

Street people Study calls them the 'new poor'

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SANTA CRUZ — Santa Cruz street people are part of the nation's "new poor" who are often attracted here by the "quality of street life," according to a university- and city-sponsored report released Thursday.

The report, called "Streetpeople and Straightpeople in Santa Cruz: A Report of the Downtown Study," contains no surprises.

The study, funded with \$5,000 in city funds and \$6,000 in university money, will be used as a working paper for discussions about street people by the city Downtown Commission and university.

The report — considered by city and university staff to be a draft document that will be discussed and amended before a final report is issued to the City Council — states the street-people population of Santa Cruz cannot be accurately characterized as transient.

"The individuals in this population include long- and short-term residents who are unemployed and homeless, the mentally disabled homeless, street musicians and 'hippies' and others whose style of life still echoes the counter-culture of the 1960s decade," says the report.

"Another important finding is that the social organization of street people, their patterns of behavior in resolving problems of everyday living, is also very complex."

The document is based on research, mostly conducted from October through February, by university faculty, students and street people. The research was directed by UCSC community studies and sociology professor William Friedland and Ph.D. candidate in sociology Robert Marotto. Two street people — called "native investigators" by the researchers — were hired to help with the study at a cost of \$800.

A faculty committee will discuss the report at a meeting this afternoon, said Marotto. The committee includes sociology professors Robert Alford and John Kitsuse; assistant psychology professor Valerie Simmons; and psychology and legal studies professor Richard Wasserstrom.

"I don't think we see the study as completed. We see this report as a working document and discussion paper," said Marotto. "We're still working through our conclusions."

Yet to be released is the appendix to the report, which includes the numbers and statistics on which the document is based. Those figures were scheduled to be released this afternoon.

"We are still very close to having expended the \$11,000," said Marotto. "But there is some money left in our budget."

Council members Katy Sears-Williams and Spiro Mellis had voted against spending money on the study.

Sears-Williams recently failed to convince a majority of council members to establish a task force on the homeless. Council members said they wanted to see the results of the study before appointing a task force.

One of the preliminary recommendations in the report is for the establishment of a task force "organized into committees involving straight and street people."

Labeling street people "transients" has served to misguide the city in developing public policy, states the report.

Santa Cruz street people are part of the nation's new poor who "tend to be relatively young, unemployed and often homeless white males with a fair amount of education," states the report.

Santa Cruz street people are unique because they are highly visible, particularly in the downtown community and come into frequent contact with other residents, says the study.

Police officer Gary McConnell, who has regularly worked the downtown and San Lorenzo Park area frequented by street people, agreed many of the street people are "certainly poor."

But, he added, "I would not think that this is anything new. I don't know what the study means by 'new poor.'"

The researchers estimated there are 250-400 people in the street people population, "except during the summer months when an influx of travelers begins and true transiency peaks."

There is commonly more than 500 and sometimes more than 600 homeless Food Stamp recipients in north Santa Cruz County, states the report. "While these numbers may seem slight compared to figures on homelessness in other areas, they are extremely high when seen as a proportion of the general population of the city."

The report estimates one of every 100 people in the community is a street person.

With the coming of the rainy season, the influx of street people into the city ceases, notes the report.

It adds: During the winter, a small number of more privileged street people who reside in the community leave Santa Cruz for places with more clement winter weather."

The Southwest and Hawaii are favorite winter retreats, states the report.

Nearly one of every two street people answering questionnaires told researchers they had been Santa Cruz for "at least one year." Ten percent said they have been living here for more than five years.

More than three-quarters of the street people who were asked said Santa Cruz "had notoriety because of its hospitality, and only 13 percent said it was known because support services (such as Food Stamps and other public assistance) were available," says the report.

Adds the report: "There are strong indications that some street people are attracted to Santa Cruz because street life here is more relaxed and less dangerous than elsewhere."

In response to a question about what they liked best about Santa Cruz, street people told researchers "they appreciated the quality of street life itself."

"It is evident ... in Santa Cruz there are far fewer people living on the street who are 'hard-core' by virtue of having spent a lot of time on the streets and in skid rows in cities and who are prone to violence."

"To the extent that Santa Cruz is a 'mecca' for the new poor, it is a place where social character attracts street people as well as straight people," according to the report.

The majority of street people in Santa Cruz are white, between 20 and 35 years, and have, with only a few exceptions, a substantial level of educational achievement.

Street people told researchers they want jobs, shelter and a bathing facility.

Researchers found there is no consensus of opinion on what should be done about the street people, and that many residents interviewed wished the problem "would just go away."

"While employers and employees, on the whole, have somewhat negative view of the street people, both indicated an understanding of the complexity and difficulty of 'the problem' with some respondents being hostile to street people, others being very sympathetic, and many falling in between," states the report.

The data indicated "there are relatively few people with clear-cut views unaccepting of any sort of behavior by street people on the Mall. Results show a considerable indifference as well," the report says.

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SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL
April 5, 1982