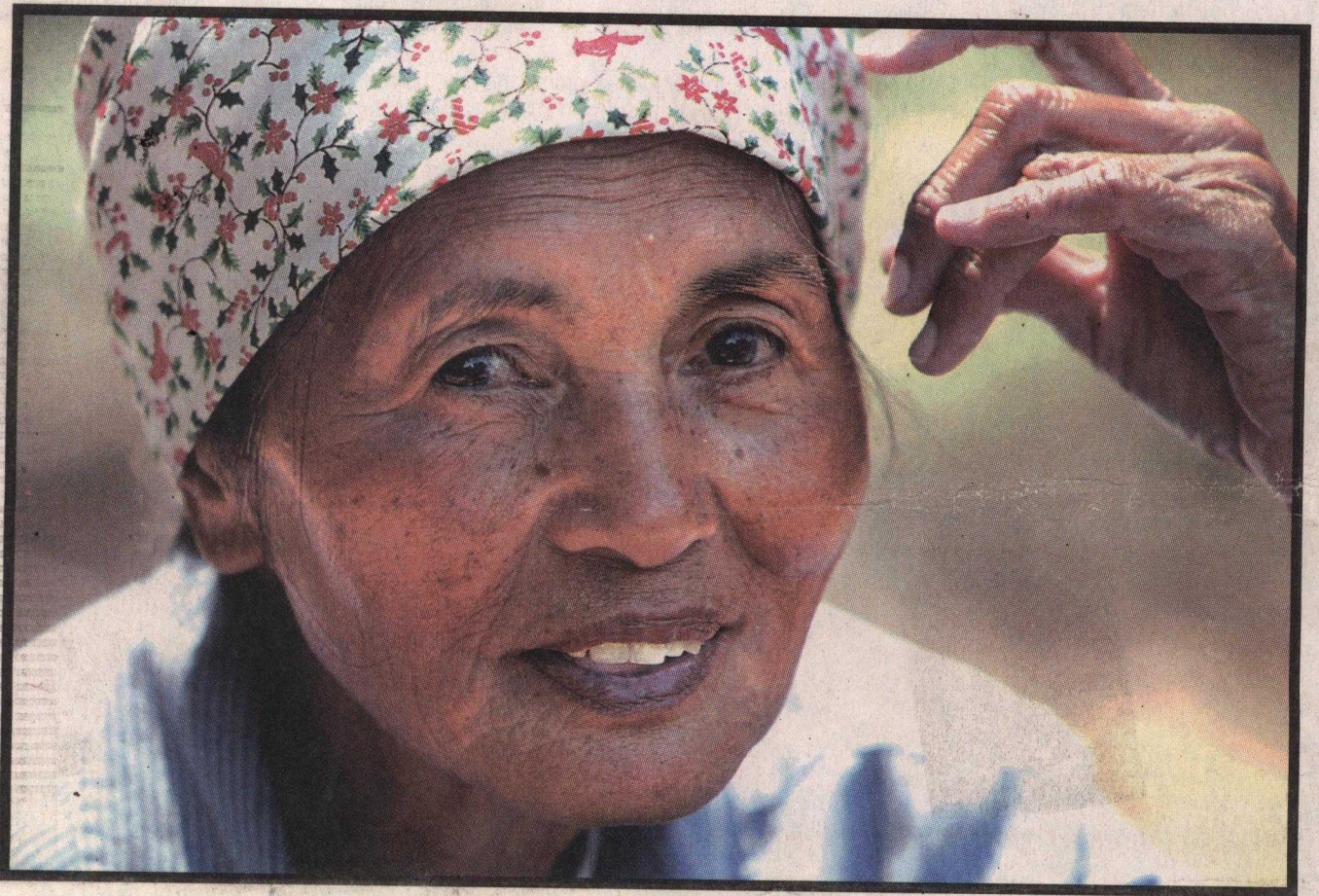


MORE SENIORS FIND THEMSELVES ON THE STREET AS THE POPULATION AGES



By PEGGY TOWNSEND | Photos By SHMUEL THALER

A Quiet Crisis

Homeless

7-13-03

In the mornings, Binh Nguyen walks to the beach or sometimes to the store. ■ You can see her on the sidewalk, her hair caught up in a red and green kerchief, a small cloth bag in her hand. She looks like any other grandmother. ■ Binh takes quick, rolling steps as she walks, so it always looks like she has somewhere to go. She is 71 and hates to sit still. ■ Before her walk, she will sweep leaves. Afterward, she will volunteer at the St. Francis Soup Kitchen. ■ She doesn't look much different from the retirees who work beside her, making soup, folding napkins, setting bread out in baskets. ■ But Binh has a secret — one that is shared by a growing number of people in Santa Cruz. ■ Well into her golden years and a grandmother to three, Binh is homeless.

HER STORY, PAGE A13





As commuters head to work, Binh Nguyen waits to cross Highway 1 after leaving the River Street Shelter in the morning.

By PEGGY TOWNSEND | Photos By SHMUEL THALER

Homelessness Weighs on an Aging Population

71-YEAR-OLD WOMAN FACES LIFE ON THE STREET

The hardest part of living on the streets is the walking.

Every morning before 8 a.m., 71-year-old Binh Nguyen must get up from the temporary bed she has at the River Street Shelter and head off onto the street.

Sometimes the tiny woman will walk two miles along the levee to the beach where she watches the sunbathers and families with picnics set out their places on the sand. She likes seeing them there.

"It's entertainment," she says.

Sometimes, she'll walk up the hill to Shopper's Corner market where she'll stand in line with the housewives and college students to buy bread and cheese, which is all she eats now.

By noon, Binh will walk a few miles back to the St. Francis Soup Kitchen where she works as a volunteer most afternoons. Then she'll head out again.

Five hours of walking.

Five hours to fill up until the shelter opens again at 5 p.m.

"It's very hard," says the grandmother

who came to the United States from Vietnam more than 30 years ago, a woman who had houses and servants and three boys to raise, until everything fell apart.

"I get very tired sometimes," she says, lifting a delicate brown finger to emphasize the point. "I need to have my own place, so I can rest."

