

# Report on Homeless

## Fewer on Streets but More Are Chronically Homeless

Homeless  
by Michael Thomas

The number of people struggling to survive in the streets and riverside encampments of Santa Cruz County has fallen over the past two years, according to a survey released on Jun. 12. The survey also refuted the perception that Santa Cruz attracts homeless persons from other communities and that most of them panhandle to get by.

However, a large portion of the county's homeless are stuck on the streets for long periods of a year or more, with mental health and substance abuse problems making it difficult to gain a foothold.

"The good news is that overall, homelessness has decreased by about 17 percent," said Peter Connery of Applied Survey Research, the organization that conducted the survey. That decrease is consistent with the current trend nationwide.

The homeless population count was carried out by a

team of volunteers on Jan. 25 this year. Many of the volunteers were homeless persons themselves, and as such have intimate knowledge of where their peers are located. They received training and hourly pay to do the count. They also conducted 429 interviews, providing valuable insight into who is on the street and the challenges they face.

### Timing of Study Skews Results

The 2007 Census and Survey found a total of 2,789 people were homeless during the snapshot count. In 2000, the total was 3,293 and in 2005 it was 3,371.

However, the previous counts were done in March, while federal mandates pushed this year's count up to the end of January. During that month, migrant farm workers — who officials believe make up a portion of the total — are often out of town. Also, the homeless population that remains may be less visible to volunteers.

Tove Beatty, Executive Director of Mountain Commu-

nity Resources and co-chair of the County's Mental Health Board, was among those that volunteered on the counting day. "It was a bitter cold morning and anyone who was out looking for a place to sleep was probably pretty well hidden," Beatty said.

Nevertheless, Connery, who has overseen similar surveys nationwide, believes the data reflects a real change.

"I think there has been an

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overall decrease, but those [seasonal] factors do contribute," he said.

Connery encouraged county officials to address some of the less-encouraging findings in the report. He said the percentage of homeless who are

"unsheltered," which means they don't have access to shelter beds or transitional housing, is one of the highest he has seen at 82 percent.

The point-in-time count is also used to estimate the number of people who are homeless at some point over the course of the year. The annual figure was just under 5,600 people, down a bit since the last survey in 2005. That translates to about 2.1 percent of the county's population, which is consistent with statewide statistics.

### Who Is On the Streets?

Interviews with individuals yielded some of the more troubling statistics.

Many have been homeless for at least a year or have found themselves on the street at least four times in the past three years. These "chronically homeless" individuals accounted for 48 percent of those interviewed.

Fewer young people, women and mothers were found on the streets, but the number of women who said

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they had experienced abuse or domestic violence increased from 21 percent to 29 percent.

The most common reasons for becoming homeless were loss of employment, mental health problems and substance abuse.

"Every person has a unique life story and every person has had a series of breaks and obstacles that have gotten them to where they are," said Mary Lou Goeke, Executive Director of United Way, which helps administer the survey.

However, a profile of the most common homeless person was assembled from the interview data. The typical homeless person is a Caucasian male in his late 40s who has been homeless for a year or more and usually sleeps outside. He was a county resident when he became homeless.

Though he is likely to have a high school diploma or a GED, he is unemployed and cited unemployment and alcohol or drug use as the primary causes

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of homelessness. Most say they get some form of government assistance, usually food stamps.

The average homeless person is equally likely to seek health care at the Homeless Person's Health Project, a hospital emergency room or the county clinic.

"It's really important to acknowledge that these are our residents from our county," Goeke said.

She hopes the statistics will help dispel the idea that creating services and shelters for the homeless draws more individuals from outside the County.

"They're not traveling homeless people," she said of survey respondents. "These are folks who are our neighbors."

### Long-Term Transitional Housing Needed

One local man who addressed the County Board of Supervisors following the report's presentation said he had been homeless on and off since the 1989 earthquake. He said that a 30-day stay in a shelter is often not enough time to get on one's feet, since the waiting list for longer-term transitional housing is often six months or more.

However, there are success stories. The mother of a three-year-old who was formerly homeless in Santa Cruz praised the work of local programs such as Families in Transition, which helped her get off the streets.

Ken Cole, Executive Director of the

Homeless Services Center, said the survey results, though mixed, include cause for happiness.

"There is a lot of hope. There is a lot of progress being made," Cole said. "People are restored to housing every day and that's what keeps service providers going."

At the new Rebele Family Shelter on River Street, Cole said that homeless families are transitioning to long-term housing after an average stay of three months. The shelter allows stays of up to six months. Though the county's traditional shelters are full and have waiting lists, the family shelter is currently just 75 percent occupied.

Though most homeless people are struggling with a variety of challenges, Cole insists that providing the security of housing is the first step.

Goeke agrees.

"You can't start them in job training or addiction recovery," she said. "You have to start them with a place to sleep and something to eat."

The coalition of agencies working to secure grants for homeless services has been successful in recent years, according to Goeke. Federal and local dollars have made possible projects like the new Nuevo Sol long-term housing project on Barson Street.

However, if the county's homeless census shows a decline, will that reduce local agencies' eligibility for grant funds?

"No," she says. "If anything it means we can show that we are making an impact. I think it will help us." ■