

Researchers Recommend Using Jails to Help, Not Punish, the Homeless

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Kevin Fitzpatrick

(PhysOrg.com) -- Jails could be a point of strategic intervention in helping homeless people access treatment for substance abuse and mental health problems, according to a study at the University of Arkansas.

“The [homeless](#) may be thought of as a community’s rabble, but the reality is that homeless arrestees are people with significant needs,” wrote sociology professor Kevin Fitzpatrick and colleague Brad Myrstol.

“The homeless aren’t who we think they are,” Fitzpatrick said. “A lot of the crimes they are arrested for are related to their housing status, such

as sleeping on a park bench or going to the bathroom in a field. It's because they don't have their own place and are just more visible.”

Contrary to stereotypes, homeless people are jailed not for their dangerousness but for their offensiveness, the researchers found. Sixty-two percent of homeless arrestees were charged with minor offenses, and only 24 percent were charged with a crime of violence.

However, [alcohol](#) and [drug use](#) are more prevalent among the homeless arrestees. The researchers found that homeless arrestees are significantly more likely to report lifetime use of alcohol and every illicit drug examined in the study.

Because the homeless may demonstrate more long-term problematic behaviors while having fewer economic resources with which to pay for services, Fitzpatrick and Myrstol suggest that helping the homeless where they are — which, for many, is in jail — could be the answer.

“The jail represents a point of strategic intervention for slowing the revolving door,” they wrote. The researchers recommend either linking arrestees up with services — for pretrial detainees who can make bail — or providing services within jails.

Previous research into what is called the rabble-management thesis suggests “the primary function of the [jail](#) is to control and govern socially offensive people, not to process and punish dangerous, predatory criminals.” Fitzpatrick and Myrstol's analysis provides substantial evidence in support of this thesis.

Fitzpatrick and Myrstol's research used data from more than 47,000 interviews with jailed adults in 30 U.S. cities from the Arrestee Drug Abuse Monitoring program. The data show that the homeless in jails are statistically less dangerous than other arrestees. They are more likely to

be jailed for misdemeanors, less likely to be jailed for felony offenses, more likely to be jailed for maintenance and property offenses, and less likely to be jailed for violent offenses.

More information: Their article, “The Jailing of America’s Homeless: Evaluating the Rabble Management Thesis,” is published online in the journal *Crime & Delinquency*, and is available as a PDF at cad.sagepub.com/cgi/rapidpdf/0011128708322941v1

Provided by University of Arkansas ([news](#) : [web](#))

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