Column #15

2015 POINT-IN-TIME HOMELESS CENSUS TAKERS ASK:
"WHERE HAVE ALL THE PEOPLE GONE?"
By Wanda Sue Parrott

ACTUAL RESULTS of the bi-annual Homeless Census in Monterey County won't be released for several weeks, but preliminary facts indicate the city of Monterey's homeless population outnumbers Pacific Grove's by about 10 to 1. The ratio of homeless women to homeless men seems to be 1.06 females per every 10 males.

These statistics were gathered Wed., Jan. 28, 2015, by my 4-member crew during the 2015 Point-in-Time Homeless Census conducted by the Watsonville branch of Applied Survey Research. ASR's mission statement is: *Helping people build better communities since 1980.*

According to ASR: The federal government requires a Point-in-Time count during the last ten days of January nationwide every two years. Each count results in a "snapshot" of the number of sheltered and unsheltered homeless on a given night. Thus, early morning hours provide census takers the chance to count people before they arise and depart their sleeping places for the day.

While ASR produced and oversaw the people-counting activities that comprised the early-morning census, those who actually performed the field work were teams of unpaid volunteers coupled with paid guides who led the head-counting expeditions. As a reporter, I was embedded with bed-seeking troops half my age.

We met during pitch-black darkness at the Salvation Army in Seaside at 5 a.m. We were served steaming Starbuck's coffee and pastries while being paired up with team members and given our maps. I was assigned to two young women I'll call Tisha and Julie and a young man I'll call Gavin.

Gavin is an expert at slogging through muddy paths and following grass-track trails because his uncle lives under bridges in Monterey.

We refreshed our memories about rules John Connery, ASR Research Assistant, gave at our training session a week earlier. "Don't ask questions or talk to the homeless," I recalled.

"Don't take any pictures." Gavin said.

"Be respectful. Don't intrude on their privacy," Tisha said.

"Do enumerate them by gender, if possible, by age, and whether they are in a vehicle, campsite. To be a family, there must be a child under 18," Julie said.

"If you sense danger, get out of there!" we all said.

Equipped with flashlights and our maps, we climbed into Tisha's van. First stop was Del Monte Shopping Center, where we parked behind two dumpsters and headed down a steep path leading through oak trees, tall grass and eerily primeval wetlands paralleling the freeway a few hundred yards away.

First encampment found by flashlight beam was an abandoned dent in grass surrounded by empty beer cans. We puffed and panted around a bend and up a steep hill.

"Shhhh. There's one," Gavin pointed to a plaid shirt. We slunk toward the camp. The fabric was hanging on a limb. "It's just a road sign," Gavin said, shining his beam into the trees. A dozen strips of orange cloth hung like fabled yellow ribbons from old oak trees. "They're pointers, like the fairy-tale crumbs the kids followed to keep from getting lost."

Behind a hedge of dry brush, we glimpsed several sleeping bags and other articles. Nearby was another sleeping bag. All were empty.

"Where have all the people gone?" Julie asked.

Gavin said, "They move around. They ain't called invisible for nothing." His flashlight beam spotted three objects shaped like hippo-sized potatoes. "Shhhh." Gavin beckoned us forth. Eureka! We found our first encampment in which three people were fast asleep. Judging from their gear, all appeared to be male.

Dawn was breaking. Back at the car, we split into two teams, one to trek along the roadside and the other to trudge through the deep brush. We met up at Jack in the Box on Munras Ave. and consulted our maps.

Homeless Census maps, derived from U.S. Census Bureau tracts, are guideposts to counting the unsheltered homeless. Our two census tracts covered Monterey from Munras Ave. at Fremont to Skyline Drive and Veterans Park. The other map was for Pacific Grove from Forest Ave. to David Ave. to Congress and back along Sinex Ave.

We got to Jack in the Box at 8:30 a.m. The invisibles were now visible. Two homeless men were using the facilities and having coffee. A couple went by on bicycles, waving and saying, "Good morning. We're waking up." I smiled and returned the greeting. Tisha said, "That's a no-no!"

A sixtyish woman in brown coat and black stocking cap flashed a smile and "Please Give What You Can—God Bless You" sign. I turned away to avoid bursting into tears and reminded myself why remaining impersonal-but-involved matters: *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you because there but for the grace of God go I!*

The Point-in-Time census increases community understanding of homelessness, retains and improves funding for homeless services, generates valid, accurate data regarding homeless individuals and their families, and links homeless data collection efforts to strategic program and policy planning.

Julie and Gavin navigated as we finished counting people from inside the van. We scanned Pacific Grove's George Washington Park but spotted no homeless there. Our tour ended at 9:50 a.m. on Candy Cane Lane, where no signs of Santa Claus or homeless people were observed.

We returned to the Salvation Army at 10 a.m. sharp. Our Street Tally Sheets totaled 32 homeless people: 29 men, 3 women. Except for the couple on bicycles, all others were loners on foot; no families or pets were counted.

Twenty-six of the men and all three women were in Monterey. The remaining three men were in Pacific Grove. Not a huge number, but a definite indicator that the homeless really are almost invisible in Pacific Grove.

Biggest number of the morning was 55, the amount of dollars Gavin was paid in cash.

Details about the Point-in-Time Census can be found at www.appliedsurveyresarch.org.

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