

Dear committee members,

I am a professor at the London School of Economics and have devoted the last ten years of my life to studying homelessness in the United States. I'd like to share some of what I have learned with you here.

The problem this bill seeks to address is not limited to Oregon alone. Across the country, as homelessness rates rose in the 1980s, instead of increasing housing support, local governments began outlawing activities that unhoused people undertake to simply to survive, such as panhandling, sitting on sidewalks, camping, and pushing shopping carts. In recent years, the climate of hostility has only deepened. Between 2009 and 2014, the number of laws targeting homeless survival increased by sixty percent. These strategies—ostensibly designed to promote economic redevelopment—have made life nearly impossible for those without housing. Could you survive if there were no place you were allowed to fall asleep, to store your belongings, or to stand still? For unhoused people across America, these circumstances are an ordinary part of daily life. In my capacity as a researcher, I have heard countless stories of lives deeply affected by draconian laws policing the use of public spaces. Oregon now has an opportunity to do better, and in so doing, to lead the nation towards a future in which people are not targeted for police harassment simply for being poor.

Anti-homeless sentiment is also deeply bound up with American racism. In the latest surveys, African Americans were nearly seven times more likely than whites to become homeless, as the result of the extreme rental exploitation, gentrification, and predatory lending that targets black neighborhoods. Policing of homelessness further reinforces the racial biases of American police departments. Today, the jail has become the de facto site for managing homelessness, a trend that mirrors a larger national incarceration explosion. Although crime rates have steadily declined since the mid-90s, incarceration rates have skyrocketed. As many as seventy percent of unhoused people have experienced incarceration, and twelve percent of jail detainees are homeless upon arrest, overwhelmingly jailed for trivial order maintenance offences.

As jails have taken on the function of providing lodging, homeless shelters have seen dramatic cuts to their budgets. All of this is coming to a head into today's crisis caused by the global COVID-19 pandemic, during which hundreds of thousands of people in the US face the possibility of homelessness. Responding to the problem with police harassment is no longer a viable option. This bill before you presents Oregon lawmakers a powerful opportunity to influence the future of national policy, as the nation is now being forced by the current crisis to reckon with homelessness as the tragic consequences of a failed welfare state and stagnating wages. In all my years of research, I have not seen a bill on homelessness that is more important or more historic. I strongly urge you to support this bill to restrict unfair laws targeting people without housing.

Best,
Dr. Jessie Speer