



One Hidden Effect of COVID-19 on Homeless: Nowhere to Use the Bathroom

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On Skid Row, home to an estimated 8,500 homeless, city officials installed a mere 6 hand washing stations following the closure of public bathrooms due to coronavirus fears. Homeless advocates reported hours-long waits. In Washington, D.C., only 9 portable restrooms have been installed in homeless encampments; city officials feared adding them would legitimize the illegal encampments, and worsen the spread of COVID. In Sacramento, 51 portable restrooms have been installed for the city's 5,570 homeless, but hours have been limited to dawn to dusk. Many homeless have complained that there is nowhere to go at night and early morning.

Since 9/11, Reuters reported, the number of public restrooms in the U.S. has fallen dramatically, and the current pandemic has brought the number down to 0 in some cities. The homeless have been forced to use private restrooms, such as those in fast food restaurants and gas stations, for years because of the shortage – but those have been closed to the public as well in many states. What this has led to is both a human rights and a public health issue. Lack of restrooms and hand washing stations limits access to sanitation and basic needs for the homeless, which forces them to relieve themselves in inhumane conditions. The lack of sanitation could also worsen the effects of COVID-19 on the homeless population as well. The Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review reported in April that as many as 3,400 homeless individuals had died from coronavirus, a number which has surely risen since.

The lack of restrooms is just one of many problems the homeless are facing during the COVID pandemic. Shelters and food banks have closed across the country and the lack of healthcare for the homeless has limited their access to testing and treatment for the virus. The pandemic, in addition to causing novel problems for those experiencing homeless, has brought many pre-existing problems into sharp relief. It has exposed the inadequacies of the response to homelessness that have existed for decades, and the routine mistreatment the homeless are faced with daily, of which the failure to provide clean and safe bathrooms is but one example.

References:

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-usa-homelessness-f/closed-bathrooms-afflict-u-s-homeless-in-coronavirus-lockdown-idUSKBN2321FX>

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