But the possibility of affording an apartment is as distant as the memories of a life when she had a car and nice clothes and read Voltaire in her free time.

At 71, Binh is not the oldest person living on the streets of Santa Cruz.

By experts' counts, 29 people over the age of 70 wander the streets; three of them are over the age of 85.

Exact figures are hard to pin down, but one local count reported there were 116 people over age 60 on the streets last year. Those

who work with homeless say there are probably more.

The reasons for seniors' homelessness range from the expected — alcoholism, drug use, mental illness — to the unexpected. Things like being estranged from their families, or divorced, or sick, or not planning well enough for retirement.

Underpinning it all is the fact that Santa Cruz is one of the most expensive places to live in the country and that there are not enough subsidized units for seniors to cover all the people who need them.

It's a problem that will only grow as baby boomers begin to reach their senior years.

A quiet crisis, is what some experts call it. "You grow up with the expectations of what your golden years are supposed to be like, and we carry those expectations even though the realities have changed," says Pam Rogers-Wyman, a client specialist with the Homeless Persons Health Project.

"You don't expect it; that grandmothers will be homeless.

"But there they are."

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'I get very tired sometimes. I need to have my own place, so I can rest.'

BINH NGUYEN

A QUIET CRISIS



Binh Nguyen leaves her room at the River Street Shelter. She is not permitted to stay there between 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Crisis: As population ages, more seniors are on the streets

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Life in Vietnam

Things were bad for the Catholics who lived in Hanoi in 1954. ■ The French had fled after years of fighting, and Ho Chi Minh had just taken control of North Vietnam. ■

had no where to go.

"The social services worker told her we were the only ones who could take her, and we were stuck," Cole says shaking his head.

"We did the best we could, until we could get her into something on Monday," he says.

"There are a lot of disconnect-

But she dropped out when she couldn't pay her rent and drifted into homelessness.

