

Homeless

(Continued from Page 1) homeless persons, up 65 persons from the 86 logged in 2005, and up almost 300 percent from the 36 documented in 2002. Included among the 2006 crimes were five rapes, six people set on fire and 20 murders. These numbers are almost certainly low, because a high percentage of attacks on the homeless are believed to go unreported.

The escalating violence and accompanying media coverage has prompted lawmakers in six states — California, Florida, Maryland, Massachusetts, Nevada and Texas — to introduce legislation that would extend hate crime laws to enhance penalties for violent crimes committed against homeless people.

A seventh state, Maine, recently passed a law mandating harsher penalties for violence against the homeless without labeling such attacks hate crimes. Florida led the nation in 2006 with 48 reported attacks on the homeless in cities located in all regions of the state; however, legislators there voted down the proposed legislation in May. The state with the second highest tally, Arizona, had 16, all but one of which occurred in the Phoenix metropolitan area.

Last January, shortly before the NCH report came out, three teenagers were arrested for shooting to death two homeless men in St. Petersburg, Fla. during a botched robbery.

"Clearly, homeless people are targeted because of their lack of housing," said NCH executive director Michael Stoops.

"If every homeless person had a door, a key, whether to a shelter, or apartment or motel room, there would be less attacks," Stoops said.

The spreading violence has raised a key question for Stoops, other advocates for the homeless, and the larger civil rights community: Should the homeless, who are frequently targeted out of hatred but also because of the sheer ease of attacking them, be protected by hate crimes legislation?

Mutual Protection

Washington, who considers himself lucky to have survived last year's beating at the hands of six skinheads, still carries his Bayfront Medical Center hospital records in a black leather pouch on his waist. They show he was admitted to the emergency room and discharged last Dec. 1. The attack left scars on his forehead and an abscess below his bloodshot right eye.

After the attack, Washington moved into St. Petersburg's infamous "tent city," a place where dozens of homeless people congregate inside tents on a small plot of land just outside the downtown business corridor.

St. Petersburg homeless advocate Eric Rubin, who used to be homeless himself, said that homeless people created the tent city last year to be in a safe zone of mutual protection, with its own democratically elected government and security patrols.

"That is what brought it [the tent city] together, people being beat up and murdered," Rubin told the *Intelligence Report*, published by the Southern Poverty Law Center.

"The homeless spontaneously came together for protection, and that's what we're still working toward," Rubin

who stays there has been attacked or harassed, including herself.

"I've had eggs thrown at me and my stuff stolen," said Hines, known affectionately to her constituents as "Mom."

"They're just rich kids. ...When they throw whatever at you and you see the car they're driving, it's not an old Chevy, y'know?"

Many attacks on the homeless go far beyond throwing eggs from nice cars. In February, two White teenagers and a 22-year-old White man videotaped their premeditated attack on a randomly chosen homeless victim as they kicked and beat him in Corpus Christi, Texas.

On March 27, homeless Army veteran John D'Amico and his friend Michael Wantland, who's also homeless, were attacked by two

showed that 84 percent of attacks on the homeless in 2006 were carried out by assailants under the age of 25 and 62 percent were committed by youths between 13 and 19.

Stoops blames at least some of the violence on "thrill seekers" inspired by the wildly popular "Bum Fights" DVD series.

"These kids are bored to death," said Stoops. "They're at home watching violence on TVs and on their computers, and they say, 'Let's go emulate what we just saw.'"

Last January, Florida Atlantic University surveillance cameras captured three teenagers beating to death a 45-year-old homeless man with baseball bats in Fort Lauderdale. The graphic images quickly made their way to mainstream news broadcasts and YouTube video streams.

Insight, Laws and Solutions

There are conditions and societal attitudes that contribute to this abuse according to homeless advocates who say that legislators and city leaders must be aware of the dynamics of the "dehumanization" of the homeless — understanding the victims and the abusers.

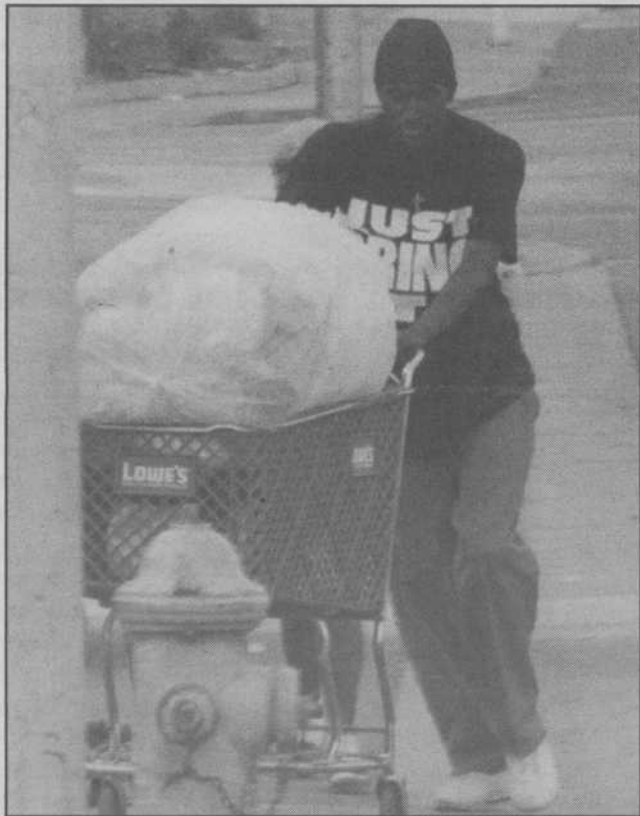
Local laws criminalizing the feeding of homeless persons send a dangerous message, labeling them as "low-lives," signaling a green light to younger people and those prone to abusing others considered inferior, according to Stoops of the homeless coalition. Advocates for protecting the homeless urge legislators to qualify this form of abuse as a hate crime, but there is opposition and misperception.

