


# VENTURA COUNTY 2007 HOMELESS COUNT



 **Sunny**  
High of 64 at the coast, 70 inland. C8  
Wednesday, Jan. 24, 2007

## VENTURA COUNTY **STAR**

**Conejo Valley Edition**

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**COUNTY**  
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**IN FRIDAY'S STAR**

**Academic aggregation**  
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East County Editor: Mike Comeaux, 496-0803; [mcomeaux@VenturaCountyStar.com](mailto:mcomeaux@VenturaCountyStar.com)

Thursday, Jan. 25, 2007

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## STAR East County

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**The skinny on a sandwich**  
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Tuesday, Jan. 23, 2007

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IN WEDNESDAY'S STAR

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# Mission to count homeless begins Volunteers will be out today

By Teresa Rochester  
trochester@VenturaCountyStar.com  
January 23, 2007

Jeff Rodriguez is ready.

The missions pastor for Crossroads Community Church in Camarillo has a dozen volunteers at his disposal and others waiting in the wings.

He has gathered jackets, sandwiches and canned food to use as goodwill offerings.

Armed with the offerings and clipboards, Rodriguez and his crew will hit the streets, parks and parking lots of Camarillo this afternoon in search of the homeless.

Hundreds of other volunteers throughout Ventura County will do the same. Today marks the beginning of Ventura County's first homeless count.

"This is an amazing event," Rodriguez said.

The count is required for all communities receiving funding for homeless services from the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Once the count is complete, the number will be incorporated into the county's 10-year plan to reduce homelessness.

"We have numbers in there, but those numbers are guesstimates until we actually get what the homeless count is," said Cathy Brudnicki, executive director

of the Ventura County Homeless and Housing Coalition. The plan is designed to curb homelessness through the development of more affordable housing, improved prevention programs and more coordination between existing services.

The results of the count will be used to make decisions about services and funding.

For Jessica Murray, director of the Community Assistance Program in Ojai, that is the most important point.

"This is going to help us get a real clear picture of who isn't being served," she said. "We can develop more and better services if we know who and where the people are."

Murray's crews of volunteers will begin at 6 this morning and hit Steckel Park, Camp Comfort and the bike trail in Ojai.

She encouraged the homeless to come to social service centers so they can be counted.

After today's street count, the census takers will move to homeless shelters, food pantries and other social service providers to ensure that as many people as possible are counted.

Organizers have conceded that the count will likely fall short. It is difficult to tally those who live in vehicles or those who sleep on the couches at friends' houses.

## Count will be used to determine services

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## County begins homeless count

By Teresa Rochester,  
trochester@VenturaCountyStar.com  
January 23, 2007

**S**usan Marine knew they were coming. As soon as the group of five, escorted by two police officers, arrived outside her tent in the Arroyo Simi, Marine stepped out in a black T-shirt and jeans, her blue eyes rimmed in black eyeliner, to answer their questions.

"We knew they were doing the count," Marine said. "I just hope they put it to good service, to good use."

Today marks the beginning of Ventura County's homeless count. Volunteers armed with standardized forms are making their way to river bottom encampments, shopping centers, parks and parking lots for a street count. Organizers said the count was proceeding smoothly today, with no major incidents.

On Wednesday, the count will move indoors. Those in homeless shelters, at food pantries and at other social service spots will be counted. That count will end Monday.

Ventura County is joining about 500 other communities across the nation in counting its

homeless population, said consultant Joe Colletti, executive director of the Institute for Urban Research and Development.

The reasons for the count are numerous. Communities that receive funding for homeless programs through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development are required to conduct such counts. Programs here receive about \$1 million from HUD.

Information gleaned from the count also will be incorporated into a draft 10-year plan to end homelessness in Ventura County.

The plan calls for more affordable housing for the county's poorest residents, an increase in programs to keep people from becoming homeless, and better coordination between social service agencies.

The plan estimates about 6,000 people in the county experience homelessness each year.

Results from the homeless count also will be used to make decisions about where services are needed and how to divvy up funds.

The numbers tallied in the next five days will serve as a baseline for future counts, which must be conducted every two years.