Sometimes she and her son stayed with her now-deceased sister in Southern California. Sometimes she found a room in exchange for work.

In between, she took to the streets.

It's been about 15 years, she

The county's older homeless

■ 29 people over the age of 70 wander the streets of Santa Cruz County, by experts' count; three of them are over the age of 85. Those who work with homeless say

Nearly a million people decided to flee south. ■ Binh was among them.

She was young, pretty and well-educated. She spoke French and Vietnamese fluently and had a fiancé who was a doctor.

Le-Van Nguyen was his name. "He was a very good doctor," she says.

The two settled in Saigon and married. Le-Van began teaching at a university there, Binh says, and she gave birth to their first son, a boy she named Duc.

They lived in a brick villa, she says as she sits in the shade of a wide tree at the River Street Shelter, waiting for her dormitory-style room to open. Her hair is caught up in a kerchief. She pins the pocket of her shirt closed to keep her money from falling out.

In Vietnam, she had a maid and a housekeeper who helped her with the three boys who soon filled the house, she says.

On Fridays, they would go out to dinner.

But on a solo trip to Paris, her husband committed suicide.

"He took a bottle of tranquilizers into the woods," Binh says and wipes her brown eyes with a small square of napkin. "He had too much depression."

She lost her house and moved her three boys into an apartment.

But she found a job as a sales representative with the drug giant Roche and then through a friend, met a dashing engineer from America named Charles Parsons.

"I fell in love with him," Binh says.

Things were looking up.

A tide of seniors

In the '60s, Santa Cruz was full of senior citizens who lived in beach cottages and apartments that didn't require much rent.

But then the earthquake roared through the area in 1989, destroying some of the cheap housing they had relied upon.

The tech boom rattled lives even more.

By 2001, the median sales price for a new home was three times higher than the national average, according to the Santa Cruz County Community Assessment Project report. That same year, average rents climbed 14 percent for a one-bedroom apartment.

"Ten years ago, we'd go months before we saw a senior citizen," says Paul Brindel of the Community Action Board which helps the homeless with emergency housing.

"The reality is now, we will see as many as four or five at any given time."

Eric Seiley, Santa Cruz Police Department's Homeless Resources Officer, sees them too.

Some of the elderly homeless share the same problems as their younger brethren, he says. Like the mentally ill old man who spends his whole check on vodka and motel rooms so he ends up on the street even though the month is only half gone, or the woman with wrinkles and wild gray hair who has enough money to live in a house but prefers the street instead.

But there are others, victims of circumstance.

"Some of them worked their whole life and had no retirement planning," Seiley says. Then, the old house they rented for \$600 a month gets sold for \$500,000, and they have nowhere to go.

There are housewives who got divorced and lonely men and women who are estranged from their children for a reason they no longer remember.

Or maybe it's a broken hip or a cancer diagnosis that shoves them into homelessness.

Ken Cole, director of the Homeless Community Resource Center, remembers the summer Friday afternoon when a taxi pulled up in front of the center with a frail, 72-year-old woman inside.

She had just gotten out of a hospital in Monterey County and

Last year, the Homeless Persons Health Project saw 116 seniors — a small part of the 8,500 people who are estimated to be homeless at some point each year in the county.

But it's the future that's more ominous.

The same project saw 144 people between the ages of 55 and 59 — the beginning of the tidal surge of baby boomers.

A national Seniors Commission report agreed things would get worse before they got better.

Last year, there were 35 million seniors in the United States — one-third of them with housing needs.

By 2020, the number of seniors will reach 53 million.

Says Julie Conway, housing coordinator with the Homeless Persons Health Project: "This is just going to get worse."

On the street

In 1968, Binh took her three sons and followed her new husband, Charles, to Canada and then to Santa Cruz.

They lived in a nice house on Trevethan Avenue with a big back yard, she says.

"I was happy, yes," she says. But trouble loomed again.

Her youngest son was diagnosed with a mental illness. As he grew older, he got angry and would fight with his stepfather, she says.

