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### Jail's 'frequent flier' has been in and out 123 times

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At any given time, Rosevelt Richardson is almost certainly at one of two places -- in the Orange County Jail or on an Orlando street corner.

They're hardly his favorite two hangouts. They're just the ones he knows best.

"I've put myself in a rut, and I don't know how to get out of it," Richardson said. "I'm tired of this."

How could he not be? During the past 10 years, Richardson has checked in and out of the county jail 123 times, or about once a month. And right now, he's checked in -- for stint 124. Richardson sits in jail, disappointed with himself but with one inescapable distinction: No one has been booked into Orange County's jail more during the past decade than he has.

Richardson, a 59-year-old homeless panhandler, heads the list of "frequent fliers," the most-booked inmates since 1999, according to jail records surveyed by the Orlando Sentinel.

The group of the county's top 10 fliers is made up mostly of transients who have smiled, cringed, glared and frowned for 836 mug shots. All are men. Most are black.

Almost all of their arrests are for panhandling and other petty crimes such as loitering, urinating in public and trespassing, records show. Sprinkled throughout the hundreds of arrests are some violent crimes and drug charges.

"In general, a lot of people who come in and out of the jail are people who are homeless or mentally ill," jail spokesman Allen Moore said. "Because of their life circumstances, they get in a position where they violate city or county ordinances [and are arrested]."

On a recent weekday, Richardson pulls up a chair in a barren interview room at the jail. The skeptical look on his face shows through his salt-and-pepper beard and extends to his bald head and eyes. He doesn't yet understand why he would be of any interest to a reporter. He's surprised -- almost pleased -- to learn he's at the top of the list. This time he's here for violating probation on a prior trespassing and panhandling case.

The room echoes as he answers questions about why he can't stay out of jail.



"Because my income is panhandling," Richardson says. And in Orlando, that's illegal.

Arthritis invaded Richardson's joints a few years ago, making it nearly impossible for him to do the only trade he knows: migrant field work. He dropped out of school in sixth grade to follow the fields to pick oranges, cucumbers, watermelons and tomatoes, he said.

He fathered four children but left his family when his youngest son was 6 months old. Richardson said he hasn't spoken to them since he left their Gainesville home in 1986.

His small stature, which earned him the street nickname "Shorty Kellem," doesn't help him get work in day-labor jobs. But this time, he hopes a judge will help him get on his feet by ordering him to a work-release program.

"I don't know how to get out of this cycle," said Richardson, explaining that he has to start over every time he's released from jail. "It's wearing me down."

Although life may appear easier behind bars -- the guarantee of three meals a day, a roof over his head and a warm bed to sleep in -- he says he doesn't want to be there.

"I'd rather be walking the streets hungry than full in the jail," Richardson said.

He has past felony convictions on drug charges but says he has been clean for the past four years.

Recurring arrests are hardly limited to Orange County, though its frequent fliers are more prolific than those in some counties. The most-arrested person in Osceola County is Martin Luther Wagner (59 times during the past decade), according to the Osceola County Jail. Wagner also has arrests in Orange County, records show.

In Lake, No. 1 is Thomas Cleveland Bass (52 times). Seminole and Volusia counties were unable to compile similar statistics.

Each time Richardson is picked up by police and hauled off to jail, he loses his few possessions.

When he returns, they have either been tossed out or stolen by other homeless people, who need it, he said. All he owns are the clothes he wore to jail. His identification card expired on his birthday, April 28, so now he doesn't even have that.

"The little stuff I did have is gone," Richardson said.

At the Coalition for the Homeless on West Central Boulevard, clients are offered lockers for a small fee paid by the week or the month. If the rent is not paid, the items are tossed, spokeswoman Muffet Robinson said.

Occasionally, coalition workers will receive a letter or call from the jail asking them to keep the items until the locker renter is out of jail.

"They do what they can to work with the guys," Robinson said. "But we are not a storage facility."

Almost half of the men in the group list the coalition as their home address, according to public records. Privacy policies do not allow the coalition to confirm whether the men are clients.

"It's all trash and litter to most of us, but to them it's their stuff," said Jim Wright, a sociology professor at the University of Central Florida who works with the homeless.

"It must be frustrating as all get out . . . when you get arrested and it all disappears."

Although Richardson has grown accustomed to the in-and-out routine, he said he wants change.

Meanwhile, he plans to serve the rest of his several-month sentence.

If anyone is looking for him, he said: "Oh, I'm not hard to find. Just check the jail."

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