

[REPORT]

July 2025

The Public Health Impacts of Encampment “Sweeps”

Introduction

Encampments and Their Residents

People live in encampments because they have no reasonable alternative.⁹

More than 650,000 people in the U.S. experienced homelessness on any given night in 2023. Far too few emergency shelter beds and transitional housing options exist to serve the population in need,¹ leaving hundreds of thousands of individuals—nearly 40% of the unhoused²—with no option but to seek shelter in places not meant for habitation, including sleeping outside in groups or encampments.³

Available evidence shows that residents of encampments are typically between 25 and 60 years of age.^{4,5} Encampment residents are often people of color; most are living with a disability, and many are subject to systemic discrimination for their gender or sexuality.^{4,5} Most encampment residents are also long-time residents of the neighborhood where they camp, with deep ties to the local community.⁴

The vast majority of people living in encampments lack viable alternatives for shelter. A study conducted in Denver, Colorado found that 70% of city residents living in unsheltered public spaces had been turned away from emergency shelters due to lack of capacity.⁶ A similar study in San Jose, California found only 508 year-round shelter beds available for the more than 5,500 unhoused residents in the city.⁷

Recently, encampments have become more visible as development takes place on previously vacant spaces, or as the homeless population grows to exceed the capacity of unsheltered spaces that are out of public view.⁴

Encampment Disruptions and Involuntary Displacement (“Sweeps”)

Many U.S. cities have used disruptive methods to respond to visible encampments, often called “encampment sweeps.” Other names used for such sweeps include “clean-ups,” “abatement,” “move-along orders,” “clearings,” “forced relocations,” and “involuntary displacements.”^{8–10}

Encampment sweeps typically fall into three categories: spot sweeps, temporary sweeps, and permanent sweeps.

- **Spot sweeps** typically involve service providers or other city authorities passing through the camp to pick up trash, offer resources, and connect people with desired services. Spot sweeps of this nature are often considered helpful and are appreciated by encampment residents.¹¹
- **Temporary and permanent sweeps** are inherently disruptive. In these sweeps, residents are sometimes given one or two garbage bags in which to move a limited number of personal belongings then forcibly displaced from the location by police while sanitation crews remove and destroy everything left behind. In temporary sweeps, residents are allowed to return to the location after it has been cleared; some encampment residents may experience such sweeps as often as once per month. In permanent sweeps, residents are barred from returning to the encampment location under threat of arrest.¹¹ Some municipalities take efforts to make the area unusable by blocking it off with concrete barricades or closing the area to public entry entirely.¹²

Some municipalities provide encampment residents with a few days’ notice of an upcoming sweep;¹³ however, those timelines are not always followed, and some residents have undergone sweeps of their encampment days before it was scheduled to occur.¹⁴ Many sweeps begin very early in the morning and last most of the day, leaving residents little or no ability to prepare.¹¹ Some municipalities combine encampment sweeps with linkage to social services;^{4,7}

however, the intended positive effects of these linkage attempts are usually undermined by one or more of these common challenges: the absence of comprehensive outreach strategies before, during, and after the sweep; the lack of available services to be offered in the first place; lack of housing options that meet residents' needs; reliance on law enforcement officers to carry out sweeps instead of a more suitable workforce; and increased criminal justice involvement as a consequence of police involvement and systematic warrant checking during the sweep.^{5,15}

Encampment sweeps do not reduce homelessness. Nor do they improve housing access. Instead, they usually erode viable pathways to housing by disrupting social ties, reducing access to vital records, and creating barriers for housing services.¹⁶ More than 90% of people who are displaced by sweeps remain in public spaces after displacement, and nearly two thirds simply move down the street, because they have nowhere else to go.⁵



Encampment Sweeps Increase Overdose Deaths

Overdose is a **leading cause of death** among unhoused populations. Before COVID-19, about 25% of all deaths among unhoused, unsheltered city residents were due to overdose.¹⁷ Since then, several studies suggest that overdose deaths have nearly doubled among those who are unhoused.^{4,18}

Encampment sweeps may account for as many as **24%** of all deaths among unhoused people who use drugs.¹⁰