"I know he (her youngest son) needed me," Binh says, leaning forward, putting a hand on a listener's arm. "I have an obligation to live with Charles, but if I stayed with him, I would lose (my son)."

Binh and her husband were divorced, and she left the two-bedroom house on Trevethan.

Her two older sons became successful professionals — a doctor and a physicist — and she took her youngest son with her to UC Santa Cruz to study French literature, she says.

says.

She does not want charity like food stamps or a Section 8 housing voucher — even if there were any to give out.

She would like to live with family, or on her own, she says.

She reaches into the small bag she carries with her every day and pulls out a notebook where she has written her oldest son, Duc's, phone number in careful letters.

He has a practice in the Bay Area.

"I never ask Duc for help," Binh says as she stands in the small space of the soup kitchen where she volunteers. "Duc has to take care of his three children."

Instead, she says, she plans to look for her middle son, the physicist, to see if she could live with him.

The last time she heard, he was single and living in Texas.

She opens the lid on a huge pot of chicken soup she helped make, then stops to join in a blessing with the rest of the volunteers, although she does not eat with them.

"There were family problems," she says of her estrangement from her sons.

Charles died seven years ago. She has not seen either of her older sons in years.

"The last time was 1992, something like that," she says in her heavily accented voice. "I'm not sure."

Her oldest son, the physician, said he did not know his mother was homeless, but that if she asked, he would have given her some money.

"But I do not want to do the old traditional way of housing my parents," he says from his office phone.

"I do not want to do that."

His mother, he says, had a good lifestyle, but turned it down when she divorced his stepfather.

there are probably more.

■ Homeless Persons Health Project saw 144 people between the ages of 55 and 59 — the beginning of the tidal surge of baby boomers. A national Seniors Commission report agreed things would get worse before they got better.

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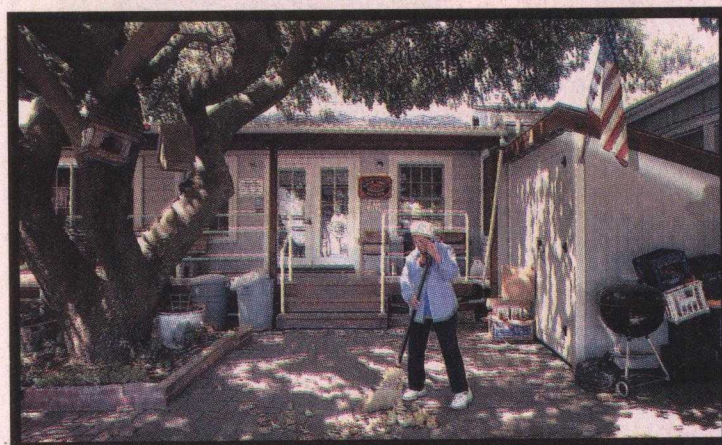
■ Santa Cruz County is one of the most expensive places to live in the country and there are not enough subsidized senior units to cover all the people who need them. In 2001, the median sales price for a new home was three times higher than the national average, according to the Santa Cruz County Community Assessment Project report.

■ There are more than 870 subsidized units for senior citizens in the county — and another 37 on the way. Every complex and facility has a waiting list, some may be two or three years long, according to the Senior Network Services.

■ Community Action Board sees as many as four or five seniors at any given time seeking help. Ten years ago, the group would go months before they saw a senior citizen.

■ The estimated cost of care is \$1,400 a month per person, according to the Homeless Persons Health Project.

See **CRISIS** on **PAGE A19**



Nguyen likes to stay busy, it helps fill her day, she says. Here she sweeps the patio of the River Street Shelter.



Nguyen goes about her tasks quietly amidst the energy of her fellow volunteers at the St. Francis Soup Kitchen.



Nguyen checks her possessions kept in a drawer under her neatly made bed at the River Street Shelter.

'They are the hidden homeless.'

BRENDA MOSS, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, SENIOR NETWORK SERVICES

Older homeless population in county, by age:

55-59: 144

60-64: 68

65-69: 19

70-74: 13

75-79: 9

80-84: 4

85 and older: 3

*Source: Homeless Persons Health Project, 2002***Crisis**

Continued from Page A18

"She stiff-armed me early on," he says. "She wanted to do things her own way.

