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Homeless Encampment Sweeps May Be Draining Your City's Budget

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Amid rising inflation and lack of available, affordable housing, homelessness has been [increasing to crisis levels in the United States](#). According to the [National Alliance to End Homelessness](#), between 2016 and 2020, there was a 6 percent jump in rates of overall homelessness.

During this period, [unsheltered homelessness rates increased by 20 percent](#). Unsheltered homelessness was especially prominent on the [West Coast and among women, Black and Latinx people, and people not experiencing chronic homelessness](#).

Though the reasons for recent increases in unsheltered homelessness are well researched and documented and include [the rise of the cost of living, lack of affordable housing, and a lack of resources for people experiencing homelessness](#), many of the most common responses to homelessness encampments are implemented by law enforcement and fail to address the root causes—while [costing cities substantial amounts of money](#).

People who experience unsheltered homelessness are [more likely to have interactions with law enforcement](#) (PDF), such as through homeless encampment sweeps. This contributes to the [revolving door of homelessness and incarceration](#) and other legal system involvement, which places immense financial burdens on communities.

Evidence suggests alternative solutions, such as permanent supportive housing and rapid rehousing, reduced police involvement, and wraparound services, are more effective and can help reduce financial burdens on city budgets.

The cost of encampment sweeps versus evidence-based solutions

In urban areas, [homeless encampment sweeps](#), in which law enforcement officers or sanitation workers remove entire communities, are a common response to unsheltered homelessness. Sweeps reduce the visibility of homelessness, but evidence shows they only [further displace unhoused people](#) and do not address its root causes.

Sweeps [exacerbate negative outcomes](#) for people experiencing homelessness while straining city budgets. An Abt Associates report showed that [responding to homeless encampments cost Houston, TX \\$3,393,000 and San Jose, CA \\$8,557,000](#).

When addressing the homeless crisis, policymakers should consider using the following alternatives to police responses to homelessness. These alternatives can both improve outcomes for people experiencing homelessness and save cities money.

- **Community response teams.** Using community response teams can be a cost-effective strategy in addressing homelessness. The [Crisis Assistance Helping Out on the Streets program](#) in Eugene, Oregon, dispatches medical and mental health crisis workers instead of law enforcement. After the program began, the police department [saved an average of \\$8.5 million a year](#) (PDF) during a three year span (2014–17). For communities that have implemented community response teams, evidence shows [increases in public safety, fewer and lower rates of suicide, and significant drops in the use of emergency departments](#).
- **Continuums of care.** Coupled with Housing First, [continuums of care](#) provide services such as intensive case management, critical time interventions, and assertive community treatment (ACT). These interventions have been shown to [reduce the number of days spent homeless as well as alcohol and substance use, and ACT has been shown to be cost-effective compared with standard case management](#). [One 2020 study](#) showed that 69 percent of the costs of an ACT intervention were offset by savings in other costs such as emergency shelters.
- **Supportive housing.** Research shows it costs taxpayers [\\$31,065 a year to criminalize a single person](#) experiencing homelessness while the yearly cost for providing supportive housing is \$10,051. And in the Urban Institute's evaluation of the Denver Social Impact Bond Initiative, researchers found that program participants experienced [fewer interactions with law enforcement, reductions in jail stays and time spent in jail](#), reduced stays in shelters, and reduced use of short-term or city-funded services, such as detoxification services, when they receive such housing.

The evidence shows encampment sweeps don't solve the root causes of homelessness and may exacerbate negative outcomes for unhoused people. Leveraging these solutions could help reduce financial burdens on city budgets while improving the health and well-being of people experiencing homelessness and communities as a whole.

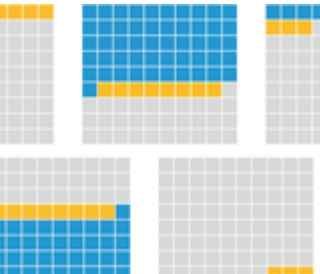
The original version of this post incorrectly stated that the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness produced the report showing the costs of responding to homeless encampments. Researchers from Abt Associates authored the report (corrected 1/10/2022).

[Housing First](#), [Criminal Justice](#), [Supportive Housing](#), [Policing](#), [Homelessness](#)

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