

Across the US, on a daily basis city officials criminalize unhoused people -- issuing citations, fines, arrests, sweeps -- for performing unavoidable survival activities such as sleeping, sitting, lying down, and eating. Cities often justify such criminalization out of ostensible concern for health and safety. This scenario is playing out right here in Oregon as we speak, with city and small town officials violently displacing people attempting to shelter in place in the midst of an unprecedented housing and public health crisis-- rather than providing trash, hygiene, and other basic services necessary for survival, as recommended by the CDC.

I'm a researcher at the University of Oregon, and after interviewing over 50 homeless community members in cities from coast to coast (including several across Oregon) about their experiences with environmental hazards, including fire, soil pollution, noise pollution, flooding, and more, a pattern became clear. Not surprisingly, over and over I heard people express significant concerns about such dangers. Yet, people do not simply decide to locate in such areas on their own accord. As local governments criminalize people living in downtown and residential areas with growing frequency, for doing nothing but attempting to survive in the absence of stable housing, people are forced into ever more marginal spaces. What is even more egregious is that local governments then criminalize and sweep people from these marginal places AGAIN, in the name of health and safety--essentially making it illegal and impossible for unhoused people to exist, anywhere. This cycle of hazard exposure, criminalization, and eviction impacts people in nearly all of the houseless communities I spoke with, and its impacts are especially significant for BIPOC people, LGBTQ+ folks, elders, and immigrants who are more likely to experience cumulative and intersectional harms at the hands of criminal justice, housing, and healthcare systems. (Link to journal article: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2514848619892433>.)

This cycle needs to stop. The answer is NOT to criminalize and displace people. The answer IS to re-invest in a housing-based social safe -- and to work with people to ensure that they have a safe place to live and survive in the meantime.

The criminalization of homelessness results from local and state governments pandering to housed people, who, enshrined in their private property rights, envision they ought to be allowed to force those in more precarious situations to disappear. Homelessness became widespread when the federal government cut funding for affordable housing for working class people by nearly eighty percent in the early 1980s--while increasing subsidies for middle and upper-class homeowners tenfold. Homelessness will not go away by incarcerating and evicting people—that merely inhumanely immiserates people. Homelessness will ONLY go away when a serious financial commitment is reinstated for a social safety net for the poor and working class. In the meantime, people need a place to exist, to eat and sleep and live, to build community.

It is long past due that Oregon's elected officials recognize housing as a human right, and put this belief into action by stopping the criminalization and sweeps of people who have nowhere else to go. Please vote yes on the Right To Rest, HB 2367.