"So I just went my own way."

Then he ends the interview.

"I'm busy," he says. "I've got to go."

"I don't expect him to help me," Binh later says of her oldest son. She stands on the brick steps of the shelter she will have to leave on Tuesday when she reaches the maximum number of days clients are allowed to stay there.

"I expect (my middle son) to help me."

All she needs to do, she says, is find him somehow.

Out of reach

It's hard being a senior without much income these days.

There are more than 870 subsidized units for senior citizens in the county — and another 37 on the way.

But numbers are deceiving.

"Every complex, every facility has their own waiting list," says Brenda Moss, executive director of Senior Network Services, "and they may only open that list for two days a year."

Even if a senior gets on the list, she says, the wait may be two or three years.

But that's not the only problem.

Once someone is homeless or has been evicted or has an arrest, they'll have a harder time competing for that vacant spot.

It's the same on the free market, according to Conway, a housing expert with the Homeless Persons Health Project.



Health Project — If a senior can even find a place he or she can afford on a \$600 to \$800 monthly Social Security check.

Years ago, Conway says, there were board and care homes where seniors could go.

But the state's Title 22 law set standards that made it too expensive to operate them any more.

"The estimated cost of care is \$1,400 a month per person," Conway says. "The reimbursement rate is about \$720."

Right now, there are only three board and care homes in the county.

Sometimes, nursing homes will try to keep a homeless senior for as long as possible, according to Paul Gendreau, a nurse with the homeless project.

"But they are under such cost limitations, they can only do so much."

The county's shelter systems, which offer a free meal and a place to sleep — sometimes on a pad on the floor — are not geared for senior citizens who may struggle with arthritis or high-blood pressure.

And then there is another reality. Those who work with the homeless say many seniors are too independent and proud to want to stay in places like a nursing home, or the El Centro senior housing project in downtown Santa Cruz, where they have to share kitchens and living areas.

Instead, they may sleep in their car and wander the street by day, keeping up the pretense of having a home and trying to work.

It makes them invisible to all but those who work with them.

"They are the hidden homeless," says Moss of Senior Network Services.

A plan

In the mornings, Binh makes her bed at the River Street Shelter.

She tucks in the corners of the gray bedspread. Puts her tiger throw pillow in place and settles her alarm clock against it.

The three other beds in the small room are made, but rumpled.

Binh's is hospital precise. As neat as a pin.

She sweeps up the patio with a broom that's almost as tall as her 5-foot frame, then takes her little blue bag and heads for the streets. Everyone who knows her says she is a hard worker.

Binh feels better today because she has a plan.

When her stay at the shelter runs out on Tuesday, she will switch over to the program that busses people to churches to sleep each night.

Then she will save whatever money she doesn't give to her youngest son from her \$620-a-month check. It will go toward a first and



Nguyen finds a private spot near Harvey West Park to eat her lunch of cheese and bread.

At work for seniors

To access senior services for family members or someone who may need help, or to volunteer your time or make a donation, contact any of the following groups.

Homeless Persons Health Project: 454-2080

Senior Network Services: 462-6788

Community Action Board: 457-1741

Mercy Housing: 471-1914

Homeless Community Resource Center: 458-9525

To help Binh Nguyen, contact Peggy Townsend at ptownsend@santa-cruz.com.

last deposit on a room, she says.

