

4 Assaults in 24 hours Stir Fear in Irvine.

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Police Task Force Formed and Patrols Beefed Up After Spree.

Responding to an outbreak of sexual assaults on women, Irvine, police officials increased patrols Wednesday in two neighborhoods of the normally serene suburban community, formed a special task force to investigate the attacks and dispatched volunteers on an unusual door-to-door effort to warn residents.

The campaign was organized after four attacks—two rapes, an attempted rape and a sexual assault—were reported between 11 a.m. Tuesday and 11 a.m. Wednesday. It appeared that two of the crimes might have been carried out by the same culprit, police said.

No arrests had been made in connection with any of the incidents by late Wednesday.

Police Bulletin

"At this time, these crimes do not appear to be connected to the recent escape of a (suspected) rapist from Orange County Jail., "a police bulletin said in a reference to the Monday morning jailbreak of Michael Eric Gonzalez, who was still at large late Wednesday.

Irvine Police Detective Lt. Robert Lennert said patrols in the University park and Woodbridge communities, where three of the crimes occurred were being increased to anywhere from four to 12 times their normal strength. Patrols would remain at regular strength in other parts of the city, he said.

A task force of four investigators—one concentrating on each case—plus a sergeant in charge was working to solve the crimes, Lennert said. "As leads come in, we're basically turning the whole (detective) bureau loose on it," he added.

Pamphlets Distributed

Finally, Explorer Scouts and other volunteers started distributing informational pamphlets at about 6 p.m. Wednesday in a community that still appeared to be largely unaware of the crimes. The volunteers were expected to complete distribution of a bulletin about the crimes and tips on how residents could protect themselves to about 6,000 Woodbridge homes sometime this morning.

Lennert said it is "definitely not usual" for the city to experience such a rash of assaults. Irvine recorded 18 rapes in 1982 and 10 in 1981, he said, adding that he could not recall any rapes in the Woodbridge area in the past two years. The two rapes in the city since Tuesday brought to 10 the number of rapes reported this year.

Lennert declined to speculate on what could cause such an outbreak. "There's seldom any logic as to why in these things," he said.

Irvine police Sgt. Ron Flathers cautioned residents against an overreaction. "The last thing we want is a panic in the city. [Rapes] kind of happen all over, we just seem to be taking care of it on the same day here. It's just kind of our turn for it."

Based on descriptions given by witnesses, Lennert said chances were "very, very slim" that any of the crimes were committed by Gonzales, the escapee accused of raping a Balboa island waitress.

Most Residents Unaware

Not many Irvine residents seemed aware of the crimes by Wednesday afternoon. Near the twin Woodbridge lakes, children frolicked about on bicycles as others strolled together, and it appeared the rash of attacks was having little impact on the planned city of 70,000 which boasts the slogan "Another Day in Paradise."

An exception was Earlene Landesman, who sat with her husband Dennis Landesman on their lakeside porch. She had heard of the crimes from a co-worker at Saddleback Community Hospital in Laguna Hills on Wednesday morning.

"I don't understand," she said. "I was shocked. This is crazy."

She said she normally was a cautious person but had been getting lax about security lately. She added, "Now I'll be keeping my (car) windows up and my doors locked."

Mayor Larry Agran said he had not heard any upset constituents. "The police have advised me of these occurrences," he said. "They apparently are unrelated, which makes it more of a freak thing . . . we're all mystified and deeply concerned, and we hope (the rash of attacks) is over."

Jackie Sherman, an Irvine Police Department employee and coordinator of the UC Irvine rape prevention program, decried what she called the lack of facilities to help rape victims.

The Irvine Community Against Rape (I CARE) shut down its operations earlier this year because it lacked funds, she said. "Not only is there no rape crisis center in this county, there is no exclusive rape hot line period," Sherman said. "It's not good for victims and it's not good for the community."

The first two crimes occurred in Woodbridge, both at about 10:55 a.m. Tuesday, according to police.

The first rape was committed in a neighborhood near Barranca Parkway and West Yale loop. A housewife in her mid-20s answered a knock on her door and was asked by a man dressed in work clothes if she needed any painting done. When she said no, the man pulled a sharp knifelike instrument, forced his way inside and attacked the woman, police said.

The second Woodbridge attack took place near West Yale Loop and Blue Lake North. Police said a 22-year-old live-in housekeeper opened the door to a man who forced his way inside, began to choke her and then produced a knife, which he held to the victim's stomach. She broke free, however, and escaped. The case was being characterized by police as an attempted rape.

In both crimes the attacker was described as a Latino male in his early 20s with black hair and brown eyes, of short height and medium build, wearing tan pants. Lennert said there were some differences in the descriptions, but added the cases might be related.

Freeway Incident

The third crime occurred at about 6:35 p.m. Tuesday, on Interstate 5 southbound in Irvine just north of the Jeffrey Road exit, police said. They said a 22-year-old woman was sitting in her disabled auto next to the freeway when a motorcyclist stopped and offered assistance. The man leaned into the car's open window, placed a knife at the throat of the woman, demanded her wallet, then attempted to sexually assault her. The woman managed to bolt free and flag down a passing car as her assailant fled.

The fourth incident took place at about 10:30 a.m. Wednesday, Lennert said. A 22-year-old woman was walking along an undeveloped path in the William R. Mason Regional park, next to Jeffrey Road near the Parkview Center shopping area in the University Park neighborhood, when a teen-ager approached her. The attacker, wearing only a ski mask and pair of shorts, forced the woman into a culvert and raped her, Lennert said.