

# Missing persons report: 1,107 Tenderloin kids

Neighborhood stability at stake as views of a mobile population clash over proving who really lives here



**Fourth- and fifth-grade students** visiting the Janice Mirikitani Family, (Above) Youth and Childcare Center gather outside the center in November on their way to the Tenderloin Children's Playground a short walk away. **Tigotae Mills, 9,** (Below) San Francisco City Impact Academy fourth-grader, participates in a science project.

## People of the Tenderloin

With this issue, Central City Extra launches a photojournalistic series to put the Tenderloin's people on display. It taps the talents of Paul Dunn, whose "Farmers on the Roof" feature in The Extra won first place in the S.F. Peninsula Press Club's recent annual awards. People make a neighborhood and the Tenderloin is San Francisco's most diverse. This series will show them in action.

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It's possible that some children were adrift in the city with no neighborhood connection. The homeless children count has risen disturbingly, according to Jennifer Friedenbach, Coalition on Homelessness executive director: Nearly 2,100 in San Francisco now, some with parents, some without, a surge from the 844 in 2005. Moreover, it's unlikely any of the TL kids will return.

But to one highly respected child-and-family authority in the Tenderloin, the loss is way off the beam.

Midge Wilson, founder and executive director of Bay Area Women's and Children's Center — a neighborhood safety net since 1981 — says not so. BAWCC, which serves 600 neighborhood women and children each week, is based at Tenderloin Community, keeping her especially close to the population. Wilson counts 3,500 kids in the Tenderloin.

"We call it our Tenderloin Kids Count. I've sent out teams of college kids, interns, building to residential building, who ask building managers and owners for the numbers, ages and races of kids living here.

"We've done it four times over 34 years, and the numbers are always about the same, around 3,500. And that's what we go with. We share that information with others who work with families and children in the Tenderloin. It's a compelling figure in an area so small."

What makes her count credible, she says, is the teams' ability to get a

more accurate count than the census. Her teams aren't counting for the government; they're counting for Wilson's center and for money and grants it might land to help neighborhood kids and their moms, great selling points. More kids means more leverage.

By contrast, HSA is the city's leader in using the census figures to guide program development for services. It also shares the information with community groups seeking grants.

The U.S. Census supplements its data annually based on results of the American Community Survey, a mandatory calculation that invites 1 in 38 households to answer survey questions online or by mail. The Census Bureau compiles the numbers for civic and academic institutions and businesses to use. The data also help the feds and states determine how to distribute more than \$400 billion each year.

Wilson counts Tenderloin kids, using the same boundaries as HSA, but HSA does it with census tracts, 122 through 125.

"With the census," Wilson says, "it's always an undercount. Large families are typical here. Let's say there's a family of six. But they will only report two kids because they're afraid they might not be able to stay there if they say more. We talk to the families and neighbors. Once we found as many as 10 people living in one small room on Leavenworth."

Wilson's first count was in 1984, the last in March 2007. Since then, she says, something unusual has occurred. "People were cooperative then,

but the mood in the Tenderloin has changed in recent years. People have grown more suspicious and protective of their privacy. They're more reserved about specifics about children."

The last crew she sent out in the summer of 2012 were three college students and a high school senior. They were armed with IDs and brochures about BAWCC. They came back almost empty-handed, rebuffed because people wouldn't talk to them.

"I thought we'd get information like we did before," Wilson says. "But I'm really comfortable using that 3,500 number. If anything, I err on the conservative side."

A decline in neighborhood children surely would show up in the Tenderloin Community Elementary School's records. The school district's 2013-14 data show enrollment was 364. A school spokesman said this year it is 373 and was 388 in 2012. For nine years before that, the K-5 school's enrollments never dropped below 351.

Certainly, there's been a shift in children in the Tenderloin, and Wilson marvels at the diversity it has brought to the school on Eddy near Van Ness she helped found 18 years ago.

Thirty years ago, Wilson says, two-thirds of the children were Asian and Pacific Islander. Ten years ago an influx of Arabic and Latino children began with a "wonderfully diverse" result.

The district Website shows the school's makeup last fall: Hispanic 34%, Asian 26%, other white 14%, African American 13%, Filipino 3%, American Indian 1%, Pacific Islander 1%, multiple

races 3% and decline to state 4%.

"The classes are all full," Wilson says. "If the school is under capacity, it's by very few. We're well beyond the original numbers. We're packed."

Where a decline does show up during the past decade is at Tenderloin Children's Playground a few blocks away on Ellis Street.

"As far as playground participation goes, yes, I did see the difference," says Rec and Park's Kay Rodriguez, who worked at the park from 1995 to 2009. "But I'm not sure why (it happened). There were a number of factors."

At first, she said, Tenderloin Playground was the only facility around with an after-school program. Then Glide created one. Soon all the schools had them. "I don't remember when," Rodriguez said. "But the kids would go directly into them. It happened really fast. DCYF was funding them."

And summers from 1995 to 2002 would see maybe 300 kids on the playground. "It's still the only safe place in the neighborhood to run around — it's still the sanctuary." But those numbers plummeted by 2009 to 100, sometimes down to 20, she said.

"It fluctuates in the Tenderloin. No one really stays there permanently. They (families) get a Section 8 and go to another part of the city. And the city is working faster to get them out. The numbers dropped drastically."

The park had an after-school tutoring program with 25 kids until 2009 when the department said to stop helping with homework because the job at the park was recreation. "We lost all those kids," Rodriguez said.

The park had seven employees in 2002; now it has two.

HSA's Kelly is pretty sure subsidized housing played a role by relocating the missing children, as Rodriguez suggests. But again, quantifying the egress is problematic. "We only have partial program numbers," Kelly said after consulting HSA's Housing and Homeless program about its effort to get families out of SROs and to rent-subsidized apartments.

The Tenderloin Housing Clinic ran the HSA program under contract from 2007 to 2012. The last two years, the rent subsidy program has focused more on families in homeless shelters and their wait lists while the SRO families program went to an organization called First Avenues. But the data show only former SRO residents who "transition successfully" off their rental subsidy, not those who get the subsidy. During THC's five years it was 59 families. With First Avenues it's been 20.

"The Tenderloin has the perception of being temporary, but it's a huge achievement if they (families) can move out," says Su of DCYF. "They work very, very hard to get into permanent housing. My concern is if they are doubling up" elsewhere, maybe "in the Sunset or Bayside. Others — low- to middle-income families — may have said, 'We can't live like this.' They weren't rich enough to live here. The \$55,000-\$80,000-a-year families don't qualify and are left out of other subsidies. So they go somewhere affordable."

Even so, the majority of the 1,100 children lost from the Tenderloin were

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(Top) **De Marillac Academy** sixth-grader Richard Espinoza, 11, left, shoots a basketball in the school's courtyard playground in November with sixth-grader Juan Herrera, 11, right. (Center) **Esteban Capulin**, left, jokes with Andres Arguijo during a poetry-writing lesson at the Vietnamese Youth Development Center. Capulin, 14, attends KIPP San Francisco College preparatory; Arguijo, 13, attends Galileo Academy of Science and Technology. (Bottom) **De Marillac Academy** sixth-grader Citlaly Angeles, 11, left, draws in the school's new art room. At right is sixth-grader Sean Hale, 11.