Studies have found that unhoused people who were forced to leave their encampment in the past 30 days had 2.5-times higher odds of non-fatal overdose compared to those who had not been displaced.¹⁹ Similarly, studies of death records show that unhoused people who were regularly forced to relocate experienced 70-90% higher rates of overdose death compared to those who were not.¹⁰

Common causes of overdose death after encampment sweeps include: return to use due to loss of medications for opioid use disorder, loss of naloxone for overdose reversal, and loss of trusted social ties with people who are ready and willing to respond to an overdose.¹¹ Losing connections with trusted suppliers and/or a familiar drug supply can put people who use drugs within the encampment and those who live in homes in the surrounding neighborhood at higher risk of overdose.²⁰⁻²²

Other Human Costs of Encampment Sweeps

Encampment sweeps are associated with negative health effects in addition to overdose. Encampment residents often lose possession of essential medications (including HIV medication, hepatitis C medication, and medications for opioid use disorder) in sweeps.⁸ Many also lose possession of essential medical equipment that cannot easily be replaced, such as walkers, wheelchairs, crutches, canes, and other medical devices.⁸

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Encampment sweeps worsen many substance use outcomes in addition to overdose. Recently displaced encampment residents have nearly three times higher odds of using drugs or alcohol and twice the odds of living with infectious disease.²³ Those who used drugs before displacement often lose possession of essential harm reduction supplies, including sterile syringes and naloxone, during encampment sweeps.¹¹ As a result, people who have been recently displaced are more likely to share syringes and use substances in more dangerous places (to avoid police contact).^{19,24} Forced displacement also reduces residents' access to medications for opioid use disorder.¹⁰ People who are displaced are 40% less likely to receive this life-saving treatment.¹⁹

Encampment sweeps usually force residents into dangerous locations, such as sidewalks and freeway underpasses,¹¹ significantly reducing access to essential healthcare and social services. After displacement, street medicine teams and other outreach service providers are often unable to locate displaced residents for follow up; many residents also lose mobility aids (such as wheelchairs and walkers), which can reduce or eliminate their ability to reach stationary healthcare services, social services, and meal programs.^{8,19} For all these reasons, encampment sweeps place residents at immediate risk of injury, infectious disease, and exacerbations of chronic conditions (including cardiac, pulmonary, endocrine, psychiatric, and behavioral conditions, among others).^{8,23}

Encampment sweeps also harm social support structures. Residents are often displaced to nearby areas, risking conflict with new neighbors.¹¹ These conflicts are often made worse through the loss of trusted social contacts^{8,9} as well as complete loss of trust in police⁹ and social services providers.²⁵

The combined negative effects of encampment sweeps leave residents feeling powerless, hopeless, anxious, traumatized, and convinced that obtaining permanent housing will never be possible.^{8,9,11,26}

The Financial Cost of Encampment Sweeps

Municipalities spend millions of dollars on encampment sweeps each year, even though sweeps often make the problems they aim to solve worse. For example, in 2019, the city of San Jose spent about \$4.8 million on encampment sweeps.⁴ In 2014, the City of San Francisco spent about \$3 million on encampment sweeps *every month*.⁵

In addition to the cost of conducting sweeps and the immediate harms to residents described above, encampment sweeps also create new, long-term problems for local communities. Sweeps drive up healthcare costs by worsening health conditions, reducing access to outpatient healthcare services, increasing hospitalizations, and increasing emergency department visits.^{8,23} Encampment residents also experience nearly twice the odds of criminal justice involvement after a sweep,¹⁹ often resulting in cycles of citations, warrants, and arrests that can last for years, consuming significant time from local police departments and court systems.⁵



Why Sweeps Don't Work

"Fundamentally, the vast majority of people who are unhoused are living in encampments because there is no alternative when the cost of living is substantially higher than wages."