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## IN SEARCH OF THE COUNTY'S HOMELESS



**Eric Parsons / Star staff**

County social worker Chris Russell, right, gives Randi Brown and Jason Higbey information about free pet care in the Ventura River bottom Tuesday morning. Ventura Police Officer Trenner Marchetti, left, and Cpl. Jon Hixson accompanied the census takers.

# Census takers face disdain, courtesy as they tally count

By Teresa Rochester,  
trochester@VenturaCountyStar.com  
January 24, 2007

**M**ary King-Aitchison crouched before a small blue tent draped with a brown tarp, a clipboard balanced on her knee, a pen in her black-gloved hand.  
"Can I ask you a few questions?" asked King-Aitchison, who works in Simi Valley's Community Services

Department.

From within the tent, pitched in a clearing surrounded by brush deep in the rugged terrain near the Arroyo Simi, a man's voice consented.

"Your age?"

"45."

"And were you born in the U.S.?"

"Yeah."

Dawn had broken not long before, but the scene

*Continued* ▶

“If we can help identify our homeless people and their children, then we can provide them the educational services under law they are entitled to.”

**Paulette Ozar**, volunteer for homeless census.

## Count will be used to help guide programs



**Chuck Kirman / Star staff**

Rose Banuelos, program coordinator for the Oxnard Housing Authority, talks to people waiting for lunch at the Rescue Mission in Oxnard as part of the city's count of homeless people Tuesday.

in Simi Valley had already played out again and again Tuesday from Ojai to Moorpark, in river bottoms and on street corners, behind shopping centers and at day laborer sites.

Ventura County's homeless were counted.

The effort that began with a street count Tuesday will continue through Monday as volunteers and service providers focus on those in shelters, food pantries and other service agencies.

The homeless count, which is mandatory for any community that receives money for homeless programs from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, is the first of its kind for the majority of the county.

Ventura County receives about \$1 million a year from HUD, which requires that a count take place every two years, said Joseph Colletti, executive director of Institute for Urban Research and Development.

The results will be included in a 10-year plan that advocates are drafting to end homelessness. The plan calls for more affordable housing and improved programs to prevent homelessness, among other things. The numbers will also be used to make decisions about

the types of services available to the homeless and funding for those services.

The Ventura County Homeless and Housing Coalition, which is spearheading the plan, contracted with Colletti for \$30,000 to work on the 10-year plan and to use a count methodology that he created, said Cathy Brudnicki, executive director of the coalition.

Shortly after noon Tuesday, Brudnicki, Colletti and three other volunteers sat in a conference room that served as count headquarters in the United Way of Ventura County offices in Camarillo.

The day had been quiet so far.

“It's what we expected it to be because we spent so much time and energy organizing in the communities,” she said. “We hoped we had prepared people well, and we have.”

At roughly the same time, volunteers Maria Pinedo and Diana Sandoval walked Cooper Road in Oxnard, an oil-stained stretch of road lined with gated eateries, liquor stores and a church that offers free lunches.

As they walked the sidewalk, many people lowered their heads and quickly walked in the other direction.

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## Reasons for the count

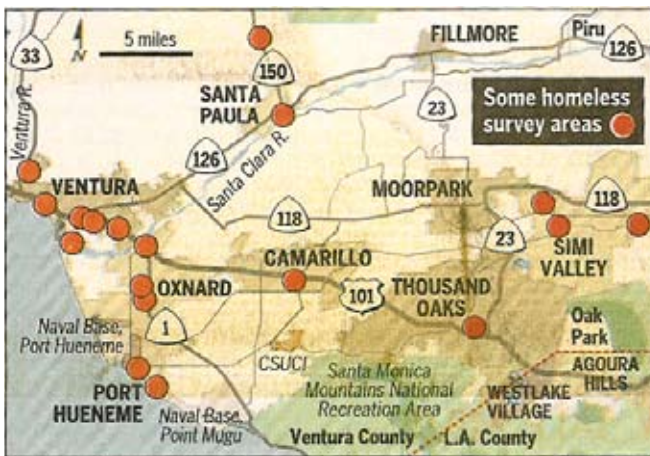
Top reasons for doing the homeless count:

- To find out how many homeless exist in our community. Prior numbers have been based on caseloads of homeless service providers.
- Once we have it, the number will be incorporated into the 10-year plan to end homelessness.
- The number will drive decision-making

concerning services and funding.

