

The Homelessness Crisis Is Getting So Bad That Cities Are Now Building Their Own Camps

Vice, by Emma Ockerman, July 16, 2019

Thousands of people sleep on the streets in Oakland, California. They pitch their tents in the Home Depot parking lot. They build elaborate tree forts. They park their bulky RVs in residential areas.

In the past, city officials might have torn down their temporary shelters and even arrested the homeless people living there. But many places around the country, Oakland included, have started homeless encampments themselves — or at least allowed people to occupy a small slice of land to make living outside more humane. Last month, Oakland designated a city lot where homeless people can park their RVs. And in late 2017, the city started providing heated, garden shed-like cabins with a door that locks and enough space for two people.

“It’s just to make things more manageable because it’s so bad in the streets,” said Joe DeVries, assistant to Oakland’s administrator and head of the city’s encampment management team. “We don’t have housing or shelter for everybody, and we have to create a less inhumane situation.”

In an attempt to combat a deepening homelessness crisis, other cities have instituted similar policies to Oakland’s. In February, city crews in Modesto, California, pitched 150 tents beneath a bridge and asked people to move in. San Clemente, California, designated a campsite for homeless people in May. And last year on the East Coast, Rochester, New York, quietly opened a small homeless camp.

The new accommodations don’t fix the lack of affordable housing at the root of the problem. And not everyone — especially residents who live near encampments that have burned down or seen outbreaks of disease — can see the benefits. But advocates and experts concede so-called “sanctioned” encampments — or those given legal permission to exist — are at least better than ignoring or trying to conceal the problem without offering any solutions.

“We should never accept that people live in camps — but at the same time we know that authorized encampments can be better for residents than being exposed on the streets,” Sara Rankin, associate professor and director of the Homeless Rights Advocacy Project at the Seattle University School of Law. “They literally have nowhere else to go, and there isn’t a safe and legal place for them to be.”

The problem with camps

Oakland, the largest city in Alameda County, hasn’t always looked kindly on solutions homeless people come up with in their times of desperation. Officials have dismantled impromptu encampments in the past. But a rampant affordable housing crisis in the Bay Area has meant the number of homeless people far outstrips available shelter beds and forced officials to be more flexible.

If done correctly, the city-authorized encampments can enable the city to ultimately house people in more stable conditions. The population of Milwaukee’s tent cities, for example,

dwindled in January after the city took a roll call of people staying there and paired more than 100 of them with caseworkers to find permanent housing and health services.

Despite the benefits, encampments can have a rough time shaking the reputations of their unsanctioned, unregulated counterparts. Stockton, California, firefighters have complained they constantly put out blazes at homeless encampments this year. A 16-year-old girl was raped in a Raleigh, North Carolina, homeless encampment earlier this month. Unsanitary living conditions in Los Angeles homeless encampments have caused outbreaks of typhus and hepatitis A.

While government cash and oversight can help mitigate those ills, some cities won't or can't provide services to more unruly camps and shut them down instead. Oakland's Mayor, Libby Schaaf has even said she doesn't endorse the encampments.

"All have ended in fires, unhealthy conditions for residents, let alone the surrounding community," Schaaf told KPIX, the local CBS affiliate.

Ryan Robbins, a 39-year-old music producer living in Oakland, feels the situation with the camps has snowballed over the past few years. Two of his kids went to a school near a large encampment in Fruitvale called "The Village," which the city once considered sanctioning.

"It burned down like four times, and this was 200 yards, at most, from my kid's school," Robbins said.

Oakland dismantled the camp in January and moved some of its homeless residents to the city's so-called "community cabins," or the dozens of shed-like structures located in small villages across Oakland. But Robbins said that once The Village was shut down and campers moved elsewhere, a park near his home swelled with RVs and tents.

At another tent camp in Oakland, dubbed the "77th Avenue Rangers," three people died of weather-related conditions. While Oakland doesn't currently sanction any tent cities, the city has provided portable toilets and trash pickup at well-established tent encampments, including the 77th Avenue Rangers, since 2016. But the camp's infrastructure eventually collapsed after a "criminal element" took over, according to Derrick Soo, the camp's founder.

A different kind of community

Soo started the 77th Avenue Rangers camp in 2014 along with eight other homeless people seeking safety and companionship. They cleaned up garbage on the block, worked with a local non-profit to bring basic health services to the camp, and coordinated with local food banks and businesses for food drop-offs. Soo's friends even cared for him there when he had cancer.

"If it wasn't for my friends that were back at the camp, I would've died on the streets," the 59-year-old said. "We truly became a community."

Soo couldn't find an apartment or stable, long-term shelter in his hometown after an eviction. He earns \$1,018 a month off disability checks from the federal government; the average studio apartment in Oakland — where rent has spiked by more than 50% since 2012 — goes for \$1,950 per month.

"It burned down like four times, and this was 200 yards, at most, from my kid's school." The West Coast, in particular, is in the throes of a homelessness crisis. In San Francisco, which has one of the worst affordable housing markets in the country, the homeless population has grown by 30% since 2017. A year earlier, the city had already declared a state of emergency. And nearly 60,000 people are unhoused in Los Angeles County alone — up 12% from last year.

Across the country, nearly half of all renters spend more than 30% of their incomes to keep a roof over their head. In general, the cost of living continues to rise, while wages remain stagnant.

“For a small segment of the population who are vulnerable, the fact that rents have been marching up so much quicker than incomes provides that negative ecosystem,” Gary Dean Painter, the director of the Homelessness Policy Research Institute at the University of Southern California.

On top of that, there’s drastic lack of available shelter beds on the West Coast. The Bay Area cut nearly 1,700 emergency shelter beds between 2011 and 2017. And the available shelter beds don’t always meet people’s needs. Some separate family members, lack storage for belongings, kick people out each morning, or expose homeless residents to unsafe and abusive conditions.

Building new shelters also isn’t easy. In San Francisco, wealthy residents have fought tooth-and-nail against an innovative “navigation center” that would temporarily shelter homeless people and their pets.

The right way

Robbins, who lived near the Oakland homeless camp that burned down, agrees the city should build some sanctioned encampments — like the RV parks — but only in specific, regulated locations.

Some residents seem to disapprove wherever homeless people go, though. One of Oakland’s largest encampments is tucked behind a Home Depot. Last week, a local real estate developer tried to push \$2,000 in cash on each resident in an effort to clear the entire camp out. He showed up in an elf costume towing a U-Haul, leaf-blower packed with dollar bills, and megaphone. Residents said the incident was humiliating. After he left, the city announced a plan to shut the camp down.

DeVries knows some encampments have gone badly. He’s had to put down dangerous dogs trawling tent cities and said he discovered people living in “nasty, disgusting” conditions at other camps.

But when encampments are sanctioned and infused with ample services, cash, and infrastructure, they can work.

Mayor Michael B. Hancock, the mayor of Denver, Colorado, called his city’s tiny home encampment a “tremendous success” in January. Residents at the city’s “Beloved Community Village” found jobs or went back to school while staying in the shed-like homes, and some moved on to more permanent housing.

Still, advocates worry cities aren’t focusing their attention on the long-lasting problem — housing — and instead are trying to address what most upsets their well-to-do constituents: tent cities. But it’s a start.

“It’s kind of like doing something that’s good versus always waiting to do something that’s the best,” Painter said.