

An Overview of Homeless Encampments for City Leaders

Key Takeaways

Some individuals choose to live in encampments due to a lack of better housing alternatives.

The shelter space available, or shelter system requirements and conditions (e.g., sobriety requirements, entrance fees, separation from partners or pets, strict entry and exit times, or safety concerns), may be incompatible with an individual's current circumstances.

Conducting evictions of encampments, or “sweeps,” often displaces individuals rather than reducing the number of individuals experiencing homelessness.

Without referrals to shelters, housing, or additional resources, this approach fails to target the root causes of homelessness and can instead further destabilize established communities.

Criminalization creates and exacerbates barriers to housing and employment, rather than addressing the causes of homelessness.

By making sleeping, camping, sitting or lying down, pan handling, sleeping in cars, loitering, or begging illegal — either in an entire city, or in particular places — it criminalizes individuals for engaging in life-sustaining activities, and disproportionately impacts Black Americans.

Given discrimination by landlords and employers against criminal records, criminalization also perpetuates the harmful cycle between arrest, incarceration, emergency shelters and homelessness.

Dismantling encampments over public health concerns is counterproductive.

Without additional housing capacity and resources, dispersal of individuals experiencing homelessness will increase the potential for the spread of infectious diseases.

Sanctioning encampments is not an alternative to providing services and permanent housing, but can ameliorate the conditions of living on the streets.

By providing individuals experiencing homelessness with connections to services, individuals living in encampments can experience improved access to support services and transitional or permanent housing options. Municipal support and involvement with encampments can also create the opportunity for the relationship and trust-building that is often key to ushering individuals living in encampments into other housing options.

What are Encampments?

The term “encampments” suggests a level of transience, but also community. **Encampments are places where a group of individuals experiencing homelessness reside that is not intended for long-term, continuous occupancy.**¹ Encampments often consist of tents, wooden pallets, or lean-to shacks built with scavenged materials; can often be found under bridges, in tunnels or within other shelters; or they can be a collection of individuals who reside in vehicles near one another.² Cities of all sizes may report encampments, but they are more prevalent in the west due to favorable weather conditions. There are higher rates of unsheltered homelessness in states such as California, Hawaii and Oregon.³

[Homelessness is first and foremost the result of a severe shortage of affordable housing, poverty, and insufficient resources. Encampments are a visual representation of the lack of those resources and of policy failures.](#)⁴

Without sufficient resources to shelter and house the growing population of unhoused people, the number of encampments has grown in cities nationwide: Between 2007 and 2017, there was a 1,342 percent increase in the number of unique homeless encampments reported in the media, and encampments have been reported in every state.⁵

Encampments can be home to just a handful of individuals, or to dozens of people. These individuals may be part of a core group of people who know each other and move to different locations when needed, or a changing group of people who cycle in and out of the encampment.⁶ Encampments also range in degrees of formality. Some encampments are simply a place for a group of individuals to sleep and reside together, while others have social structures, enforced norms and standards of behavior.⁷



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Why Do People Live in Encampments?

According to the 2020 point-in-time count (PIT), there were 580,466 individuals actively experiencing homelessness and 941,871 beds dedicated to serving homeless or formerly homeless people.⁸ However, more than half of the national bed inventory (58 percent, or 545,722 beds) was for permanent housing for formerly homeless people, while just 42 percent (396,149 beds) was available for people currently experiencing homelessness.⁹ Despite there being more beds nationally than individuals experiencing or transitioning out of homelessness, many cities and counties struggle to fill their existing shelter beds, or face a shortage of beds.

There is an inherent mismatch between the availability and type of shelter capacity, and the location of unhoused people.

For example, states such as Maine, West Virginia and Kansas have enough beds to shelter more than 90 percent of individuals facing homelessness in the state, while California is only able to offer year-round beds to 21 percent of the state's unhoused individuals.¹⁰ There is also a significant deficit in low-barrier shelters and variability of beds proportionate to each state's homelessness population.¹¹

Many shelters have requirements that make them undesirable for some individuals experiencing homelessness, including sobriety requirements, entry fees, gender requirements that separate partners and families, restrictions against having pets, set entry and exit times that may be incompatible with an individual's work hours, insufficient security, and lack of secure storage for personal belongings.¹² Of the 396,149 beds available to individuals currently experiencing homelessness, just 0.6 percent are provided through **"safe haven"** shelter locations that offer low-barriers to access.¹³ The remainder of the inventory is made up of emergency shelter beds (76 percent), which cater to very short-term stays, and transitional housing programs (23 percent).¹⁴

Furthermore, encampments may offer a greater sense of autonomy and security from targeted aggression, assault, theft or police harassment.¹⁵ Some reports have highlighted that shelter inhabitants face assault, robbery and demeaning treatment from staff.¹⁶

These environments can be particularly stressful for women experiencing

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SAFE HAVENS

A type of supportive housing designed to reach among the hardest-to-serve individuals experiencing homelessness who may be unable or unwilling to access other and more restrictive supportive services.

homelessness, who are disproportionately victims of domestic violence and sexual assault.¹⁷ Some shelters are also known to be health and sanitation hazards, with citations of health code violations, evidence of bug infestations, and issues with waste storage and disposal.¹⁸ These concerns are especially pertinent in light of the COVID-19 pandemic given the limited ability to maintain safe social distancing in an overcrowded shelter.

