



A homeless man relaxes on the Pajaro River levee Wednesday.

Tarmo Hannula/Register-Pajaronian

Volunteers conduct biannual homeless count

By TODD GUILD

OF THE REGISTER-PAJARONIAN

WATSONVILLE — Approximately 40 people braved the early morning chill Tuesday to help conduct a biannual count of the homeless people who live in Santa Cruz County.

The volunteers paired up with homeless guides who know the nooks and crannies of the county where people seek shelter

for the night. Together they canvassed 52 U.S. Census tracts in the county to directly observe homeless people.

The census is conducted nationwide every two years, and the information helps the federal government determine what homeless services and funding is necessary for each county.

"It's important for our community to know how many people are homeless here

so we can direct the appropriate type of services to them," said Monica Martinez, executive director of the Homeless Services Center in Santa Cruz.

Because the survey has been conducted for more than a decade, organizers can also see how the numbers of homeless people are fluctuating, Martinez said.

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This year, census takers are focusing on younger people, aged 18-25 and minors 17 and below, she said.

Too often, the census does not give an accurate picture of the scope of homelessness in Watsonville, because some mothers hide with their children inside a van and wait for the census counters to pass through, fearing their kids will be taken away by Child Protective Services.

But coordinators stress that they don't contact CPS to report homelessness. Instead, they help make sure that the kids have the services they need.

Watsonville's homeless population fluctuates at higher rates than other cities. The strawberry season draws a large number of migrant farmer laborers, which increases the demand for cheap and temporary housing; while the supply remains the same.

Since the count only happens in January, it's unclear how the numbers in Watsonville change

during the growing season when thousands of people flock to the area.

The majority of South County homeless people must travel to the larger shelters in Santa Cruz to spend the night, officials say.

In past counts, the average homeless profile was a Caucasian male, 43 years old, homeless for more than one year, sleeps outdoors, blamed loss of job or unemployment and alcohol or drug use as the primary causes of homelessness, does not have a high school diploma or GED and receives government assistance.

Census takers were conducting a count in Monterey County on Wednesday.

Applied Survey Research, which spearheads the count, is also contracted by Sonoma, San Francisco and Santa Clara counties to help with counts there.

The results are expected to be released in spring.

Some previous counts were:

2011: 2,771

2009: 2,265

2007: 2,789

2005: 3,371

For information, visit www.appliedsurveyresearch.org.