

Homeless Teens and the Youth Curfew

Santa Cruz imposes a curfew, but how can politicians send the homeless youth home?

by Becky Johnson

Homeless youth in Santa Cruz fall into several categories: punks (the largest group), hippies, gothics, and deadheads. They vary in their attitudes towards drug and alcohol use, and their disenfranchisement from society. The causes of their homelessness vary, but a significant number are escaping homes in which the adults are abusive, alcoholic, or over-controlling. An unusually high percentage of gay teens are homeless, having been rejected from strict religious homes.

Emily, who is now 19 years old, spent several years living on the streets of Santa Cruz with her boyfriend. Several of her friends on the street are runaways from abusive homes, some from foster homes. Others are throwaways; kicked out by their parents. "Some teens are homeless by choice," says Emily. "All the kids like it downtown. They feel welcomed. They like hanging out with their friends."

In its haste to enact a curfew with as little public debate as possible, the Santa Cruz City Council chose summertime, when schools are out, both colleges are nearly empty, and the enormous number of teens in the city are from places like Cleveland and Connecticut. Their 'stealth' process involved no advance announcement of the committee meeting from which the curfew sprang, only a day's advance notice for the first appearance of the law, and a late-night schedule for debate (excluding young people and homeless people in shelter programs).

The teen curfew was proposed three years ago as part of a package of anti-homeless laws involving bans on sitting, panhandling, camping and sleeping. Many of the ordinances were passed in 1994, but the youth curfew was dropped. An anti-tarrying curfew passed the County in early 1996, but was rejected by the City



Art by Christa Occhiogrosso

The troubling dilemma of where to put wandering homeless youth may have delayed the curfew's enactment in the more liberal, urban, university-centered Santa Cruz downtown. Pacific Avenue in Santa Cruz — like Berkeley's Telegraph Avenue, Haight Street in San Francisco and Eugene's University Avenue — has long supported a thriving counterculture, where young people find shelter, protective cover and simpatico spirits.

SAFETY IN NUMBERS

"Homeless teens feel safety in numbers and tend to gather together after dark," reports Emily. A service provider, who fears for her funding, anonymously said that homeless youth frequently gather after hours to find a squat or safe sleeping space. The curfew will criminalize that.

County sheriffs have no provision for homeless youth, other than the comment that there aren't many of them. Calls to the county sheriff for more information were not returned by press time.

The City has a nighttime Sleeping and Camping Ban, making the position of homeless youth and their parents even more precarious at night. Authorities used

the planned opening of a homeless youth shelter 10 miles out of town for 20 teens as an "answer" to concerns about the curfew's effect on youth. Above the Line's Shelter, while not yet open, cleared the final permit hurdle two months ago.

That the City Council's action is another case of smoke and mirrors is clear from the conditions of that permit: no court referrals will be accepted. It is intended to be a voluntary facility only. With only 20

spaces in a county which has an estimated 3000-5000 homeless population, it will most likely have a waiting list before it even opens. It is hardly the "solution" for what to do with homeless youth picked up for being outside after curfew. Is it now to become a series of holding cells for 15-year-olds caught chatting downtown on Pacific Avenue after the movies?

In a speech to the Santa Cruz City Council, long-time homeless activist and writer Robert Norse, who hosts a weekly radio show on the civil rights of homeless people on Free Radio Santa Cruz (96.3 FM), expressed particular concern that the curfew could inequitably impact homeless youth. A frequent speaker at council meetings, Robert sometimes appears in a bathrobe complete with teddy bear, as a gesture of recognition for those who must bathe, eat, drink, brush their teeth, have sex and sleep in the public eye as they have no homes, and hence no privacy.

Commenting on a portion of the curfew law which exempts young people on the sidewalk in front of their house, Robert said, "Scores of homeless youth, after all, don't have a special section of sidewalk in front of their house where it is legal for them to be after 11 p.m. This exception specifically benefits those who are not homeless; more profoundly, those who have homes are not forced as a matter of necessity to use public and semi-public spaces at night as homeless people do."

Robert asked a series of questions which councilmembers had failed to take into account and are still unanswered.

August 1997