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Business Improvement District Policing Fact Sheet

What are Business Improvement Districts?

Every day in US cities, Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) violate the rights of homeless and poor people. *BIDs use public funds to hire private security agencies who work in tandem with police bureaus and the courts to carry out one core function: removing visible signs of poverty to maintain and extend private property rights in public space.*

BIDs are particular areas, spanning a few to several hundred blocks, in which all property owners pay a special tax or fee to the city, which then turns funds over to a private corporation or nonprofit that manages the BID. These funds are overwhelmingly spent on policing and security. There are at least 1,200 BIDs across the country, going by various names, such as Community Benefit Districts (CBDs), Green Benefit Districts (GBDs), and Enhanced Service Districts (ESDs). Regardless of what they are called, BIDs are funded using public resources, are undemocratically controlled by the area's largest property owners, and receive shockingly little oversight by local governments.

BIDs are a driving force behind the privatization and white washing of public space. To defend private property rights, BIDs funnel millions of dollars of public money into private security programs. They also enable corporate actors to collaborate with public agencies to increase police presence and bolster court systems, with grave impacts on poor and homeless people. And they lobby for discriminatory laws that criminalize poverty. Such practices ensure that people who were historically targeted by policies like Jim Crow, Sundown towns, Anti-Okie Laws, Operation Wetback, and Ugly Laws are still disproportionately harmed by laws on the books in 2021. Housing (in)justice is therefore deeply intersectional: anti-poor laws today magnify the ways that oppression continues to be stratified along lines of race, ethnicity, immigration status, and disability.



BIDs Pay Private Security and Cleanup Crews to Police Poor People

How do BIDs carry out such oppressive policing? BIDs spend more money on private security and surveillance—often labeled as “cleanup”, “public safety”, or “hospitality” programs—than anything else. The core function of security and surveillance is to remove visible signs of poverty, often with little accountability or oversight measures. For example:

- In 2019, the Hollywood Partnership BID in **Los Angeles** spent over \$3.5 million on private security, funding security guards who patrolled an average of 14 hours per day.
- In 2020, **Portland** Enhanced Service Districts (ESDs) collected more than \$10,000,000 in license fees and related revenues, much of it used to fund armed security guards working closely with local police; a recent audit found NO oversight over such spending and policing.
- The 2019 **New York City** BID Trend Report found that BIDs collectively spent \$25.1 million dollars on “public safety” in 2019, including 36 BIDs with private security forces that collectively logged 660,000 total hours across 337 officers.
- In 2020, the Center City BID in **Philadelphia** spent over \$4 million on “public safety”, including a fleet of 52 in-house security guards who patrol the district 7 days a week.

BID security forces focus on “quality of life” policing by criminalizing street vendors, buskers, and poor and homeless people for basic survival activities such as sitting, lying down, sleeping, and panhandling.

- Over a five-month period in 2019, the Downtown **Denver** BID security program reported responding to the following types of incidents: 2,130 sit and lie, 1,847 trespass, 721 unauthorized camping, and 2,285 “welfare” checks.
- According to a survey published by UC Berkeley Law in 2018, over 80% of **California** BIDs identified “panhandling and loitering” as “one of the most important issues that the BID has faced in terms of safety and security.”

BID street cleaners also displace poor and homeless people from public spaces by threatening to call police and remove personal belongings if people refuse to “move along”.

BIDs Increase Police Presence in Public Space

In addition to hiring private security, BIDs also pay for and oversee police. BID-funded police officers are armed, uniformed, and authorized to make arrests and use force as usual—but report to and take direction in part from BID leadership. For example:

- In **San Francisco**, the Castro/Upper Market BID hires police officers through the 10B program to issue citations for “open containers, urination in public, shoplifting, intoxication in public, vandalism, sit-lie violations, etc.”
- In **Portland**, the Clean & Safe ESD pays the Portland Police Bureau (PPB) for four contracted police officers, in addition to the officers regularly stationed in the area. The ESD has the authority to select and assign officers to the program, and together with PPB jointly supervises six officers in total.
- In **Oakland**, the Downtown/Lake Merritt BID successfully advocated for the deployment of a new police “Metro Unit” that works in partnership with the BID’s Ambassador Program.

BIDs Operate Their Own Courts and Prosecutors

In some cities, BIDs are deeply involved in the criminal justice system beyond just policing the streets. They have significant sway over the entire legal system through various mechanisms.

- In **Sacramento**, for example, the Downtown Partnership BID partners with the Sacramento County District Attorney’s Office to fund a dedicated “community prosecutor” serving the district. This prosecutor works directly with downtown businesses, property owners, and local police to specifically prosecute “quality of life” crimes and implement “nuisance abatement measures.”
- In **Portland**, until recently the Lloyd District ESD paid for a dedicated Assistant District Attorney who exclusively prosecuted crimes in the district, and the Clean & Safe ESD continues to fund a staffer who works closely with the DA.

BIDs Lobby for Laws that Criminalize Homelessness More Broadly

Finally, BIDs use their political influence to push policies that further criminalize homelessness, and attack those seeking to roll back laws that make it a crime to survive. When new laws and policies prove effective in ridding BIDs of homeless people in one city, BIDs in other places quickly adopt them.

- In 2019, for example, **Sacramento**’s Greater Broadway Partnership collaborated with the City of Sacramento to file a civil lawsuit that would permanently ban 7 homeless individuals from entering the area of the BID.
- In 2011-2012, the Downtown **Denver** Partnership lobbied for a camping ban that criminalized the act of sleeping outdoors, and later spent \$200,000 against a campaign to overturn the ban.
- The **California** Downtown Association, which includes many California BIDs, worked to defeat SB608, the Right to Rest Act, and AB5, the Homeless Person’s Bill of Rights.

In other words, BIDs influence policies that criminalize poor people *even outside BID boundaries*.

There is no such thing as a “better BID”.
Our message is clear: abolish BIDs, abolish private security, abolish police and prisons.

For more info go to: wraphome.org/homeless-exclusion-districts/