As fear has risen, Redding's crime has dropped. When she was younger, Karen Bronson’s parents told her to avoid the Parkview area, a dangerous area then known as “The ‘Hood.” She’s now 43 and lives there, with Redding City Hall a block away from her front yard. The worst she’s experienced? Someone stole her patio furniture — shortly after she and her husband moved there in 2001.

Over in that City Hall, however, the fear of crime seems far more visceral, and it’s driving public policy. The idea of an unprecedented crime wave has filled social media, not to mention packing the seats at the police chief’s town hall meetings. And at a recent goal-setting meeting, all five City Council members identified public safety as their No. 1 priority.

April LaFrance, leader of the Safe City Project, has likened Redding to a house without a front door, so vulnerable are its residents. But the numbers show the city has been far more successful in dealing with crime over the years than many of its leaders and residents realize, a Record Searchlight analysis shows. In fact, the truth may be closer to Bronson’s experience than to the horror stories on Facebook.

Adjusted for population, for every two property crimes reported by Redding residents in 2013, three were reported in 1995.

That’s a difference of more than 2,300 crimes since 1995, when crime already was plummeting in Redding, in California and in the United States.

Locally, the reduction in crime — particularly in the mid-1990s — was attributed to law enforcement agencies combining efforts to rid the area of gangs, parolees and troublesome group homes. Law enforcement officials say they can’t pinpoint the reason crime is so far below 1995’s level, but worry it could be because some crimes are going unreported — and thus uncounted — because residents and businesses tell them calling the police is not worth it. And yet, they can point only to anecdotal evidence that this is the case.

Crime statistics offer no solid way to determine how many — or few — crimes aren’t reported in the city. Their limitations leave the topic open to plenty of speculation. But the hard evidence runs counter to the common belief in a wave of crime rising to unheard of levels.

REDDING’S CRIMINAL HISTORY

Two decades ago, Redding was smaller — about 18,000 fewer people than today’s population of 91,000. The Redding Police Department had about 20 more people on its staff.

As for crime, the city had plenty of it.

“We had drive-by shootings — drive-by shootings — on Hilltop in the middle of the day,” said Bob Blankenship, who became Redding’s police chief in 1988.

In 2012, the peak year for local crime in the 21st century, Redding reported 5,590 crimes per 100,000 people. Most of them were property crimes — burglaries, thefts or stolen vehicles.

But in 1995 Redding’s crime rate reached 7,278 per 100,000 people, including a property crime rate of 6,585.

And that was better than 1994 — when Redding’s crime rate, adjusted for population, surpassed 8,000 cases per 100,000 people, including a total of six murders.
Three things fueled crime at that time: gangs, group home youths and parolees, Blankenship said.

Law enforcement agencies solved those problems in the 1990s, Blankenship said.

Police worked with Shasta County sheriff’s deputies to drive out gangs through aggressive enforcement.

The problem with parolees started when they were released from prison, he said. Parolees were sent to where they had been convicted, not where they had lived previously. Redding’s location along Interstate 5 meant that many people passing through, and gang members from areas trying to establish a presence, returned to Redding rather than home, Blankenship said. Some were sent here from Southern California for a new start, he said.

That was fixed by appealing to the state, Blankenship said.

The California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation still generally sends parolees to their last legal residence, said Luis Patino, information officer with the agency.

An effective partnership between Shasta County criminal justice agencies made them the first in the state to successfully convict group home operators for fraud, Blankenship said.

“Shasta County ... took on the group home industry,” he said. “Some of the group homes (then) were just money makers for the people handling the homes.”

Among them were Terrence Fennell and Lawrence Foster, administrators of His Haven Youth Homes, which ran seven facilities for troubled juveniles in Shasta County. Both men were convicted of stealing hundreds of thousands of dollars in state funds after an investigation in the mid-1990s.

The cash was supposed to help provide shelter, rehabilitate and care for the youths there. Instead, the money went into the two men’s pockets. Troubled group homes were common in Shasta County, which in 1997 had one bed for every 638 residents — the highest per capita ratio in the state.