Homelessness is a "status," something the homeless "don't choose," according to Robin Tomas, president of the California Association of Human Relations Organizations. Tomas explains the perception is otherwise, but deems crimes against homeless persons is status-based and should be protected as are crimes targeting ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and other protected categories.

The passage of stronger laws is imperative, says Brian Levin, director of the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism at California State University, San Bernardino, because of the "astronomical risk" of attack faced by the homeless.

In Part 2: "Prejudicial Targeting" and "The Un-Welcome Mat"

Brentin Mock writes for *Southern Poverty Law Center's Intelligence Report*.



Sentinel-Voice photo by Ramon Savoy

A homeless man pushes a cart filled with his belongings.

said.

The tent city made headlines in January when local police raided it, slicing tents down with blades while homeless men and women cringed inside. The campers rebuilt. But on March 13, the encampment swarmed with police and contracted workers who broke the city down again. Municipal officials planned to move the campers to a city-run lot where they would be photographed, fingerprinted and given ID wristbands, then supervised by city officials.

Washington, who is the tent city's elected donations intake officer, sat aloof in a rickety lawn chair, watching the city workers dismantle his city one stake at a time. Kathy Hines, the encampment's elected mayor, said almost everyone

10-year-old kids and one 17-year-old in Daytona Beach, Fla. One of the 10-year-olds allegedly smashed D'Amico in the eye socket with a cinderblock.

"Yeah, they attacked me because I'm homeless," D'Amico told the *Intelligence Report*. "They were calling me 'ol' man' — this and that. They were just looking for a fight."

Two days later, in Laguna Beach, Calif., a 22-year-old member of MS-13, a particularly violent Latino street gang, was arrested for stabbing a homeless man he apparently chose at random.

Unlike the Laguna Beach stabbing, the vast majority of attacks on the homeless are carried out by young, White and middle-class males, according to the NCH study of crime statistics. The study

Autopsy

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sleeping outside the convention center at 2 a.m. when her father either jumped on the hood or was struck by the patrol car. What she remembers supports the police report.

"When I raised my head, I saw my dad on the hood," Shauntan Brumfield told CNN. "He was holding on. I saw his hand balled up, and he was going down to punch through the glass. I heard the gunshot."

Jordan said there was no dispute Brumfield had a pair of shears or large scissors in his hand when he wound up on the hood of the car and that the two police officers inside had reason to believe they were endangered.

"We believe in this incident that the police officers were truthful and credible and, therefore, this was a justifiable homicide," Jordan said.

Family members said Daniel Brumfield had shears in his hand because he had been using them to cut cardboard boxes to use as makeshift beds for his grandchildren to sleep on, rather than lay on the bare concrete outside the convention center.

In a statement released by the New Orleans Police Department in October 2005, the department said Officer Ronald Mitchell shot Brumfield outside the convention center at about 2 a.m. on Sept. 3, five days after Hurricane Katrina flooded the city.

The statement said that moments after Mitchell and his partner heard what they thought was a gunshot, a man jumped onto the hood of their patrol car swinging something shiny. The officers, believing they were being attacked, opened fire. The police statement described the incident as attempted murder of a police officer.

The case is further complicated by the fact that the officer who fired the fatal shot, Ronald Mitchell, was later terminated by the police department for what police spokeswoman Sabrina Richardson said was "a domestic violence issue with his wife."

Mitchell has since gone to work as a security guard at a strip club and could not be reached for comment.

CNN filed a lawsuit against the Orleans Parish coroner more than a year ago to gain access to autopsy reports on four people shot and killed by police in the first week after Hurricane Katrina struck.

In a court hearing, CNN authenticated one initial autopsy report that showed Ronald Madison — an unarmed, mentally retarded person with no criminal record — was killed by a shotgun blast to his back, even though the police officer told investigators that Madison had turned and reached in his waistband before that officer opened fire. Also killed on the Danziger Bridge was James Brissette, 19.

The officer, who soon resigned from the department, is charged with first-degree murder in the case, pegged the "Danziger Bridge incident." Six other policemen also were charged as a result of a shootout on the Danziger Bridge, which occurred a day after Brumfield was killed by police outside the Convention Center. Three of the other officers were indicted in the killing of a second person on the bridge. All the officers have pleaded innocent and are awaiting trial.

An August 16 hearing will be held to determine whether the presiding judge in that case, Raymond Bigelow, should recuse himself from the case and whether charges filed against several of the indicted officers should be dropped.

Assistant police superintendent Steven Nicholas told The Associated Press that the coroner's report was released because the district attorney had closed the case without charges.

"What, do you think a person can't be shot in the back to protect yourself?" he said.

"It's not like the Old West where you wait for someone to draw. A person might attack and then duck around. There can be all sorts of reasons for it."

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