Community Responses to Encampments

Community responses to encampments can vary depending on the balance found between the competing priorities of a diverse group of stakeholders, including encampment residents, business owners, public health and safety officials, community residents and advocates.

Responses to encampments tend to fall into one of four categories:¹⁹

CLEARANCE WITH LITTLE-TO-NO SUPPORT

Provide little-to-no notice of a sweep or clearing of an encampment, and no referrals to services or housing

1

CLEARANCE WITH SOME SUPPORT

Provide ample notice of a sweep, and referral to housing or services

2

TACIT ACCEPTANCE

Allow encampments to exist regardless of law or ordinances explicitly authorizing or prohibiting their existence, and provide basic infrastructure such as portable toilets and showers

3

FORMAL SANCTIONING

Permit an encampment by law or ordinance on public or privately owned property, and provide infrastructure and public services such as laundry, potable water, lockers for the storage of belongings, and meal services

4

While the wellbeing of individuals experiencing homelessness should be the primary factor shaping a municipal response to encampments, resource limitations might force cities to make service provision tradeoffs. Instead of providing more permanent housing solutions, cities may resort to “sanctioning encampments” or “tacitly accepting encampments” to provide residents with some semblance of stability. Other cities employ “clearance with little-to-no support” or “clearance with some support,” often leveraging laws criminalizing homelessness to displace encampment residents or to clear encampments.²⁰

A study conducted by the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty reveals that 72 percent of surveyed cities have at least one law restricting camping in public, and 51 percent of cities have at least one law restricting sleeping in public, which makes evicting encampments broadly enforceable by law.²¹ **These punitive laws unfairly penalize individuals for engaging in life-sustaining behaviors when they have no other suitable or viable options, and has been deemed unconstitutional by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit Court in the [Martin vs. City of Boise](#) ruling.**²²

MARTIN VS. CITY OF BOISE:

A court case in which the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit ruled in 2018 that if a person experiencing homelessness has no option of sleeping indoors, a city cannot cite them for violating an ordinance disallowing sleeping outside in a public space.



Challenges Associated with Clearing Encampments

IMMEDIATE IMPACTS OF SWEEPS ON INDIVIDUALS

If an individual is not present when an encampment is cleared, they may lose important possessions such as identification, which is needed to secure jobs and housing; tents and clothing, which provide protection from the elements; and potentially life-saving medication.²³ Additionally, clearing an encampment can violently disrupt the social connections established within the community, potentially destabilizing familial structures that could otherwise provide needed support to unhoused individuals.

Even the threat of sweeps makes it difficult to maintain stability as people must worry about watching their possessions, or move from place-to-place to avoid sweeps rather than focusing on more productive pursuits such as securing employment, seeking treatment for mental and physical health conditions, or gaining access to more permanent housing and shelters.

The threat of sweeps is also stressful and can have significant negative health effects, such as causing individuals to lose sleep and contributing to worsening mental and physical health conditions.²⁴

Lastly, the overuse and misuse of law enforcement during sweeps can erode the trust or exacerbate adversarial relationships between encampment residents and law enforcement or outreach workers, particularly for people of color who face additional racial discrimination.²⁵



PUBLIC HEALTH

While public health concerns are often cited as reasons to justify sweeps, encampment evictions often exacerbate public health concerns and put individuals experiencing homelessness at greater risk of exposure to infectious diseases like COVID-19.²⁶

Sweeps simply disperse individuals, often leaving them with no basic sanitation and waste disposal infrastructure, and spreads the discard of food waste, trash and bodily waste.²⁷ As a result, the dispersal of encampment community members has been found to actually increase the potential for infectious disease spread.²⁸ In many cases, encampments may be the most immediate, reasonable alternative to more permanent housing solutions.

