

Survey finds increase in homelessness

Numbers jump by nearly 1/3 in SC County since 2000

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SANTA CRUZ — A report released Thursday found that the number of homeless people in Santa Cruz County had grown by about a third since 2000.

The 2005 Santa Cruz County Homeless Census and Survey, released by Watsonville-based Applied Survey Research, presents statistical characteristics of the county's homeless population. The report, which the federal government requires of communities that receive federal housing funds, estimated that the homeless population had reached 3,371, up from 2,475 in a survey conducted in 2000.

"It is very clear that the homeless population is not going away. It is, in fact, growing," Santa Cruz County Supervisor Mardi Wormhoudt said at an event marking the release of the report.

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The characteristics of homelessness revealed by the survey will help local agencies determine how best to distribute resources, Wormhoudt said.

"This is the kind of hard knowledge we need in order to spend our dollars effectively and compassionately," she said.

The study contradicts the image of homelessness presented by the most visible examples, said Peter Connery, a vice president at Applied Survey Research. People talking to themselves and pushing shopping carts overflowing with all their belongings around town are only a portion of a population that also includes families, children attending school, part-time workers, veterans and people who found themselves unable to pay their rent or mortgage, according to the report.

Economic problems cause people to become homeless as much as do personal failures, Connery said. Respondents reported the loss of a job as the most common event leading to their current period of homelessness. Inability to pay rent and alcohol or drug use tied as the next most common causes of homelessness, according to the report.

By the numbers

Among the homeless survey findings:

- 18 percent of those not living in shelters were living in vehicles.
- 356 children were homeless with their families.
- The portion who reported more than a year of homelessness grew to 60 percent in 2005 from 48 percent in 2000.
- 43 percent of homeless met the federal definition of chronically homeless.
- 60 percent of homeless respondents had at least one disabling condition.

— Register-Pajaronian staff

Connery also blamed increasing housing costs and a difficult employment market for the growth in the portion that reported long periods of homelessness. Six out of every 10 respondents had been homeless more than a year, compared with fewer than half in the 2000 survey.

Watsonville City Council member Dale Skillicorn, who attended the event, called the survey a start toward identifying the needs and causes of homelessness in south county. However, the report did not separate south county homelessness data from north county, he noted.

He speculated that Watsonville could benefit from a center where services could be provided to those who are homeless due to job trouble as well as those who face dis-

abling conditions.

Applied Survey Research trained 50 surveyors, including many who were actually homeless themselves, to conduct the surveys. The surveyors fanned out over the county on the rainy morning of March 22 and ran 1,155 people through a questionnaire, according to the report. Later, questionnaires from 692 respondents in emergency shelters were added.

Employing homeless people to conduct surveys gives the project great advantages, Connery said. The homeless surveyors contributed knowledge that overcame obstacles to surveying homeless people, he said.

"It's inherently difficult to count people who don't want to be counted and don't want to be seen," he said.