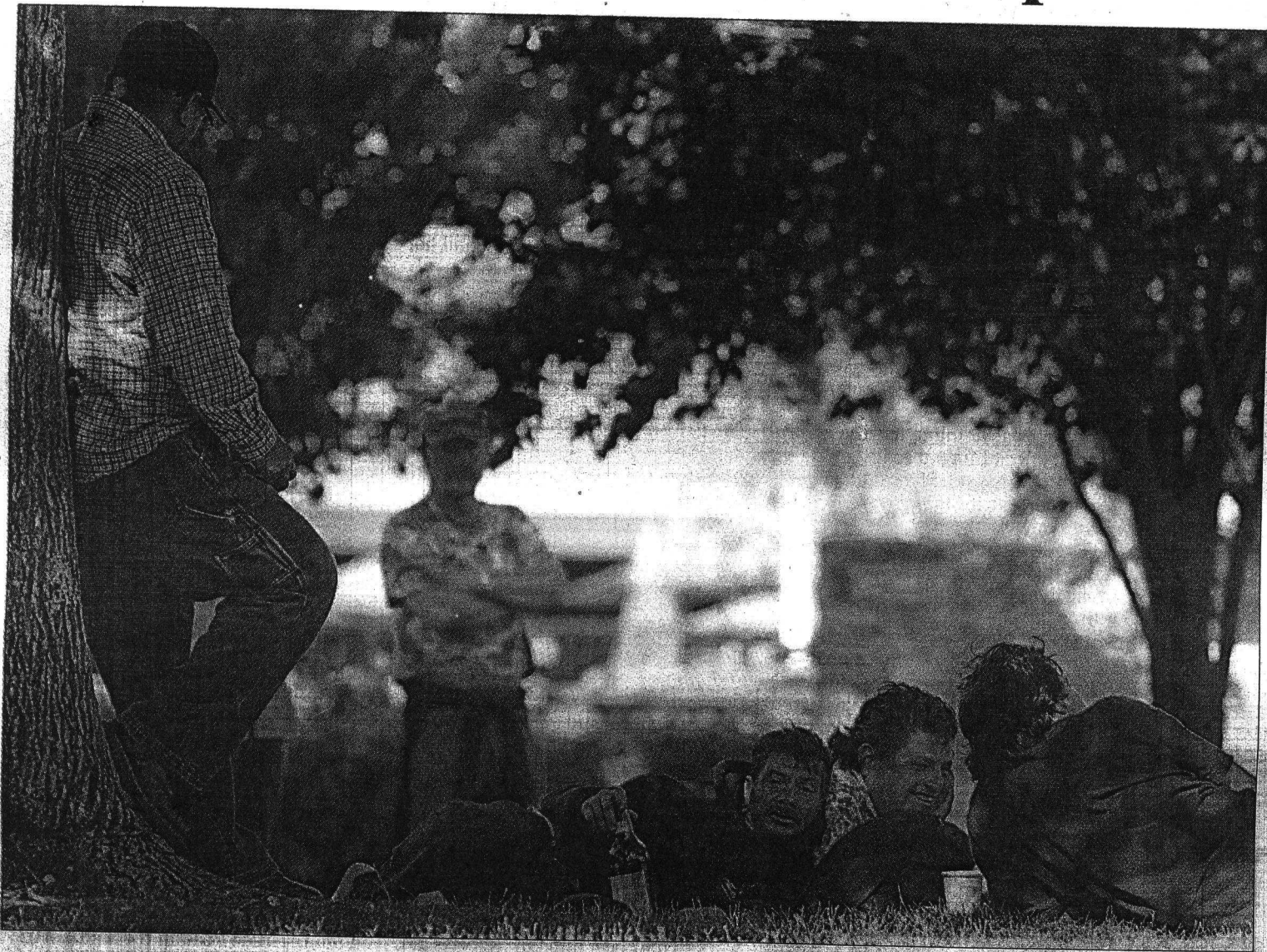
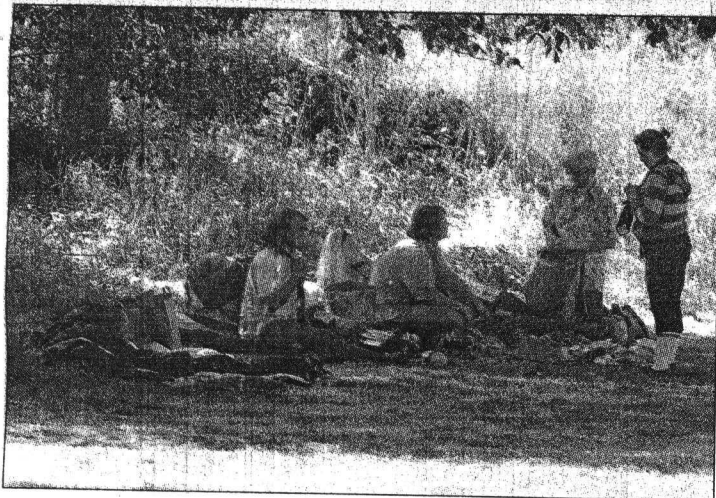


