

Tampa, Florida criminalizes homelessness

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On July 18, the city of Tampa, located in central Florida, passed a new city ordinance that essentially criminalizes homelessness. Item #60, which was passed by the city council by a 4-3 vote, allows police officers to arrest anyone who is found sleeping or “storing personal property” in public. In only two weeks, the result has been increased harassment and jailing of the homeless by the Tampa Police Department.

The draconian legislation was enacted without any plans to create temporary or transitional housing. City officials have instead decided on incarceration as the solution to the massive homeless crisis in Tampa.

According to the 2012 Annual Homeless Assessment Report, Tampa harbors the largest number of homeless people for a mid-sized city in the United States and numbers sixth overall behind Seattle and Las Vegas, with 7,419 living in shelters. However, the same report states that, on average, only two out of five homeless people were actually counted, meaning that there could be as many as 18,500 in Tampa, which had a population of 346,000 in 2011. This means that a staggering 5 percent of Tampa’s population could be homeless.

Charles Todd and Summer Stevens, two homeless residents of Tampa, explain that they are forced to sleep hidden under a bridge, but can only do so when the sun is completely down. Speaking to the WSWS in Lykes Gaslight Square, a city park in downtown Tampa, Todd described the police harassment.

“There are bicycle cops all around this park every day, spying on us, following us everywhere, and hiding behind trees,” he said. “They aren’t watching the roads or the stores—they are watching us. If you even set a bag down, they will take you to jail. You have no other choice.”

Michael Jans, another homeless man, told the WSWS that he left Stockton, California, over a year ago to escape this same problem. “If you’re homeless here in

Tampa, you might as well say you’re a communist. It’s a witch hunt out here,” he explained. “The cops hide behind delivery trucks and bushes, spying on us with binoculars and talking to each other over their radios.”

The only other option for the homeless living in Tampa is to seek shelter at the Salvation Army. However, those seeking shelter must pay \$10 each night to stay there and are forced to follow religious rules. The waiting list for such shelters purportedly numbers in the hundreds every night, with many being turned away when capacity is filled.

“How are we supposed to pay \$10 a night when we can’t get a job? We have no way of taking a shower every night or washing our clothes. No one will hire us, and we can’t panhandle,” Charles Todd told the WSWS. Another Tampa city ordinance passed in November 2011 banned panhandling six days a week, with the exception of Sunday, closing off that means of survival to homeless residents like Todd.

“Once you’re out on the street, you’re done,” Todd explained. “It’s nearly impossible to get out of it.”

Brian McLellan, a homeless man who has already been in jail several times for loitering and panhandling, confirmed what the others explained, that the only options for them are the Salvation Army or jail. “There is no affordable housing here, and there are no jobs for us,” he told the WSWS. “The police won’t talk to us about how to make things better. They just arrest us.”

City council members did acknowledge the fact that shelter space is limited and promised that the law would not be enforced if shelters were unavailable. They also discussed methods for transporting homeless people to shelters outside of city limits, but no plans for that have yet been put into place.

Gerald Williams, a homeless man who was born in Tampa and has lived there all his life, was recently arrested and given a court date for sleeping near Lykes Gaslight Park. “I fell asleep that night with a friend

beside me,” Williams related, “but when I woke up, he was gone, and two police officers were standing on each side of me.” Williams was unable to attend his court date two days ago, due to his belongings, including his citation, being stolen. He was told by the court that he had to return on Friday to find out if an arrest warrant has been issued.

“The cops told me that this park is police property, and that I couldn’t come back here for 165 days,” Williams told the WSWS. “They told me that having a shopping cart is a misdemeanor. They couldn’t care less about us. It’s not right that all these people have money downtown, yet they won’t use any of it to open up any of these empty buildings to allow us shelter.”

Williams continued, “I’ve tried to go get help from social services, but they just tell me that I’m a man and that I need to get a job, as if it was that simple. If I could do that, I wouldn’t be in this situation. That’s no way to treat someone. They don’t understand how degrading it is to live like this, and they make it worse.”

Amanda Mole, editor of the *Tampa Epoch*, explained in an interview that “it costs \$50 a day to incarcerate one homeless person for one day.... During the last homeless count that took place, we had 356 homeless people in jail.” She continued, “With those numbers, we spent about \$6.6 million a year in Hillsborough County alone just on incarcerating the homeless.”

With the new legislation, those numbers are sure to increase. In May, Pasco County jail, in neighboring Hillsborough County, had its highest head count ever, with 1,550 prisoners being held in an area designated for 1,200.

The homeless are not the only target of police harassment in the wake of the new city ordinance. Elizabeth Toms, a member of Tampa Food Not Bombs, which provides free food to homeless people every Tuesday morning in downtown Tampa, has also been harassed by city park officials and the police.

“They’ve come to our table many times and told us that we can’t be here, that we need a permit to give out free food to people,” Toms related. “They’ve threatened me with citations. However, I’ve contacted the city, and you don’t need a permit unless you have more than 50 people gathered together. They say things like this to us all of the time, trying to intimidate us, but we know the law.”

The homeless who are being arrested are not criminals. They are military veterans, the mentally ill, and single mothers. Red, a man who has been homeless for 40 years, explained that there will be no more room left for actual criminals in the jails if this continues. “We aren’t doing anything wrong. We aren’t bothering anyone. They don’t pay attention to robberies and crimes around this area. They are only paying attention to us. They treat us as if we are not human, but we are!”

“What it all comes down to,” Charles Todd declared, “is that all of the people in these high rises—they don’t want to look out of their windows and see us here. We are just trash to them. Do you think the police would arrest a 12-year-old boy or an elderly woman who fell asleep on a bench here? No! We are the targets of these attacks. If you look homeless in this city, the police will watch you until they get you.”



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