

Hate Crimes Hit the Poor

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son to. Complaints against the police range from simply not listening to the use of excessive force.

When Larry Cessna was beaten, he was not satisfied with the way that his report was handled and he complained to the police about it. Imagine his surprise when the "forward motion" on his case was that he received a ticket in the mail for the time he was beaten, charging him with drunk and disorderly behavior.

The police most intimately charged with protecting the powerless are often those about whom the most complaints are made. For example, Sergeant Steve Clark, the department's liaison with the City's Commission for the Prevention of Violence Against Women, is also known on the street as the man who confiscated blankets from the homeless three years ago during the time of the famous City Hall Sleep-in. When asked why he took the blankets instead of merely taking photographs for evidence, he smirked and answered, "Because I can." Clark is also the star of several stories of intimidation against young people and the homeless.

Another officer is said to have threatened a man with a trespassing ticket when he was approaching the Community House in order to apply for services there!

The police ask the homeless to tell them where they are camping, promising to patrol there more frequently for their

protection, but campers know that more patrols mean more tickets and more arrests. An arrest doesn't even lead to a safe night in jail. In Santa Cruz, people arrested for illegal sleeping are "released" at three in the morning. Tickets are being given for "the intent to camp" — which amounts to the possession of a bedroll.

Early in the year, three people were sleeping, with permission, in a shed on a property at the edge of town, in an industrial area near the river. During the night, a group of five or six people all dressed in black burst into the shed yelling "Police! Get up!" Of course, they were not police. They were "trollbusters," and they beat the three with chains and pipes.

In the spring, police representatives told a meeting of the homeless that they knew who the assailants were and would soon have them in custody. In June, a man named Aaron Bertch was arrested along with one juvenile. As of this writing his trial has not been scheduled. And he's charged with assault, not with a hate crime, because, as we all know, beating up on the homeless with pipes and chains is not a hate crime.

Meanwhile, attacks continue, and there is no coordinated effort to make the streets safe. And there will not be until crimes against the poor are recognized and acknowledged for what they are, and those who are charged with defending the public safety are not also charged with harassing the homeless.