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## Alarming rate of Sacramento homeless deaths due to preventable—and often violent—causes

### Almost one homeless person dies each week, according to a new report

By [Dave Kempa](#)

**Vivian Valles** feared for the life of her son, **Vincent McKinney**. She'd long fought to find him stable housing, but the 51-year-old McKinney, suffering from bouts of prolonged inebriation, always wound up back on the streets of Sacramento.



Vivian Valles' son, Vincent McKinney, died as a result of a beating while living on the streets. A new report says more than 500 homeless individuals died on the streets in the past 11 years.

PHOTO BY STEVEN CHEA

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“One of these days, you’re gonna get hurt or killed down here,” Valles, 70, would tell him. She’d watch the evening news, bracing herself when they named a homeless man struck by

a train or found dead.

This past Thanksgiving Day, the broadcast she'd long dreaded arrived.

"That night, I saw it," said Valles, her voice breaking in grief. "I saw it on TV. They said it was my son."

McKinney's life ended in the park across from the Crocker Art Museum, the result of a beating he sustained early in the evening of Wednesday, November 27.

While McKinney's passing comes as a shock to family, friends and homeless advocates who'd been impressed by his recent streak of sobriety, a study to be released this Friday shows Sacramento's homeless community endures an alarming rate of deaths throughout the year due to preventable—and often violent—causes.

Sacramento County has been home to 501 homeless deaths, almost a quarter of which were a result of injury or wounds, between June 2002 and June 2013, according to a report by the Sacramento Regional Coalition to End Homelessness and Sacramento Steps Forward.

"It's sobering to think that, over a 10 year period, we're talking about almost one person a week, week in and week out," said Bob Erlenbusch, executive director of SRCEH and author of the study.

Erlenbusch was particularly shocked that 23 percent of the deaths came as a result of injuries or wounds—disproportionately from blunt-force trauma, gunshots, stabbings and hangings. "It's very indicative of how violent it is for homeless people living in the community," he said.

Homeless advocates will release the report, titled "Sacramento Homeless Deaths Study 2002-2013," in tandem with a memorial ceremony taking place at 10:30 a.m. in Friendship Park at Sacramento Loaves & Fishes on Friday, December 20. This will be one of numerous services across the country held in recognition of National Persons' Homeless Memorial Day, which falls each year on the winter solstice—December 21 this year—which observers refer to as the longest, darkest night of the year.

In releasing the study, which uses Sacramento County Coroner's Office data, Steps Forward and SRCEH aim to raise awareness on the high rate of deaths in the homeless community (some two to three times more than that of housed Sacramentans, according to the report) and stress the preventability of most homeless deaths. Ideally, the groups want to hold a homeless-deaths policy forum with the Sacramento County Board of Supervisors to make strides toward increasing the life expectancy of homeless residents which, at 47 for women and 50 for men, falls about 25 years short of the national rate.

Given these figures, it is perhaps not such a surprise that McKinney's life ended at 51, just one year after his partner, Michael Wagner, who passed last winter while sleeping next to McKinney.

When a member of the homeless community dies, Loaves & Fishes holds a memorial for the deceased in Friendship Park. Birte Peebles, library director at Loaves and “keeper of the names” of departed guests, remembers Wagner’s death.

“I’m not sure if they’ve ever had that many people at a service,” said Peebles, who still holds in the library archives a flyer from the memorial, which includes a photo of the mustachioed Wagner, head atilt, grinning under a baseball cap.

“Vincent was genuinely devastated when Michael died,” recalled Friendship Park staffer Mark Hawkins, who conducts memorials for the dozens of guests who die each year. Last Tuesday, Hawkins stood near the park’s Memorial Wall, which includes engravings of the names of park guests who died in previous years. Hawkins oversaw Wagner’s memorial in March. On January 10, 2014, he’ll do the same for McKinney.

“It’s a chance for people here to say goodbye,” he said, then turned his thoughts to Valles. “We’re not designed to bury our children.”

Today, the county coroner and Sacramento police continue to investigate McKinney’s death, with Arthur Bird, an acquaintance of McKinney’s, currently facing murder charges.

And while closure is not yet obtainable, the grieving process has long since begun. Early this month, mourners converged in the park across from the Crocker Art Museum where McKinney’s life was taken, piecing together a memorial on a nearby picnic table complete with candles, flowers and notes scrawled in chalk to the departed. It is along one of these green wood panels where, even today, you might see remnants of the white-chalk note Valles left her son.

“It is us you left behind,” she wrote. “Our family who will feel the loss. Now you know how much we all love you.”