LONG-TERM IMPACTS OF THE CRIMINALIZATION OF HOMELESSNESS

Roughly 48,000 individuals entering shelters every year come almost directly from prisons or jails. Additionally, of the 11 million people detained or incarcerated every year, as many as 15 percent have reported experiencing homelessness.²⁹

This cycle between homelessness and incarceration is hugely damaging to personal stability. Even misdemeanor convictions can make someone ineligible for subsidized housing, and criminal records are routinely used to exclude applicants from employment or housing.³⁰

The criminalization of homelessness disproportionately impacts individuals who are Black, Hispanic/Latino, American Indian/Alaskan Native, Pacific Islander and those of multiple races, who are overrepresented in both the homeless and incarcerated populations.³¹ According to the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, Black and American Indian/Alaskan Native populations are incarcerated at rates 3.2 and 2.1 times higher than white populations respectively.³²

The impacts of incarceration only further traps people in poverty and homelessness, making homelessness progressively more difficult to emerge from as time passes.

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CITY SNAPSHOTS:

Effective and Empathetic Responses to Encampments

OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA

Compassionate Communities

In the years leading up to 2016, the City of Oakland struggled to stymie a growing population of unhoused individuals. Community activists and councilmembers alike noted that encampment removals were ineffective and futile. This spawned the creation of the “Compassionate Communities” program, wherein the city reframed its approach and considered people living in the streets as “constituents to be served, rather than a problem to be solved” by temporarily sanctioning an encampment under the I-530 overpass.³³

The City of Oakland worked in partnership with leaders from the encampment community to provide services such as waste pick-up, portable toilets, sanitation stations, mobile health clinics, and large concrete barriers to protect the residents from traffic.³⁴ The city also coordinated with social services, faith-based organizations, volunteers and nonprofits to provide food-drop offs, and directed social services and relief employees to the area with the ultimate goal of helping residents find permanent housing.³⁵

According to the city, more than half of the encampment’s original 40 residents found housing, including eight in permanent housing and sixteen in transitional housing.³⁶

While initial reactions from the surrounding neighbors were apprehensive, the overall sentiment became more positive once city officials explained the scope and nature of the pilot program.³⁷ While the city has acknowledged the need to address the root of the crisis — a lack of affordable housing in the area — sanctioning the encampment provided much-needed support in the interim.

While exact estimates of the cost effectiveness from the program are unavailable due to the exponential growth of the homeless population during the pilot project and high staff turnover, the city was able to reduce the most egregious health and safety hazards that the encampments posed, and began to embrace encampment residents as members of the community.³⁸ The learnings from this program lead to the creation of the Cabin Community program.

Cabin Communities

The Cabin Community program is an emergency intervention “designed to serve as a temporary bridge from the sidewalk to services, from the street to housing.”³⁹ Since the program’s inception in 2017, **Oakland has implemented seven different Cabin Communities that have served more than 600 people — more than half of whom have exited the Cabin Communities into permanent or more supportive housing.**⁴⁰

Cabin Communities are a collection of four walled cabins, providing residents with a roof to sleep under, sanitation infrastructure, and case managers who support residents with acquiring a California ID, securing benefits, and seeking employment or permanent housing.⁴¹ Each site also has a flexible spending budget that can be used to overcome barriers to housing such as security deposits and rent payments, transportation assistance for employment or family reunification, and clothing for job interviews or new jobs.⁴² Maintenance costs for a single site total approximately \$850,000 per year to serve 38 residents.⁴³

The Cabin Community program illustrates the power of regional collaboration and partnership. The cities of Oakland and Emeryville and corporate foundations worked in collaboration to fund and provide services directly to the communities.⁴⁴

The effort also hinges upon state-level support through AB-3139, which allows the California Department of Transportation to lease state highway property for emergency shelter or feeding programs for \$1 per month.⁴⁵ Mayor Libby Schaaf of Oakland and Ally Medina of Emeryville have both highlighted the Cabin Community program’s multi-level collaborations as important to addressing the regional nature of homelessness.⁴⁶

Some have criticized the cabins for feeling institutionalized in nature, given that residents often share a cabin and camp rules are strictly enforced.⁴⁷ If a resident is kicked out of their cabin or leaves, they may not have anywhere to turn back to given that many former encampments have been dismantled.⁴⁸ Program design also lacks the intentional inclusion of individuals experiencing homelessness, maintenance and outreach, a consideration that other cities should keep in mind when designing similar programs.⁴⁹

LAS CRUCES, NEW MEXICO

Las Cruces, a small city in New Mexico, is home to the Camp Hope shelter, a sanctioned and permanent encampment that hosts 45 inhabitants at a time. Camp Hope was founded in 2011 through a partnership between three individuals experiencing homelessness and the Mesilla Valley Community of Hope (MVCH).⁵⁰ Together, the two groups petitioned the city to institute a temporary zoning agreement for an adjacent piece of property from the Community of Hope campus owned by the city.⁵¹ This was amended to a permanent zoning agreement three years later.⁵²

The success of Camp Hope is contingent on three main factors:

- 1. Partnerships with service providers**
- 2. Strategic location and co-location**
- 3. Self-governance**

