

Hate Crimes Against the Poor Don't Count

Beating up on the homeless with pipes and chains is not a hate crime

Despite a rash of violence directed against the homeless, they are afraid to go to the police. Many of them fear the police even more than unexpected attacks.

by Lucy Kemnitzer

Santa Cruz doesn't have much hate crime, the District Attorney says. Police spokesmen told the *Santa Cruz County Sentinel* that the first one all year was in September, when a Hispanic man was attacked by a gang of youths. Readers of the newspaper were surprised: they wondered what were those other attacks they'd been reading about all year, if not hate crimes — maybe they were invitations to dance the polka?

The legal definition of hate crime, by the way, does not include attacks on people because they are or are perceived to be homeless or poor. No special statistics are kept about these attacks. There has been no special effort to stop them, though by some informal estimates there have been at least 20 attacks on the homeless alone in Santa Cruz since the beginning of the year.

The author's son was jumped and beaten on Tuesday night, September 22, as he was walking past a public park in downtown Santa Cruz. He may have been chosen at random, as a denizen of the South



A homeless woman in Santa Cruz, isolated and vulnerable. Alena Smith photo

of Laurel neighborhood, or he may have been chosen for his "stylishly ragged" clothing. The five young white men who beat him told him they were beating him because "you're a fucking victim!"

The same night, a few blocks away, two young local activists were jumped and beaten by a group of young white men, and a man was beaten and stabbed by a group of young white men — this time they claimed that the reason was that the man was friendly to blacks and Latinos (the beating took place in a largely Hispanic neighborhood). There are other, unconfirmed, stories of beatings the same night. Not enough information exists to say

whether these assaults were all perpetrated by the same group of young white men, or whether there are two or more groups attacking people in Santa Cruz.

Earlier this year there was a rash of violence directed against the homeless, enough so that some of it was even reported in the newspapers. Our local man with a tape recorder, Robert Norse, has been collecting these stories from people who are afraid to go to the police with them.

Why are they afraid to come forward? Many of them fear the police even more than unexpected attacks. They have rea-