

AUBURN, ALA – Professor Carole Zugazaga worked as an emergency room social worker for ten years in Orlando, Fla. She then moved to help with the homeless population in Lee County, Ala. She has worked with Auburn University for the past six years researching the homeless population in the Auburn and Opelika area as a professor at Auburn University.

Some of her studies have used information gathered over long periods of time and others have taken data from snapshots of one day. Most data collected shows the Auburn/Opelika area having lower numbers of homelessness than other places in the nation. Zugazaga attributes this to not being able to find an accurate sample of respondents to her surveys.

The long term studies show that 47 percent of the homeless in Alabama suffer from mental illness, alcohol abuse, substance abuse or are separated from marriage. There are 40,000 homeless veterans in Alabama, and that number is growing. These are only a fraction of the statistics facing the homeless population in Alabama.

The snapshot studies, as Zugazaga calls them, shows different statistics than the long term studies. These statistics are from a single night in Alabama. According to the numbers, there are 5,391 homeless people in any given night in Alabama, of these 70 percent are men, 65 percent are white and 403 are victims of domestic violence.

Zugazaga put together the first report on the homeless population in 2006. She received help from the Auburn Police Department as well as going to abandoned warehouses around Opelika. While riding with the Auburn Police Department, she went to a few houses that homeless people will stay in for the night. She found no one inhabiting the buildings though there were signs people had been there recently.

She said she met a man at a run-down warehouse that had long, unkempt hair, a beard in equal disarray and wearing nothing but a loin cloth. She said he approached her to warn her of the dangers of entering the warehouse and was non-threatening despite his appearance.

Zugazaga told about a man that was homeless and living behind the Checker's restaurant in Auburn. He was living there for about two weeks until the police told him that he could not stay there. He was able to turn his life around and opened his own homeless shelter. His shelter is full most nights and will help people get jobs and find permanent housing.

This shows that there are possibilities for the homeless to get back on their feet with help from people like this man as well as organizations such as the East Alabama Coalition for the Homeless