- It is required by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development in communities receiving HUD funding.
- The number will become the baseline for future counts.

*Source: Cathy Brudnicki, executive director, Ventura County Homeless and Housing Coalition*



**Online:** Log on to [www.VenturaCountyStar.com](http://www.VenturaCountyStar.com) for an interactive version of this map.



**Karen Quincy Loberg / Star Staff**

Simi Valley Police Officers Jim Wismar, left, and Greg Riegert, climbing into a crawl space at a Simi Valley overpass, check for occupants in a homeless encampment.

“These people don’t want to talk to us,” Pinedo said.

Outside Win’s Hamburgers on A Street, the soft-spoken pair approached three people sitting at a picnic table. A homeless man chased them off.

“You don’t care about us. Leave us alone,” he barked at the pair. Sandoval added three notches to her count, then moved on.

Ventura County’s largest city is conducting its count separate from the rest of the county.

Because of its size and demographics, Oxnard receives its own money from HUD, said Sal Gonzalez, the city’s housing director.

Two years ago, when HUD mandated the counts, Oxnard officials tallied 183 homeless people in its borders. The county did not do a count that year.

After a number of discussions between the city and the coalition, it was decided that Oxnard would use the methodology created by Colletti. Using the same counting method will help ensure the integrity of both counts’ results.

“It is beneficial because we can now compare numbers and check and see if there is any duplication,” Colletti said.

Earlier in Thousand Oaks, volunteers filled boxes with bag lunches, and their pockets with Carl’s Jr. and McDonald’s meal cards, to offer to the homeless people they met along the way.

Monica Nolan and Paulette Ozar headed out in Nolan’s sport utility vehicle to Newbury Park. For three hours, they walked parks and shopping centers looking for people to count.

Like archeologists, Nolan and Ozar peered over a hillside along Highway 101 pointing out potential clues that someone might have lived at the rocky outcropping.

“There are beer cans,” Nolan said, concluding that the spot behind a former Home Depot was likely a party spot.

Ozar said she wouldn’t miss the count.

“If we can help identify our homeless people and their children, then we can provide them the edu-

*Continued* ▶

cational services under law they are entitled to,” she said. “And get them enrolled in school.”

Well before Nolan and Ozar started counting, volunteers with gloves and clipboards and Ventura police and Ventura County sheriff’s deputies snaked through dense brush lining the Ventura River bottom.

Deputies discovered the camp of Kent Christman, 48, who came to Ventura from Portland, Ore., two years ago.

His left hand was swollen and wrapped in tape. He was barefoot. He said he hurt his hand protecting himself in a fight with another river dweller named “Cool Whip.”

For money, he scrounges bottles and aluminum cans that he takes to a recycling center. He said he no longer drinks alcohol. He planned to contact his sister in Portland to see if she will wire him money to get a bus or train home.

“It’s really hard to make enough money to pay rent here,” he said, his voice cracking and his eyes welling with tears. “I need to clean up my act.”

The early morning chill had gone by the time the five volunteers at the arroyo in Simi Valley came upon John Griffin.

In the middle of the camp he shared with another man was a table with a metal spice rack, the glass jars of spices partially filled. In the trees hung a wooden fish, a white feathered dream-catcher and a blue disabled parking placard.

Dressed in a red and gray track suit, Griffin, 35, said he moved into the arroyo six months ago after his van was impounded by police because he was driving without a license. After giving his information to the counters, Griffin said the count was a good idea.

“It will help them (city and county officials), and it might help us,” he said, adding that it may give “a better basic overall understanding of people, some of whom choose to live outside and others who have no choice but to live outside.”

Griffin said that after arriving by circumstance, he is staying in the arroyo by choice.

“I love it out here because it’s beautiful,” he said. “Call me crazy, I like it. I do.”

— *Staff writer Kevin Clerici contributed to this report.*

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# Police say they'll clear Ventura River

By Scott Hadly  
shadly@VenturaCountyStar.com  
January 24, 2007

**R**ousted from his sleep, Victor Ramirez stood outside his makeshift tent early Tuesday, shirtless in pajama bottoms and white socks as the goose bumps rose on his bare skin.

