



Evidence Informed Recommendations for Addressing Persons Experiencing Homelessness

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WHAT IS 'MEASURE®'?

MEASURE® is an Austin-based, not-for-profit, public education and research organization which seeks to improve community agency functionality and ability to address community needs through groundbreaking research and advocacy. Founded in 2015 by President, Jameila “Meme” Styles, we’ve established a data driven culture embedded with our motto “Data driven - Community Led.” Our mission is to use data to empower communities to eliminate social disparities.

THE PROBLEM

Austin's policy toward homeless criminalization continues to consume vast manpower and organizational resources. In fact, thousands of citations have been issued over the last two years and there has not been a reduction in the amount of people experiencing homelessness.

Frivolously ticketing the homeless for minor incidences directly impairs access to services, while decreasing trust in institutions and increasing risk for people who are experiencing homelessness.

On June 6, 2019, Austin City Council voted to postpone a decision on a new draft ordinance that would address homelessness. During this discussion,

Austin Police Chief asked for clarity on how officers should respond to the management of problems associated with Austin’s increasing homelessness population. Mayor Steve Adler also requested more information about the public health impacts related to homelessness and police response to camping outside of business areas.

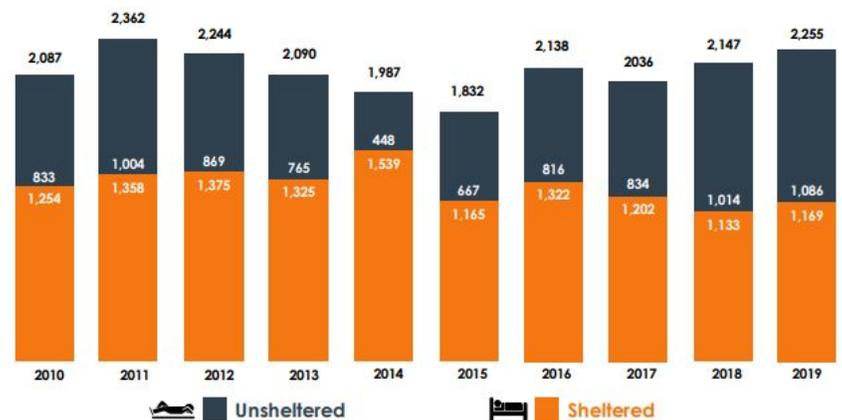
THE DATA

Utilizing police officers to address issues of homelessness comes with fiscal and social costs. One study shows that for a medium-sized police department an officer may spend 2–4 hours for each arrest.¹ Moreover, officers are ticketing homeless people for actions that are often related to living circumstances that are beyond their control. Such actions are often open to police officer discretion and are perceived as criminal offences as opposed to survival tactics. This translates to a great amount of officer time and organizational resources that could be used to prevent more serious crimes.^{1,2} Furthermore, these tickets and arrests may cause further financial impairment to people experiencing homelessness that can cause them to remain homeless.

The three standing ordinances that are viewed as minor offences and continue to criminalize homeless Austinites include; “no camping,” “no soliciting,” and “no sit and lie.” In a 2018 survey of individuals experiencing homelessness, respondents reported being issued 219 tickets for “no camping,” 39 tickets for “no soliciting,” and 191 tickets for “no sit, not lie.”³ This equated to a ticketing average of 5.7 times a year per surveyed individual.⁴

According to the 2019 Homeless Point In Time Count (PIT), homelessness is on the rise. The total number of individuals experiencing homelessness on January 26, 2019 was 2,255 a 5% increase from the 2018 PIT count.⁵ If the number of individuals experiencing homelessness continues to rise while homeless shelters continue to operate at full capacity

Persons Counted Experiencing Homelessness in Point-in-Time Counts (PIT)



¹ Lum, C., & Nagin, D. S. (2016). Reinventing American Policing. The University of Chicago Press., 6–10. doi:129.174.021.005

² Kohler-Hausmann, Issa. 2013. “Misdemeanor Justice: Control without Conviction.” American Journal of Sociology 119(2):351–93.

