

# Criminalizing Homelessness

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At some point cities across America decided that homelessness is a crime. The National Coalition for the Homeless describes the criminalization of homelessness as “measures that prohibit life-sustaining activities such as sleeping/camping, eating, sitting, and/or asking for money/resources in public spaces. These ordinances include criminal penalties for violations of these acts.” Often law enforcement will conduct sweeps on homeless persons and confiscate their personal property such as tents and clothes. Some cities have made panhandling and the handing out of food to homeless people in public places illegal all in an effort to maintain a certain “quality of life”.

In January 2017 seven people were arrested in Tampa for handing out food to homeless people in a park without a permit. In October, 12 volunteers in El Cajon, California were arrested for the same offense. Two months later an activist was issued a ticket for handing out food in Atlanta. And who could forget the March 2018 viral video that shows a homeless man eating peacefully in a Myrtle Beach, South Carolina McDonald’s after being brought in by a Good Samaritan who paid for his meal being kicked out and harassed by the police?

Lawmakers who support food sharing bans among the homeless claim that it is an attempt to stop the spread of hepatitis A which has increased in the homeless population but advocates maintain the idea that it’s all an effort to criminalize homelessness. Hepatitis A which affects the liver and can be deadly if not treated is the result of poor sanitation and hygiene and the drinking of unclean water, both issues impacting those on the streets. The concern of any illness being spread among the homeless from food sharing is unfounded as there has not been one case of food poisoning or food-related illness.

The outlook for those without shelter seems to be getting worse as federal funding and support seems to be drying up with budget cuts for affordable housing, and the repeal of an Obama-era guidance that asked state and local courts to refrain from imposing fines and fees on those that are poor and homeless. The increasing cost of housing throughout the country makes it even more difficult for homeless people to get off of the streets. In Los Angeles, the average rent in 2016 according to the New York Times was found to be as high as \$2,000 a month for a two bedroom apartment, far too expensive for a working-class family living on minimum wage. Average rent in Los Angeles is expected to increase by 5% every year according to the LA Times which would put an estimated 2,000 more people on the streets. With more than a quarter of Los Angeles residents spend more than 30% of their income on rent, a 28% increase from 2000 to 2014, the homeless epidemic will only continue to grow. Los Angeles is not the only region in the Golden State that is unaffordable to live in, the Bay Area and the Coachella Valley increasingly get more expensive each year.

The idea of maintaining a “quality of life” is merely a smoke screen title for pushing these the homeless out of municipalities rendering them out of sight and out of mind. It’s easier to push them away and treat them like trash and not people then it is to help them. It makes better financial sense for communities to fine homeless people who can’t afford to pay so the fines increase then it is to find ways to bring in extra revenue to help them. However easy isn’t always right. If lawmakers truly cared about stopping the spread of disease among those who are forced to call the streets home then they would be advocating for more resources and programs to help them as well as higher wages. Historically with the exception of a few moments in history, the United States has punished those in poverty and at the current moment, the poor are getting hit hard. A nation can be judged in many ways including how it treats its homeless and what it does to help them.

## References

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