

Homeless numbers dropping, study finds

But advocates, alarmed by jump in 'chronic' street dwellers

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SANTA CRUZ — The number of homeless in Santa Cruz County is at one of its lowest points in years, but those who remain have an established street life that makes them difficult to help.

That's according to the 2007 Santa Cruz County Homeless Census and Survey, scheduled for official release today.

The study shows the number of homeless people has dropped by 24 percent in the past two years, from 2,789 this year compared to 3,371 in 2005, the last year the survey was done. The number of homeless was 3,293 in 2000, when the third most recent census was done.

But compared to other counties around the state, Santa Cruz has a high number of "chronic homeless," those who have been homeless for more than a year, or four times in the past three years, and have a disability, said Peter Connery, vice president of Applied Survey Research of Watsonville, which conducted the study.

Of those surveyed, 43 percent were chronically homeless compared to 41 percent in 2005 and a national average of 23 percent.

"It's probably harder to get out of being homeless when you're

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Homeless

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here," Connery said.

The chronically homeless often live indiscreetly on the streets and avoid shelters, which makes it difficult for them to get assistance from social workers, Connery explained.

"When there's not shelters, you don't have touch points to the system," he said. "Therefore your disabilities last longer, it's harder for you to turn around."

The homeless report is required before the county can qualify for federal grants to help the homeless.

According to the study, the profile of a "typical homeless person" is a 47-year old white male who has been homeless for one year or more, sleeps outside, and was living in the county at the time he became homeless. He cites unemployment, the loss of a job and alcohol or drug use as the primary reasons for his homelessness, has a high school diploma or GED, and receives some form of government assistance, which is usually food stamps.

In northern Santa Cruz County, homeless residents tend to camp in hard-to-find spots in the Santa Cruz green belt or sleep along the San Lorenzo River, said Ken Cole, executive director of the Homeless Services Center in Santa Cruz.

In the Pajaro Valley, the homeless often sleep along the Pajaro River or pack tightly into houses, according to Cole.

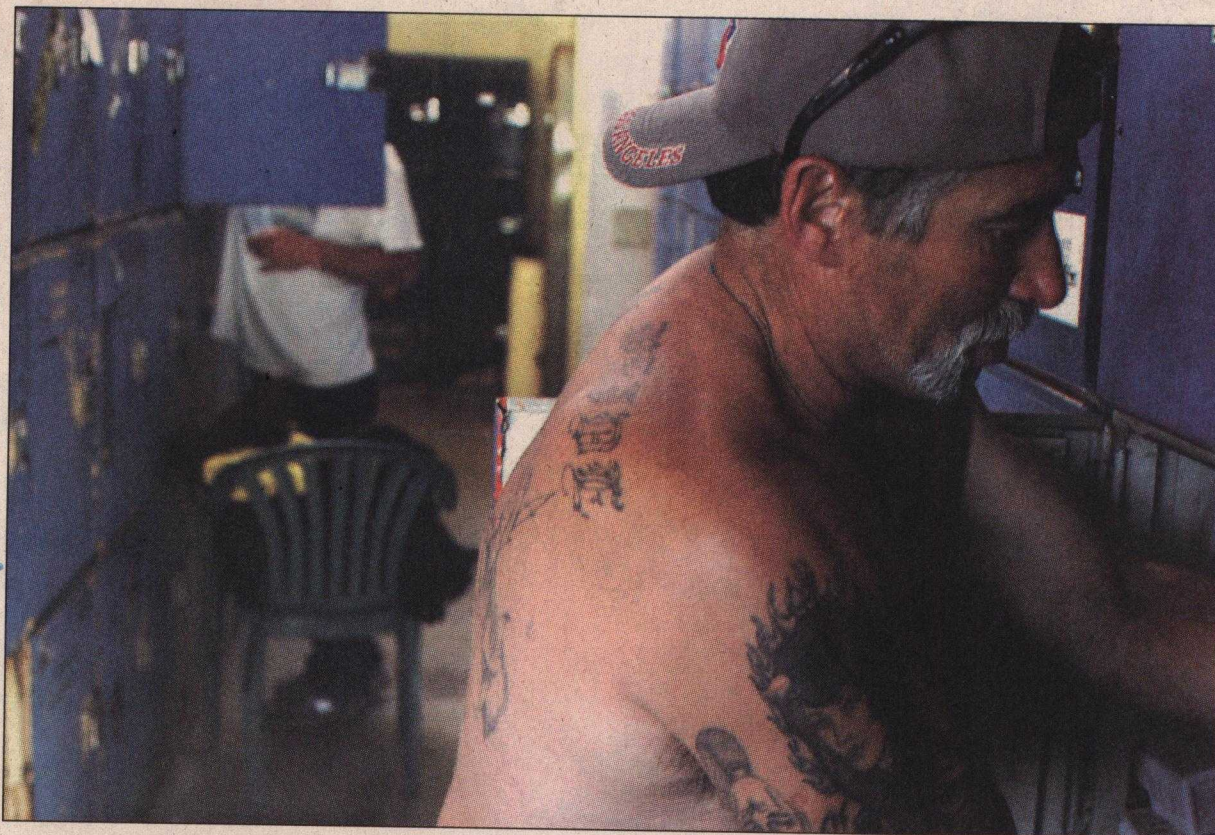
The study did not provide a geographic breakdown.

