Lincoln and all of the great police officers we have out there," Police Chief Tom Casady said.

He repeatedly emphasized the dedicated and creative work of the police force, including techniques such as notifying a neighborhood when a pattern of burglaries is identified.

"Some of these projections are receiving national attention as examples of quality police work," he said.

Property crimes are often the ones that affect the most citizens, Casady said, so the drop has a positive effect on the community.

"I've had my car broken into, too," he said. "I know how terrible it feels."

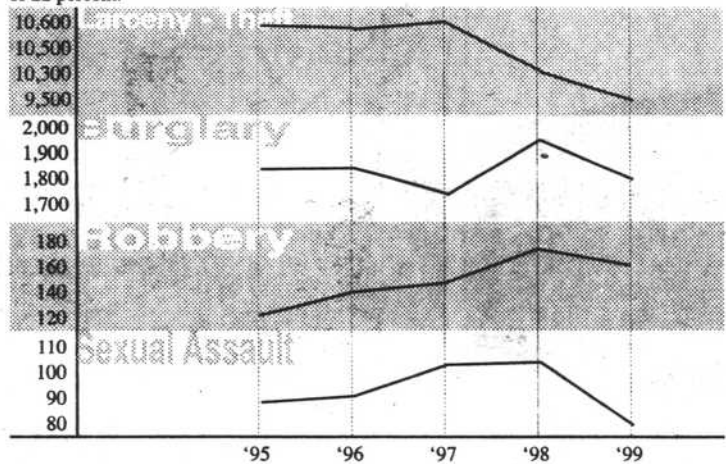
Mayor Don Wesely said city police did a good job despite limited resources.

"We're actually understaffed over in the police department right now, and I hope that we can do even more when we bring them up to full strength," Wesely said.

Lincoln is mirroring a larger trend

Taking a Bite

Four areas of crime decreased in 1999. Sexual assaults decreased the most, with a drop of 22 percent.



Delan Lonowski/DN

Source: Lincoln Police Department

toward falling crime rates, Casady said.

FBI data for the first half of 1999 show a 10 percent drop in crime nationally. However, Nebraska as a whole has experienced slowly rising crime rates.

"Aggravated assault and armed robberies have risen the most," Casady said. "Armed robbery concerns me the most, both because of the danger to the victims and because it's been rising steadily for years."

"Over the course of my lifetime, the increase is simply staggering."

Most of the decrease was a result of

the low property crime rates. Violent crime rates actually have risen slightly.

"We've just experienced our first apparent homicide of the year," Casady said. "And that reminds us that violent crime has grown faster than the population over the past decade."

Even though some violent crimes have risen, so have criminals' odds of getting caught.

"Over the past decade, we've doubled the number of felony arrests," Casady said. "We've simply gotten better at catching these people."

LEGISLATURE

Legalization of hemp debated

By Jill Zeman

Staff writer

Hemp could be seen alongside more traditional Nebraska crops in the future if a proposed legislative bill is passed.

Members of the Agriculture Committee on Tuesday discussed LB1079, which would allow the cultivation of industrial hemp.

The bill was introduced Jan. 7 by Sen. Ed Schrock of Elm Creek and says legal hemp must contain no more than three-tenths of 1 percent of tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), the chemical that induces a high.

"I'm not interested in smoking this product; I'm interested in growing it," Schrock said.

Currently, it is legal to buy and sell products made from hemp, but it is illegal to grow it.

Industrial hemp is good for the earth because it requires little or no fertilizer or insecticide, he said.

The United States is the only industrialized nation that does not allow the cultivation of hemp, Schrock said.

"Either we're right, and everyone else is wrong, or everyone else is right, and we're wrong," he said.

Schrock brought several items made of hemp for the committee members to examine.

"If my wife had more time, maybe she'd have made some brownies for the committee," Schrock joked.

Members of the Nebraska State Patrol expressed concern that the legalization of industrial hemp would create problems with the enforcement of drug laws.

Currently, a sample suspected of containing marijuana must undergo three tests, said John Dietrich, director of the Nebraska State Patrol crime lab.

These tests take about 30 minutes, and none of them tests the amount of THC in the sample.

If hemp were made legal, the lab would need to determine whether the sample was marijuana or industrial hemp by testing the amount of THC, Dietrich said.

This additional test would take an extra two hours per sample, and the lab

would need to hire more chemists and purchase more equipment, Dietrich said.

The benefits of hemp far outweigh the initial setbacks, said Thuvan Ahrens, owner of Solstice.

Solstice, formerly Hemp Fields, 126 N. 13th St., offers many products that are made from hemp: Clothing, paper, linens and books are just a few, Ahrens said.

"Uses for hemp are endless," she said.

Ahrens said she imports many of her hemp products from Canada, Hungary and China.

"It would be so much easier if hemp could be grown in the United States," she said.

The committee has not voted on the bill and will decide later whether to advance it to the floor for debate.

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