

# WOMEN AND HOMELESSNESS

in Santa Cruz County

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## Overview

In 2011, the Santa Cruz County Women's Commission published a report on the Status of Women and Girls (SOWAG). While some of the SOWAG's six sections referred briefly to homelessness, none focused solely on homeless women's issues. The Women's Commission, with the help of Angela Taylor, a dedicated CSUMB intern, now includes *Women and Homelessness in Santa Cruz County*, in the SOWAG report, due to rising needs and awareness of the issue. This report supports key stakeholders, including decision makers, educators, organizations working to address homelessness, and the public at large, to create positive and impactful solutions that will benefit homeless women, their children and the community at large.

## Abstract

Women, girls and families face barriers when they try to access homeless services in Santa Cruz County. These barriers were identified through interviews with eleven key stakeholder and one client-based focus group, chosen because they serve this demographic specifically.

Fifteen interview questions concentrated on identifying: the unique characteristics of women experiencing homelessness; barriers to accessing services; existing services that are effective; and the needs of women, girls, and families not being met within the community. Two key findings from the stakeholder interviews and the focus group are: there are eligibility barriers to homeless services; and the community is failing to meet needs, such as affordable housing options, mental health services and child care.

The Women's Commission proposes an additional survey to measure demographic data, housing status and an assessment of needs of Women and Homelessness in Santa Cruz County.

*Keywords:* Women and Homelessness, Family Homelessness, Santa Cruz County, Barriers to Service, Stakeholder Interviews

## Key Stakeholder Interview Questions

- 1) Which agencies in Santa Cruz County that are focused on homeless women, girls (transition-aged youth), and families do you feel are most effective?
- 2) Can you provide some examples of programs that you are familiar with that serve homeless women, girls, and families?
- 3) Do you see Medicaid expansion (Affordable Care Act) positively or negatively affecting homeless women, children, and families? Please explain.
- 4) What specific Santa Cruz City or County policies help or hinder services for homeless women?
- 5) **Does your agency have policies in place that would assist or create barriers to services for homeless women?**
  - Eligibility barriers - program rules that establish the criteria for who may receive the benefit as well as time limits on receipt. Many eligibility restrictions are embedded in federal policy and cannot easily be influenced at the local level (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2015).
  - “If you’re not sick or dying, you’re not a priority.”
- 6) **What needs are not being met for homeless women, girls, and families in SCC? If you could do one thing to meet these needs, what would you do?**
  - Unmet needs
    1. Reduced access to affordable housing
    2. Reduced access to affordable child care
    3. Reduced access to transportation within the county
- 7) Does your agency conduct a needs assessment or client satisfaction survey directly with homeless women that address their needs? How often is this survey conducted? How do you implement the survey with homeless women? Would you be willing to provide us with a copy of the survey? Would you be able to provide us with access to the data or a report on the findings?
- 8) Does funding for your agency come from grants or individuals? Does your agency have any non-traditional partners, such as for-profit funders? Would you be able to provide us with a copy of your financial report including information about your funders?
- 9) How often do you see reentry clients and/or families? What are the reasons for reentry?

- 10) What environmental factors impact homeless women?
- 11) Is your agency working towards the Smart Path implementation of the county's coordinated entry system? If so, what is your agency doing to prepare?
- 12) Is there a resource guide for gender-specific services at your agency? If not, how would your clients benefit from having one?
- 13) How do you promote your services to the public? Is there an online source for information that other agencies can access? Does your agency have an outreach coordinator?
- 14) Do you know of programs in other counties that are successfully helping homeless/unhoused women access the services they need? Can you provide examples of best practices? Are you in communication with them?
- 15) Can you recommend anyone else you think we should interview? Why? Can you please share their contact information?

