

REPORT - *A Dream denied: The Criminalization of Homelessness in U.S. Cities*, by National Coalition for the Homeless

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The National Coalition for the Homeless (NCH) and the National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty (NLCHP) today released a report, A Dream Denied: The Criminalization of Homelessness in U.S. Cities, tracking a growing trend in U.S. cities - the criminalization of homelessness. The report focuses on specific city measures from 2005 that have targeted homeless persons, such as laws that make it illegal to sleep, eat, or sit in public spaces. The report includes information about 224 cities nationwide.



The Dream Denied report also ranks the top 20 U.S. cities with the worst practices in relation to criminalizing homelessness.

The national ranking is based on a number of factors, including the number of anti-homeless laws in the city, the enforcement of those laws, the general political climate toward homeless people in the city, and the city's history of criminalization measures.

In addition to the "meanest cities," the report identifies examples of more constructive approaches to homelessness.

NCH and NLCHP released their last joint report on the topic in 2002. In the 67 cities surveyed in this report and in the 2002 report, there are currently more laws used to target homeless persons, including a 12% increase in laws prohibiting begging in certain public places and a 14% increase in laws prohibiting sitting or lying in certain public spaces.

Michael Stoops, NCH Acting Executive Director, said, "Advocates around the country continue to report that homeless people are being unfairly harassed for being on the street when they have no other place to go."

Maria Foscarinis, NLCHP Executive Director, noted, "The report highlights these unjust practices and promotes approaches that aim to solve homelessness, rather than make it worse. These practices that target homeless people forced to live in public spaces are not only cruel and counterproductive, but frequently violate homeless people's constitutional rights."

While more cities are cracking down on homeless people living in public spaces, cities do not have adequate shelter to meet the need. The U.S. Conference of Mayors report released in December 2005 revealed that 71% of the 24 cities surveyed reported a 6% increase in requests for emergency shelter, with 14% of overall emergency shelter requests unmet and 32% of emergency shelter requests by homeless families unmet. At the same time, Congress is cutting key social safety net programs that could help reduce homelessness. Legislation passed last month by the House and Senate proposes to cut Medicaid funding by \$4.8 billion and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) assistance by \$732 million over the next five years. These cuts are supported by the Bush Administration, despite the Administration's stated goal of ending "chronic" homelessness, which is especially prevalent among disabled homeless

persons living on the street.

Another trend documented in the report is increased city efforts to target homeless persons indirectly by punishing or placing restrictions on service providers serving food to poor and homeless persons in public spaces.

Chris Cosden, a lawyer in Sarasota, Florida, who has represented homeless clients in court challenges to three different Sarasota anti-lodging laws, said, “These laws attempt to make the lives of homeless people so wretched that they are compelled to go elsewhere . . . for a legislative body to intentionally do that is just plain mean.”

The report also includes information about constitutional challenges to measures that criminalize homelessness.

Top Twenty Ranked Cities:

1. Sarasota, FL
2. Lawrence, KS
3. Little Rock, AR
4. Atlanta, GA
5. Las Vegas, NV
6. Dallas, TX
7. Houston, TX
8. San Juan, PR
9. Santa Monica, CA
10. Flagstaff, AZ
11. San Francisco, CA
12. Chicago, IL
13. San Antonio, TX
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16. Anchorage, AK
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18. Los Angeles, CA
19. St. Louis, MO

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[FEDERAL] [STATE]

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Source:

<http://www.nationalhomeless.org/publications/crimreport/index.html>