

# Not Enough Hate for a Hate Crime

**A Salinas homeless man is murdered by being doused and set afire while sleeping in a doorway. Yet, this is not considered a "hate crime."**

by Becky Johnson

Salinas, CA — He had been known in the area for the last ten years or so, said those who remembered him: Ken Rand, the owner of Baseballs, Etc., said he looked like "Santa Claus" with his long, white beard. None ever knew him to be violent or dangerous. All knew of his use of alcohol which the local merchants sold him.

A clerk at the Baskin-Robbins Ice Cream store on Laurel said he was very articulate, and didn't fit the mold of what people expect from homeless people. Another witness said Thomas was college-educated and had once been a teacher. Most of those who had known him said he was a Vietnam veteran as well.

We hear people talk in derisive terms about homeless people: They are all a bunch of drug addicts and alcoholics. They are just sponging off others. Many of them are "homeless by choice." The names — bums, derelicts, lazy, street scum, human detritus — have all been used to dehumanize homeless people. Such language, when used by those who are the leaders of a City, such as the owners of businesses, or members of the City

Council, have the effect of justifying violence against homeless people.

And Charles Thomas, 56, of Salinas, California, was one of the "visible" homeless. His addiction to alcohol most likely ate up his social security check.

Sometime before 10:30 p.m., according to several press reports, Charles Thomas laid down to sleep behind Coastal Dental Care at 1244 N. Main Street in north Salinas. He didn't use the shelter at "The Mission" for he was averse to its religious overtones.

According to Lt. Manuel Perrine of the Salinas Police Department, some person or persons doused Thomas with a flammable liquid, most likely gasoline, and set his body on fire. When police arrived, his lower body was in flames, badly charred, with pieces of flesh already hanging off it.

He was hospitalized at Santa Clara Valley Medical Center with third degree burns on 40 percent of his body, and, after living for a week in agony, he died.

On May 13, some flowers and an American flag were set beside the still charred building.

The National Coalition for the Homeless (NCH) recently published a study of hate crimes against the homeless. Salinas does not appear on the list of the top 20 cities named for the highest incidence of hate crimes, but California is named the most lethal state for homeless people.

Local police can't remember of a case of a homeless hate crime in the past few years in Salinas. Nor will this case likely

be ruled a hate crime against homeless people. The Salinas Police Department reported they were actively pursuing an individual or individuals who, they believe, committed the crime. And since they at first claimed that a suspect was also homeless, this has not been ruled a hate crime against homeless people.

The NCH analyzed published news reports over a four-year period. They only counted assaults or deaths committed by non-homeless people against homeless people. Unless police officials and District Attorney's offices stated that the cause of injury or death was motivated by hatred against homeless people, the statistic is ruled a crime statistic and not a hate crime statistic.

For instance, the NCH study found only six incidences of hate crimes against homeless people in Los Angeles over a four-year period. Since Los Angeles has a homeless population estimated at between 54,000 and 86,400, this almost certainly represents a serious undercount.

The Salinas case highlights why hate crimes against homeless people are undercounted. The death of Charles Thomas by being doused with gasoline and set afire does not qualify as a hate crime.

Nearby Santa Cruz, with six reported hate crimes against homeless people in a four-year period, ranks third in the nation for homeless hate crimes.

According to the *Monterey Herald*, Lt. Dan Perez says that investigators were following "some very promising leads."

Lt. Perrine is quoted as saying "We think the fire was set intentionally. We don't think it was a cooking accident."

But on May 27, Sgt. Clark of the Salinas Police Department reported that no warrant has been issued nor has anyone been arrested for the murder. "We don't even have a definite suspect," he said, in sharp contrast to earlier, more publicized reports. He said there were no indications whether this had been done by a single person or a group of people.

When asked if this might be a hate crime, he said, "That is one of many possible scenarios. I wouldn't characterize this as a hate crime. It is still unclear as to what happened."

Police Detective Bryan, who is handling the ongoing investigation, said, "There is no record of Thomas' having been a victim recently, but homeless people don't tend to make police reports."

However, in this case, the police do not know who did it or why, but they leaped to the prejudgment that it was not a hate crime against homeless people.

Charles Thomas' funeral will be out of state. His family has retrieved his body. Thomas had more or less kept in touch with one of his brothers over the years.

No one in the family even knows why Thomas insisted on living in Salinas. And no one knows why he was doused with gasoline and set on fire to burn to death either. But, according to the Salinas police, you can bet it was not a hate crime.