

San Francisco's homeless dying at record rate

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A record-high 157 homeless people died in San Francisco over the last 12 months according to a report released by city authorities December 15. The annual Homeless Death Review showed a sharp increase in such deaths since 1997 when 104 homeless people were reported dead, and just above the 154 dead counted in 1996.

The average age of the deceased was 42 years old. According to officials, drug overdoses accounted for 62 deaths, seven were suicides and four of the homeless died of severe infections. One hundred thirty-four of the homeless dead were male, twenty-two female. One was listed as transgender.

The report, which is compiled from medical examiner records, is merely a body count and does not hint at the causes for the rise in deaths. Others, including homeless advocates, cited as possible causes the cut-off of welfare benefits, endless rain attributed to El Nino weather patterns, a crackdown on the homeless by Mayor Willie Brown and a shortage of single hotel rooms for the poor.

There are an estimated 5,000 to 15,000 homeless people in the city. Every night homeless shelters are filled to capacity and hundreds of people sleep in parks and in the doorways of businesses. There are only 1,400 shelter beds available through the city or charities and authorities plan to add another 300 by the beginning of December. Among the homeless there are an estimated 500 'car dwellers,' people who live in abandoned cars, buses and trucks parked on the city's streets.

Last year, a few days after the *San Francisco Chronicle* published an October 31 editorial urging Mayor Willie Brown 'to halt the invasion and occupation of Golden Gate Park by junkies, drunks, hostile bums and petty criminals,' the Democratic mayor banned sleeping overnight in the park and deployed scores of police to expel the homeless. Brown

established a hotline for residents and neighbors to complain about the homeless, and hinted that he would carry out helicopter searches to root out homeless camps, if the problem persisted.

In an effort to appear humanitarian Brown announced that he was considering building a campground for the 'vehicularly housed' in a port area south of the downtown financial district. The mayor's coordinator for the homeless, Terrence Hill, boasted that the city was the first in the nation to even think of legitimizing living in cars.

Two-thirds of the homeless dead were found in Tenderloin, Inner Mission and South of Market, which are among the poorest parts of the city. Randy Shaw, director of the Tenderloin Housing Clinic, said the rising economic inequality in the Bay Area had contributed to increased housing shortages.

'There has never been a scarcer supply of rooms in the history of San Francisco,' said Shaw, whose nonprofit group operates programs to house the homeless. 'We used to have over 1,200 units of single hotel rooms available for general assistance. Now it's gone below 800. I have people willing to spend 80 percent of their general assistance income on housing,' he said. 'That's \$310, leaving only \$45 for food, and I can't get them a room.'

The 1997 Homeless Death Review detailed the sad fate of those ignored or turned into pariahs by official society. 'Joe's skeletal remains were found by gardeners at Golden Gate Park inside a sleeping bag that was inside a pup tent,' is one example cited in the report. 'Joe was 42 years old when he died.'

Another victim highlighted in the report was 'Sally,' 27, who was discharged from San Francisco General Hospital to a single-room occupancy hotel. 'She was found dead in the breezeway, where she collapsed on her way to the hall bathroom.'

The city has assigned three healthcare workers to

prevent homeless deaths.

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