

Policing the Homeless in Santa Cruz

SCPD accused of assaults, neglect and indifference towards homeless victims

by Becky Johnson

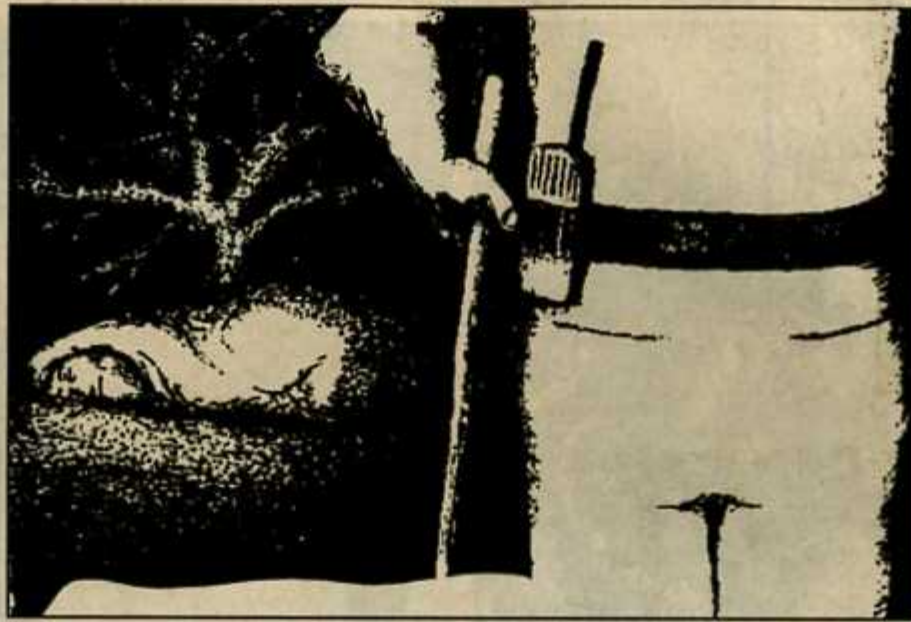
The Santa Cruz Police Department has repeatedly failed to acknowledge the existence of hate crimes against homeless people, despite the recent release of Police Chief Steven Belcher's report to the Homeless Issues Task Force that, in 1999, 51 homeless people were the victims of assault out of a population estimated at between 750-1500.

Numerous reports of beatings committed by vigilantes have surfaced, many of them not reported to the police. But even when the police do get involved, they downplay the significance of the violence.

On April 14, the *Santa Cruz County Sentinel* reported in a front-page article about anti-Semitic hate crimes. While certainly an important issue, it was hardly a breaking story. Buried inside was a tiny article about two homeless men who were beaten within an inch of their lives behind Lighthouse Liquors in Santa Cruz.

Although the title of the article said "Police Seek Clues in Homeless Beating," the assault occurred on Sunday, April 9, and was not reported until Friday, indicating that the police were not concerned if the trail got cold in finding witnesses or apprehending the suspects.

Worse yet were comments attributed to SCPD Sgt. Steve Clark, who said of the homeless victims: "We don't know if they were targeted or had voluntarily gotten themselves into a confrontation." Clark also said: "The victims were intoxicated and could not remember what happened."



A homeless man was viciously stabbed twice while he slept in San Lorenzo Park. Eyewitnesses report that the victim, Brad Mills, was handcuffed by police and taken into custody while saying, "Can't you see that I've been stabbed?"

By suggesting to the press that the victims may have somehow contributed to the assault and by downplaying the seriousness of the crime with his comment that they "are expected to recover," Clark reinforces the lack of concern the general public should feel when a homeless person is the victim of an assault.

Couldn't the victims be unable to remember details of the attack because

they "sustained head injuries?" Two eyewitnesses observed the two men being beaten with a metal pipe and pieces of wood. Worse yet, when the witnesses attempted to call 911 at Lighthouse Liquors, the clerk refused to place the call. When the police did arrive, the bloodstained items were found at the scene of the attack.

Victims James "Boston" Leonard and Steve Dawson had to be airlifted to Stanford Hospital for treatment. Leonard was initially listed in critical condition at Stanford Hospital and remains hospitalized. Dawson has been released.

With "Boston" still in Stanford Hospital recovering from the brutal assault, yet another homeless man was viciously stabbed twice while he slept in San Lorenzo Park. Eyewitnesses report that the victim, Brad Mills, was handcuffed by police and taken into custody while saying, "Can't you see that I've been stabbed?" Mills was also airlifted to Stanford for treatment, a procedure used only in the most serious cases.

At a meeting of homeless people organized by the Homeless Services Center, a man named Michael claimed he "had the right to sleep without being beaten. These are sick people, even serial killers that just want you to die. They even call it a sport. It's called trollbusting."