"We're not going to arrest you; we're just here with someone who wants to ask you a few questions," Ventura Police Cpl. Jon Hixson said. "You know you're not supposed to camp here, right?"

Then county social worker Chris Russell asked for his initials, the year of his birth and where he had slept the night before.

"Are you homeless?"

"Yeah," Ramirez said. "I can't afford rent right now."

The 30-year-old sometime-construction worker shares a tent with his girlfriend, Randi Brown, 21, and their dog, Pokey. It's hidden in a warren of 30-foot-tall arundo donax, an invasive bamboo that chokes much of the Ventura River bottom.

Their tattered shelter is next to that of a friend, Tim "Timbo" Bowman, 45, who was recently released from a six-month stay in the County Jail. Bowman said he was sent up for aggravated assault after a neighbor "sicked her dog on me, and I went after it with a shovel." Normally, he'd be staying with his mother, but she died, and he has nowhere else to go.

## 22 people found

Bowman and Ramirez were among 22 people found living in the dry Ventura riverbed Tuesday between the beach and just north of Stanley Avenue.



**Karen Quincy Loberg / Star Staff**

John Rodriguez, homeless for two years, was the only one left at a large encampment in Simi Valley.

Social workers with police and sheriff's deputy escorts were there for two reasons. They were helping with a countywide census of the homeless. And they were to warn people in the river bottom that they have to clear out within the next week or risk arrest.

Amongst the red willows, mule fat scrub brush, sycamores and thick stands of bamboo of the river bottom, people have long found hidden places to shelter. Within easy walking distance to services along Ventura Avenue, close to downtown, and at the intersection of the highway and railroad tracks, the area is a magnet for people on their way somewhere else or with nowhere else to go.

Sean, a 35-year-old from St. Louis who would give only his first name, said he picked his camp on the beach side of the railroad tracks because he was easily concealed, could walk downtown for food and hop onto a train when he was ready to leave.

*Continued* ▶

# Ventura River homeless warned area will be cleared soon



Greg Mott, above, lives along Highway 118 near Sycamore Drive in Simi Valley.

## Camp close to food, train

“I keep to myself,” said the man, who has been a “traveler” for eight years. “I stay away from shelters ‘cause I just want to be left alone.”

He kept warm during the freeze with a little fire and a few extra layers of clothes. In the morning, he hoofed his way to the Burger King for a cup of coffee and a bathroom break.

But even Sean’s little camp and the many others that dot the river bottom

have left their mark.

The campers leave behind trash, waste and sometimes sophisticated shelters that include fencing, rugs, mattresses, tents and tarps. Beyond that, there is a certain “wild west” atmosphere hidden among the tall reeds.

“It’s not a safe place for anyone,” Ventura Police Sgt. Tom Radwin said.

There is also the danger of a rapidly rising river during winter rains. The river has claimed lives before, and several homeless people have had to be plucked from the rising water in the past. More than two years ago, the city of Ventura did its most extensive sweep of the river bottom, forcing out about 150 people.

## River dangerous during rains

“I guarantee we saved some lives,” Ventura Social Services Director Peter Brown said of the sweep.

Less than two months later, a monster storm drenched the county and the rain-swollen river was edging the bottom of the Main Street bridge. If anyone had been camping on one of the many little tree and bamboo-covered sandbars or islands in the riverbed, they could have drowned in the rising water, Brown said.

But the long-term effects of the sweep and regular enforcement of no-camping laws through the river bottom area are harder to gauge.

“I would be surprised if there were as many people there,” Brown said, and indeed from the walk-through Tuesday, there were fewer people and even fewer unoccupied camps.

But walking on the crisscrossing litter-strewn trails, sodden clothes, pornographic magazines and mounds of human excrement, it’s easy to see that the problem isn’t likely to go away.



## Photos by Eric Parsons / Star Staff

With her teaser gun at the ready, Ventura Police Officer Trenner Marchetti orders Eddie McMilan out of tent in which he was hiding Tuesday. Officers assisted in the count of homeless and warned those in the river bottom to leave.



Ventura Police Cpl. Jon Hixon, left, interview Howard McClure during Tuesday’s count. McClure lives in an encampment along railroad tracks behind the Pierpoint Racquet Club.

