

Silicon Valley's homeless: Everyday workers in shadow of tech affluence

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MOUNTAIN VIEW — In the same affluent, suburban city where Google built its headquarters, Tes Saldana lives in a crowded but tidy camper she parks on the street.

She concedes it's "not a very nice living situation," but it also is not unusual. Until authorities told them to move, more than a dozen other RVs filled with people who can't afford rent joined Saldana on a tree-lined street in Mountain View, parked between a Target and a luxury apartment complex.

Homeless advocates and city officials say it's outrageous that in the shadow of a booming tech economy — where young millionaires dine on \$15 wood-grilled avocado and think nothing of paying \$1,000 for an iPhone X — thousands of families can't afford a home. Many of the homeless work regular jobs, in some cases serving the very people whose sky-high net worth is the reason housing has become unaffordable for so many.

Across the street from Saldana's camper, for example, two-bedroom units in the apartment complex start at \$3,840, including concierge service. That's more than she brings home, even in a good month.

Saldana and her three adult sons, who live with her, have looked for less rustic accommodations, but rents are \$3,000 a month or more, and most of the available housing is distant. She said it makes more sense to stay in the camper near their jobs and try to save for a brighter future, even if a recent city crackdown chased them from their parking spot.

"We still need to eat," said Saldana, 51. "I still want to bring my kids, once in a while, to a movie, to eat out."

She cooks and serves food at two hotels in nearby Palo Alto, jobs that keep her going most days from 5 in the morning until 10 at night. Two of her sons, all in their 20s, work at a bakery and pay \$700 toward the RV each month. They're all very much aware of the economic disparity in Silicon Valley.

"How about for us people who are serving these tech people?" Saldana said. "We don't get the same paycheck that they do."

It's all part of a growing crisis along the West Coast, where many cities and counties have seen a surge in the number of people living on the streets over the past two years. Counts taken earlier this year show 168,000 homeless people in California, Oregon and Washington — 20,000 more than were counted just two years ago.

The booming economy, fueled by the tech sector, and decades of under-building have led to an historic shortage of affordable housing. It has upended the stereotypical view of people out on the streets as unemployed: They are retail clerks, plumbers, janitors, even teachers, who go to work, sleep where they can and buy gym memberships for a place to shower.

The surge in homelessness has prompted at least 10 local governments along the West Coast to declare states of emergency, and cities from San Diego to Seattle are struggling to come up with immediate and long-range solutions.

San Francisco is well-known for homeless tent encampments. But the homeless problem has now spread throughout Silicon Valley, where the disparity between the rich and everyone else is glaring.

There is no firm estimate on the number of people who live in vehicles in Silicon Valley, but the problem is pervasive and apparent to anyone who sees RVs lining thoroughfares; not as visible are the cars tucked away at night in parking lots. Advocates for the homeless say it will only get worse unless more affordable housing is built.

The median rent in the San Jose metro area is \$3,500 a month, yet the median wage is \$12 an hour in food service and \$19 an hour in health care support, an amount that won't even cover housing costs. The minimum annual salary needed to live comfortably in San Jose is \$87,000, according to a study by personal finance website GoBankingRates.

So dilapidated RVs line the eastern edge of Stanford University in Palo Alto, and officials in neighboring Mountain View have mapped out more than a dozen areas where campers tend to cluster, some of them about a mile from Google headquarters.

On a recent evening, Benito Hernandez returned to a crammed RV in Mountain View after laying flagstones for a home in Atherton, where Zillow pegs the median value of a house at \$6.5 million. He rents the RV for \$1,000 a month and lives there with his pregnant wife and children.

The family was evicted two years ago from an apartment where the rent kept going up, nearing \$3,000 a month.

"After that, I lost everything," said Hernandez, 33, who works as a landscaper and roofer.

He says his wife "is a little bit sad because she says, 'You're working very hard but don't have credit to get an apartment.' I tell her, 'Just wait, maybe a half-year more, and I'll get my credit back.'"

The plight of the Hernandez family points out one of the confounding problems of the homeless surge along the West Coast.

"This is not a crisis of unemployment that's leading to poverty around here," said Tom Myers, executive director of Community Services Agency, a nonprofit based in Mountain View. "People are working."

Mountain View, a city of 80,000 which also is home to Mozilla and 23andMe, has committed more than \$1 million over two years for homeless services, including money for an outreach case manager and a police officer to help people who live in vehicles. At last count, there were people living in more than 330 vehicles throughout the city.

Mayor Ken Rosenberg is proud of the city's response to the crisis – focusing not on penalties but on providing services. Yet he's also worried that the peace won't last as RVs crowd into bike lanes and over-taxed streets.

Last week, Mountain View officials posted signs banning vehicles more than 6 feet high on some parts of the street where Saldana, Hernandez and others living in RVs were parked, saying they were creating a traffic hazard. The average RV is well over that height.

That follows similar moves over the summer by Palo Alto, which started cracking down on RVs and other vehicles that exceed the 72-hour limit on a busy stretch of El Camino Real.

In San Jose, officials recently approved an ordinance pushed by an interfaith group called the Winter Faith Collaborative to allow places of assembly – including gyms and churches – to shelter homeless people year-round.

Ellen Tara James-Penney, a 54-year-old lecturer at San Jose State University, parks her old Volvo at one of those safe haven churches, Grace Baptist Church, and eats in its dining hall. She is paid \$28,000 a year to teach four English classes and is carrying \$143,000 in student debt after earning two degrees.

She grades papers and prepares lessons in the Volvo. At night, she leans back the driver's seat and prepares for sleep, one of two dogs, Hank, by her side. Her husband, Jim, who is too tall for the car, sleeps outside in a tent cot with their other dog, Buddy.

The Bay Area native remembers the time a class was studying John Steinbeck, when another student said that she was sick of hearing about the homeless.

"And I said, 'Watch your mouth. You're looking at one.' Then you could have heard a pin drop," she said. "It's quite easy to judge when you have a house to live in or you have meds when you're depressed and health care."

In response to growing wealth inequities, unions, civil rights groups and community organizations formed Silicon Valley Rising about three years ago. They demand better pay and benefits for the low-income earners who make the region run.

SEIU United Service Workers West, for example, organized roughly 3,000 security guards who work for companies that contract with Facebook, Google and Caltrain, the mass transit system that connects Silicon Valley with San Francisco.

One of those workers is Albert Brown III, a 46-year-old security officer who recently signed a lease for half of a \$3,400 two-bedroom unit in Half Moon Bay, about 13 miles from his job.

He can barely afford the rent on his \$16-an-hour salary, even with overtime, but the car that doubled as his home needed a pricey repair and he found a landlord willing to overlook his lousy credit. Still, Brown worries he won't be able to keep up with his payments.

His feet have been hurting. What if a doctor tells him to rest for a few days or a week?

"I can't miss a minute. If I miss a minute or a shift? No way, man. A week? Forget it, it's over. It's all downhill from there," he said.

"It's a sad choice. I have to decide whether to be homeless or penniless, right?"

Follow AP's complete coverage of the homeless crisis here:

<https://apnews.com/tag/HomelessCrisis>