After crime hit highs in the mid-1990s, rates began to fall across all categories measured by the FBI for Redding and California. Statewide, the property crime rate per 100,000 people plummeted from 5,500 crimes in the mid-1990s to 3,000 today.

“Crime, in general, the bottom has fallen out in so many areas,” said Frank Scafidi, director of public affairs at the National Insurance Crime Bureau. “We’re seeing the same kinds of dips across the nation. You still hear anecdotes, someone won’t go out at night because somebody down the street left their car open and somebody walking down the street took their iPad.”

After crime plummeted in the 1990s, it stayed relatively flat through the 2000s, rising once around 2005, until the Great Recession hit. Redding’s Police Department laid off about a quarter of its sworn officers and much of its civilian staff.

And crime began its latest rise, although it has remained well below historic levels.

THE LIMITS OF DATA

Ed Rullman’s experience is very different from Karen Bronson’s.

Back in 1995 the Redding restaurateur, owner of C.R. Gibbs American Grille, didn’t mind leaving his windows open at night to let cool air into his home. He didn’t even think of owning a gun.

These days, he has a concealed carry permit and leads the Redding Merchants Crimewatch, an online neighborhood watch he started 3½ years ago to respond to crime.

“In the ’90s we had our issues, but Redding was known as a nice place to go,” he said. “(People) weren’t afraid to walk down the street, they weren’t afraid to get out of their car at Safeway, at Raley’s. You weren’t accosted by someone.”

He’s skeptical of the statistics showing a drop in crime.

He’s certainly not alone in that.

There have been some technological changes since 1995, and different people have tallied the statistics over the years, creating the possibility of inconsistency.

Stacy York, Redding Police Department’s statistician, said she uses the FBI’s definitions of crime when compiling the statistics.

Changes to the FBI’s database between 1995 and 2013, for the most part, didn’t affect the data’s reliability, said Meredith Williams, a
However, the data don’t capture a perfect picture, York said. The trends don’t show the majority of what police encounter and deal with, such as alcohol overdose calls. Trespassing, vandalism, drug crimes and other lesser crimes aren’t included either.

But the most common, and likely most serious, questions are about underreporting, said George Kikuchi, an associate professor of criminology at Fresno State University.

What we don’t know

It’s known as the “dark figure of crime” — the offenses not reported to police, Williams said. “Of all the crimes happening, (crime rates are) only a way to know a fraction of them.”

Nonetheless, she said, the stats are “as good as you’re going to get.”

Redding businesses and residents tell Rullman they frequently don’t report property crimes because they don’t feel the police will do anything about them.

“It’s a big frustration, you call the cops and don’t get any response at all,” or it takes a long time for an officer to respond, he said.

He said Shasta County law enforcement agencies, already battered by funding cuts, have had to cope with the effects of AB109, which shifted some recently released inmates from the state prison and parole system to county jail and probation.

Redding Police Chief Rob Paoletti said he also frequently hears that frustration, which leads him to believe that a number of property crimes aren’t being reported.

But he acknowledged there’s no way to gauge how big — or small — that number is.

Blankenship said he doesn’t think underreporting was a large problem during his tenure — he had enough personnel to respond to calls, take reports and be proactive.

In 1995, Redding had one officer for every 750 people. Today, it’s one officer for every 940 people, and there are far fewer community service officers to help fill out reports.

But the Rev. Ann Corrin of Pilgrim Congregational Church, who has long maintained Redding isn’t as dangerous as people fear, questions the assumptions about underreporting. She noted that social media helps fan the flames of fear, with a single post circulating broadly and making things seem worse.

She recounts a flier warning her neighborhood to be vigilant of suspicious activity, such as an unfamiliar person asking about a lost pet. “A few months before, I was that neighbor knocking on doors with a picture of my cat,” she said.

Corrin, working on creating a day center for the area’s homeless, said growing fears of crime are based on feelings, not facts. She said most people will report when their valuables are stolen.

