

More Hardships Than Ever

A survey of Santa Cruz County finds more people living on the streets, more street people assaulted, more homeless due to illness and disability, more mothers and children displaced.

by Becky Johnson

Last March, when the U.S. Census 2000 was in full swing, the United Way of Santa Cruz County conducted a point-in-time homeless head count and a homeless survey. On March 21, 95 volunteers throughout Santa Cruz County counted homeless people at various locations to provide empirical evidence to prove what social service providers have suspected all along: Homelessness has increased nearly three-fold in the last ten years.

In addition, 811 homeless people filled out surveys over a three-week period last March providing meaningful data to aid in the interpretation of statistics on homelessness. Among the findings: 33 percent of homeless people are working; 79 percent have lived here for over five years; and 72 percent intend to stay. The myth that the homeless populace of Santa Cruz came from "somewhere else" was exploded.

Another myth — that "our shelters are never full" — was not substantiated. Of those surveyed, 45 percent had reasons why they did not try to use existing shelters, and 21 percent reported having been turned away from a shelter.

The demographics of the homeless population show why it is so difficult for them to get good, full-time jobs. First, 34 percent are minors, children or youth under age 21. Many others have severe health problems that seriously hinder their ability to seek employment: 27 percent have received mental health services; 32 percent have hepatitis; 12.6 percent are disabled; 8.6 percent have HIV or AIDS. Nearly 25 percent of the women reported that domestic violence was



Lydia Gans photo

All across California, more sick and disabled people are forced to live on the streets.

a factor in their homelessness.

The combination of the high cost of housing, lack of employment or insufficient employment, and family problems has caused homelessness in over 70 percent of the cases studied. The myth of "personal responsibility" or "bad decisions" being the cause of homelessness was not substantiated.

Law enforcement plays a large role in the life of a homeless person. Of those surveyed, 30 percent report needing legal help. Of the 811 people surveyed, 99 had been cited for sleeping/camping in the last 12 months. A total of 188 out of 811 surveyed had been arrested in the past year.

Homeless people are often victims of crimes. Twenty percent have been a victim of a crime in the last 12 months (162 out of 811 surveyed). Of these crime victims, 72

had been physically beaten, 13 sexually assaulted, and 5 reported abuse by the police — a total of 90 violent crimes committed in a one-year period out of only 811 people surveyed. These statistics reinforce SCPD Police Chief Steve Belcher's December, 1999, report of 51 reported assaults against homeless people in Santa Cruz.

Of all crimes committed against the homeless community, only 90 victims made a report of the crime to the police, while 119 chose to make no report. The survey results show that for every seven crimes committed against homeless people, only three are reported, while another four go unreported.

On the point-in-time count taken by the United Way, 3,293 homeless people were