

# Cities are criminalizing homelessness by banning people from camping in public. That's the wrong approach, report says

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More cities are punishing homeless people for sleeping in public, a new report shows, amid an increase in Americans living on the streets.

Arresting or ticketing people who have nowhere else to go doesn't help them find permanent housing, according to the National Law Center for Homelessness and Poverty report. Instead, policies criminalizing homelessness can make it more difficult to afford and qualify for housing.

The report out Tuesday comes while the Supreme Court considers reviewing a case on the legality of arresting unsheltered people when no shelter beds are available. It also follows a Trump administration memo proposing more police involvement in responses to homelessness.

Almost three in four of the cities surveyed restrict camping in public, the report found, marking a 15% increase since the last study in 2016. The number of unsheltered homeless likewise rose in the last three years, according to the Department of Housing and Urban Development, at a rate of about 10%.

To enforce those camping bans, police sometimes do sweeps of homeless encampments, said Tristia Bauman, the report's primary author. If homeless people refuse to move themselves and their belongings, they may face arrest, fines or warrants. Landlords may later see an offense as a reason to reject apartment applications.

"Misdemeanor convictions can exclude someone from housing or subsidized housing," Bauman said. "These laws worsen the problem."

Fines can also drain the already limited budgets homeless people survive on, she said, and essential belongings can be lost in sweeps. Combined with the lack of affordable housing, Bauman said punitive laws can put housing further out of reach.

A person who earns the federal minimum wage of \$7.25 has to work 103 hours every week to afford a one-bedroom home at the national average fair market rent, according to the National Low Income Housing Coalition.

In addition to camping and sleeping bans, the report also recorded an increase in city laws restricting sitting and lying down in public, as well as living in vehicles. Of the 187 cities surveyed nationwide, 55% had a sit-lie ordinance and half limited the latter.

The authors of the report recommend cities end such policies and use funds to provide supportive housing and housing subsidies. In the meantime, they suggest building tiny homes and meeting homeless people basic needs, such as by setting up showers and toilets.

"While cities have a legitimate interest in preventing the accumulation of urine and feces in public space, such interests cannot be met by criminalizing unavoidable bodily functions," the report reads. "If people do not have regular access to toilets, they will expel their human waste in areas other than toilets – they have no choice."

*This article originally appeared on USA TODAY: Homeless bans 'worsen the problem' of homelessness, new report shows*