While some say this year's lower number of homeless stems from the county's increased efforts to provide housing, others wonder if a crackdown in immigration laws or Santa Cruz camping rules contributed to fewer people being counted.

The county's homeless residents "are very sensitive to rumors, and there was a lot of buzz about the city cracking down this past winter," said Cole.

In addition, Cole said, the survey was done in January of this year, as opposed to March in 2005, which could have had some effect. Migrant workers, who tend to stay in the Pajaro Valley and work the fields during the day, for example, usually have not arrived at that time of year.

For Connery, the most startling statistic was not the drop in the number of



Shaminder Dulai/Sentinel photos

Pauly Ruffini looks through his locker before talking a shower Monday at the Homeless Services Center. The lockers are rented for \$15 initially, then \$5 per month thereafter. Ruffini considers it a valuable service. "The only alternative is to stash your stuff and hope it's there when you come back."

The county's homeless

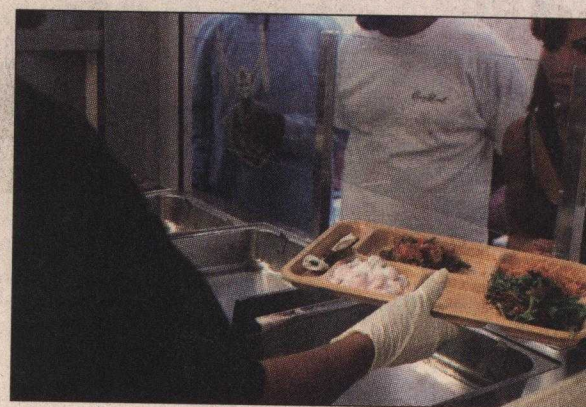
- There are 2,789 homeless people living in the county.
- Nearly 69 percent are male.
- About 54 percent are white, 23 percent Latino and 5 percent black.
- Nearly 62 percent have been homeless for a year or more. Almost 32 percent have been homeless for more than three years.
- About 68 percent lived in Santa Cruz before they became homeless.
- About 13 percent are employed; 87 percent are unemployed.

SOURCE: 2007 Santa Cruz County Homeless Census and Survey

homeless residents, but the large percentage of those who sleep outside.

According to the report, 83 percent of those surveyed are "unsheltered," compared to 79 percent in 2005 and 49 percent in 2000.

"When you look at it from that per-



Volunteers serve hot plates at the center on Monday. The volunteers are usually homeless themselves and donate their time in exchange for food and services.

spective, there's a lot of work to do," he said.

Supervisor Mark Stone said he also was surprised at the number of residents who do not stay in a shelter. As a result, he would like to see more outreach to those who are not taking advantage of the county's homeless services.

"If we can provide services in a timely manner to keep folks from falling into homelessness, and once they do, give them a leg back up, we can proba-

bly give them a better chance of getting out of that situation," Stone said.

The report is sponsored by the United Way of Santa Cruz County. Executive Director Mary Lou Goeke declined to comment on the study until after it is presented today.

The report will be discussed at 10 a.m. in the Board of Supervisors' chambers, 701 Ocean St., fifth floor, Santa Cruz.

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