

New laws targeting the homeless passed in multiple US states

Matthew Taylor
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As the number of homeless people in the United States continues to grow, state and local governments are enacting new laws targeting the poorest and most vulnerable segment of society.

According to the recent 2022 Homelessness Assessment Report compiled by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), on any given day in 2022 there were 582,500 homeless people in the US. Among that number, 60 percent stayed in city or state sponsored homeless centers, with the remaining 40 percent sleeping on the streets or in an improvised shelter. Between 2020, when the last report was issued, and 2022 the homeless rate increased by approximately 1 percent.

According to Consumer Price Index data for 2022, rental costs increased by an average of 8.3 percent over the previous year. Shelter costs, when considered as a whole, which includes rent or mortgage payments, utility bills and other expenses related to housing represented 40 percent of the core inflation increase over the past year.

For most of the working class, housing costs account for the largest part of their monthly income. The second largest expense is food, which rose in cost by 10-12 percent in the last year. Considering the already tenuous state of most workers' finances, this spike in inflation has had the predictable effect of pushing more people into homelessness.

As more and more workers are forced into homelessness under the strain of record inflation and rising rents, they find themselves trapped between a collapsing social system and oppressive new laws passed to conceal the failures of capitalism.

Forty-eight states already had existing anti-homeless laws prior to 2022. In four states (Texas, Florida, California, and New Hampshire) "camping" in any

public place is banned. In New Hampshire, sleeping anywhere in public is outlawed. There are dozens of other laws on the books in various states which prohibit loitering, vagrancy, or panhandling.

State laws will often overlap with various municipal laws, both of which are frequently found by the courts to be unconstitutional. Legislators rely upon the fact that those targeted by these laws have few resources to challenge their validity. According to the National Homelessness Law Center, 60 percent of lawsuits challenging anti-panhandling or anti-camping laws are successful, as well as 77 percent of lawsuits challenging loitering, loafing, or vagrancy bans.

Several new anti-homeless laws took effect in the last year. In Missouri, the state legislature has coupled a ban on sleeping in public places with the withdrawal of state funds for permanent housing. In Tennessee, a law passed last July makes sleeping in a tent on public property, under a bridge, or on an interstate exit a felony punishable by imprisonment, the first of its kind in the nation. In Los Angeles and Portland, two cities with large homeless populations, their respective city councils have passed various restrictions on encampments.

In many states the anti-homeless laws being passed are based on model legislation formulated by the ultra-right Cicero Foundation. The institute was founded in 2016 by billionaire Joe Lonsdale. Lonsdale is also the co-founder of the tech company Palantir, which has created software used by the police and military. According to Pew, nine bills have been introduced in six states over the past two years based on the Cicero model, whose features include "state-sanctioned encampments with a six-month residency limit, a ban on permanent encampments and penalties for cities that refuse to remove them."

The passage of these new laws and ordinances is often accompanied by large -scale police raids of homeless encampments where tents, blankets, and other personal belongings of encampment residents are confiscated or destroyed.

In New York City under the administration of Democratic Mayor Eric Adams the police have carried out dozens of raids on encampments and makeshift shelters. During the height of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020 the city moved more than 8,000 homeless individuals into hotel rooms as a measure to control the spread of the virus. Little more than a year later, however, the administration of former Mayor Bill de Blasio rescinded the policy and moved to relocate the homeless to barracks style shelters.

The city has set up a hotline for residents to report homeless encampments and has tasked transit police with evicting people who are sleeping on subway trains. In January of 2022 the NYPD conducted 133 “clean-ups,” or raids, on various encampments, many of which house a single individual and consist of little more than cardboard boxes.

Although it is city policy to offer homeless victims of police raids access to shelters, many refuse. The city-backed shelters are frequently overcrowded and dangerous, and are vectors for the spread of COVID-19.



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