And some of the problems have moved upstream, closer to Stanley Avenue, Brown said.

Ted Witt, manager of operations for Aera Energy, said his employees have seen more of a problem. The company, which has hired private security to deal with the issue, leases about 100 acres for oil production along the river and the adjacent Taylor Ranch.

“The camps pose security issues for our operations and our employees, and they’re trespassing,” Witt said.

Thirteen of the 22 people found camping along the river bottom were in the vicinity of Aera’s lease.

Within a week, police and sheriff’s deputies plan to go back, and this time they will be making arrests, issuing citations and clearing out the debris.



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# Opinion

## EDITORIAL:

# Homeless tally important step How can we end homelessness?

**K**nowledge is power, and in the case of learning the number of homeless in Ventura County, it is also money.

An ambitious job of counting homeless in Ventura County and across the United States continues today. The Star encourages all those who are without shelter to make themselves known to the hundreds of volunteers who are fanning out around the county this week to count them. Anyone who is homeless and has not been counted or who knows of someone who is homeless in Ventura County is encouraged to call the county of Ventura Homeless Services office at 987-6712 or one of the many local assistance agencies in their community.

A count is required by the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development, as it provides funding for homeless services.

The count is an important preliminary step in the county's 10-year plan to reduce homelessness, a project spearheaded by the Ventura County Homeless and Housing Coalition. Other organizations nationwide have taken up the same challenge to end homelessness in a decade.

The local homeless coalition's 20-part proposal to reduce homelessness notes there are an estimated 1,000 homeless people in the county on a given day, with many more thousands homeless in the course of a year.

This week's count will test those figures and give local officials a better gauge to guide decisions about funding and services. Of course, there is no way for a full count, given that many homeless are hidden in riverbeds, living in vehicles, at friends' houses or simply don't want to participate.

Certainly, a tremendous amount of work and coordination has gone into the effort and we commend those professionals and many more volunteers who have walked campgrounds, sidewalks, riverbeds, side streets and who knows where else to get an accurate count.

The tally continues for the next five days and results will be discussed at a Feb. 14 meeting, organized by the Ventura County Housing and Homeless Coalition.

Knowing how many homeless there are in Ventura County is a vital step toward marshaling the resources to assist neighbors in need.



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## Local tallying of homeless goes indoors

By Teresa Rochester,  
trochester@VenturaCountyStar.com  
January 25, 2007

In the dark and cold, Jessica Murray spent Tuesday morning counting the homeless living in Ojai and giving them free socks as part of a first-of-its-kind homeless count in Ventura County.

On Wednesday, Murray, the director of the Community Assistance Program, turned her attention indoors as the count continued with a focus on those using homeless shelters, food pantries and other social service agencies.

"We know who they are," Murray said. "We just put a note by their name so we know they have been counted. It's been a little easier for us. I think we probably got most of them."

The homeless count is required for communities that receive homeless funding from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

The results of the count will be included in a 10-year strategy to end homelessness, which calls for more affordable housing and programs that prevent homelessness. Information from the count also will be used to make decisions about funding and programs.

The results are expected to be released in four to six weeks, said Joseph Colletti, the executive director of the Institute for Urban Development and Research and also a count consultant.

"There was a lot of community commitment and as a result we were able to do a pretty thorough count," he said.

The service agency count will continue through Monday.

Diana Ortuno, shelter director for Lutheran Social Services in Thousand Oaks, said several of the agency's clients who came in Wednesday morning had already been counted the day before but "there seems to always be one or two new ones."

Those who participated in the street count said things went smoothly for the most part.

"There was a lot of word out in advance that the count was going to be happening," Ventura's Community Services Manager, Peter Brown, said, adding that most of those counted were responsive to the idea. "I think some people decided in advance they were not going to cooperate. When they were approached multiple times they gave us some feedback."

Cathy Brudnicki, executive director of the Ventura County Homeless and Housing Coalition, which spearheaded the count, said that a couple of concerns emerged in terms of training and locations where the counts took place.

"We could have given people a little more information in 'what-to-do-in-case-of,'" she said, adding that organizers also learned about an encampment that was missed and will be counted later.