PORT ST. LUCIE - The most recent crime statistics released for the city of Port St. Lucie indicate that in 2010, the city experienced a 9.4 percent reduction in serious crimes, as compared to 2009.

Police Chief Brian Reuther credits the reduction to the effective strength of the police department and the strategies that are used.

"It is always good for communities," he said. "We are doing everything we can to impact the crime rate."

The report was released by the Florida Department of Law Enforcement. It includes the crimes of robbery, aggravated assault, burglary and larceny. The largest decrease was in robberies, which went down from 60 in 2009 to 49 in 2010, an 18.3 percent decrease. The statistics show a continuance of a three-year downward trend in robberies.

The city is now ranked among the top 400 cities nationwide with at least 75,000 residents that have the lowest crime rate. Port St. Lucie ranks 339 out of 400, with 400 being the city with the lowest crime. This places the city in the top 15 percent of cities in the country with the lowest crime rates.

In Florida, 27 cities are also ranked, and Port St. Lucie comes in with the third lowest crime rate. The two cities with less crime are Cape Coral and Coral Springs.

The police department uses a number of different strategies to deter crime, including message boards, reverse 911, unmarked vehicle and bicycle patrols in neighborhoods, a volunteer response team and crime analysis data to identify crime "hot spots."

Rachel Boba, an assistant professor of criminology at Florida Atlantic University, has been working with the Port St. Lucie Police Department for the past seven years to use crime analysis that identifies "hot spots," or areas that show increased criminal activity over time.

"You need to have a systematic way to look at (the data), then act on it," she said. "The overall focus is to prioritize, and the strategies we're using are shown to be successful."
She said this type of initiative is being used with all kinds of agencies.

"We are looking at putting this into smaller agencies in Florida," she said.

This systematic crime-reduction strategy breaks crime into three areas: immediate activity; short-term activity of groups of similar crimes taking place in a short time; and long-term activity, related activities taking place over a longer period of time.

This allows the police department to coordinate the necessary resources to respond effectively.

Dr. Boba's and the Port St. Lucie Police Department's work received recognition from the International Association of Chiefs of Police in September 2008 when they received the Excellence in Law Enforcement Research award.

More recently, a detailed study written by Detective Lieutenant Roberto Santos was published in the February 2011 "FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin."

According to Chief Reuther, the system the police department has in place supports those strategies.

"It engages everyone in the organization," he said. "We have weekly meeting to discuss current hot spots, and this initiative allows us to operate more efficiently and effectively. By looking at and analyzing the local crime data, we can deploy resources to enhance what's already in place."

Looking toward the future, Chief Reuther said residents needed to be involved.

"People feel this is a very safe city," he said. "In the long term, we are looking to drive crime down even more. For that, we need the resident's cooperation and understanding. Together, we can bring it even lower."