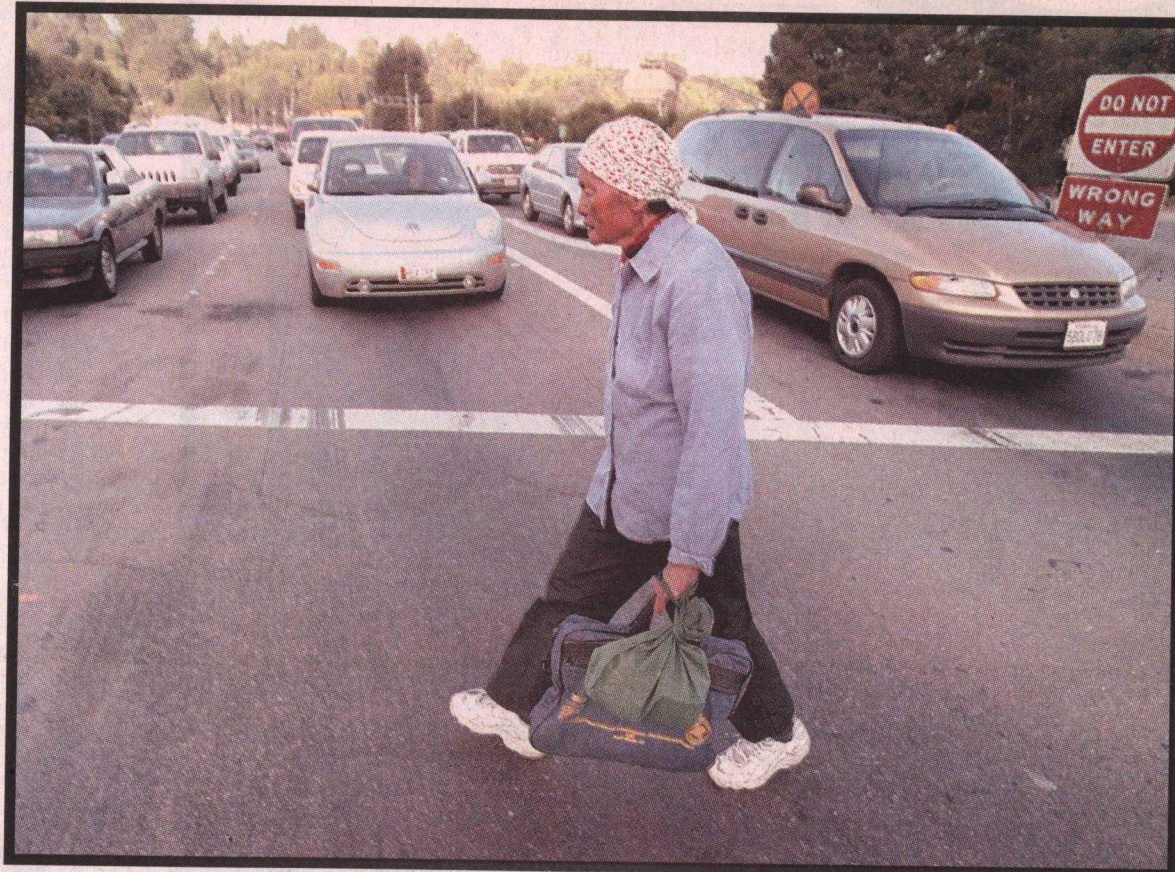
She saw some possibilities in the newspaper.

In the meantime, she says, she will try to find her middle son.

It's a warm day, but by afternoon the ocean breeze has kicked in.

She leaves the soup kitchen where she has swept the floors, folded napkins and washed the dishes, and walks to her favorite spot, a little grove of eucalyptus trees where cars can't go.

If she closes her eyes, she could almost imagine the cars that whoosh by on nearby Highway 1 are a waterfall or the wind in a canopy of trees.



Nguyen heads across Highway 1 to buy her lunch supplies from Shoppers Corner market when the doors of the River Street Shelter close at 8 a.m.

Instead, she lays out the one simple meal she eats each day: wheat bread, a few slices of Swiss cheese and water she sips from a small plastic bottle.

She still misses the fresh crab and soft soybean cakes in Vietnam. She

doesn't like the food in the shelters.

Binh sits in the clearing under the trembling eucalyptus, and sunlight settles on her like a cloak.

She likes it here. It's the only place she can be alone.

Then, after her lunch, she heads

down the hill and over to the shelter to wait for the doors to open.

She is 71.

Waiting is all she can do.

Contact Peggy Townsend at ptownsend@santa-cruz.com.