

SLEEPING AMONG US

Spending a cold night counting Hillsborough County's homeless.

URBAN EXPLORER

BY ALEX PICKETT

It wasn't the amount of people living on Tampa's streets that surprised me during last week's homeless census count by the Hillsborough County Homeless Coalition. In the four hours I shadowed volunteers, dressed in green shirts and armed with clipboards, we saw only 18 people (17 of them men).

No, what struck me was where the homeless slept as temperatures fell to 40 degrees: under semi truck trailers, on warehouse loading docks, in open fields, along railroad tracks and between shopping carts on a sidewalk. None of them had a tent, sleeping bag or even a piece of cardboard separating their thin bodies from the freezing concrete. They were distrustful, maybe scared and only agreed to take the survey at the sight of a new wool blanket. Others simply walked away.

Which is why I'm following four shivering volunteers down the railroad tracks off of Skipper Road in complete darkness, trying to get the attention of three homeless individuals hurrying away from us.

"People are out hurting the homeless," says HCHC staff member Edi Erb, looking down and trying not to fall on a railroad tie. "They don't know who we are."

The volunteers can't seem to catch up and we give up the pursuit. It's been like this all night for Erb, Jodie Gatewood, Christina Daniels and Khadijah Rivera.

"That's one thing that's different this year — there are more people like this who are not responsive," says Gatewood, a program supervisor for Mental Health Inc. who has volunteered for the homeless census three times. If the individual decides not to take the survey, the coalition can't count him or her in the final count.

There are other factors this year that might prevent an accurate count of the county's homeless by the 260 volunteers canvassing shelters, soup

kitchens and wooded areas. Rain the night before the count coupled with cold weather drove many street people from their encampments. And each year the census is guaranteed to be an undercount — there's just not enough people to scour every abandoned building or wooded area. In the end, the number tallied will affect the amount of the money the federal government gives to the county's homeless service providers. The less homeless counted, the less dollars received.

These are the problems explained to me by the volunteers as we make our way through North Tampa along Nebraska Avenue from Fowler to Bearss avenues, a depressed area marked by motels, warehouses and porn stores (and homeless men and women living behind all of them). Our next stop is the woods behind an abandoned apartment complex on N. 25th Street. The women take out flashlights and peer through the woods for signs of habitation: trash, tents, blankets and backpacks.

This is just one of 350 sites in Hillsborough County mapped out by the HCHC with information culled from service providers, homeless advocates and, many times, the homeless themselves. In fact, when we finally find a man and woman lying on a blanket in the bushes, a little shaken by our intrusion, they direct us to other camps in the area.

"All these people need some help tonight," the man pleads to volunteers. "It's cold, and we all got wet last night."

When we drive to the next block, directly in front of a HART bus hub, we meet 65-year-old

John Robinson and 62-year-old Ron Castro sitting on two overturned shopping carts and wrapped in heavy cotton comforters. Robinson, a Navy veteran who did a stint in Vietnam, says it's his health that caused him to lose his job, then his home, three years ago. Now he spends his days in the library waiting for the government to approve Social Security disability payments, and between stays at weekly motels, he sleeps right on the sidewalk here.

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MR. ROBINSON: Sleeping on the streets is safer, he says, than the Salvation Army.

ST. PETE: THE MEANEST STREETS?

If the negative reactions to St. Petersburg's homeless population don't let up over the next year, the city might earn itself the title of "Meanest City in the Nation."

Michael Stoops, executive director of the National Coalition to End Homelessness, says the city leaders' decision to destroy tents in a Jan. 19 raid on tent city may merit the ill-favored label.

"St. Pete's allegedly progressive reputation has taken a hit," Stoops says by phone from his Washington, D.C., office. "St. Pete, Ft. Myers, Sarasota, Orlando — every city in Florida could make the list."

The NCEH and the National Poverty Law Center choose the "meanest city" every two years based on cities' laws or actions that criminalize the homeless. Sarasota made No. 1 on the list in 2006 when city commissioners passed an anti-lodging ordinance that gave police permission to arrest people who camped on city property like parks and sidewalks. One of the elements necessary for arrest under the law is that the person "has no other place to live."