#### Agencies Interviewed February 2017 – April 2017

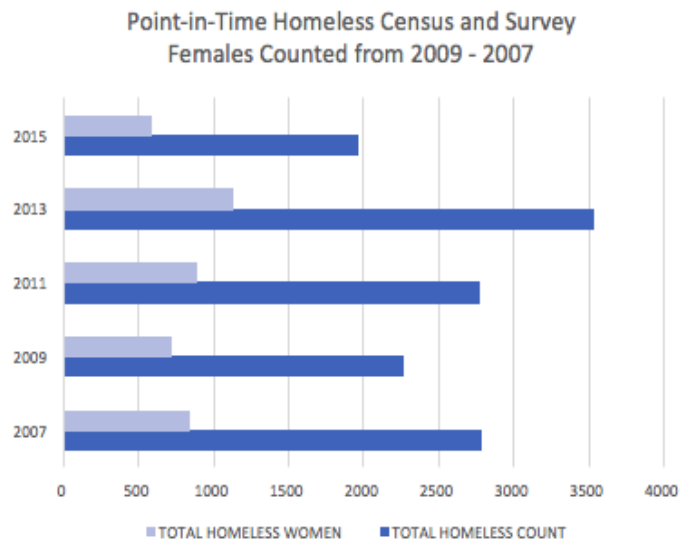
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1. Encompass – Susan Paradise, TAY Program Manager
2. Walnut Avenue Family & Women's Center – Martha Welden, Director of Advocacy and Prevention
3. Families-In-Transition – Melisa Vierra, Executive Director
4. Homeless Services Center; Rebele Family Shelter – Pamela Nell, Program Manager for Rebele Family Shelter & Tom Stagg, Director of Programs
5. Homeless Garden Project – Lindsay Andrews, Training and Education Supervisor  
Frances Salgado, SJSU MSW Intern, Ilana Sawyer, Cabrillo Human Services Intern  
❖ Focus Group – Six women who were active program participants
6. Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Office – Cynthia Chase, Inmate Program Manager and Mayor of Santa Cruz
7. Monarch Services – Maria Barranco, Program Manager
8. County of Santa Cruz, Human Services Department – Jessica Scheiner, Senior Analyst
9. Veterans Resource Centers of America - Holly Ruud, Lead Case Manager
10. Pajaro Valley Shelter – Annette Melendrez, Program and Case Manager
11. Pajaro Valley Unified School District– Richard Puente, Healthy Start Coordinator for At-Risk Students

## Introduction

There are unique barriers women, girls, and families face while trying to access homeless services in Santa Cruz County (SCC). Frequent use of crisis services, such as hospitalization, has a significant financial impact on local government. As recognized throughout a variety of SCC Community Assessment Reports, supported with eleven key stakeholder interviews and a client-based focus group, there is a significant need for an increase in services, especially in the areas of affordable housing, child care, transportation within the county, and gender-specific emergency shelters. The impact homelessness has on a community can result in the criminalization of poverty, higher rates of emergency services use, and higher rates of incarceration (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2016).

As of 2015, SCC's total population was 271,804 with females accounting for 50.2% of the population. The total number of households in the county was 96,127, with family households totaling about 61,521. Female head-of-household families, with no husband present, represented 11.7% of these total households (Applied Survey Research & United Way of Santa Cruz County, 2015). From 2007 to 2015, females have consistently represented a minority of 30 – 32% in the SCC Point-in-Time Homeless Census Counts. Although females are a minority within the homeless community, it is important to note that their experience often involves having a family, and that there are numerous implications for these women and their children as an at-risk population. Seventy percent of survey respondents in homeless families were female, much higher than the survey respondents not in families (25%). (Applied Survey Research, 2007-2015).



Since the release of the Status of Women and Girls Report (SOWAG) in 2011, there have been major policy changes affecting the status of women experiencing homelessness in SCC. These changes are present in the SOWAG chapters of Healthcare, Criminal Justice, Violence Against Women, and Economic Justice.

