
2011 HOMELESS POINT IN TIME SURVEY
COUNTY OF SAN LUIS OBISPO

Introduction

On January 26, 2011 service providers, community volunteers, students and city and county staff joined together to realize a “point in time” survey of those living among us who lack shelter. The enumeration provides a snapshot of who they are and the varied factors that propel them to homelessness. The point in time involved a count of people known and believed to be homeless as well as 279 in depth surveys.

The enumeration report is but a single source of information about our homeless citizens. The survey results are a window into the lives of the people who responded. The results do not necessarily extrapolate to the entire homeless population. The objective client data collected by the service providers is also a valuable source of information. With more agencies entering their information into the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) we are gaining a broader perspective of those who have reached out to access services. This objective client data, read in conjunction with the enumeration report contribute to an understanding of our clients that can assist in planning for responsive services and housing programs.

Discussion

A total of 3,774 people without a place to call home were counted on survey day. The enumerators noted 1,927 adults. This included people in shelters, transitional housing, unsheltered and doubled up with others. Regionally, San Luis Obispo and North County had similar percentages, 35% and 36% respectively, South County 26%. However, North County reported a significant number of children, 954, representing 71% of their count. Considering only adults North County had 20% of those counted compared to 43% in San Luis Obispo and 35% in South County. The survey team did report that the North County did not have as robust a crew of enumerators as in the past which may account for the seemingly low count of adults in this region.

A total of 1,847 children were noted as homeless on the day of the survey, representing 49% of people who lack a home. This included approximately 1,214 youth who were staying with family or friends because their family lost housing or experienced other economic hardships. Setting aside this group, approximately 630 children were counted as literally homeless: in motels, shelters, cars or the streets.

Two hundred-seventy nine people agreed to respond to depth surveys which give a rich portrait of those who are living among us with no shelter. Sixty-six percent were men; 32% women; 2% teens. Seventeen percent of those surveyed had children with them; 70% reported being single. Sixteen percent were veterans. The average age was 42 years. Fifty-nine percent were white; 15% Latino and 4% African American.

This is not a transient population. Sixty-five percent had been in San Luis Obispo County for over 5 years; another 20% have been here over 1 year. Thirty-eight percent were originally from the county; 31% had family or friends in the County. It was also a fairly educated group, with a third having completed high school and another 39% having some or completed college.

More than half, 57%, reported this was their first experience of homelessness. Twenty-six percent have been homeless for more than a year; 51% between a year and five years. By comparison among those who had been homeless before, 70% were homeless more than a year this time; 19% between 3 months and a year.

Of the reasons cited for losing their housing, 47% were due to economic causes (unemployment, low wages, eviction, rent increase). Twenty-three percent of the causes were medically related (mental illness, substance abuse, illness). Asked where they slept the previous night, 48% said in their car or outside; 23% in a shelter or transitional housing.

Survey respondents reported marked incidents of health and wellness issues. Of the 279 survey respondents 38% reported a physical disability; 31% a mental illness; 22% had chronic substance abuse issues and 17% chronic health conditions. Many reported more than one ailment. Community services are reaching some homeless. In the past year, 67% had received food from a community program; 32% used the day center, 41% the shelter and approximately 15% accessed mental health and substance abuse services. For health care, 32% used the clinic, while 43% reported using emergency rooms. Twenty-three percent of the respondents took advantage of case management.

Seventeen percent of the people surveyed were employed, full time, part time or seasonal. Others relied on other resources for support: food stamps, 38%; SSI 15% and general assistance, 11%. A disability prevented 55% from obtaining work; while a third (33%) reported they could not get hired.

Many of the people surveyed did report efforts to obtain employment. Eighty-one respondents, 29%, reported using one or more job training services. Of those, 79% had used services at one of the County's three One Stop Business Centers; another 17% were engaged in vocational training or job club.

The richest information came from the final question, where the person was simply asked: "What do you need to change your life?" Common themes ran through the responses. Most heard related to the desire for housing. "I long for a stable place to live. I don't want to be homeless forever." Next most often cited was the desire for work, "I just want to find a job. Quick. In order to support my family." Other common responses were the need for income, including disability benefits; some moral support ("I need someone to believe in me."), and an opportunity to get and stay sober. These responses reveal that those in our community who lack shelter long for the same basic needs that we all do: safety, security, support.