



Introduction

Santa Cruz is a community of limitless beauty and opportunity. Towering redwood forests and verdant coastal grasslands dominate the hillside landscape. Pristine beaches and world-class surf breaks bring Monterey Bay and Pacific tides to the edge of the forest. This extraordinary community is tucked in between the sea and the mountains.

Cradled by this exceptional natural environment, Santa Cruz enjoys opportunities not usually found in small rural areas. The community is home to a University of California campus. Students and university jobs bolster the local economy. Research and entrepreneurship are shared values of faculty and local residents, oftentimes leading to remarkable innovation.

Santa Cruz hosts visitors from around the world and its tourism industry is the economic bedrock of the town. Tourists are drawn to Santa Cruz for its recreation, seaside amusement park, bustling downtown, and endless beaches. Art, culture, sustainable agriculture and locally sourced food and drink connect community members and visitors alike in museums, along Downtown streets, on farms and vineyards, and around local restaurant tables.

The community fabric is woven with these threads of beauty and opportunity. People lucky enough to live and spend time in Santa Cruz reap the benefits of this vibrant community. However, the fabric of Santa Cruz also contains-different and troubling threads that impact our community.

The small geographical space between the mountains and the sea is also home to metropolis-level crime and complex societal issues. Santa Cruz property and violent crime rates rival or surpass even those of inner-city California communities.¹ Drug addiction is rampant and fuels high property crime rates and a public health crisis around carelessly discarded hypodermic syringes in public spaces. Alcohol spurs violence in the Downtown entertainment district. Like other Central Coast cities, gang culture exists and impacts the lives of countless at-risk youth and young men of all ethnicities. Youth violence is sparked by gang rivalries, at times ending in homicides. When compared with other cities in California, the city of Santa Cruz has one of the highest per capita rates of homelessness. Many Santa Cruz homeless suffer from crippling addiction and/or mental illness, symptoms of which may result in public nuisance and criminal behaviors.

Large metropolitan cities manage the myriad of public safety issues within their much larger geographic boundaries utilizing substantial budget resources, a broader tax base, health services and all-encompassing criminal justice systems. Further, some metropolitan cities and counties are bundled under one combined government agency, ensuring common public safety goals are achieved through better management of resources and cost-savings.²

¹ 2012 Crime rates: California Metropolitan Statistical Area (violent crime rate: 424/100,000 inhabitants, property crime rate: 2767/100,000 inhabitants); Compton (violent crime rate: 1242/100,000 inhabitants, property crime rate: 2447/100,000 inhabitants); San José (violent crime rate: 363/100,000 inhabitants, property crime rate: 2914/100,000 inhabitants); Santa Cruz (violent crime rate: 711/100,000 inhabitants, property crime rate: 5887/100,000 inhabitants)

² An example of a bundled city/county management structure is the City/County of San Francisco.



In contrast, Santa Cruz must tackle these same issues with a lean police force, budget and tax base within a high density geographical space. The City's public safety goals have not historically been prioritized by the County even though the City hosts County Health, the Main Jail, the Superior Court, and is the County seat. Lack of inter-agency collaboration and coordination as well as a unified City/County vision is partly to blame for the City's public safety challenges.

Community discourse over Santa Cruz's public safety challenges has evolved over the years. There is widespread support for the funding programs that improve public safety by treating addiction, providing affordable housing, and reducing poverty. However, views on tolerance, which has long been an overarching value of the community, have changed. Many now believe tolerance without accountability is a cause of the City's current safety concerns, especially around drug addiction, related crime, and public health concerns. Recent community discussions are focused on balancing tolerance and compassion with accountability.

Responding to this recent community discourse, and on the heels of a series of horrific events, the Santa Cruz City Council elected to form a Public Safety Citizen Task Force to grapple with the “deep-rooted issues affecting our public safety.” 15 members³ were selected and given six months to arrive at a set of policy recommendations capable of improving public safety conditions in the City. Although a colossal task, Task Force members rose to the challenge, bringing open minds and hearts, a common purpose and respect for each other and the process. After six months of education and heated deliberation, several high-priority recommendations were identified that coalesce around the following topics.

Prevention

Discarded hypodermic syringes in the City’s open spaces, beaches and residential neighborhoods pose a significant public health problem. The Task Force finds that the County has not properly accounted for and mitigated the unintended consequences of locating a Syringe Services Program (SSP) within a residential neighborhood and the geographical boundaries of the City of Santa Cruz. Discarded hypodermic syringes in public and privately-owned spaces must be significantly reduced . Until this public safety crisis is rectified, the Task Force strongly recommends that the County Board of Supervisors consider the management of SSP as a top priority and relocate SSP to a non-residential area.

