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Criminalizing Homelessness Doesn't Work, Housing People Does



Entrance to a forested homeless camp, outside Bend, Oregon. Photo: Jeffrey St. Clair.

In the largest eviction of a homeless encampment in recent history, around 100 unhoused people were recently forced to vacate Oregon's Deschutes National Forest — or else face a \$5,000 fine and up to one year in jail.

The forest was the last hope for the encampment's residents, many of whom were living in broken down RVs and cars. Shelters in nearby Bend — where the average home price is nearly \$800,000 — are at capacity, and rent is increasingly unaffordable.

"There's nowhere for us to go," Chris Dake, an encampment resident who worked as a cashier and injured his knee, told the *New York Times*.

This sentiment was echoed by unhoused people in Grants Pass, 200 miles south, where a similar fight unfolded. A year ago this June, in Grants Pass v. Johnson, the Supreme

Court's billionaire-backed justices ruled that local governments can criminalize people for sleeping outside, even if there's no available shelter.

Nearly one year later, homelessness — and its criminalization — has only worsened.

Today, a person who works full-time and earns a minimum wage cannot afford a safe place to live almost anywhere in the country. The federal minimum wage has remained stagnant at \$7.25 since 2009, and rent is now unaffordable for half of all tenants.

As a result, there are now over 770,000 people without housing nationwide — a record high. Many more are just one emergency away from joining them.

The Supreme Court's abhorrent decision opened the door for cities to harass people for the "crime" of not having a place to live. Fines and arrests, in turn, make it more difficult to get out of poverty and into stable housing.

Since *Grants Pass*, around 150 cities have passed or strengthened "anti-camping" laws that fine, ticket, or jail people for living outdoors — including over two dozen cities and counties in California alone. A Florida law mandates that counties and municipalities ban sleeping or camping on public property. Due to a related crackdown, almost half of arrests in Miami Beach last year were of unhoused people.

Emboldened by *Grants Pass*, localities have ramped up the forced clearing of encampments — a practice known as "sweeps."

While officials justify them for safety and sanitation reasons, sweeps harm people by severing their ties to case workers, medical care, and other vital services. In many cases, basic survival items are confiscated by authorities. Alongside being deadly, research confirms that sweeps are also costly and unproductive.

Punitive fines, arrests, and sweeps don't address the root of the problem: the lack of permanent, affordable, and adequate housing.

President Trump is only doubling down on failed housing policies. He ordered over 30 encampments in D.C. to be cleared based on a March executive order. And his budget request for 2026 would slash federal rental assistance for over 10 million Americans by a devastating 43 percent (all to fund tax breaks for billionaires and corporations.)

For too long, our government policies have allowed a basic necessity for survival to become commodified and controlled by corporations and billionaire investors. We must challenge this if we ever want to resolve homelessness.

Housing is a fundamental human right under international law that the U.S. must recognize. Homelessness is solvable *in our lifetime* if our country commits to ensuring that every person has a safe, affordable, dignified, and permanent place to call home.

As housing experts have long noted, governments should invest in proven and humane solutions like Housing First, which provides permanent housing without preconditions, coupled with supportive services.

Despite the obstacles, communities continue to fight back — including in Grants Pass, where disability rights advocates are challenging the city's public camping restrictions. Others are forming tenant and homeless unions in their cities, organizing rent strikes, and pushing for publicly funded housing (or “social housing”) that's permanently affordable and protected from the private market.

The *Grants Pass* decision may have opened the door to new cruelties, but local governments still have a choice to do what's right. Now, more than ever, we must demand real housing solutions.

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