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Despite increases in some major areas — rape, robbery and murder — overall reported crime in Dallas dropped by 10.7 percent in 2012, a record ninth consecutive year crime has fallen in the city.

The drop is in line with what is happening nationally and was driven by significant decreases in every area of property crime, which had about 7,600 fewer offenses.

Police Chief David Brown attributed most of the reduction to the department’s increased efforts to arrest thieves — 20 percent more in 2012 than the previous year — through the help of a task force that targets rings that buy and sell stolen property.

“The longer you can keep a thief in jail, the better your stats are going to be,” Brown said. “Every day they’re out of jail, they’re stealing from you. Even if you can keep them in jail a week, a month or two, that affects your crime compared to last year.”

Though pleased with the consistent reductions, Brown refused to say crime figures would plateau.

“Every year, you’re a victim of your own success. If you are successful, then you’ve got to fight against what you did last year and try to do more,” he said. “If there is a baseline, it’s not going to be during my tenure as chief. We’ve got to keep reducing crime.”

But it is difficult to assess how much crime in Dallas has actually dropped over the years. That’s because police have employed a variety of methods during the last five years of recording how offenses are reported, which has helped to lower the crime rate on paper.

Some of the changes complied with federal guidelines while others did not, but in all cases, police claimed the reductions as actual crime decreases.

A 2011 National Crime Victimization Survey, which is based on interviews with members of the public, shows how unreliable police statistics can be if used as a measure of actual crime levels.

The study found that only about 61 percent of serious violence was reported to authorities, with rape only being reported about 27 percent of the time. Victims reported property crimes about 37 percent of the time, the survey found.

John Eterno, a former New York City police captain and co-author of the book The Crime Numbers Game: Management by Manipulation, says changing the way crimes are recorded to improve stats has become common in police circles.

“Once you put this enormous pressure on making sure that the numbers look good, you’re going to make sure they look good,” Eterno said.

Dallas police commanders, however, have long maintained that federal crime reporting guidelines are vague and contradictory. They say their reporting practices mirror those of other major cities and are not improper.

One big crime reporting change Dallas police made in early January 2012 was how they handle low-level shoplifting offenses.

A recent Dallas Morning News analysis found that such reports plummeted on the day that police began the new policy, which stopped officers from responding or taking reports on most shoplifting cases with stolen property worth less than $50.

The News analysis found that for the first eight months of the year, petty shoplifting fell by 73 percent compared with the same period the year before. That accounted for nearly a third of the city’s drop in overall crime at the time.

During the same eight-month period, more serious shoplifting offenses dropped only slightly, just 2 percent.

It is unclear how the policy change affected the final crime tally for 2012, but the city recorded its biggest drop in total offenses in the theft category — which includes shoplifting and other types of stealing — with a drop of 4,000 offenses.

Brown largely discounted the effect of the policy change on the city’s overall crime tally, and instead credited the department’s crackdown on fencing.

“We’ve shut down over 100 fencing locations,” the chief said in a recent interview. “If you plot where these locations were taken down and you plot the decreases in property crime, there is a correlation there between when you take down a fence and what affect it has on residential burglary and other types of property crime.”

Those other property crimes were a significant force in driving down Dallas’ overall crime numbers. According to the city’s crime statistics, Dallas’ burglary numbers dropped about 14 percent, or about 2,600 offenses. Other North Texas departments also reported big drops in their burglary counts: Grand Prairie fell 28 percent; Irving, 23 percent.

Dallas’ auto theft tally also dipped by double digits — nearly 12 percent — in 2012.

But that doesn’t reflect the full scope of the drop. The city recorded 17,419 auto thefts in 2003 compared with 7,062 in 2012 — a reduction of about 59 percent.

Experts say the decrease reflects a national trend fueled by technological advancements that have simply made vehicles more difficult to steal.

“A lot of your crooks are opportunists and they’re going to steal what’s easy to steal,” said Walt West, commander of the Tarrant Regional Auto Crimes Task Force.

Fred Lohmann of the National Insurance Crime Bureau lauded Brown and said the department has led the way locally to combat auto theft and vehicle break-ins through its bait car program, which makes those crimes easier to prosecute.

In the violent crime arena, the city ended the year with 151 murders, one less than had previously been reported by authorities.

Police have said a nearly 14 percent rise in the city’s murder tally in comparison with 2011 was primarily caused by an increase in domestic-related murders and have noted that the number of homicides remains at historic lows.

The department recorded 4,093 robberies in 2012, 27 more than the prior year. The chief said the slight increase was the result of an uptick in “criminal on criminal” robberies. After he drastically cut the number of detectives investigating robberies last July, Brown told members of the city council’s public safety committee Monday that he plans to beef up the unit soon.

Later, Brown sounded upbeat in discussing the city’s crime figures.

“This is the safest Dallas has been in five decades,” he said.

Corrections and Clarifications

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