Table 1, Homeless Census Counts

## Health Care

Health care for homeless women and families has become increasingly accessible since the enactment of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA) of 2010. The ACA expanded

Medicaid eligibility to people whose yearly earnings are below 133% federal poverty level and now provides the much-needed coverage of behavioral health care and rehabilitative services to homeless populations (United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, 2014). More than 7.7 million women (ages 18-64) signed up for health insurance during the first Open Enrollment period in 2014. In this same period, 1.1 million women between the ages of 19 - 25 were now covered under their parent’s plan. Women can no longer be denied health insurance coverage because of their gender or pre-existing conditions like pregnancy if the ACA remains intact.

This expansion was implemented in California through the California Medical Assistance Program (Medi-Cal) that serves low-income populations like families, seniors, persons with disabilities, children in foster care, pregnant women, and for the first-time, childless adults whose incomes fell below 138% of the federal poverty level. This allowed low-income single women without children in SCC to access both preventative and primary health care services like well-woman visits, screening for gestational diabetes, domestic violence screenings, breastfeeding counseling, and contraceptive services for the first-time (The ACA and Women’s Health, n.d.).

Of the eleven stakeholder interviews conducted for this report, nine interviewees said they see the ACA positively affecting women, girls, and families who are homeless in SCC. A stakeholder at the Rebele Family Shelter noted that, “Planned Parenthood was the only place to go” before this expansion. Now, there is increased accessibility in community clinics such as the Santa Cruz Women’s Health Center, the East Cliff Family Health Center, and the Homeless Persons Health Project.

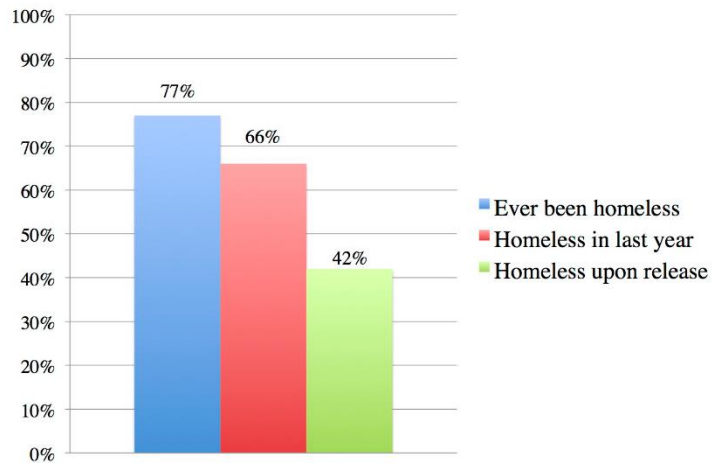


Table 2, Homelessness (Greene, 2017)

### Criminal Justice

The city of Santa Cruz enforces a ban on outdoor camping which in 2015, resulted in officers issuing 1,913 camping citations; typically, 96% of these citations will remain unpaid (Herring, 2016). If a person is on the waitlist for Homeless Services Center or River Street Shelter, they will not be in violation of the camping ban (City of Santa Cruz, 2017).

According to recent findings by Dr. Susan Greene in her report *Gender Matters: A Profile of Women in Santa Cruz County Jail*, two out of three women interviewed has been homeless within the last year and almost half of the women did not have a stable home to return to after their release from jail (2017). In addition to concerns of recidivism, safety is a huge concern for women who

are released without a home to return to. In a study by the Vera Institute of Justice, people who were released from prison or jail without a home were seven times more likely to encounter an arrest within the first month of release (Mettraux and Culhane, 2002).

As per Street Sheet, a publication of the Coalition on Homelessness in San Francisco, there are two main impacts of an unpaid citation while being homeless; first, an immediate impact where the fine increases and it may go to collections, a driver’s license suspension, issue of an arrest warrant; and second, a lingering impact of an increasingly harder time to find housing due to bad credit, a harder time finding a job due to a lack of license, and court debt after exiting homelessness (Herring, 2016). This change in city policy was mentioned by two out of eleven stakeholder interviews as hindering services for women experiencing homelessness.