– Chang et al., 2022

Displacing residents from encampment sites typically leaves them living in the same public spaces with fewer resources than before.⁵

Research has identified many common causes of these policy failures in U.S. cities. The most significant and ongoing issue is the lack of affordable housing.⁴ Emergency and temporary shelter capacity is grossly inadequate to meet current need, with some cities seeing their unhoused population exceed shelter capacity by more than 1000%.^{6,7} Resources allocated to encampment outreach and targeted efforts to connect residents to services are also very limited compared to the resources spent to conduct sweeps.⁴ Finally, many cities do not track the effectiveness of their outreach efforts, and some do not have any outreach plan in place at all.¹⁵

Evidence-Based Responses to Public Encampments

Without exception, encampment response of any kind (including outreach and service delivery) should be planned and carried out through direct consultation and collaboration with encampment residents.^{27,28}

Encampment sweeps do not increase shelter use, because they do not increase shelter capacity.²⁹ To be effective in reducing the number of people living in unsheltered spaces, encampment responses must create pathways to housing opportunities beyond the shelter system, including access to permanent housing.⁴ Coordinated entry into housing services and other support systems can be offered to encampment residents through targeted outreach at any time, not simply in conjunction with planned sweeps that disrupt access to these services.^{4,16,29}

Key Elements of Effective Encampment Responses

Effective encampment responses begin with thorough needs assessments and collaborative planning processes that include equitable input from both encampment residents and their neighbors.³⁰

Strategies to consider include:

- **Transparent prioritization strategies:** Develop and publish plans for directing services to the locations and/or individuals with the most acute health and safety needs first.
- **Centralized tracking systems:** Create or integrate a system to track available shelter beds, transitional housing units, and permanent housing units to facilitate transitions to stable, sheltered living.
- **Coordinated case management:** Implement coordinated case management to enable trained and qualified professionals to perform outreach to encampment residents, address barriers to healthcare and housing resources, and track person-oriented health and housing goals.
- **Ongoing health and social services:** Continue providing health, hygiene, sanitation, and nutritional services to the encampment while coordinated case management and supportive housing services are underway.
- **Provide wrap-around housing assistance.** Provide dynamic support for residents' transition to housing, including financial and case management assistance with moving

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services, furniture, start-up kits with essential supplies for new renters, rent subsidies, and other challenges with typical move-in expenses; educating landlords on more effectively engaging renters with low credit scores, past evictions, criminal records, or other potential concerns can also be helpful.^{28,30}



Housing First Strategies

Housing First strategies have very strong evidence for success. They produce better outcomes than other housing approaches and are highly effective at helping residents with complex mental and behavioral health issues (including substance use disorders) transition quickly into permanent housing.^{4,27} For this reason, Housing First strategies should be central to any encampment response effort.⁴

Temporary Supported Communities

For some city residents, Temporary Supported Communities (TSCs), also known as “sanctioned encampments” can offer a short-term, safer alternative to living in unsheltered public spaces.²⁹ TSCs are intended to be temporary in nature, typically lasting 6 to 36 months depending on local need and service capacities.³¹ While they do not address the root causes of homelessness, TSCs can create short-term, safer environments where outreach, healthcare services, employment services, and housing navigation and support can be effectively delivered while people are connected to housing.

Sanctioned Parking Programs

Well-planned, sanctioned parking programs can also offer safe options for people living in vehicles (e.g. cars, trucks, or RVs) who need housing support and are at high risk of becoming unsheltered and transitioning into encampments.²⁹

Involuntary Displacement as a Last Resort

Some municipalities turn to the involuntary displacement of encampment residents as an emergency measure. If a municipality determines that it is unsafe for residents to remain in a particular location, even after taking into account the profoundly negative community-wide impacts of forced displacement, the planned sweep should begin with coordinated planning across multiple agencies to ensure that encampment residents have low-barrier access to essential services and that this access is sufficiently reinforced against the disruptions that the sweep itself will cause.²⁷ Any encampment sweep deemed necessary should be preceded by weeks—and, in some cases, months—of robust and regular outreach and service delivery to encampment residents, including housing navigation and ongoing housing support for each resident even after a successful transitioning to permanent housing.⁴

