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Crime on the rise at area colleges

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Sex assaults, along with liquor law and drug abuse violations, increased at Princeton University last year, a newly released annual security report says.

Burglaries at Princeton and the College of New Jersey were up in 2008, while TCNJ experienced a dramatic spike in motor vehicle thefts.

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Along with other institutes of higher learning across the country, Princeton, TCNJ and Rider University last week released their annual security and fire safety reports as required by law, giving students and the public a glimpse into

recent trends of campus crime.

Princeton's jump in the number of sex assaults, Public Safety Deputy Director Charles Davall said, is directly related to the effort colleges are making to have the victims of these crimes come forward.

Sexual assault is the most underreported crime on college campuses throughout the country, Davall said. "We attribute the rise in reported incidents over the past several years to the tremendous outreach that our SHARE (Sexual Harassment/Assault Advising, Resources, and Education) office does on campus and the atmosphere of safety and support they create for survivors to report these incidents in a confidential manner."

In 2008, the university's Department of Public Safety received 18 reports of sex assaults, 17 of these occurring in a residential facility. It's an increase from 14 reported sex assaults in 2007 and 12 in 2006.

While Princeton experienced a small increase in burglaries last year, TCNJ was especially hard-hit. The college reported 34 burglaries, 23 of which were in residential facilities. The numbers are noticeably up from 20 in 2007 and 19 the year before that.

Campus police Chief John Collins said the spike may have less to do with tough economic times than students leaving their possessions open as targets of opportunity.

"Last year, when we started getting a rash of burglaries on campus, we sat down with reporters from The Signal and the student government and said, 'You need to get the message out to people to lock their doors,'" Collins said.

At Princeton, the situation is much the same, Davall said. Fifty eight burglaries were reported in 2008, up from 37 in 2006.

"It is important to note that our residential dormitory burglaries make up most of these stats, and these were not burglaries where someone forced their way into a dorm," he said. "Someone simply walked into a dorm room through an unlocked or propped open door."

Unlocked doors may also be part of the reason for the 14 motor vehicle thefts at TCNJ last year.

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The college's safety report showed that one auto theft per year had been documented in 2006 and 2007.

"Car thefts have been a thorn in my side," Collins said.

Many of the cars, however, were recovered by neighboring police departments, Collins said, and the rash of break-ins and thefts appears to be over.

"We didn't have any for quite some time (in 2009), and then we had one in the spring, and then there weren't any," Collins said.

In contrast to its sister institutions in Mercer County, Rider University's only reported increase was in motor vehicle thefts, from none in 2006 and 2007 to one in 2008, their report shows. Burglaries at Rider decreased to 11 last year, down from 30 in 2007 and 28 in 2006.

"We are bound to see these numbers fluctuate from year to year," spokesman Dan Higgins said.

Rider, however, was the only institution to report any hate crimes for 2008.

"Two happened on campus; one was in the residence halls," Higgins said.

Both involved vandalism of personal property, he said, and were investigated as criminal mischief.

Following a year that saw student Gary DeVercelly die of alcohol poisoning following a fraternity initiation, fewer students were arrested in 2008 for liquor law violations. Rider's report shows 61 arrests last year, down from 100 in 2007.

"We're very encouraged that the alcohol policies we've established this year have led to more responsible behavior on the part of our students," Higgins said.

Higgins said the university is seeing the results of the new policies, which include residence directors in Greek houses, coupled with the vigilance of public safety officers.

"It is certainly one of the changes that was made, and certainly the new awareness that a new policy has been put in place has contributed," he said.

Disciplinary actions and judicial referrals for alcohol were up slightly, 348 in 2008 as opposed to 335 in 2007, Rider's report shows.

"We'll continue to be vigilant and promote responsible behavior throughout our campus," Higgins said.

At Princeton, arrests for drug abuse violations skyrocketed from none in 2006 and 2007 to 15 in 2008, the university's report shows.

"Most of the arrests for drug violations were made on non-students," Davall said.

Arrests for liquor law violations also went up, from two in 2007 to 10 in 2008, according to the reported figures.

"The increase in the number of arrests for liquor law violations is directly attributable to increased efforts by the borough police to impact high-risk drinking, particularly for serving alcoholic beverages to underage persons," Davall said. "Some of these arrests occurred on Prospect Avenue, and some occurred on campus."

None of the three schools reported any significant fire incidents in 2008.

The yearly reports highlight the unpredictability of crime on college campuses, Collins said.

"You have to be proactive," he said. "Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't."

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