### Violence Against Women

A major concern among women who are experiencing homelessness is safety from violence, especially for women who are homeless with children. According to the National Network to End Domestic Violence, 38% of all victims of domestic violence become homeless at some point in their lives and over 90% of homeless women have experienced severe physical or sexual abuse (National Network to End Domestic Violence, n.d.). In the SCC 2015 Point-in-Time (PIT) survey, 57% of female respondents reported having a history of domestic violence and 8% reported to be currently experiencing domestic violence. This is an increase from the 2013 PIT survey, which recorded an equal 6% percent of men and women who were currently experiencing domestic violence. There were no reporting’s on histories of physical, emotional, or sexual abuse over a lifetime in the 2013 PIT survey. As stated by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, reporting on the number of sheltered and unsheltered victims of domestic violence is optional for PIT counts (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2016). This means, the 2015 PIT survey for SCC included additional gender-disaggregated subpopulation data as previously recommended in the 2011 SOWAG report.

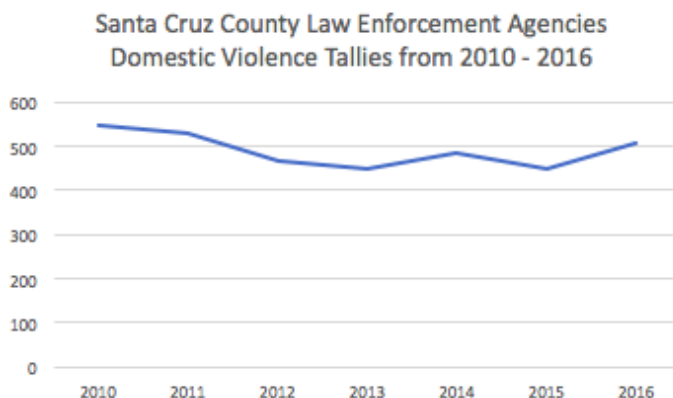


Table 3, Domestic Violence Calls

The Santa Cruz Police Department recorded tallies of domestic violence calls during October (Domestic Violence Awareness Month), from the years 2010 through 2016. In October 2016, there was an increase to 546 calls from the previous year of 528 calls. There were 300 cases of domestic



violence acts from January 2016 – October 2016 with male survivors representing 56 of cases.

This uptick was noted by the Department as an increase in awareness and seen as support for community members being connected to resources for domestic violence (Todd, 2016). While the additional police trainings on how to recognize the signs of domestic and intimate partner violence are being recognized by the community, three out of eleven stakeholders interviewed stated a need for further training of civil servants.

Walnut Avenue Family & Women’s Center, and Monarch Services are the leading local agencies in providing services to women experiencing domestic violence as noted by six out of eleven stakeholder interviews. Walnut Avenue provides short-term emergency shelter for survivors of domestic violence.

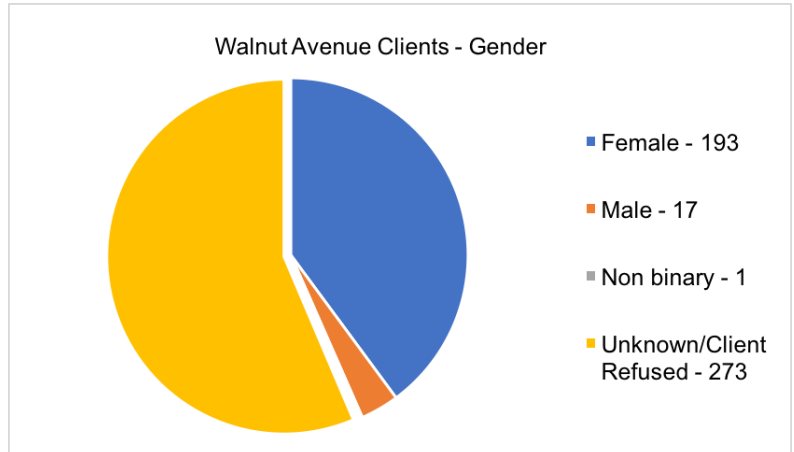


Table 4 Walnut Avenue Clients by Gender  
01/01/2017- 03/10/2017

The Mariposa House at Monarch Services provides temporary emergency shelter to survivors of domestic and intimate partner violence; they also offer services including counseling, support groups, parent education, health education, legal advocacy, goal planning, children’s services and help accessing appropriate community resources.

