



Community Organizing and Activism: Confronting Injustice in Public Spaces



Homeless Rights

“People experiencing homelessness are like the canary in the coal mine. If they don’t have rights, then none of us do. We are only as healthy and as free as the most politically unpopular people in our society are.”

– Marcus Hyde, Homeless Rights Advocate

OVERVIEW

Homelessness today is a national crisis. The emergence of modern mass homelessness in America coincides with two connected historical phenomena; progressive legislation passed to ban racial discrimination in housing policy - i.e. the Fair Housing Act of 1968 - and a conservative backlash to legislative wins culminating in the withering of social safety programs. For instance, from 1979 to 1983, the federal affordable housing budget was cut by over 90% (<https://www.cityofsanrafael.org/history-modern-homelessness/>).

The criminalization of homelessness, through policing and laws that ban activities like panhandling and sleeping on the sidewalk exacerbate the problem of homelessness by burdening poor people with fines, fees, and criminal records. “These laws, designed to move visibly homeless people out of commercial and tourist districts or, increasingly, out of entire cities, are often justified as necessary public health and public safety measures. The evidence shows, however, that these laws are ineffective, expensive, and often violate homeless persons’ civil and human rights” (https://nlchp.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/No_Safe_Place.pdf). Homeless rights organizers believe that everyone, has a right to housing and access to public spaces. Homelessness ends with a home, not a jail cell. To learn more about homelessness and housing policy history visit www.homelessunion.org.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What would it take to ensure that everyone in your community had access to safe and stable housing?
2. Many communities have laws that criminalize loitering (to stand around without an apparent purpose) or panhandling (asking for help and money). What happens when unpopular speech is criminalized and when the physical presence of unpopular people is criminalized? What ramifications does this have on other people’s rights?
3. What improvements in your community could be made to protect poor and homeless people from being treated as criminals?
4. Why is lack of affordable housing a growing issue and concern?