It’s nearly impossible to tell, on a local scale, how significantly underreporting contributes to falling crime rates. Almost by definition, no reliable data exist — only opinions and anecdotes.

One way might be to compare what people tell their insurance company about stolen goods to what they report to police. But the National Insurance Crime Bureau doesn’t have area specific data on the number of insurance claims people file if they lose property to theft, said Scafidi, spokesman for the agency.

Local information is not available from Insurance Information Institute or Verisk Analytics’ Insurance Services Office, which aggregate information on claims from across the country, their representatives said.

Across the nation, however, the National Crime Victimization Survey provides an excellent complement to crime rates, Kikuchi said. It asks people what crimes have happened to them, whether they called police and, if they didn’t call, why not. In general, most reported they did not.

But the study shows the trend of reporting has actually been improving.

About 67 percent of thefts went unreported to authorities in 1994, according to the survey.

But that dropped to 60 percent of all property crimes 14 years later, according to a 2012 study co-authored by Lynn Langton with the U.S. Department of Justice.
That's largely driven by thefts, which make up 86 percent of the property crimes covered in the report, said Langton.

The majority of victims surveyed said they don’t report property crimes to police because either the police wouldn’t help or the crime wasn’t important enough.

Among violent crime victims, 16 percent said they didn’t report because they thought the police wouldn’t help.

Race and gender didn’t change the rate of reporting crimes to police in the survey, though age did, she said. Younger people tend to report crimes at a lower rate than older ones. Victims with higher incomes also seemed to fail to report crime more often, according one examination of the data, she said. The victimization survey did not include homeless people, she said.

VIOLENT CRIME RISES, FALLS

Emily Keys and her friend Cheyenne Berg, both 18, say they’ve heard Redding is one of the most dangerous cities. Strange people sometimes approach or catcall the pair, who were out at the Sundial Bridge on a recent evening.

Keys, who like Berg lives in Redding, said she sees Facebook posts about property crimes about five times per week. Both said they haven’t been victims of property crimes, however.

Redding Police Chief Paoletti said crime perceptions are influenced by social media and the visibility of transients. He’s also heard many fear Redding is a dangerous place, which he says isn’t true.

“A person in Redding is very safe,” he said. “Property isn’t.”

Violent crime — murder, rape, robbery and aggravated assault — hit a recent peak in 2010 of 867 crimes per 100,000 people. The rate has since fallen by about 20 percent. However, about 20 to 25 percent of robberies are shoplifters who resist store personnel, turning a theft into a violent crime, Paoletti said. Transient-on-transient crimes and domestic violence make up a solid chunk of violent crimes, especially aggravated assaults.

The most serious crime — murder — recently has occurred about two to four times per year, compared with the early to mid-1990s when five to seven murders typically were reported each year.

Many, including Bailey and Bronson, say they’ve seen transients and homeless people much more often in the past few years.

Transients who act strangely and seem aggressive understandably unnerve residents, Rullman said. But violence between them and other Redding residents is rare.

When Rullman tells transients to leave his restaurant or property, most comply — albeit grudgingly.

Back in the Parkview neighborhood, Karen Bronson says homeless people walk through regularly, but mostly don’t cause trouble. She rents her home from her mother, Marlene Bronson, 72, who along with her husband purchased it in 2000.

The neighborhood had improved thanks to redevelopment efforts — the worst homes were demolished and replaced with colorful structures she refers to as Toon Town. Other homes were fixed up with funds the city provided.

Karen Bronson says police also helped curtail crime.

Today, it’s a far cry from the drug- and crime-infested neighborhood it was in the 1990s. People did have concerns about crime then, and asked many of the same questions they ask today.

Still, even having seen that change Marlene Bronson says she lives with fear now that she didn’t feel then, when she says she felt much safer doing evening shopping. One reason? She says social and news media spread news about crime more quickly and widely today.

CRIME RATES from 1A

Edition: Redding   Section: Local   Page number: 1A   Record: R0005827358   Copyright: Copyright (c) 2015, Redding Record Searchlight (CA)