

*Economy*

## **Akron Police Told A Homeless Panhandler He Should ‘Get A F\*cking Job.’ Now He’s Suing.**

*Think Progress, by Alan Pyke, May 4, 2016, 12:29 pm*

City leaders in Akron, Ohio, are violating the First Amendment by threatening to arrest panhandlers who do not register with city police, a new lawsuit from the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) alleges.

Police currently use the registry to conduct background checks and then issue photo identification badges to certified beggars. The same law also prohibits panhandling in certain parts of town, bans it city-wide after sundown, and makes it a crime to solicit charity with a dishonest story of hardship.

Homelessness advocates have long criticized those kinds of restrictions on panhandling. And the core idea of these policies is based on misinformed stereotypes. Research indicates that public perceptions about panhandlers that might motivate policies like Akron’s – the idea that beggars are conning the kind-hearted out of spare change and then use it to get booze and drugs – are wrong.

Akron’s auditing of individual poverty chews up staff time and city resources without doing anything to mitigate poverty and homelessness. “Silencing the speech of the poor does not solve poverty. Rather than trying to prevent individuals from speaking about their needs, public officials would be better served by trying to address those needs directly,” ACLU volunteer attorney Joe Mead said in a press release.

Jerry Hill, who says he has to support himself and an 18-year-old son by panhandling because Parkinson’s prevents him from working, is one of the plaintiffs in the suit. Akron police have told Hill he’s a “stain on society” and should “get a fucking job,” according to the lawsuit.

The Rubber City instituted the panhandling registry and other restrictions back in 2006. The hearings that produced the law focused on “the goal of accommodating select members of the public who preferred not to hear this particular form of constitutionally-protected speech,” the suit says.

Prohibitions and restrictions on being homeless are common in American cities from coast to coast.

Rather than boost services or tackle affordable housing, many communities have decided to treat the homeless like criminals. So-called sit-lie laws ban citizens from sprawling out on sidewalks and public property. Many places make it illegal to sleep in one’s car or to camp in public, leading to messy and destructive conflicts between the homeless and the workers tasked with implementing politicians’ ideas. Some towns have even tried to ban charities from feeding the homeless outdoors.

But the homeless have started fighting back. Lawsuits brought by homeless residents challenging the way they’re treated by their cities have made some headway, in turn encouraging more people in similar predicaments to sue.

Homeless people in Sarasota, Florida, also recently teamed up with the ACLU to sue over a local ordinance restricting where people may sleep. Similar restrictions on where people may sleep and urinate prompted another lawsuit in California.

This burgeoning legal movement scored an important symbolic victory outside the U.S. this week. The Italian Supreme Court ruled Monday that it is not a crime for a starving homeless person to steal small amounts of food. The judges threw out the 2015 conviction of a homeless man for stealing about \$4.50 worth of cheese and sausage from a supermarket, finding that he’d acted “in the face of the immediate and essential need for nourishment” and could not therefore be jailed and fined for the theft. The ruling is not legally binding as precedent on lower courts, but the reasoning behind a “right to survival” may eventually cross borders.