

Homeless Encampments: To Whom are the Streets For?

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Camping on the streets is a strange concept. Just about anyone will think of tents primarily as a recreational shelter during hikes in the wilderness, far from an actual residence in a populated area. Yet, the average American will likely have seen tents more often while walking down a nearby street. And rather than that comfy vision of outdoor relaxation, the image relates more to a habitat of stench, blockage, and grime that the news seems more than eager to constantly complain about.

The state of the streets, coated with homeless encampments, does have genuine cause for concern. Tents can often take up a large amount of space on sidewalks and can even leak onto commercial roads. This, along with the general instinct to avoid the homeless, have rendered some camped areas difficult to traverse, especially for the disabled. Tents and their inhabitants pile garbage into hills, which collect vermin such as maggots, rodents, and fleas that can infect others who pass by. Ingenious tents that tap into streetlights, fire hydrants, or building wiring to build appliances with working electricity and water, aren't regulated for safety standards and can become dangerous hazard zones during malfunctions.

Scheduled street and sidewalk cleaning crews have considerable difficulty doing their jobs around encampments due to conflicts with the homeless. "Spot cleaning," a protocol that temporarily moves homeless property to flush, vacuum, and sanitize those areas, has been successful in the past, but it has had its share of conflicts over confiscation. And due to mandates made during pandemic

quarantines, some states have disallowed forced evictions, leading to an increase in tents and a decrease in methods that can manage the declining conditions of these streets.

However, there are some strange priorities that are immediately noticeable in the news coverage of homeless encampments. The issue appears frequently as a risk to public health and the declining quality of American streets that are packed and overpopulated with tents that can stretch for a mile in locations such as golf courses, boardwalks, and beaches. The call to clean the streets of these tents treats encampments as a growing "infestation" of homeless who disrespect the spaces that average citizens, the disabled, and business owners need every day, meanwhile the high vulnerability of people inside these tents always risks being overlooked.

Tenting on the streets is one of the very limited choices that a broke citizen, crippled by the rising costs of living and shelter overpopulation, can make to survive, so legislation is incredibly tricky with this recognition. Like the suggestions to ban camp evictions, there are state legislators who are aware that freeing up the streets for citizens complaining about transportation and public health alienates the homeless from those same common amenities. Removing encampments is a human rights violation and serves to criminalize the homeless even more. There is also a risk that normalizing homeless encampments will encourage tents that illegally access public resources and city blockades. But even if city evictions go through, the homeless can easily just move their belongings to another place that will complain about them, then another, and another, as long as a state-wide ban remains absent.

Like many controversies surrounding homelessness, the issue isn't so much a series of troublesome lawbreakers as it is the natural desperation and decisions left for the people suffering under these conditions. Encampments aren't just a high density of individuals on their own, they've developed into small communities that rely on each other for resources and security. Remove one, and you must remove the rest. Do this to appease citizen complaints, and you'll only find more citizen complaints. Removing tents is not only unviable but also expensive and useless in the long-term.

How do you legally recognize a community that shouldn't exist in the first place? Camping on the streets to survive is a shared, unfortunate reality of the homelessness crisis. Until the proper alleviations have been met, there's no way to actually get rid of the problems surrounding it. So why not make temporary suggestions for coexistence in the meantime? If sidewalk blockage is a problem, enforce rules that encourage the homeless to make themselves passable rather than being forced off. If trash buildup is an issue, install dumpsters and bins nearby encampment villages so their waste can be collected easier. If even that suggestion doesn't stop the flow of trash and vermin, why not employ the homeless to help with clean-up and disinfection efforts around their area? If you don't want the homeless to create their own appliances, then make storage, shower rooms, and bathrooms more accessible. Suggestions such as these don't "normalize" encampments or solve the problem, but they can be steps to build resources and trust networks that can disincentivize exploitation and hostile relations with the government.

At the moment, however, our priorities are skewed. An eye-opening quote from within the NBCL coverage of encampments reveals just that: "we are the second largest city in the country. Don't tell me that this city has to look like, smell like, and behave like a third-world country." If LA looks like, smells like, and behaves like an underdeveloped country, then perhaps it is.

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