

February 15, 2008

Attacks on the Homeless Rise, With Youths Mostly to Blame

By AMY GREEN

CROSS CITY, Fla. — Warren Messner was 15 when he and some friends attacked a homeless man and left him for dead. Mr. Messner jumped on a log laid across the man's ribs. He does not know why. He was high, does not remember much and wants to forget the rest.

Today Mr. Messner is a baby-faced 18-year-old serving 22 years for second-degree murder. He used to like skipping school and listening to rap music with friends. He imagined he eventually would help his father install flooring. Now he talks to his parents nearly every night from the maximum-security Cross City Correctional Institution.

"It was just a senseless crime," he said, his eyes down, his shoulders slumped. "I wish it would have never happened. It made no sense. It was stupidity."

Mr. Messner's story is not unusual. Nationwide, violence against the homeless is soaring, and overwhelmingly the attackers are teenagers and young adults. In Florida the problem is so severe that the National Coalition for the Homeless is setting up speakers bureaus to address a culture that sees attacking the homeless as a sport. It is the first time the organization has singled out a particular state.

Of more than 142 unprovoked attacks on homeless people in 2007, the most — at least 32 — were in Florida, according to a preliminary count by the coalition and the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty. Nationwide, such attacks rose about 65 percent from 2005.

In Fort Lauderdale a group of teenagers captured national attention in 2006 when a surveillance camera caught one laughing as he beat a homeless man with a baseball bat. The teenagers attacked three homeless men that night and face a murder trial in one man's death. A year later in Daytona Beach, a 17-year-old and two 10-year-olds attacked a homeless Army veteran. One 10-year-old dropped a cement block on the man's face, the police said.

"What could possibly be in the mind of a 10- or 12-year-old that would possess them to pick up a rock and pick up a brick and beat another human being in the head?" said Ron Book, chairman of the Miami-Dade County Homeless Trust. "It defies any rational thought process, but it's also why we felt so strongly we had to do something."

The trust has teamed with the local schools to develop a curriculum for elementary, middle and high schools teaching respect for the homeless.

Advocates for the homeless blame a society that they say shuns the homeless through laws that criminalize sleeping in parks, camping and begging.

"I think it reflects a lack of respect for the homeless that has reached such extreme proportions that homeless people aren't viewed as people," said Maria Foscarinis, executive director of the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty.

Troubled by news photos showing those two 10-year-olds in Daytona Beach in prison suits and handcuffs, the National Coalition for the Homeless joined with AmeriCorps Vista to open speakers bureaus last fall in Key West, Jacksonville and Tallahassee. Nine more are planned in Florida. The idea is to educate students using speakers who are homeless or once lived on the streets, and the organization wants to open more bureaus nationwide, said Michael Stoops, executive director of the coalition.

The speakers are like George Siletti, who grew up in foster care and lived as a homeless drifter on and off for 25 years, starting at the age of 16. Now 51, Mr. Siletti said he took medication for schizophrenia and depression and lived in subsidized housing in Washington, addressing schools, churches and organizations about homelessness.

"I've had bottles thrown at me. I've had people spit on me, cursed me out for no reason," said Mr. Siletti, who was attacked by teenagers in Fort Lauderdale as he and others slept under a bridge in the 1980s. "People seem to pick on the most vulnerable because they really think that they won't do nothing."

In Miami, students are learning from a weeklong curriculum and a DVD teaching that families are the fastest-growing segment of the homeless population. The curriculum requires younger students to make posters and older students to write essays about what they learned.

Legislation adding the homeless to hate-crime laws has been introduced in Alaska, California, Florida, Maryland, Massachusetts, Nevada, Ohio and Texas. Bills are also pending in Congress.

Mr. Messner, who is an imposing six feet, 240 pounds in his blue prison suit, talks about his crime with quiet resignation.

He and his friends were looking for a place to smoke marijuana near his home in the Daytona Beach area when they stumbled on Michael Roberts. Mr. Messner joined the attack and remembers hearing Mr. Roberts groan when he jumped on the log, but then Mr. Messner tried to pull his friends away, he said.

"He was making noises," Mr. Messner said. "He asked one time why we was doing it to him. Why we was messing with him."

A few days later, Mr. Roberts's body was found. Mr. Messner agreed to a plea bargain and drew the lightest sentence of the four convicted in the attack.

He does not like prison much. He keeps busy doing yard work, exercising and reading. He likes James Patterson novels and murder mysteries. He has dropped at least 40 pounds and developed a penchant for prison tattoos. One arm reads "thug" while the other reads "life." His mother's name, Lori, is on one hand. On one arm is the same cross he wears around his neck, surrounded by the words "hope," "faith" and "love."

"I'm not a killer. I know that," Mr. Messner said. "A lot of people, they see this story and call us killers. I'm not a killer. I regret what I did. I wish I could take it back."