At a recent meeting of the Homeless Issues Task Force (HITF), Doug McGrath reported to the Task Force an incident of police misconduct against the homeless. "Officer Alex Martin beat a homeless man with his flashlight across his face." The man, Charles, interviewed by HUFF (Homeless United for Friendship and Freedom), bore visible scars and scabs across his face. He admitted he was drunk at the time. "There is no excuse for this type of behavior on the part of Officer Martin," said McGrath.

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Yet another report received by the HITF on police violence against homeless people was a case in which a homeless man, Carl, who had been drinking along the railroad tracks on Santa Cruz's Westside, was beaten up by young thugs. He went to a nearby 7-11 where he called the police to report the assault. When police arrived they neither looked for the suspects nor seriously considered Carl's report of having been beaten despite the fact he was dripping with blood. Carl was arrested, booked into Santa Cruz County Jail for "public drunkenness" and released at 2 a.m. into the pouring rain.

None of these reports to the HITF made it into their final report. Insiders report they were expunged for being "too controversial." Also not heard by the HITF was this case: A homeless man in a wheelchair, Mario, reports he was kicked and punched from behind in early April by Officer Perry. The reason for the stop was "open container/drunken in public"—hardly a violent crime. The man reportedly returned a punch to Perry. His companion Lenny, a witness, says he's been arrested more than 60 times by Officer Perry.

The Santa Cruz City Council and the County Board of Supervisors remain not merely oblivious to these assaults, but have laws that enable them. The infamous City Sleeping Ban remains in full force even though shelter space dropped on May 1st to 28 spaces for 750-1500 homeless people in the city. The HITF recommendations to end the sleeping ban and institute other reforms remain undiscussed. Promises to "present new wording" for the sleeping ban sections of the camping ordinance have been casually broken by Mayor Keith Sugar, swing-vote

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kingmaker Katherine Beiers, and liberal Chris Krohn. This has great impact because the City and County bans mean that homeless people cannot sleep in numbers, in well-lighted areas, and in areas patrolled by police without fear of tickets, fines, warrants, or harassment.

Sgt. Clark, the police officer who downplayed the significance of the beatings of homeless victims Dawson and Leonard, has a reputation for defaming homeless people. In January of 1999, he reported to *Sentinel* reporter May Wong that a 32-year-old homeless man, Robert Zesiger, who had committed suicide in the dead of winter in a very public place — directly behind the County Building — had died of "an auto-erotic death" (see *Street Spirit*, February, 2000). Sgt. Clark's unfounded and malicious rumor hung like a posthumous cloud over this tragic death for months, yet it was later disproved.

A phone call placed by HUFF to Det. Burt of the Santa Cruz County Coroner's office confirmed that there never was any evidence of an auto-erotic death, either the day Zesiger's body was found or in the coroner's report which ruled the death a "suicide."

Despite this hard evidence of misstatements to the press and the public, the Citizens Police Review Board (CPRB) recently exonerated Sgt. Clark of any wrongdoing. Sources close to the board explained the decision was based on an assumption that the coroner would be too reticent to record any information on auto-erotic activity in its report. The CPRB did not interview Det. Burt to determine if claims made by HUFF were accurate even though it had complete

authority to do so.

Mismanagement and bias go to the top in the Santa Cruz Police Department. Chief Belcher covered up an assault on homeless Steve Argue by Officer Garner when Argue legally sold *Street Spirit* newspapers. City Attorney John Barisone openly describes the police department as his "client," not the residents of Santa Cruz.

PROTESTS HEAT UP

At the City Council meeting on March 28, protesters demanded that Mayor Keith Sugar put the sleeping ban on the agenda as an emergency item. When he refused, about 30 protesters lay down with blankets and sleeping bags on the floor in front of the council. Mayor Sugar, rather than deal with the protesters, closed the meeting and the council walked out.

At the April 11th meeting, HUFF protesters presented a pie to the City Councilmember voted "the most supportive of the anti-homeless Sleeping Ban." When the "winner," Councilmember Mike Rotkin, declined to step up to the podium to receive his just desserts, HUFF activist Robert Norse, dressed in a chef's hat and white baker's jacket, accepted the award — a sloppy, whipped-cream mess flung into his face.

Protesters are now considering a sit-in at the Mayor's office, a march to City Council, an all-night Street Party downtown and/or the setting up of "Tent City 2000" at City Hall. Activist James Nay has been arrested for chalking "Geneva Convention says Sleep Deprivation is Torture" and "Downtown Merchants should support Sleep for All" on Pacific Avenue. He promised, "We will continue to protest until safe zones are set up where homeless people can legally sleep."

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