Current prevention programs for drug addiction and gang involvement are under-serving the community. Additionally, the City’s open spaces are not designed and utilized effectively to reduce crime opportunities. The Task Force strongly believes that to reduce criminal conduct and recidivism within its boundaries, the City must re-evaluate its priorities regarding public safety to focus more on drug treatment funding and efficacy to reduce criminal recidivism, support at-risk youth after-school programming, and enhance environmental design and pro-social activation of the City's most crime-ridden open spaces, business districts, and parks.

³ One member resigned leaving a voting membership of 14 during deliberations on recommendations.



Strategic Police Enforcement

The Santa Cruz Police Department (SCPD) is understaffed and is thus unable to focus on community policing, directed enforcement, and/or enforcement of low-level crimes and nuisance behaviors in the City's open spaces, gateways and other geographical focal points. This leads to disorder and high crime rates in the City's most beloved areas. The Task Force has identified two critical SCPD priorities. The Task Force recommends the City take immediate measures to staff the SCPD at budgeted levels, and move towards a long-term goal of building a police force-on par with national per capita levels. The Task Force also recommends implementing a targeted policing model that emphasizes enforcement of nuisance crimes in natural, city entry and focal point areas.

Strategic Code Enforcement

Santa Cruz is burdened with a high number of high-risk alcohol outlets⁴ and residential indoor and outdoor marijuana grow operations for medical and recreational purposes. High-risk alcohol outlets contribute to alcohol-fueled violence and crime. Growing, cultivation and processing of marijuana in residential neighborhoods is a serious public safety concern, a code enforcement issue, and often involves secondary criminal activity. The Task Force therefore recommends regulatory reform of the City's high-risk alcohol outlets and medical marijuana grows.

Offender Assistance with Accountability/Recidivism Reduction

Repeat offenders are an ongoing challenge to the City. A relatively small number of individuals are responsible for an excessive number of arrests and citations.⁵ A new collaborative management model, in partnership with the City's regional partners in Health Services, non-profits, and criminal justice system, is needed to reduce the impact of repeat offenders on the community. The Task Force recommends a specialty court model for veterans, substance abusers, mentally ill and/or homeless offenders. The specialty court is a proven model in halting the revolving door of recidivism by linking offenders to treatment and rigorous judicial monitoring. Specialty courts are highly collaborative, bringing together the criminal justice system and service providers to enforce court-ordered sanctions. The Task Force finds that the specialty court model would provide offenders with the right balance of treatment assistance with accountability.

Criminal Justice Accountability

The Task Force finds that the Santa Cruz County Courts have failed the community with regards to criminal sentencing. Improved accountability should come in the form of increased

⁴ According to the City of Santa Cruz Ordinance No. 2010-02, "a high-risk alcohol... retail outlet [is] where alcoholic beverages are sold such as a bar, tavern, liquor store, convenience store, nightclub, banquet facility, and/or premise where live entertainment and/or dancing occurs."
(<http://www.cityofsantacruz.com/Modules/ShowDocument.aspx?documentid=12253>)

⁵ See Introduction and Background for more information.



transparency, consistent adjudication of the City's municipal code violations, and implementation of a specialty court model (as noted above).

The Task Force recommends the following measures be implemented by the Santa Cruz County Superior Court:

- Court to issue a misdemeanor warrant to individuals following three failures to appear in a six-month period. This automatic warrant issuance will eliminate the need for the City Attorney to prosecute repeat municipal code infraction offenders who fail to appear.
- Compel the Presiding Judge of the Santa Cruz County Superior Court to appear before the Santa Cruz City Council twice a year to share what the Court is doing to address high repeat offender rates in the City of Santa Cruz and receive input from the City Council and City Attorney.

Collaborative Accountability and Appropriate Funding

The Task Force strongly recommends that the City communicate with each jurisdiction named in the report and ask that it be responsive, in writing, to the recommendations that impact their operations. Further, the Task Force recommends the City Council and County Board of Supervisors consider an alternative funding mechanism to support any Task Force recommendations that are outside of the City and County's regular budget.

Conclusion

Santa Cruz's public safety problems are complex, but can be solved. Multiple factors including substance abuse, tolerance without accountability, and lack of inter-agency collaborative strategies among the City, County and Court system have led to a serious public safety problem within the City. Fourteen City residents took on the challenge of identifying solutions through education, collaboration, and respectful dialogue, a trend that will hopefully spread to others throughout the rest of the County. The outcome of the Task Force process is a set of policy recommendations capable of far-reaching influence and a community united behind positive change. Change will only happen with the full commitment of the City, County, criminal justice system, social service nonprofits, and residents to move together towards a common goal of improved public safety for all.