

# Rise in RV homeless throughout South Bay

*In Gilroy, Morgan Hill, Mountain View, officials are seeing a spike in homeless population, with many of them living in recreational vehicles*

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GILROY — This week was a street week for Aida Barron.

The 58-year-old South County native parked her 1979 Dodge Beaver recreational vehicle on a commercial cul-de-sac near the Gilroy Walmart, a ritual she does every fourth week when she needs to vacate the San Benito Thousand Trails RV park — a requirement in their by-laws.

That means that every fourth week she's technically homeless, one of hundreds of people living in RVs in the South Bay who were counted in this year's annual homeless census. The results, released last week, showed a huge increase in some areas, notably in cities south and north of the county's homeless population center of San Jose. And officials and advocates said many are living out of recreational vehicles on city streets.

"There's definitely a trend of people living in RVs because there's just no affordable housing available," said Dee Pearse, director of the Gilroy Compassion Center. "Waiting lists for low-income housing are three to five years long. People are opting to buy these older RVs and live in them for shelter."

Overall, San Jose's 4,350 homeless comprise nearly 60 percent of Santa Clara County's 7,394, and the big city saw a modest growth of 7 percent over the last count in 2015. Gilroy, which has the second-highest homeless population in the county, saw a 64 percent increase to 722. Mountain View had the third highest — 416 homeless counted with a 51 percent growth, and Morgan Hill came in fourth with 388 for a staggering 379 percent increase from the last count.

"Morgan Hill was obviously significant," said Rebecca Garcia, the city's housing manager. "There are a couple of reasons: The cost of housing is too high but that's everywhere. One thing that occurred that was unique to Morgan Hill was the recent closure of the Thousand Trails RV park here."

The 66-acre campground park closed after it flooded in January and has not yet reopened. Thousand Trails officials said they plan to open in the fall after repairs are completed.

Pearse believes the count was accurate and that the city has the highest number of homeless per capita in the South Bay. The numbers indicate that Gilroy has one homeless person for every 73 residents — that's higher than the nation's big-city per-capita homeless capital of Washington, D.C., which has one for every 90 residents.

Other areas considered heavy with homeless people, such as San Francisco and Los Angeles, have about one for every 113 residents. San Jose has about half that — one homeless person per 227 residents.

"It's a shame that our numbers are so high but I'm glad we're getting a good depiction of what's going on out there," said Pearse, adding that many people can no longer afford to live where they grew up. "We have people who have lived in the city their whole life and once they're homeless they still want to stay in an area they're familiar with."

Morgan Hill Police Chief David Swing said he's "seen an increase across the board" in homeless people, more than he's ever seen in his 20 years with the city.

“It’s hard to quantify,” he said, adding that it doesn’t seem to have quadrupled as indicated by the census. “But absolutely, there’s been a noticeable increase over the past two years.”

Santa Clara County Supervisor Mike Wasserman, who represents the South County area, put more stock in an improved count generating higher numbers than in an actual increase in homeless people.

“We housed 3,000 people,” he said. “If that means we should have counted 10,000 or 11,000 two years ago, so be it.”

He said this year’s count had a number of factors that would account for the increases.

“The count was done in January, after a historic rainfall, after they opened the Ochoa Migrant Center for families,” he said. “The Gilroy Armory opened up more beds. They were all right there to be counted instead of being scattered throughout the hills. I think the count two years ago was not nearly as complete as it could have been.”

He said that while this year’s count “is not 100 percent,” he feels it was “much more accurate” and looks forward to the 2019 results after the the count’s \$950 million Measure A housing bond begins to be implemented this fall.

Tom Myers, director of Community Services of Mountain View, said the RV dwellers there are part of an increase in homelessness, in general.

“People living in vehicles, particularly the RVs, are far more visible,” he said. “But they’re also in automobiles as well as on the streets.”

In Palo Alto, city officials have fielded numerous complaints from residents concerned about the proliferation of RVs, many stretching bumper-to-bumper along El Camino Real. In many cities including Palo Alto and Mountain View, vehicles must be moved every 72 hours, and both cities are conducting an information campaign to let people know they need to abide by the law.

“The last resort is to crack down on them,” said Lisa Caracciolo of Palo Alto’s communications office. “We just want to let people know they need to move it a couple miles down the block.”

She said they are also sending social workers to check on whether the RV dwellers have specific needs, and know about available services.

“We all live in the Bay Area, and understand how hard it is to live there,” Caracciolo said.

For those with a mechanically sound camper, it’s not hard to move down the street. For Barron, it’s a little more complicated. The starter on her vehicle doesn’t always work — often someone needs to crawl beneath the 24-foot camper and whack it with a screwdriver — and it will overheat on a long trip. So she doesn’t get much farther than the 35-mile trip between Gilroy and the San Benito park. Before the campsite in Morgan Hill closed, she would do a semi-weekly move between the two.

She prefers the quiet of the Thousand Trails sites, with amenities such as a swimming pool and on-site grocery store. It’s easier for her 84-year-old mother, who usually lives with a sister but was visiting the possession-packed RV on Monday. They used to have a home in Gilroy but after the family patriarch passed away they could no longer make ends meet and suddenly Barron found herself living out of the land cruiser the family used to roll out for pleasure trips around the Southwest.

“It happens,” she said, “and it happened to us. It’s really hard to go from there to here — when you know your home is gone.”