

Atlanta officials continue campaign against the homeless

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4 July 2005

Citing the need to improve the atmosphere for business, the city council of Atlanta, Georgia is considering a stricter ordinance barring “panhandlers” from soliciting donations downtown. The draft of the new ordinance states that the presence of begging homeless people in the business district “contributes to the negative perceptions” of the city, “causes a sense of fear and intimidation” among visitors, and “increases potential criminal activity” near banks and public areas. If the proposal is adopted, Atlanta will join dozens of other US metropolitan areas that have enacted similar bans against homeless people in the past few years.

Atlanta was rated the nation’s second “meanest” city in 2004 by the National Coalition for the Homeless. Right-wing radio personality Neal Boortz reacted to the Coalition’s annual report by expressing disappointment that the city hadn’t ranked first. He commented from his Atlanta studio that much more could be done to remove “urban outdoorsmen” from the downtown area. “Hey, it’s a business district, not an outdoor flop house for drug addicts, winos and petty crooks,” he stated. “If we try just a little harder I’m sure we can be number one.”

Advocates from civil rights organizations, including the local Rainbow/PUSH Coalition, have characterized the panhandling ban as primarily racist, pointing out that the majority of homeless in Atlanta are black. However, the majority of Atlanta residents are also black, including the council member who proposed the restriction. Supporters of the ban have cited this to refute the claim that it is a racially motivated policy. While racism is one component of discrimination against the homeless, the criminalization of the homeless is most fundamentally a class question. In this, upper-middle-class African Americans and prominent right-wingers are in solidarity.

In 2003, Atlanta mayor Shirley Franklin declared that charitable food donations to homeless people outside of shelters was unsanitary—“feeding the hungry is a health hazard”—and issued an executive order prohibiting the practice. Many church groups and individuals were deterred by the possibility of being arrested, although most advocates

were outraged and a few disregarded the order, continuing outreach efforts.

Laws criminalizing essential activities such as sitting, sleeping and bathing violate basic civil rights and make homeless people—who have no other option than to perform these functions in public areas—targets for harassment and selective arrest. The adoption of such policies also places the blame and social and economic costs of homelessness on those individuals suffering from its effects, rather than addressing the causes of homelessness. These include lack of affordable permanent housing, lack of access to health care, ongoing privatization of public parks and services and the continuing decline in wages. Every year, hundreds of people die from exposure to the elements, or from complications of illnesses caused by long-term exposure, simply because shelters are full.

While many shelters and rehabilitation programs around the country have had funds severely reduced, governments have shifted budget emphasis to business districts and police forces in the name of economic revitalization. The trend further enriches and entrenches the wealthy, and simultaneously exacerbates the already desperate existence faced by more than 3.5 million homeless people in the US.

Little Rock, Arkansas was ranked the worst city in the Coalition for the Homeless report. For years, the city has been consistently hostile toward the homeless in terms of policy, but was particularly aggressive in 2004. Preparing for the November Clinton Presidential Center grand opening, Mayor Jim Dailey publicly ordered the police to clear the 27 homeless camps in alleyways, abandoned buildings, and along the river. “I want these camps cleaned up, and I will say that loudly and clearly ... as far as I’m concerned we need to run off those individuals who are the chronic homeless that don’t want services provided to them” and those who “expect they’re going to victimize the community with their panhandling or other crimes,” he stated.

During one sweep, police entered a riverside camp and, without giving notice or warrants, turned people out and

dumped their belongings into the river. As for the homeless who were receiving services from area shelters, Mayor Dailey suggested they be required to pick up trash and mow. “If you’re not willing to do something for the community in exchange for the handouts that are given to you then you don’t belong here.”

The millions of dollars and publicity poured into Little Rock both before and after former President Clinton’s library opened in November were limited to the city’s newly renovated luxury hotels and business district. Meanwhile, grants for shelter improvements in central Arkansas so far this year have been limited to a 50-bed expansion—far from adequate for the estimated homeless population of 3,000, half of whom sleep on the streets.

In his 2005 State of the City address, Mayor Dailey made it clear that among the “nuisances” still persisting in Little Rock were the homeless population and several working class neighborhoods, now subject to video surveillance and “targeted inspections” by the city’s rapidly and substantially beefed-up police force.

Many large cities, including New York, Los Angeles, Dallas, Cincinnati and Las Vegas have enacted ordinances against asking for donations, placed “no trespassing” signs and barbed wire under bridges and overpasses, and fined or jailed homeless people for violating “quality of life” laws by begging or sleeping outdoors.

The “tourism-friendly” urban coasts of Florida and the state of Hawaii have effectively made it illegal to be destitute through a lack of public restrooms and punishment of weeks in jail for urinating in public or sleeping on the beaches. Government officials have used concern for real estate value and tourism appeal as pretexts for such abuses. Not surprisingly, both Florida and Hawaii are listed by the Coalition as among the five worst states to be homeless.

California, another destination for many homeless people because of the warmer year-round climate, was labeled as the “meanest” state. California police have been accused of routinely destroying personal belongings and abusing the homeless living in encampments or while waiting in lines outside of shelters. Camps are frequently cleared by police or other personnel wearing orange radiation suits, adding an element of humiliation to the distress of having all personal belongings—bedding, children’s toys, and forms of identification—lifted by crane into the back of a garbage truck.

In Fresno, for instance, an ordinance was passed against panhandling. Then, in February of last year, an outdoor drunk tank was set up by the evangelical Christian Rescue Mission, working with the local police department without formal city approval. The holding area consisted of razor wire fence beneath an overpass, where intoxicated homeless

individuals slept on the bare ground. Supported by some Fresno city officials as an alternative to jail, the holding area was promoted as a way to save over \$400,000 a year in booking fees for public intoxication offenders. The rationale was strengthened by the general budget shortage; the state no longer reimburses police processing fees to cities, averaging \$170 per arrest.

No such financial shortage burdened New York City’s law enforcement community during the Republican National Convention last summer. No fiscal excuse was necessary to implement policy changes against the estimated 38,000 homeless in the city, including mass arrests of people sleeping in Central Park, and identity verification and search checkpoints overseen by local police as well as Homeland Security and the Secret Service. Public assistance benefit cards, which have photos and require fingerprinting, were not accepted as valid proof of identification despite being government-issued cards. A large area around Madison Square Garden and Penn Station, where the convention was concentrated, was closed off completely, cutting off access to several shelters and soup kitchens for the week.

The Democratic National Convention in July inspired similar measures, epitomized by the expensive show of force demonstrated by Boston police in riot gear, but also in the preparatory round-up of long-term homeless in attempt to “clean” the streets. City officials denied that the round-up took place, but homeless advocates commented on the seemingly spontaneous “relocation” of many regular clients. Such sweeps are routine in cities before major events, and given little media attention. Meanwhile, reports on Boston-area homeless were limited to praise for leftover food donations from the convention to area shelters. Unfortunately, several city shelters had already closed under budget strains brought on in part by preparations for the convention itself. A number of homeless Bostonians were found frozen to death last winter.

“Illegal to be Homeless,” the 2004 report from National Coalition for the Homeless is available online at <http://www.nationalhomeless.org/crimreport/index.html>



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