

Local

✓ Homeless survey finds lots of kids

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SANTA CRUZ — A private survey of the homeless conducted 10 days ago shows almost one-third of the persons counted are children.

The survey conducted by the Short-term Housing Coalition of Santa Cruz County is an attempt to determine how many people still need housing following the Oct. 17 earthquake.

Coalition Director Margaret Boll cautioned that the figures are preliminary, hastily compiled for the coalition's meeting last Friday. Final numbers should be ready in about a month.

The early figures show more than 500 homeless in shelters. Of those 160 were children.

The survey also attempted to count people living on the streets or in cars. It is one of the projects of the 14-member coalition of government, private and non-profit groups formed in January to identify needs of pre- and post-earthquake homeless. A separate group is focusing on permanent housing.

"We realized we had to have a good picture of the people who are out there," said coalition chairwoman, Christine Johnson-Lyons, also executive director of the Community Action Board.

The coalition is funded with a grant from the Northern California Grantsmakers Task Force on Homelessness.

It found that "homeless children is the largest growing group of homeless in Santa Cruz County," Johnson-Lyons said.

The hush-hush survey was conducted Mar. 29 and 30, a little more than a week after the highly publicized

cized count by the U.S. Census Bureau.

"We knew we weren't going to get census information," Johnson-Lyons said, explaining why the count was attempted.

Initially, the group wanted to go along with the census workers on "homeless night" but were turned down, said Larry Pearson, a Santa Cruz city planner and member of both the housing coalition and the Santa Cruz Complete Count Committee working with the census.

Fifty counters from the Welfare Parents Support Group interviewed people in shelters and motels the night of March 29, Boll said.

The next morning between 7 and 10 a.m. counters stationed at various points around the county attempted to count street homeless and people who appeared to be living out of cars.

The group decided not to go to camp sites or confront homeless for safety reasons.

To be counted as homeless a person had to fit a "profile," Boll said. They had to look like they were "carrying their life on the back." Observers at gasoline stations and other points looked for cars packed with things that looked like someone was living inside, she said.

The survey was kept quiet because of a tendency of homeless living outside to be wary of the government or authority.

Paul Brindel, of the Shelter Project, said 10 percent of the people in shelters refused to participate. "My hunch is it is a low count," he said.

Boll said the survey was "tremendously conservative" to avoid charges of an overcount.

No numbers are available yet on the number of homeless living outside.