
US Cities Are Declaring War on the Homeless: Report

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Laws and regulations are criminalizing and punishing vulnerable and disadvantaged people in the United States.

A number of cities across the United States are criminalizing the homeless through a number of harsh laws designed to clean up the streets.

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Various “move along” laws such as bans on sleeping on the street, however, have been branded unconstitutional and are creating additional problems for increasing numbers of homeless, according to a new report from advocacy group the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, or NLCHP.

Across the country, the exclusionary new laws have targeted those with little other options. Cities have introduced bans on sleeping, camping and even sitting in public spaces. Many homeless are no longer allowed to live in vehicles and a number of cities have banned sharing free food with the homeless.

The report “Housing not Handouts” detailed the increased criminalization of the homeless through analyzing laws in 187 cities since 2006.

The report listed a “Hall of Shame” that included particularly bad laws and regulations, including threats of arrest in Denver, evictions in Honolulu, citations for sleeping in public in Dallas, and exclusion laws in Puyallup, Washington State.

Many cities have banned homeless people’s access to free food, arguing that it will encourage further homelessness. The NLCHP, however, says that homelessness stems from a lack of access to housing and that food bans instead encourage hungry people to look for food in unsanitary places, putting them at further risk.

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Bans on sleeping in vehicles and the threat of impoundment, in addition to leading to a loss of shelter, can lead homeless people to lose their belonging while also leaving them without a mode of transport to get to work and school, where they risk vehicle impoundment.

The report detailed that from the cities that were investigated, 54 percent prohibit loitering in public places and 32 percent prohibit littering in public across the whole city. While the homeless have increasingly been ordered to move on, the question remains where can they go?

This raises concerns about the inadequate level of affordable housing and shelter and opportunities to break out of living a life on the streets, even for people who are employed.

The report cited increases in homelessness amid poor access to affordable and stable housing, where more and more people are becoming priced out of housing markets. Additionally, the homeless are increasingly being placed in emergency accommodations, which "is not a long-term solution to the affordable housing crisis."

NLCHP director Maria Foscarinis called homeless a "national crisis" and the report referenced parts of Washington state and Hawaii, which have previously declared a state of emergency on homelessness.
