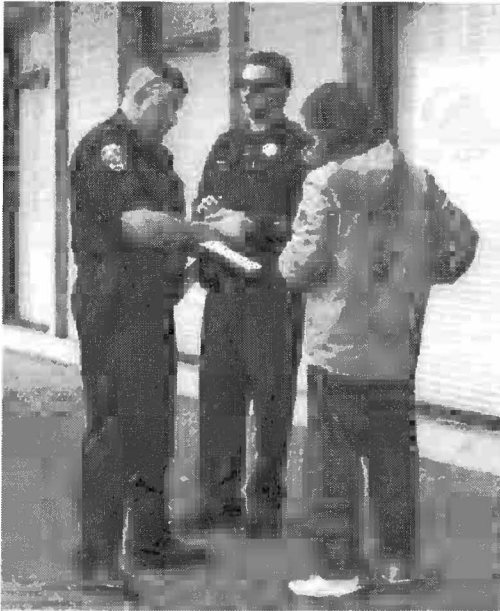


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How are Chico's recent laws impacting the homeless?

By Ashiah Scharaga, Enterprise-Record

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Chico >> A Chico State University study and county-wide homeless count have called into question the effectiveness of city laws that impact the homeless population, including the sit and lie, offenses against public properties and camping ordinances adopted since 2013.

Chico State's "Impacts of Chico's Public Safety Approach to Homelessness" analysis found that 34 percent of arrests made by the Chico Police Department from December 2013 to June 2016 were of homeless individuals, at a cost of about \$138,744 per year for policing that population through arrests, citations and booking.

This represents an increase in arrests since the sit and lie ordinance was adopted and a higher cost than that predicted by a 2016 Grand Jury report, according to the study.

The 2017 Homeless Point-in-Time Count, which generates statistics from surveys with homeless individuals in the county on one day in January, reported that less than half (46 percent) of 1,983 people surveyed said that they no longer sit, lie down, sleep or keep property in certain places because of laws like these. Eighty three percent reported that the ordinances did not lead them to leave their community.

Chico Police Chief Mike O'Brien said the city's ordinances were designed to hold people accountable for behavior that impacts others negatively. It was never touted that they were going to solve homelessness.

"We want to be compassionate and help those who want to receive help, but we also have to be compassionate to those who have been affected by the criminal element," he said. "That's not saying by any stretch of the imagination that the majority of our homeless folks are criminals. But that has to be recognized and those people have to be held accountable. ... Sometimes that piece of the conversation is forgotten."

Most of the ordinances passed were not used to make physical arrests, O'Brien said. Arrests were made as a result of something other than violating those ordinances, such as outstanding warrants, drug possession and theft.

The data from the homeless count matches his statement as well: according to the surveys, 323 people were warned, 142 were ticketed, 54 were arrested and 36 were incarcerated.

Jennifer Wilking, Chico State associate professor of political science, coauthored the university's study with professors Susan Roll, David Philhour, Peter Hansen and Holly Nevarez.

Wilking said she feels it's her job to provide the data and let the community decide who is benefitting from the ordinances. The study helps Chico understand some of the hard questions it should be asking, she said: Is it worth having the ordinances if the city could possibly be penalized with a loss of federal housing assistance funds? Are there valuable things the community is not getting from its police officers because they're spending a "significant amount of time and resources policing the homeless population?"

Wilking said she anticipates the overall annual cost to be higher because the study did not account for staff time used when contacting people, providing assists or offering resources, jail costs and cleanups of homeless encampments.

The Butte County Sheriff's office has noticed an increase in people who are inmates who have identified themselves as homeless. However, the general population has also increased as a result of prison realignment from Assembly Bill 109. On the homeless count day, nearly 25 percent of current inmates had reported they were homeless when admitted to the Butte County Jail. Eighty-four percent of the 21 people interviewed were charged with felonies and 23 percent with misdemeanors.

"Homelessness is certainly a challenging problem that does have impacts on public safety," Honea said. "It is an issue we are becoming more and more aware of and engaged in as we try to work toward solutions. ... Ultimately it's going to take a very collaborative effort from multiple segments of our community, including law enforcement."

O'Brien said the increase in arrests and costs could be because the city now has a larger police force that is capable of addressing more issues outside of critical calls for service, he said. People are contacting the police department more because they know there will be a response. In these instances, he said, most of the time officers are addressing calls from concerned community members.

The university study also concluded that as ordinances targeted specific locations, such as downtown Chico, the mean geographic location for arrests moved north over time, presumably along with the migration of those who are homeless. Wilking said the community should wonder how that has impacted other residents and businesses, such as those on The Esplanade. Northward movement also likely has implications when it comes to access to services, which are mostly provided in the downtown and south Chico areas.

Police regularly interact with a small sub-set of the homeless population, according to the studies as well as Chico police, with particular individuals generating the highest number of calls for service. Nearly 3/4 of people surveyed in the homeless count had five or less contacts with law enforcement. About four percent had over 50 and two percent reported more than 100. Wilking added that the top 25 repeat offenders in Chico have all reported being homeless at one point.

Police will continue to respond to the criminal element when it comes to homelessness, O'Brien said, but the department also has the ability to bring resources and services to people who are "service-

resistant.”

There is a half-time Butte County Behavioral Health mental health outreach coordinator who works with the Target Team to help individuals approached by police get connected to resources. O'Brien called that partnership “very, very critical.” There have also been discussions of starting a pilot crisis response unit, according to a previous Enterprise-Record article.

It is time intensive dealing with the people who are generating the most community concern and calls for service, he said. Now that the department has been expanding and creating those relationships, they will have the ability and opportunity to find solutions for those individuals, he added.

“I’d much rather see those people get the help they need,” he said. “That’s a real issue for every community and one I’m hoping this community solves.”

Wilking said she hopes there are continued studies on this topic to explore it further.

“This is our issue. These are primarily Butte County residents, so we need to come up with some approaches and solutions,” she said. “I hope we take fact-based approaches. That we do our due diligence to try to look at the data and be objective about what the data is telling us.”

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URL: <http://www.chicoer.com/social-affairs/20170610/how-are-chicos-recent-laws-impacting-the-homeless>

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