

July 13, 2021

Dear members of the Denver Board of Public Health & Environment:

I was glad to see your Q&A follow up that was posted on your website from the April presentation by DDPHE on encampments. I have been disappointed in the downstream intervention focus the city has taken in regards to protecting the health and wellbeing of residents experiencing homelessness and am glad to see your Board tackling these issues and pushing for upstream solutions.

Many U.S. cities are increasingly targeting activities commonly engaged in by homeless persons, by making it illegal to sleep or sit on sidewalks, to be in parks after curfew, to panhandle, to sleep in cars, or to use any form of shelter from the cold or sun other than their clothing. Research shows that localities are mobilizing substantial police resources to enforce these laws through “move along” orders and sweeps, citations, and arrests of persons experiencing homelessness. Though the debate between supporters and opponents of these types of “quality of life” policing is fierce, there are few empirical studies tracking the actual consequences of “quality of life” policing on the health of homeless persons.

I conducted a research survey in 2018-2019 of 484 people experiencing homelessness in the Denver area to fill in this gap along with Dr. Tony Robinson (Political Science Professor at CU Denver). In this research, we show that these “quality of life” laws impact the health and safety of the homeless. Our results, published in the academic, peer-reviewed *Journal of Social Distress and Homelessness*, indicate: (1) that respondents have worse sleep habits and mental health outcomes when they are worried about police contact; (2) that people seek out more hidden and isolated sleeping locations to avoid police contact, resulting in more physical and sexual assault; and (3) that individuals are more at risk of exposure to weather-related hazards if they have been instructed to quit using shelter from the elements. Our research provides compelling evidence showing that the criminalization of homelessness has undermined the health of people experiencing homelessness.

Additional survey data that we have not published on but is included in our *Unhealthy By Design* report (p.54-57) includes note of limited access to sanitation and hygiene facilities and information about referral into services. The dearth of public bathrooms and hygiene facilities helps explain why 54% of our survey respondents noted it was “difficult” or “nearly impossible” to find a place to use the bathroom when needed. Our survey confirms the numerous research studies which find that inadequate bathroom and hygiene access is a contributor to mental stress and mental illness. Lastly, only 14% of respondents reported being asked if they were in need of services when engaging with law enforcement, and only 3% of respondents report that a social worker or medical staff contacted to help with the situation (p.38).

The National Inter-Agency Council on Homelessness (2012), the U.S. Department of Justice (2012), and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (2016) have all argued that “quality of life” laws are cruel and counterproductive to the goals of reducing street living among homeless people and improving their quality of life. The American Public Health Association (2018) has called upon federal, state and local agencies to adopt alternative solutions

rather than criminalizing homelessness, as punitive measures “are not only ineffective in reducing homelessness and costly to enforce but serve as a barrier to income and housing stability.”

Sweeps, under the guise of public health, are not the public health answer. Some jurisdictions have shown that non-punitive, service-oriented approaches to homelessness can show positive results. Our city governments should focus on long-term, upstream solutions to homelessness through better services and expanded housing options, while limiting aggressive policing and sweep strategies that undermine the health and wellbeing of people experiencing homelessness.

I am happy to answer any questions about this research and its implications related to decision-making and recommendations from the Denver Board of Public Health & Environment.

Sincerely,

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