# Homeless population soars 22 percent



Homeless people gather in a part of San Lorenzo Park on Tuesday.

JOHN WILLIAMS/SENTINEL



Homeless people gather near the San Lorenzo River at San Lorenzo Park on Tuesday. The homeless numbers include an increase of people under the age of 25 who are homeless.

JOHN WILLIAMS/SENTINEL

## Economy, high rents blamed for sharp increase

By SHANNA MCCORD

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SANTA CRUZ — Fueled largely by the sour economy and expensive rents, the homeless population in Santa Cruz County has soared 22 percent in two years.

The number of people without homes is estimated at 2,771, according to a count conducted in January by the United Way of Santa Cruz County and the nonprofit research firm Applied Survey Research of Watsonville.

The homeless tally in 2009, the last time a census was taken, was 2,265.

The 2011 Santa Cruz County Homeless Census and Survey report will be released at 10 a.m. today at a pub-

## IF YOU GO

2011 SANTA CRUZ COUNTY HOMELESS CENSUS AND SURVEY

WHEN: 10 a.m. today

WHERE: Twin Lakes Church, 2701 Cabrillo College Drive, Aptos

lic meeting at Twin Lakes Church in Aptos.

Most alarming for researchers studying the community's homeless was the jump in number of people under age 25 living on the streets,

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## HOMELESS

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and the number of people experiencing homelessness for the first time, which increased 40 percent in two years.

There were 99 young people living without shelter in 2011 compared with 34 in 2009, the report says.

Mary Lou Goeke, executive director of the United Way of Santa Cruz County, attributes the spike in homeless youth to stiff competition for entry-level jobs on top of "sky-high rents."

"There is great difficulty finding jobs at the bottom of the employment ladder," Goeke said. "People with skills and degrees are competing for

the entry-level jobs. It's very hard to get jobs."

In addition to the county's 11.5 percent unemployment rate, the cost of renting is among the highest in the nation.

In the county, a full-time worker must earn \$33.27 per hour to afford a modest two-bedroom rental, according to the National Low Income Housing Coalition, which released its Out of Reach 2011 report in May.

"It's just so very, very difficult to find housing, especially affordable housing," Goeke said. "The waiting list for Section 8 housing is long. Thousands are on the waiting list here. That's really the driver for homelessness — affordable housing."

The county's homeless

population is counted every two years so that social service providers, such as the United Way, have a better understanding of who they're serving and what specific programs are needed.

The biannual census is required for the county to receive federal funding for homeless programs. Santa Cruz County receives \$1.7 million in homeless assistance grant money each year, which city and county leaders say is a critical source of revenue for local services.

A "point-in-time" count was taken in January by a team of about 100 people who canvassed the county — from the San Lorenzo Valley to Watsonville — to note people living in a homeless shelter or in their car, in parks, on the

street, under a bridge, in the woods.

Homelessness was up in all cities in the county except for Watsonville, which saw a slight decrease from 561 individuals to 530.

Santa Cruz had the highest number of homeless people with 1,070, up 169 from 2009, according to the report.

Scotts Valley went from no homeless to 13.

"This is partly reflective of the economy, the high cost of housing and unemployment," Goeke said. "On top of all that, services are on the decline. The state is unable to fully fund social services as they did in previous years."

Over the past decade, homelessness in the county has fallen from highs of 3,371 in 2005 and 3,239 in 2000.