The Community Policing Dispatch is the e-newsletter of the COPS Office. It aims to educate readers about a variety of criminal justice issues that affect the implementation of community policing and to assist law enforcement practitioners to more effectively address crime and social disorder in their communities.


Alternatives to Criminalization: The Role of Law Enforcement

People enter a career in law enforcement for a variety of reasons. Police officers serve the community, uphold the law, and save lives. But what do officers do when the policies in their communities challenge their efforts to improve the quality of life for those they serve?

One such policy is the criminalization of homelessness, an approach that some cities and towns are taking in an attempt to get people off the street. Not only does the practice do little to prevent and end homelessness but it also takes law enforcement officers away from their important work of solving crime and protecting the public. Fortunately, law enforcement can play an important role in creating solutions to homelessness that we know are more effective than criminalization and can even save taxpayer dollars.

Criminalization: An inefficient use of resources

People experiencing homelessness, like all people, should be held accountable when they violate the law. But arresting people for performing basic life-sustaining activities like sleeping in public takes law enforcement professionals away from what they are trained to do: fight crime. It also forces them into a role they were not trained for—interacting with people who are often coping with untreated mental health or substance abuse issues. Instead, communities need to focus resources on creating affordable housing and sufficient affordable treatment options for people dealing with serious mental health or substance abuse problems. Virtually all homelessness would disappear if there was a sufficient quantity of affordable, adequate, safe places to live.

As police departments work to implement the recommendations of the President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing ([http://www.cops.usdoj.gov/policingtaskforce](http://www.cops.usdoj.gov/policingtaskforce)), conversations about how police can best respond to homelessness using a “guardian” rather than “warrior” approach should be front and center, and there are some solutions police can implement themselves. These programs need funding to support them and, equally importantly, funding to support the services they offer as an alternative to criminal consequences.
Examples of where police departments have taken a leadership role in this critical issue include the following:

◆ Police departments, in Houston, Texas (http://www.houstoncit.org/test/); Colorado Springs, Colorado (https://cspd.coloradosprings.gov/public-safety/police/community-outreach/homeless-outreach), and elsewhere have created Homeless Outreach Teams, partnering mental health, social service, and law enforcement personnel together so that people experiencing homelessness are first offered social services and outreach rather than arrested when complaints are called in.

◆ Police in Washington, D.C., partner with the Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless (http://www.legalclinic.org/) to provide homeless response training to every new class of recruits at the police academy.

Police have the opportunity to implement better policies for interaction with people experiencing homelessness such as those above. A model set, based on those in Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, and elsewhere, is in available in our Criminalization Advocacy Manual (http://www.nlchp.org/documents/No_Safe_Place_Advocacy_Manual).

**Share your important insights as part of a broader conversation**

As important as internal changes are, law enforcement must be involved in conversations about what the entire community must do to support effective policing and effective housing policies. This is a two-way street—we encourage law enforcement officials to voice their opinions and also encourage policy makers to solicit their input.

Some important things to share with policy makers include the following:

◆ Law enforcement officers bring valuable experience to the conversation that can help them partner with providers to bring safety and services to the community as part of a larger strategy to end homelessness.

◆ It is more expensive to keep a person experiencing homelessness who has been arrested for a nonviolent offense in pretrial detention for months (as they often can't pay bail) than to provide them with housing.

◆ It is neither safe nor appropriate to put law enforcement on the front lines to resolve mental health, substance abuse, and housing crises when what people experiencing homelessness really need is housing and adequate services.

◆ It is not cost-effective to send out a team of ten officers to sweep a homeless encampment when there is not an adequate alternative place for people to be, so the camp will necessarily spring up again elsewhere and the cycle will be repeated. (Read more about effective community-based solutions to homeless encampments.)
The bottom line is that the criminalization of homelessness does not solve the problem of homelessness. Instead, it burdens people experiencing homelessness with arrest records and forces police departments to arrest people for crimes related to not having access to housing and services.

The Federal Government is working to implement alternatives to criminalization (https://www.usich.gov/news/leading-by-example-on-human-rights-of-people-experiencing-homelessness) in our communities, and we at the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty (http://www.nlchp.org/) are ready to help.

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