

Local homeless kids struggle to find a secure place to sleep

Homeless - 2000

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SANTA CRUZ — Getting a good night's sleep is a difficult task for Santa Cruz County's homeless youth.

State law says they are not allowed to stay in adult shelters. The city's sleeping ban says they are not allowed to stay on the streets. And the police say they are not allowed to stay in camps.

But in 2000, there were 783 homeless youths on the streets, in transitional housing or at emergency shelters in the county, according to Applied Survey Research of Watsonville.

And of the 20 housing-assistance shelters in Santa Cruz County, only two are available to minors.

That means the number of homeless kids in the county quickly surpasses the spaces at shelters earmarked specifically for minors.

As a result, many homeless kids are stuck in a state of limbo, often moving from place to place each night.

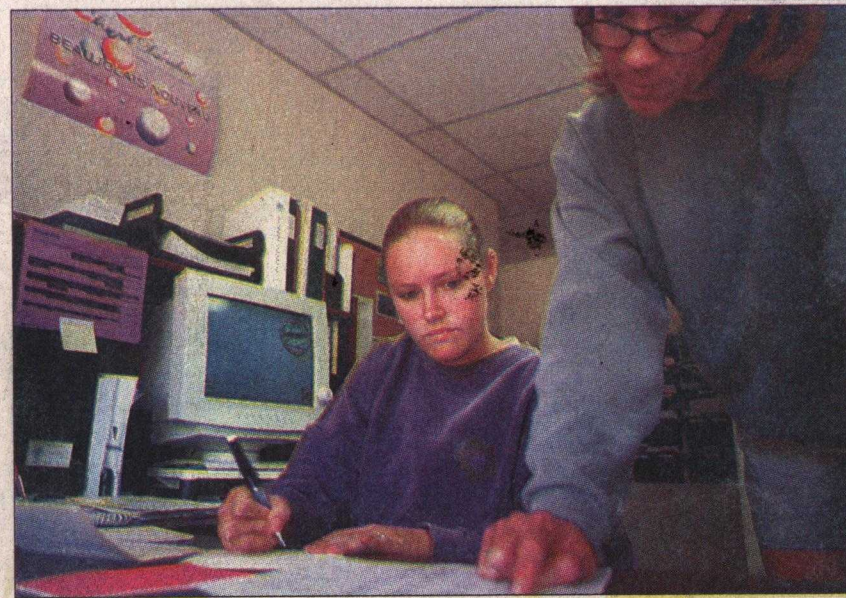
Homeless kids usually end up camping out, bumming change for hotel rooms or traveling to another city if they can't find a space in a shelter or home for minors, said Jason Murphy,

program coordinator at Youth Services in Santa Cruz.

A survey conducted by Applied Survey Research and the Community Assessment Project, a United Way-sponsored study, found only 20 percent of the homeless youth in the county live in shelters. Thirty-six percent stay with friends or family and 27 percent stay on the streets or in camps.

State law says unaccompanied minors cannot stay at shelters for adults because of liability issues, said Paul Brindel, director of the Community Action Board in Santa Cruz.

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Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Former Above The Line resident Krystle Jones, left, works with her boss, Jane Prough, at Epic Wines in Aptos.

Youth

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The kids are the responsibility of Child Protective Services, but most homeless kids are leery and don't want to be put in the system out of fear they will be sent back home or to foster care, he said.

Above the Line and Youth Services are the only two shelters that serve the county's homeless youth.

Youth Services provides emergency foster care for up to 72 hours, bypassing Child Protective Services. But the shelter can accommodate only two kids each night.

Above the Line, which is in Watsonville with offices in Aptos, is a long-term housing program for teens and does not offer emergency short-term assistance. To get into the program, teen-agers need the permission of their parents, legal guardians or the courts. Above the Line shelters some 20 teens, but there is always a waiting list for more teens who want to get into the program.

After years of bouncing from foster care to the homes of friends and family, Krystle Jones, 18, finally settled down at Above the Line when she was 17.

She says she was one of the lucky ones.

"I moved around a lot, but I just

didn't ever feel like I had a home," Jones said.

Above the Line gave her that home.

She joined her younger sister, who was placed in the home by a social worker when she was 14.

"If I know anyone who doesn't have a place to live, I always suggest Above the Line," she said.

But the organization can only take a handful of the kids who need help. Other youth, who are not so lucky, have to find other places to stay.

If minors want to stay at an emergency shelter for adults, they have to lie about their age. But people who work with homeless youth agree the shelters are not a safe place for kids.

"They are on the bottom of the totem pole at the shelters," Murphy said. "They aren't welcome by shelter managers or by other homeless people there. Sometimes they will get beat up or robbed if they are at the shelters."

People who work with homeless kids agree: The kids are resourceful and will always find a place to spend the night, even if it is just a sidewalk somewhere. But in cities such as Santa Cruz, where there are few shelters to help them, getting that good night's sleep may continue to be difficult.

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