Monarch Services remains SCC’s only domestic violence shelter and confidential rape crisis center. Walnut Avenue offers emergency hotel vouchers to survivors that qualify. While focusing on a strengths-based approach, they provide support groups and legal advocacy to survivors of domestic and intimate partner violence. From January 1, 2017 to March 10, 2017, Walnut Avenue served approximately 484 clients (personal communication, 2016).

### **Economic Justice**

Families with children are the fastest growing populations among the nation’s homeless. It is estimated that 23% of the nation’s homeless population are children under the age of 18. California accounted for 11% of homeless families with children, which is second, behind New York at 26% (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2015). As stated by the National Coalition for the Homeless, the leading causes are the lack of affordable housing and poverty. These causes are consistent with the housing crisis prominent in SCC, especially with being established as California’s least affordable city, right after Brooklyn, New York in 2015 (McKay, 2015).

*According to a 2015 UC Santa Cruz study, the median salary in SCC in 2013 was \$68,438/year. Although local government provided the highest level of employment (over 21,000 employed for 2015), service jobs, who's earning are commonly \$9 to \$10/hour, were the top advertised positions available. The household income would have to be at a minimum of \$70,000 to be considered affordable, meaning to spend 30 percent of income for housing, to pay for a two-bedroom at \$1,750 per month (McKay, 2015)*

In SCC, 60.7% of renter households experience housing burden and about 16% of the population live below the poverty level (Applied Survey Research and United Way, 2016). From the stakeholder interviews, six out of eleven interviewees said affordable housing is an imminent need among women, girls, and families who are homeless. Affordable child care options were mentioned by four out of eleven key stakeholders. Economic justice solutions for women, girls, and children experiencing homelessness in SCC are still lacking throughout the community in multiple areas.

### **Recommendations**

- Decide on a definition of homelessness. Does this include being “doubled-up?”<sup>1</sup>
- Create a gender-specific resource guide with details on eligibility for agencies and programs that are available to women, girls, and families who are homeless.
- Hold a solution-oriented town hall with key stakeholders and the public.
- Advocate for more gender-specific emergency shelters, transitional housing, and sober living environments.
- Collaborate with United Way’s – Smart Solutions to Homelessness Lived Group Experience and hold more focus groups with women, girls, and families.
- A consistent central theme found in the key-stakeholder interviews was the issue of eligibility barriers for homeless women trying to access programs and services. Supporting

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<sup>1</sup> SOWAG sub-committee decided upon definition of homelessness as lack of permanent housing in May 2017.

specific priority areas that the Homeless Action Partnership, Smart Solutions, and the United Way of Santa Cruz County identified in their countywide strategic plan, All In – Toward a Home for Every County Resident Strategic Plan to Prevent, Reduce, and Eventually End Homelessness would address some of these barriers. Specific priority areas the Commission should support include:

- Priority 1: Transforming the Crisis Response System, specifically the implementation of the Smart Path Coordinated Entry System designed to improve access to housing and services for all populations
  - Priority 2: Increasing Access to Permanent Housing
  - Priority 3: Integrative Systems and Community Support
  - Priority 5: Ending Family Homelessness
  - Priority 6 Addressing Needs in South County
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- Issuing a survey to providers to collect quantitative data is recommended to better assess the needs of women, girls, and families (clients) experiencing homelessness in SCC. This survey should be issued to the top agencies and providers who provide services to positively support this report. This would be a community-needs assessment to compare the data found from the eleven key stakeholder interviews on the questions of “What needs are not being met for homeless women, girls, and families in SCC? If you could do one thing to meet these needs, what would it be?” The data from the key stakeholders can be used to frame the surveys.

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