Examples from U.S. Cities

Durham, North Carolina has an Encampment Response Protocol that begins with a demographic, health, and safety survey of each encampment to determine whether intervention by the city is even necessary. If a formal response is appropriate, the city conducts a census of encampment residents and develops an individualized housing and services plan for each person. Before removal of solid waste from the campsite (i.e. to conduct a “sweep”) residents must receive 14 days’ notice and be provided with the means to safely and securely store their belongings at a location available by public transit. The city’s protocol also mandates an evaluation of the impacts of any intervention undertaken within 30 days.³²

Durham also recently introduced a non-police emergency response program called Holistic Empathetic Assistive Response Team (HEART). HEART team members address community concerns about homelessness and public encampments, providing a low-barrier, supportive, and sustainable connection to city and county services.³³

Bellingham, Washington has a similar policy focused on effective and equitable service delivery in response to public encampments, with specific response plans tailored case-by-case. After a thorough assessment of the needs and concerns of encampment residents, city-managed homeless outreach teams visit encampment residents, offering assisted access to available services. Encampments are cleared only if they are determined to present a risk to public health and safety, and only after residents have been given ample advance notice. When shelter beds are limited or unavailable, the city restricts encampment sweeps to instances of serious public health or safety concerns or planned construction on an encampment site.³⁴

St. Paul, Minnesota launched the Homeless Assistance Response Team (HART) in response to growing concerns about public encampments during the COVID-19 pandemic. HART provides a 24/7 response to unhoused city residents, including encampment residents, and helps people navigate transitional housing or other housing services. As of August 2022, HART was working with residents at 55 active encampment sites, connecting them with services and, when necessary, preparing residents for the safe and sustainable encampment closure.³⁵

Portland, Oregon has hosted the Dignity Village encampment since 2000, making it possibly the oldest and longest-running sanctioned encampment in the United States.³⁶



Additional Resources

On Homelessness and Public Encampments

- U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s [“Exploring Homelessness Among People Living in Encampments and Associated Cost”](#)
- U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s [“Understanding Encampments of People Experiencing Homelessness and Community Responses”](#)
- U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness’ [“7 Principles for Addressing Encampments”](#)
- San Francisco Coalition on Homelessness’ [“Punishing the Poorest: How the Criminalization of Homelessness Perpetuates Poverty in San Francisco”](#)
- National League of City’s [“An Overview of Homeless Encampments for City Leaders”](#)
- National Alliance to End Homelessness’ [“State of Homelessness Dashboard”](#)
- UCSF Benioff Homelessness and Housing Initiative’s [“Towards a New Understanding: The California Statewide Study of People Experiencing Homelessness”](#)

On the Harms Caused by Traditional and Punitive Approaches to Encampments

- ASU Center for Problem-Oriented Policing's "[Summary of Responses to Homeless Encampments](#)"
- National Coalition for Housing Justice's "[Policing- and Punishment-based Approaches: A Really Expensive Way to Make Homelessness Worse](#)"
- National Health Care for the Homeless Council's "[Impact of Encampment Sweeps on People Experiencing Homelessness](#)"

On Evidence-based Interventions for Unhoused City Residents

- U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness' "[19 Strategies for Communities to Address Encampments Humanely and Effectively](#)"
- National Alliance to End Homelessness' "[Critical Time Intervention Rapid Re-Housing Toolkit](#)"
- National Alliance to End Homelessness' "[CTI-RRH Model Program Description](#)"
- Silberman School of Social Work at Hunter College of CUNY's "[Critical Time Intervention for Rapid Rehousing: Manual for Case Managers and Supervisors](#)"
- Seattle University Homeless Rights Advocacy Project's "[It Takes a Village: A Practical Guide for Authorized Homeless Encampments](#)"
- The UC San Francisco Benioff Homelessness and Housing Initiative's "[Encampment Resolution Guide](#)"
- National Vehicle Residency Collective's "[National Parking Program List](#)"
- Community Solutions' "[What is Housing First?](#)"
- U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's "[Housing First Implementation Resources](#)"
- The National Low Income Housing Coalitions' "[The Evidence Is Clear: Housing First Works](#)"
- The City of Durham, North Carolina's "[Encampment Response Policy](#)"



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