

# HOUSE KEYS NOT SWEEPS



January 22, 2019

## What are sweeps?

- The forced disbanding of homeless communities and removal of homeless individuals from an area.
- The threat of force, arrest, citation, and/or destruction of property to coerce homeless communities to disband.
- The theft or destruction of property, including vehicles.
- *Or any combination of the above*

Sweeps fracture communities, displace people, and damage physical and mental health. They regularly result in the loss of life-preserving shelter and medication, trauma for those being removed, and tickets, citations, and/or convictions that act as additional barriers to housing stability. These sweeps are conducted by governments with no plan to house or adequately shelter displaced residents, and sweeps siphon public funds away from effective, long term solutions to homelessness.

## What are anti-homeless laws?

Public and private agencies often use anti-homeless laws as their legal basis for conducting sweeps. Anti-homeless laws criminalize the types of life-sustaining activities that homeless people have no choice but to undertake in public. These laws spread across the nation shortly after cuts to the federal affordable housing budget in the early 1980's led to mass homelessness across the nation. Of 187 cities measured by the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty in 2019:

- 57% prohibit camping in particular public places, and 37% prohibit camping in public citywide.
- 39% prohibit sleeping in particular public places, and 21% prohibit sleeping in public citywide.
- 55% prohibit sitting and lying down in public.
- 60% prohibit loitering, loafing, and vagrancy in particular public places, and 35% prohibit loitering, loafing, and vagrancy citywide.
- 50% of cities restricting living in vehicles.

Rather than simply having one “vagrancy ordinance,” cities now pass dozens of laws, which in their totality, effectively reinstate vagrancy laws that were struck down as unconstitutional. In a survey of 1,657 people in 17 cities throughout 8 states, 74% did not know a place that is safe and legal to sleep outside.

## What are the effects of sweeps?

**1. Mass Incarceration** - Between 2006 and 2019 bans prohibiting camping city-wide have increased by 92%, bans on loitering, and vagrancy city-wide have increased by 103%, and bans on living in vehicles have increased by 213%.

- In a WRAP survey of 1,657 people, 51% were cited for sleeping, 44% for sitting or lying down, and 44% for standing still. Citations inevitably lead to incarceration.
- In the same survey, 76% of people reported being harassed by private security. Business Improvement Districts and vigilante groups are often responsible for this harassment.
- Though houseless residents make up only 3% of the population of Portland, they accounted for *52% of all arrests in 2017*.

**2. Destruction of Property** - In a survey of 351 homeless San Franciscans, *46% of respondents* reported having their belongings taken by City officials while homeless, and *38%* reported having belongings destroyed by City officials.

- Life-preserving medication, wheelchairs, and green cards are regularly taken and destroyed.

**3. Sleep Deprivation** - Constant move on orders by police enforcing camping ban laws lead to serious sleep deprivation – in a Denver survey of 484 people with recent experiences of homelessness, *49% of respondents reported 2 hours or less of uninterrupted sleep*.

**4. Pushed to Less Safe Places** - Homeless people generally do not move out of public space, because more often than not, there is nowhere else to go. In the San Francisco survey, *only 9% of respondents* reported moving indoors the last time they were forced to move.

- A nationwide survey reveals that sweeps push people into dangerous places, such as toxic industrial areas, flood zones, and steep hillsides.

**5. Harm to Physical Health** - Homeless people are *three to four times more likely to die prematurely* than their housed counterparts, as a result of the sleep loss, stress, displacement and property loss that sweeps cause.

- Denver survey respondents who had been instructed by police during sweeps to quit using shelter from the elements experienced a *71% higher rate of frostbite*, a *39% higher rate of dehydration*, and *twice the rate of heat stroke*.

**6. Harm to Mental Health** - The *73%* of Denver survey respondents who stated that they were contacted “many times” by the police in the last year were *57% more likely to experience worsening mental health*, when compared to respondents who were contacted rarely or never by the police.

**7. Additional Barriers to Housing and Economic Security** - Convictions and arrest warrants can disqualify individuals from receiving public housing assistance like Section 8 and other city sponsored housing.

*“In international human rights law, providing shelter to people who are homeless is the absolute minimum standard for any country, regardless of resources. There’s a cruelty here that I don’t think I’ve seen.”* - **Leilani Farha, UN Special Rapporteur on Housing**