



Addressing Homelessness Through Housing Solutions and Systemic Change

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According to the U.S. [Housing and Urban Development](#), homelessness has increased 33%, since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Many individuals already struggling to make ends meet during the pandemic faced eviction and homelessness making the issue far more visible and pressing in many U.S. cities. Although the economic recovery of the stock market under President Biden has diverted attention from these social challenges, it is important to note that 93% of the stock market is owned by the richest 10%. This disparity spotlights the unequal distribution of wealth and underscores the systemic factors contributing to poverty and increases in homelessness.

The situation was exacerbated in 2024 when the Supreme Court ruled in the case of *City of Grants Pass v. Johnson* that punishing homeless people for sleeping in public spaces is constitutional. This decision devalues the ongoing struggle to find humane solutions to homelessness. To better address homelessness, we must end the criminalization of homelessness and instead address its root causes such as lack of affordable housing, stagnant wages, and inadequate healthcare access.

The Problem with Criminalizing Homelessness

Many cities have responded to homelessness by criminalizing those affected. While arresting individuals for occupying public spaces might seem like a straightforward solution, it often exacerbates the situation. Arresting individuals who face homelessness does not address the underlying causes of their predicament and can create a cycle of criminalization and recidivism among the criminal justice system. Criminalizing people who experience these hardships diverts attention from larger social issues, placing undue blame on the victims rather than addressing policy failures.

Cities such as Grants Pass, Oregon; Los Angeles, California; San Francisco, California; Austin, Texas; and Phoenix, Arizona have seen an increase in arrests of homeless individuals occupying public spaces. These measures strain the judicial system, lead to overcrowded jails, and create additional burdens on already stretched city resources. Additionally, criminalizing homelessness diverts individuals from essential support services that they desperately need.

In [Homelessness and Housing Advocacy: The Role of Red-Tape Warriors](#), I show how social service workers assisting people experiencing homelessness often face difficulties when explaining a criminal background to landlords during lease agreements. These criminal records are often solely the result of arrests for occupying public spaces. For instance, in Salt Lake City, Utah, over 1,600 people were indiscriminately arrested in a local park during the summer of 2016. Even social service workers in the area were stopped by the police. Judges soon dismissed all the arrests, pointing to unnecessary court costs and wasteful use of resources. In the

following weeks, many workers struggled to locate their arrested clients despite having made progress toward their housing placement. Some of the workers even had to accompany their homeless clients in court to help explain that their client should be able to sign a lease and be housed the same as anyone else. Once landlords understood the situation, most were eager to lease their unused rentals due to the additional incentives that social workers could provide.

Arresting people often disrupts their lives further through practices like "sweeps," where police dispose of encampment belongings, including valuable paperwork, medical prescriptions, and contact information necessary for employment and services. Judges see such criminalization as wasteful, people experiencing homelessness feel marginalized, and social service workers are impeded in their ability to provide housing assistance.

The current approach of criminalizing homelessness is not effective. So, what can be done?

Understanding the Root Causes of Homelessness

The first step to adequately addressing homelessness requires understanding the root causes of homelessness.

Many people think homelessness arises from personal failings or disabilities. Research shows these are usually the results of living on the streets, not the causes. In reality, systemic issues such as **unaffordable rent, stagnant wages, and expensive healthcare** push people **out of their homes** and into public spaces, where they face further challenges and marginalization. Displaced individuals often seek refuge in parks, sidewalks, or other public areas, where they face dangerous criminal activities, sleeplessness, and are targeted by gangs and illicit drug dealers.

While there have been efforts to address the systemic issues behind homelessness, these often fail to get passed. For example, the Tax Relief for American Families and Workers Act of 2024 proposed building housing units to offset the housing shortage. This Act aimed to address the fact that after the 1980's the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) stopped building new housing units. This had many impacts on the housing market, increasing demand, and thus creating the high costs we see today among rentals and home ownership. Noting how overdue this venture was, the Tax Relief for American Families and Workers Act of 2024 had bipartisan support in Congress but ultimately failed in the Senate.

Housing-First Solutions

Given the root causes of homelessness, research supports the "**Housing First**" philosophy, which provides housing to people experiencing homelessness without any prerequisites. This saves cities millions by funding rentals for those experiencing homelessness instead of paying for police responses, emergency hospital visits, or court and jail costs. Cities should prioritize funding for **housing vouchers**, which have shown to empower people to live independently all over the world. Instead, cities like Grants Pass, OR are *overpaying* for punitive responses, which only exacerbate the problem.

Policymakers must also reform the housing system to limit the barriers people face when looking to access housing. Gaining housing support consists of backlogged waiting lists due to unavailable units. Additionally,

the housing system is run with archaic practices, even relying on fax machines to verify personal documents. If someone submits all necessary paperwork, but they do not routinely check on their case by calling, then their applications for housing and services can be dropped and they must start the whole process all over again. With such long waits to get through the current system, there is no mystery as to why we see these people in public spaces, waiting as they are intended to do. Discriminating against the homeless ignores these realities and perpetuates a cycle of hardship and mistreatment.

Addressing homelessness requires a comprehensive understanding of the systemic issues at play and the adoption of policies that focus on long-term solutions, such as increasing affordable housing and enhancing social services. Policymakers should specifically examine cities that have already successfully integrated the **housing first philosophy**. The core concept involves cities allocating funds for housing vouchers, thereby providing stability for individuals experiencing homelessness. Once provided with a stable living environment, these individuals often manage to organize their affairs and eventually transition to independent living, where they often become capable of paying their own rent.

By investing in affordable housing and supportive services, cities can not only save money but also improve the lives of their most vulnerable residents. Housing is a fundamental need, yet we continue to treat those without it as outsiders rather than addressing the systemic issues that affect us all.