

The homeless “problem” in Florida

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As US cities continue to pass legislation that criminalizes homelessness, a recent study has shown that rehabilitating homeless people is actually more cost effective than keeping them on the streets and arresting them. Some cities have initiated rehabilitation programs that have helped lower the rate of homelessness within their borders, but other cities, especially in the state of Florida, have imposed increasingly harsher penalties for those unable to escape their economic hardships.

The study in question is based on information provided by the Central Florida Commission on Homelessness (CFCH), which reports that an average of \$31,000 is spent annually on each homeless person in Orange, Seminole and Osceola Counties. The cost includes the salaries of law enforcement officers who must arrest and transport homeless individuals, time spent in jail facilities and emergency rooms, and hospitalization for medical psychiatric issues.

On the other hand, giving permanent housing to the same homeless people and assigning case managers to supervise them amounts to only \$10,000 per year.

The economic impact of the criminalization method is staggering. The homeless commission’s CEO, Andrae Bailey, explained in May that these communities “will spend half a billion dollars, and at the end of the decade, these people will still be homeless. It doesn’t make moral sense, and now we know it doesn’t make financial sense.”

According to Bailey, most of the chronically homeless are individuals with varying forms of disability. Many of them are veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder, the mentally ill, and people with severe physical disabilities. In other words, she explained, “These are not people who are just going to pull themselves up by their bootstraps and get a job. They’re never going to get off the streets on their own.”

Despite the efforts of researchers to demonstrate the economic benefits that can come with giving homes to the homeless, many Florida cities still rely on draconian legislation to keep their streets “clean.”

On May 6, the city of Fort Lauderdale passed an ordinance that allows police officers to confiscate the property of homeless people after giving a 24-hour notice and grants them the ability to ban groups from sharing food with the homeless. The ordinance even made it possible for officers to forego the 24-hour notice if they felt that the property in question was dangerous or smelled bad. These could include items such as clothing, family heirlooms, or food—items that a homeless person has no secure place to store.

Last July, the city of Tampa passed an ordinance that allowed police officers to arrest anyone who has been found sleeping or storing their personal property in public. Tampa had previously banned “aggressive” panhandling at all times, and passed legislation limiting other types of begging to Sundays only.

Other US cities that have criminalized homelessness include Miami, Florida; Columbia, South Carolina; Palo Alto, California; Raleigh, North Carolina and Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. In addition to the types of behavior restrictions described above, these cities target specific metropolitan areas for homeless removal, often where the wealthier echelons of society do business. They also create and manipulate existing laws to selectively target the homeless.

According to the National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty (NLCHP), citywide bans on sleeping in public have increased in the United States by 16 percent since 2011. During the same period, the number of cities prohibiting sitting or lying down in public has increased by 43 percent. Additionally, bans on sleeping in vehicles have jumped by 119 percent.

These attacks on the most desperate elements of the population coincide with a national shortage of beds

and the loss of low-income housing. According to another report published by the NLCHP that includes statistics taken from 187 cities, the US has lost nearly 13 percent of such homes since 2001.

City officials have tried to justify their actions by claiming that criminalization of homelessness keeps the community and the environment safe.

In Santa Cruz, California, where homeless people caught sleeping outside must pay a \$20 fine or give eight hours of community service, a spokesman stated that “the law does not criminalize homeless status, only conduct which is detrimental to community health and environment, i.e., lack of sanitation and degradation of city streets, open space and beaches.”

Tristia Bauman, senior attorney for the NLCHP, has explained that “criminalization laws are the least effective and most expensive way for cities to address homelessness in their communities.” The NLCHP has stated that “arrested homeless people return to their communities, still with nowhere to live. Moreover, criminal convictions—even for minor crimes—can create barriers to obtaining critical public benefits, employment, or housing, thus making homelessness more difficult to escape.”



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