Stoops says the meanest-city label will not be chosen until the end of this year, but it will most likely fall to a Florida city.

"There's a harsher attitude toward the visible homeless population in downtown Florida cities," he says, listing a litany of ordinances and violence directed toward the homeless from the Panhandle to South Florida.

Stoops says physical attacks on homeless men and women are also on the rise in Florida. The murder of two homeless men on Jan. 17 is prompting Stoops to visit St. Pete this month to release a national report on last year's near-record number of hate crimes and violent attacks against people experiencing homelessness.

"I think there is a connection between the criminalization of homelessness and violence against people," Stoops says. "In communities where there's a negative climate it kind of gives permission or says to people, 'It's okay to beat up some homeless people.'"

Stoops hopes his February appearance will push city leaders to start addressing the root causes of homelessness and abandon any more callous reactions to the city's growing problem.

"I'm set to come down and stir up trouble," he says.

—Alex Pickett

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"We don't cause any problems," he says. "We don't drink, and we don't fight."

When I ask why he doesn't get into a shelter, he gives me a common refrain: "About the only one open is the Salvation Army, and it's so dangerous that I'm better off out here."

Castro, with his long beard, looks remarkably like the Cuban leader who shares his last name. He jokes about that between serious exchanges on what it's like to live in "the jungle."

"There's people that have good educations out here and just got into a slump," he says, munching on a peanut butter jelly sandwich. "You can only work with the hand you're dealt with. This is mine."

A few blocks away at a warehouse behind ABC Liquor on Fletcher Avenue, the volunteers approach a man wrapped in plastic, sleeping on one of the loading docks. He tells the women he is sick and doesn't want to be bothered.

"That breaks my heart," says Rivera, pointing to the man. "We're a rich country. What can we do to help them?"

When we stop at a Citgo on Nebraska and Fowler, we meet Robert Brown, another Vietnam vet, and he is disarmingly honest.

"I gets a little money, and I blow it on alcohol," he admits, his heavily creased face full of scars. "I just got out of jail again, and I sleep under that trailer there."

He directs us to a patch of woods behind Pizza Hut, where his buddy "Poppy," suffering from walking pneumonia, is sleeping. But when we find the location, littered with trash and old couches, a man on a bicycle quickly rides out of the bushes past us.

For the next hour, we drive into hotel parking lots, grassy clearings by I-275, along Central Avenue and into a cul-de-

sac of abandoned but most likely inhabited houses. At each site, there are signs of a homeless encampment — shopping carts, old mattresses, crates set up in a half-circle — but no people. We decide to make a final stop at the flea markets along Nebraska.

In front of Tampa Flea Market, lying between a Pepsi machine and a trashcan is yet another man sleeping directly on the concrete. At first, he refuses a blanket ("I'm not supposed to be out here") but eventually relents. When we pull around behind the building, we see five more people rolled into blankets on the loading dock, cowering like cats in corners or under tables. The volunteers approach them cautiously, asking if they need blankets. Most of the group ignore the question,

but one man agrees to take the survey; afterward, Daniels unfolds a blanket and lays it over him, making sure to tuck it under his back.

On our way out, Erb tells me they are finished for the night. It's 11:30 p.m., and some of the women have been out seven hours.

"We can keep driving and find one or two, but we're going to stop," she explains.

On my drive home, I think back to the man we found by the AMVETS Post 4 building on Skipper Road, just across the railroad tracks from a packed Skipper's Smokehouse. The man, probably in his

mid-40s, was upset we woke him up. The Baltimore native wouldn't give his name, but mentioned he became homeless in Florida a year ago.

"Bad investments," he grunted.

After finishing the survey and giving him a blanket, we walked back to Erb's truck. Suddenly, the man raised his head, threw off part of the blanket and wailed:

"Please do something for us! Please do something for us out here. Please!"

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TRYING TO HELP: HCHC volunteer talks to a homeless person (beneath the blanket) behind the Tampa Flea Market off Nebraska Avenue.

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