AVP 4-11-12 Crime surges up in two Valley cities

By: Jennifer Santos

After five years of decline, serious crime jumped 27% in Lancaster and 9% in Palmdale in the first months of 2012.

Statistics released Tuesday by the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department show serious crime rose from 936 to 1,026 in Palmdale and from 937 to 1,198 in Lancaster between Jan. 1 and April 5, compared to the same period last year.

"I knew we were going to have a backlash when they got rid of Section 8 investigators," said Lancaster City Mayor R. Rex Parris.

Serious crime - which includes homicide, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, theft, auto theft and arson - remains markedly down from five years ago. Serious crimes from Jan. 1 to April 5, 2007, numbered 4,706 in Lancaster and 4,827 in Palmdale, according to the sheriff's department in a report.

The upswing follows a shift in responsibility between state corrections officials and county authorities for supervising people convicted of certain crimes, but Parris said he believes the increase also is a direct result of community activists criticizing three recent deputy-involved shootings. Parris said the groups have drummed up "imaginary problems" and have caused deputies to "back off" in incidents that have racial overtones.

"We cannot enforce our criminal law on racial distinctions," Parris said. "People are getting a pass, and now that fist has turned and opened up to a velvet glove.

"I think there have been some political issues that may have gotten ahead of us that I can fix. The responsibility is mine; this got ahead of me somehow."

Palmdale Mayor Jim Ledford said he believes the increase is partially due to budget cuts, which have prevented city officials from putting the resources they once did against crime. He said residents can take precautions to avoid being victimized, such as locking car doors.

"These are difficult times; we don't have the endless resources that we used to have, but the wild card really is the resident," Ledford said. "These are crimes of opportunity; we just have to go back and re-engage residents and help them not be a target."
"Deputies are out there and doing a great job, but here, the victims may be unwittingly attributing to their own demise."

Lt. Don Ford at the Palmdale Sheriff's Station said despite the spike in crime, residents should not feel panicked because it follows a deep downward trend.

Ford said the station has already deployed a task force consisting of gang deputies and crime analysts to investigate and patrol the areas that have been hit hardest in burglaries, robberies and auto thefts. Since the task force was assigned to those areas, Ford said he has seen a decrease in crime there.

In particular, Acton had an increase in auto burglaries last month, but that stopped following the arrests of suspects, Ford said.

"The public shouldn't panic. We're pushing crime down and we're still fighting really hard," Ford said. "One of the things that really helps us the most is the public's cooperation."

Ford encouraged residents to lock their vehicles and homes, become more involved with Neighborhood Watch groups and to report any suspicious activity to local sheriff's stations.

Parris said one of his goals in the weeks ahead is to meet with local sheriff's officials and Neighborhood Watch leaders to discuss strategies to reduce the crime rate once again.

"We will not be running from convicted felons who think they are going to make us targets," Parris said.

Crime went up in unincorporated communities as well as in the cities, though crime is far less frequent there than in Palmdale and Lancaster, records show.

In Lake Los Angeles, Quartz Hill and other unincorporated areas patrolled by Lancaster Sheriff's Station deputies, the crime rate increased 33.1%.

The serious crime total there between Jan. 1 and April 5 was 195, up from 139 during the same period a year ago.

In Littlerock, Acton and other unincorporated areas patrolled by Palmdale Sheriff's Station deputies, the crime rate increased 58.2%.

The serious crime total there between Jan. 1 and April 5 was 242, up from 153 a year earlier.