

Myths and Realities about Poor People Outside

Myth: The “worthy poor” have shelter services available in Santa Cruz.

Reality: The Homeless (Lack of) Services Center has long been notorious among the homeless population for its lack of walk-in emergency shelter space for much of the year (During the winter the Armory has about 100 spots for the City's 1000-2000 homeless.)

Myth: Homeless people don't use shelter services because the rules are too “confining”.

Reality: Some vets feel a need to be outdoors; others don't want to take away from the shelter of the elderly and the ill; still others have had bad experiences with the crowded and regimented conditions of shelter services here and elsewhere. However for the Paul Lee Loft you have to wait 2-6 weeks on the Waiting List, and then may find yourself arbitrarily excluded without any clear process of appeal. Other more formal programs (like the River St. Shelter, the Rebele Family Shelter, and Page Smith Community House) have more demanding requirements and about as little space.

Myth: Fire danger, “illegal drug use or sales”, and real criminal activity are the motivation for the last ten weeks of SCPD sweeps.

Reality: While a small number of people at the campsites attacked have been cited or arrested for “real crimes” (such as assault, theft, etc.), the sweeps rely on the fact that **all camping in the City of Santa Cruz on public property is illegal** in spite of the lack of shelter.

Myth: Regularly destroying homeless survival gear without giving people any options on where to sleep will drive down the homeless population.

Reality: It makes people angrier and more desperate since human beings have no alternative but sleep, though Santa Cruz makes this a crime after 11 PM for those outside. The levee and Pogonip sweeps have actually driven some people into more visible locations downtown. The prospect of being strong-armed on Pacific Avenue by police simply for looking homeless does create a climate where only the toughest and most intransigent are likely to associate and congregate.

Myth: The “permissive” climate of Santa Cruz acts as a “magnet”.

Reality: Most of the people outside come from Santa Cruz according to recent census surveys. There has always been a flow of people through coastal college towns. Santa Cruz

Myth: The Santa Cruz City Council is “soft” on homeless people.

Reality: The Council and Council contenders are harsher on the homeless than the Los Angeles and San Diego authorities in their “no sleep, no mercy” laws, actually making the city more vulnerable to lawsuit. The recent *Levan* decision holds local authorities accountable for destroying homeless goods.

Myth: Treating homeless people harshly like disposable trash will drive them away from town and discourage others from coming. Stealing their blankets and backpacks will “teach them to leave”.

Reality: Homeless people, once stripped of personal effects, often become less self sufficient and often lose their health another few notches. This puts an additional burden on emergency room services as well as coarsening the community as a whole.

Myth: Police sweeps target only the truly “criminal element” not the “worthy poor”

Reality: Anyone outside or sleeping in their vehicle is a target at the whim of the officer of a grumpy resident. Police statistics (even on their blog) don't show any “big catches” of real criminals.

Myth: Sweeps help the environment by clearing away unsanitary campsites.

Reality: People just move. Portapotties, dumpsters, and regular trash pick-up's might actually work.