Camp Hope is located adjacent to the Community of Hope campus that houses five local community organizations, including the parent organization MVCH, St. Luke's Health Care Clinic, El Caldito Soup Kitchen, Jardin de los Ninos (which offers childcare and educational services) and the Casa de Peregrinos Emergency Food Bank.⁵³ These co-located agencies give residents easy access to a continuum of services, including basic service provision such as day shelter, sanitation services, laundry, lockers, internet, phone and postal services.⁵⁴ Co-location also offers critical access to case management services that connect residents to housing vouchers, social security and disability benefit applications, veteran services, ID assistance, reduced fare bus passes, and housing programs that include transitional and permanent housing.⁵⁵

At Camp Hope, residents conduct weekly meetings to resolve disputes and to establish community-enforced camp rules such as restrictions on alcohol, guns and abusive language or behavior.⁵⁶ Self-governance gives residents a sense of ownership over the encampment, in stark contrast to the client-provider relationship that shelters typically engender. Service workers are also better positioned to forge positive relationships with residents, which gives residents greater opportunity to reach out for assistance when they are personally ready.⁵⁷

While Camp Hope does not qualify for state, federal or foundation funding, they are able to operate due to community donations for services and resources. The MVCH created the annual Tents to Rents (T2R) fundraiser in 2016 to cover operating costs.⁵⁸ In 2018, the T2R fundraiser raised approximately \$50,000 dollars and with additional community donations, this annual revenue largely covers program costs.⁵⁹ Although the camp has a high transition rate into permanent housing — in 2018-2019, 72 out of the 174 individuals served (41 percent) secured housing — it can only host 45 people at once, falling short of the total number of individuals in need of supportive services.⁶⁰

While Camp Hope is not a solution to the need for permanent housing, the camp crucially allows those experiencing homelessness to live with dignity while in transition to more permanent and stable housing.⁶¹ **Las Cruces highlights how the compassionate treatment of individuals experiencing homelessness, provision of autonomy, and partnership with local stakeholders can provide significantly better chances of transition into permanent housing.**

Recommendations

Homeless encampments are a response to the growing unaffordability and availability of housing and should be recognized as such. Cities must treat individuals living in encampments with dignity and respect, and should consider the following recommendations:

- ◆ **End the criminalization of homelessness and instead work to provide solutions that target root causes of homelessness with a racial equity lens.**

The criminalization of homelessness is ineffective, expensive, unconstitutional, and unfairly targets people of color, particularly Black Americans given racially biased policing practices.

- ◆ **Develop constructive encampment policies that either employ clearance with support, tacit acceptance, or formal sanctioning.**

Encampments should only be “cleared” when services can be guaranteed for all inhabitants, including referrals to shelters, services or permanent supportive housing.

- ◆ **Recognize the factors that make shelters an inappropriate option for many unhoused individuals, and the implications for future policies around encampments.**

Regardless of where individuals reside, provide them with shelter, sanitation services, secure storage options and autonomy.

- ◆ **Leverage a wide range of partners to develop a comprehensive, compassionate, empathetic and effective approach to serving individuals living in encampments.**

Work with people experiencing unsheltered homelessness and partners in your community — including local nonprofits, faith-based organizations, public health offices and local universities — to provide services to encampments and to meet a diverse set of needs. Consider funding and working with community partners who specifically serve Black, Hispanic/Latino, Indigenous, Pacific Islander and LGBTQ+ populations, who face disproportionately high rates of homelessness and may be wary of government intervention.

Leaving someone
chronically homeless
costs the public

**\$30K–
\$50K**

per unhoused
individual annually.

Conclusion

Encampment sweeps are a costly, cosmetic approach that disperses people rather than meeting individual needs to reduce the number of people living unhoused. Encampments are the result of policy failures and relational poverty, which describes the processes, structures, and social relations which create and sustain poverty, rather than one individuals' faultable actions. Living in an encampment is often a decision made due to the lack of better alternatives.

The dismantling of encampments without provision of alternative and better housing services can be catastrophic to inhabitants, and is an unproductive use of tax-payer dollars. Chronic homelessness costs the public roughly \$30,000 to \$50,000 per unhoused individual each year, due in part to expenditures for emergency care, jails, prisons and psychiatric institutions.⁶² Recognizing these factors is the first step toward developing more compassionate responses to homelessness and more constructive encampment policies.

Las Cruces and Oakland are notable examples of cities that have made this recognition and considered the role encampments can play in addressing the homelessness crisis. While encampments are not a viable long-term solution to housing all individuals, sanctioned encampments serve as an intermediary step, making it easier for individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness to live with dignity while being connected to formal service provision and more permanent housing.

Housing is a basic human right. Acknowledging this is the first step to addressing unsheltered homelessness, preventing recurring homelessness and ending homelessness altogether. City leaders must direct resources toward assisting people with moving out of encampments and into safe, affordable and quality housing.

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