³ Herrera, Norma (2018, October). “Homes Not Handcuffs.” 2. Retrieved from https://grassrootsleadership.org/sites/default/files/homes_not_handcuffs_final_web.pdf

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ending Community Homelessness Coalition (ECHO). (2019, March 26). Homelessness in Austin/Travis County: 2019 Annual Point in Time Count Results and Plan to End Homelessness. Retrieved from <http://www.austinecho.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/2019-Homeless-PIT-Count-and-Action-Plan-Progress-Press-Release-.pdf>

without expansion, it is likely that more individuals will be criminalized under the current policy and thus we can expect to see a similar increase in the total amount of time officers will dedicate to handling tickets and arrests.

EVIDENCE-INFORMED RECOMMENDATIONS

Giving tickets does not solve the problem. Instead it creates a costly revolving door for people experiencing homelessness and added burden for officers. Action taken by local officials should aim to reduce homelessness by seeking to identify, understand, and address the root causes.

1. Expand the HOST Team beyond Downtown

According to the Austin Monitor, “the Austin Police Department has argued that officers are only targeting those who are disturbing the peace and that giving people a court date is a way to get them in contact with social services.”⁶ Having those in need of social services access them through the court system is not efficient and very costly. Officers addressing these issues should connect people directly to the social services at the time of need.

A dedicated homeless outreach team is a part of the solution.⁷ Units that directly interact with the homeless population, like the HOST team or social workers, should be clearly distinguishable from the police in order to foster the positive interactions and trust needed for addressing the social factors that contribute to homelessness. In addition, local business owners can be given resources about social services that they can refer to those who are in need. Entities like Aunt Bertha and Lifeworks are examples of local resources business owners can provide people with.

2. Housing First Approach

Another way to address the root cause of homelessness is to increase wraparound services and case management to pursue a housing-first approach.⁸ Housing individuals is inexpensive compared to alternatives and has an unparalleled track record, particularly in

⁶ Craver, J. (2018, August 20). City budget boosts spending for homelessness services. Retrieved from <https://www.austinmonitor.com/stories/2018/08/city-budget-boosts-spending-for-homelessness-services/>

⁷ Police Executive Research Forum. (2018, June). CRITICAL ISSUES IN POLICING SERIES The Police Response to Homelessness. Conclusion: 11 Steps Law Enforcement Agencies Can Take to Improve the Response to Homelessness, 73-74. Retrieved from <https://www.policeforum.org/assets/PoliceResponsetoHomelessness.pdf>

⁸ Culhane, D. P., Kane, V., & Johnston, M. (2013). Homelessness research: shaping policy and practice, now and into the future. *American journal of public health*, 103 Suppl 2(Suppl 2), S181-S182. doi:10.2105/AJPH.2013.301728

cities like New Orleans and Salt Lake City.⁹ Dedicated funding streams for these services and biasing distribution of bond money toward supportive housing can be developed to sustain these solutions. City officials can also revisit housing policies and improve policies to help people keep their homes.

3. Increase Evidence-Based Research

Additional research on evidence-based programs that are effective in addressing the causes of homelessness need to be further explored.¹⁰ It may be more cost effective to aim to invest in the ending of homelessness in Austin than to manage or police it. Further research could provide additional solutions not previously mentioned that are more effective uses of taxpayer dollars.

CONCLUSION

In summary, MEASURE© recommends the city redirect its efforts away from costly arrests and ticketing and toward alternatives which are empirically proven to be successful, such as rapid re-housing. In addition to the direct financial loss that the city has and will incur due to processing, there is a moral levy which those in positions of influence must pay each time they see an individual who is homeless while knowing the criminalizing effect of the current policy.

⁹ National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty. (n.d.). Housing Not Handcuffs. Retrieved from <https://nlchp.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Housing-Not-Handcuffs.pdf>

¹⁰ Police Executive Research Forum. (2018, June). CRITICAL ISSUES IN POLICING SERIES The Police Response to Homelessness. Conclusion: 11 Steps Law Enforcement Agencies Can Take to Improve the Response to Homelessness. Retrieved from <https://www.policeforum.org/assets/PoliceResponsetoHomelessness.pdf>