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FBI reports rise in violent crime

Murders, robberies grow in the first half of 2006, more evidence that a long decline is over.

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WASHINGTON — The number of murders and robberies in the U.S. continued to grow during the first half of this year, fresh evidence that violent crime is on the upswing after more than a decade of decline, the FBI said Monday.

From January to June, violent crime increased 3.7% compared with the first six months of 2005, the bureau reported. The number of robberies increased 9.7%, while murders rose 1.4%. Aggravated assaults increased 1.2%; forcible rape offenses declined less than 0.1%.

The increases, which occurred nationwide, follow an overall jump of 2.3% for violent offenses in 2005 and portend another year of rising violent crime, experts said. In 2005, violent crime posted its largest overall increase since 1991.

Though criminal justice experts were cautious about drawing conclusions from six months of data, they found the report worrisome and said the country could be in a new period of slowly rising crime.

A number of different explanations have been offered for the increase, including cutbacks in federal funding to state and local law enforcement agencies, which has led to fewer police on the street in large cities, and demographic factors, including an increase in the number of males from age of 14 to 24.

The trend also has kindled a debate over whether the country is spending enough for crime fighting and prevention at a time when growing numbers of federal dollars are being targeted toward terrorism and domestic security.

If the trend of rising crime continues, it could become a political issue in the 2008 election. Violent crime peaked in 1992 before beginning an extended decline to its lowest level in three decades.

"Violent street crime did not go away on Sept. 11," said James O. Pasco Jr., executive director of the Fraternal Order of Police, the nation's largest police union. Though "the same or additional resources are needed to fight those crimes," in many cases less money is being spent, he said.

The increases in violent crime were felt in all regions. The West had the largest increase: 4.7%.

The situation in California was mixed.

In Los Angeles, the number of violent crimes declined 2.6% to 14,961 from 15,367. The number of murders declined to 227 from 249. But robberies rose 7.5% to 7,042 from 6,552.

Violent crime in Oakland surged 37.9% to 3,665 from 2,657; the number of murders there increased to 66 from 37.

The FBI said the number of reported robberies was up in cities of all sizes. The largest increase — 12.8% — occurred in cities with populations of 10,000 to 24,999. But robberies also increased in metropolitan counties — 8.4%.

Cities of populations of 500,000 to 999,999 reported the sharpest increase in murders — 8.4%. In metropolitan counties, murders were up 3.1%.

The data are based on reports of more than 11,000 state and local law enforcement agencies.

Experts said the crime upsurge reflected an increase in gang violence, particularly in mid-sized cities, and a growth in gun crimes, including robberies and homicides.

"We have gone backward in our ability to deal with the illegal gun market," said James Alan Fox, a criminal justice professor at Northeastern University in Boston.

He said the problem had been compounded by the fact that the number of police on the street in large cities had dropped almost 10% since 2001.

The crime problem, he said, "is not going down unless we make some major changes in what we are doing."

Federal aid to state and local police declined to about \$890 million in 2006 from \$2.5 billion in 2001. Police departments are being squeezed by growing domestic security duties at a time when federal agencies such as the FBI are focusing more on preventing terrorism than assisting local departments fighting traditional crimes.

"We have seen some pretty dramatic cuts" in grant programs, said Gene R. Voegtlin, a spokesman for the International Assn. of Chiefs of Police, an Alexandria, Va., trade group for police department executives. "They are having an increasingly difficult time in effectively trying to combat crime and provide for safer communities. It has been a struggle."

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