

Fear of 'Intruder'

Police Calls Surge With Crime Spree

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San Fernando Valley residents, frightened by the brutal attacks of the so-called "Valley Intruder," are phoning police with false sightings of prowlers and with questions about forming neighborhood watch groups and securing their homes, Los Angeles police said Tuesday.

Several Valley gun shops also reported increased handgun sales prompted by fear over the attacks, although most said the increases were slight, and some saw no change at all.

The Police Department's communications division, which processes emergency crime calls throughout Los Angeles, said the number of daily crime reports jumped to 4,200 calls last weekend, about 600 more than the usual 3,600.

Most Calls From Valleys

Although precise figures were not available, most of the calls came from the San Fernando and San Gabriel valleys, where authorities believe the intruder has struck in a series of pre-dawn slayings, rapes and assaults, said Sgt. Rick Faulkner, a watch commander for the communications division.

"They're hearing noises—dogs are barking, people are on roofs—a little of everything," Faulkner said. "We're even getting shots-fired calls."

The five police stations in the San Fernando Valley also reported significant increases in the number of people asking for assistance in forming watch committees, as well as questions about what kinds of locks should be installed. Jittery residents also are asking for descriptions of the "Valley Intruder" and want to know how he has entered the homes of his victims.

However, police generally expect the interest in crime protection to wane once a suspect is arrested or the attacks cease.

Pattern Repeats Itself

"You see the pattern repeat itself whenever there's a major crime wave," said Sgt. Mike Melancon, who heads North Hollywood Division's community relations office. He said the number of inquiries about crime protection has risen by 50% in recent days, and some residents are calling the division to request extra patrols near their house when they go on vacation.

Authorities believe the Intruder may have been the man who shot Christopher and Virginia Petersen in the head last week as they lay in bed in their Northridge home. The couple survived the attack and were released from a hospital the next day. Christopher Petersen dodged other bullets to chase the man from the house, then drove his wife and unharmed, 4-year-old daughter to a hospital.

The shootings seem to have

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triggered the sharpest response in the West Valley area around Northridge, which is served by the Police Department's Devonshire Division.

The number of queries to that division regarding home security and watch groups has risen an estimated ninefold, with 40 to 50 calls coming in daily since publicity about the attacks became widespread last week.

"People are really scared. They want to know about locking up, about securing their residences," said Sheila Bell, a police service representative at Devonshire Division. "People are asking if it's all right to shoot someone in their home."

Suspect Has Stained Teeth

The department's Foothill Division, in whose area a man was fatally shot by a man believed to be the intruder, reported a 300% to 400% increase in inquiries about home security and watch groups, while other divisions in the valleys said the surge in interest ranged from 50% to 75%.

Law enforcement officials across the Los Angeles area are looking for a white man about 30 to 35 years old and six feet tall, weighing about 150 pounds, with brown, curly hair and distinctive gaps between his stained front teeth. They believe he may be driving a maroon or dark brown, two-door 1978 Pontiac Grand Prix that may have a damaged right fender.

The intruder is said to be an opportunist who enters homes through unlocked doors and windows.

Police say they are telling residents to lock all doors and windows before going to bed, even though it may make sleeping difficult by

blocking a cooling breeze.

"We've really been surprised at how many people leave their windows and screen doors open," Bell said.

Police said many people are also asking about legal restrictions on the use of handguns for protection.

California law allows people above age 18 who have never been convicted of a felony or illegal possession of a concealed firearm, a misdemeanor, to have a loaded gun in their home or business. The gun may be used against an intruder but only if the resident can show his or her life was threatened. The state mandates a 15-day waiting period before a buyer may take possession of a pistol.

Operators of gun shops said a slight increase in sales was a normal public response to publicity about a serious crime outbreak or incident.

"A lot of 'em are ladies and they're buying .38s and shotguns," a manager at National Gun Sales in Northridge said Tuesday. The manager, who asked that his name not be published, said sales had increase 20% since last week. Many are first-time gun buyers and mention their fears about the intruder as they purchase the guns, the manager said.

May Lack Experience

Police are concerned that people with little experience with firearms are buying guns.

"I personally don't recommend that they go out and buy guns unless they know how to handle them," said Sgt. Gary Merrifield of Foothill Division's community relations office. "It may be more a danger than a help."

Instead, Merrifield recommends that people protect themselves with "rolling pins or baseball bats."