

# Toronto police clear homeless camps in series of paramilitary-style raids

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Toronto police sent three people to the hospital and arrested 26 on Wednesday in a violent raid to forcibly remove residents from a homeless camp in Lamport Stadium Park. The brutal paramilitary-style operation in the capital of Ontario, which observers described as savage, was only the latest in a series of forced evictions imposed by the police at the behest of city authorities over the past month.

Metal barriers were used to confine park residents and their supporters by squads of police officers while residents were physically removed from their camp over the course of several hours. In anticipation, protesters gathered to help the residents resist, leading to scuffles with the police. The operation drew comparisons to the practice of kettling protesters—a tactic made infamous by the police during the demonstrations against the leaders of the G20 nations who visited the city 11 years ago.

The crackdown came a day after a similar raid on Tuesday at Alexandra Park, where nine people were arrested. Those detained included a photographer for the Canadian Press, who was handed a trespassing ticket barring him from returning to the area for 90 days.

The first police raid in the latest round of forced evictions occurred on June 22, when a phalanx of officers, supported by private security, descended on a makeshift encampment populated by approximately 20 to 25 homeless Torontonians in the Trinity Belwoods Park in the city's west-end. The city claimed that it repeatedly asked those residing at the park to vacate before dispatching the police to forcibly evict the people there.

The city has framed all of these operations as safety and law-and-order measures against “camping” in municipal parks after a drumbeat of media coverage denouncing the physical conditions of municipal parks with makeshift homeless encampments.

By one count, 100 police officers were involved in clearing the Trinity Belwoods camp. The police also admitted to using a drone to monitor the protesters from overhead. Protesters chanted, “Shame” and “Who do you protect?” to the police as they removed the residents.

Belongings they could not carry were put in storage, and a community garden was bulldozed in the process.

Dozens were arrested in the ensuing assault and three protesters are facing charges. Among those arrested was a prominent photojournalist, an action condemned by the Canadian Association of Journalists. He was later released without charge.

Mayor John Tory defended the forcible removal from Trinity Belwoods Park, faulting the residents for not heeding warnings to vacate. He gave his support for the conduct of police saying, “I don't make decisions about when laws are enforced in any regard in the city, those decisions are made by enforcement officials but I support what they're doing.” Tory blamed supporters of the homeless for obstructing the operation, saying fault lay at those who were “unconnected” to the residents.

In the aftermath of the latest raid at Lamport Stadium Park, the *Globe and Mail*, Canada's “newspaper of record,” weighed into the debate with a full-throated defence of police brutality. The city ordered the clearing of “illegal” camps, the paper wrote, solving the problem with “fairness and common sense.”

Camp residents have repeatedly pointed to their feeling that outdoor encampments are safer than indoor shelters proposed by the city. Many residents of the camps are suffering from addiction and mental health issues and expressed the view that the city simply desires to remove them from sight. One resident remarked to CBC News that the “government doesn't consider homeless people as humans.” A former resident of the Trinity Belwoods site said, “[e]very cent that goes to [the police] could be spent on housing.”

Surveys of homeless people in Toronto have found that concerns over safety in the overcrowded shelters is the primary reason why most take their chances on the streets. As the numbers of homeless rise, the city's shelter system is reaching a breaking point. Incidences of violence have increased by 200 percent in the last five years. Deaths in shelters have increased from 16 in the January-April 2020

period to 36 in the same period in 2021. Homeless people also have to deal with thefts of their already meagre belongings when they stay in shelters.

Lack of physical safety has been compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic. Homeless people already constitute an at-risk population due to their higher levels of comorbidities, such as respiratory diseases and diabetes. A study in the *Canadian Medical Association Journal* found that the positivity rate among the homeless was 75 percent greater than the rate among those who are housed. During the peak of the first wave, those recently homeless who tested positive were five times more likely to die within three weeks of a positive test, 20 times more likely to be hospitalized, and 10 times more likely to be sent to an intensive care unit.

While those homeless on Canada's streets usually comprise the most destitute—in particular, those suffering from the ongoing opioid epidemic and the severely oppressed indigenous community—homelessness has reached larger swathes of society when considering those that are compelled to live in their vehicles or seek temporary shelter with friends or family.

The homelessness crisis is itself directly tied to the escalating housing crisis across the country for which all political parties at different levels of government are responsible. A think tank report recently found that Vancouver, Toronto and Hamilton—a ravaged, deindustrialized former steel town where many workers squeezed out of Toronto now live—are the least affordable cities in Canada and the United States. As wages have stagnated, speculation and low interest rates have driven up housing costs across the country. The Canadian economy increasingly depends on continually rising real estate prices for growth.

On June 30, Liberal Prime Minister Justin Trudeau unveiled the second round of what he touted as his government's contribution to tackling the housing crisis. This consisted of creating a measly 3,000 affordable housing units. Trudeau reported that the initial target had been passed in the first round with 4,700 units created. He unveiled a further \$1.5 billion in investments, which will flow overwhelmingly to private housing developers.

The reality is that even assuming these investments are made in full, they would fall well short of what is needed to even put a dent in the country's housing crisis. Decades of policies pursued by all of the major bourgeois parties at every level have contributed to the lack of affordable housing.

From the 1970s until as late as the early 1990s, tens of thousands of social housing units were built annually in Canada. Ottawa largely withdrew from housing policy in the

mid-1990s under Liberal Prime Minister Jean Chretien, offloading the responsibility to the provinces, which implemented austerity measures that contributed to the collapse in public housing stock. All parties have played a role in this shift, including the New Democrats, who stopped approving rent-geared-to-income units in Ontario when they held power in the province in the 1990s.

In Canada's biggest city, the result is that thousands have been forced into the for-profit housing market, even as rents and valuations reach dizzying heights. Workers routinely spend half their income on rent. If they hope to save for a down payment on a home, the average family needs to save for more than 23 years. Property prices in Toronto have increased by more than 40 percent in the last year alone. All the while the ruling class grows fat on asset inflation backed by public funds, as Canadian billionaires have added tens of billions to their unseemly piles of wealth over the course of the pandemic.

As we wrote at the start of the pandemic:

There are plenty of resources to address the housing needs of Torontonians but this requires an attack on the wealth of the capitalist elite. ... Unwilling to undertake even modest wealth redistribution, all levels of government turn to pointing the finger at each other for the homeless and housing crises ... scapegoating those suffering from addiction and recent immigrants and refugees.

The deployment of vast financial resources to deal with Toronto's housing crisis becomes all the more urgent under conditions of the public health emergency produced by the coronavirus pandemic. Without urgent action to test homeless people, provide them with adequate medical care, and ensure they have housing and income to make it through the crisis, they risk being ravaged by the deadly COVID-19 disease.



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