

# Seniors on the streets: Aging homeless population of Silicon Valley

*As the population ages and housing crisis continues, more and more older adults are finding themselves faced with the grim prospect of homelessness.*

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SAN JOSE — Down a dusty dirt slash through the weeds, beside a busy freeway offramp in East San Jose, a padlocked gate leads to what Audrey Apodaca calls her own private “gated community.”

At any given time, there’s three or four of them living in the tidy drainage culvert between the highway and a residential neighborhood — all older homeless people trying to get by and avoid being noticed because that means being swept out. It’s a survival-mode existence that the 60-year-old Apodaca didn’t expect when she arrived in San Jose four years ago with her husband, Michael, and best friend, a Rottweiler mix named Kalli Marie. They came in a recreational vehicle with dreams of criss-crossing the country while he picked up jobs as a heavy equipment operator.

Things didn’t go as planned. The RV was stolen, then someone borrowed their van and parked it in a red zone and they couldn’t afford to get it out of impound and last August, Michael unexpectedly died.

“They say homelessness is only a paycheck away,” said Apodaca, a Ute Indian from Colorado. “And it was. We felt great while we had the RV, things were looking great. We were going to be sitting outside of it on our rocking chairs, traveling and getting old.”

Apodaca is one of the growing number of older Americans who are becoming homeless, a population that’s hard to count because they aren’t tallied as a subgroup in the “Point in Time” homeless census conducted every two years.

However, in a follow-up survey of 587 of the 7,394 homeless counted in Santa Clara County this year, 43 percent were over 51 years old compared — a 23 percent increase since 2015. It’s a trend that’s occurring across the country as Baby Boomers, particularly those born between 1955 and 1965, grow old.

Robert Aguirre, a 63-year-old advocate who recently became homeless again, said the homelessness trap is especially vicious for older adults.

“Younger people are more likely to get a job, or find a safety net — friends, relatives — that allows them to get back into normal life,” he said. “But senior citizens — if you don’t want to be a greeter at Walmart what are you going to do? And maybe your children are themselves drowning, hard-pressed to help you.”

Many, like Aguirre, became homeless after losing their homes. Sixteen percent of those surveyed said eviction was the cause of their homelessness. That’s up from 10 percent last year and just 5 percent in 2011.

“I’m not afraid of this, and I know how to handle myself,” said Aguirre, who now lives in a Dodge Neon borrowed from a friend. “But I am using the situation to forward the idea that we need to not discriminate against a renter because of their source of income. It is a problem.”

Advocates for both the homeless and seniors say it’s a situation that’s only going to get worse as a populous generation continues to get older. The nation is “not prepared to meet the housing needs of this aging group,” stated a 2014 AARP report, and the results are going to be

more and more people like Apodaca and Aguirre facing grim options. It's an assessment shared by Silicon Valley homeless advocates.

According to a joint report by Harvard University and the AARP, the number of adults 50 and over is expected to grow to 132 million by 2030 — an increase of more than 70 percent since 2000. In Silicon Valley, more than one in four residents will be over 60 by 2030, according to a Santa Clara County report.

And many of them are barely getting by.

"The lack of affordability in high-cost markets such as Silicon Valley, New York or D.C. definitely exacerbates the problem," said Dan Soliman, who oversees housing impact studies at the AARP Foundation. "However, the issue is far-reaching into communities throughout the nation."

He added that many older adults "have not, and likely will not" recover from financial hits taken during the recession.

"We may see more older adults with little to no means in the future vying to survive," he said.

In San Francisco, where the Public Health Department keeps an extensive database of services rendered to homeless clients, the number of those age 60 or older jumped 30 percent from 2007 to 2015. Nationally, the number of people over 50 living on the street rose 20 percent from 2007 to 2014, according to the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Brian Greenberg of LifeMoves, which runs 17 shelters serving 750 people each night in Silicon Valley, said their five non-family shelters have seen a pronounced rise in average age of clients over the past three years — about 18 months each year.

They're over age 55 and many have health-related challenges: More clients with mobility issues, bearing walkers and wheelchairs. Others take multiple medications that need management. And many have a hard time adapting to the dorm-style living.

"Many of them have never been homeless before and never imagined they would experience homelessness," Greenberg said. "It's people who were in service sector jobs, whose spouse passed away and rent tripled over the past decade and they can no longer afford to rent given their fixed income."

Homeless living takes a toll. According to the National Coalition for the Homeless, those chronically living on the street have an estimated lifespan between 42 and 52 years, compared with 78 for the general population.

"Fifty is the new 75 for that population," said Dr. Margot Kushel, a UCSF professor who has studied aging homeless extensively. "People basically prematurely age. ... There are 75 year olds who climb mountains. What we see here is an inversion of that."

Kushel added that doesn't mean the person with health issues has been on the streets their whole life. Those who became homeless later in life fared better than the long-term chronic homeless, but still much worse than the general population.

"What we know is that many of them were already poor, working class, doing physical labor jobs, low-skill but high-stress jobs," she said. "And they likely had poor access to health care."

Apodaca, who goes by "Li'l Bit" on the streets, said she sometimes seeks treatment at Valley Medical Center but generally gets by without government assistance. She says the "saddest thing" to her is seeing people older than her on the street, 70-year-olds living in cars.

It's rough being on her own — Kalli Marie's been missing since April when someone borrowed the dog to use as a spare-change prop but fell asleep and lost her — but she gets by.

"What you see here is a panhandler and a survivor," Apodaca said. "Homelessness can be addictive, and some people choose it. I don't choose it, but I survive it."