

Camping ban proves counterproductive and cruel

April 2 2013, by Chris Casey



A homeless man sits on a bench on the 16th Street Mall in Denver. Credit: Chris Palmer

Denver's controversial "camping ban" has left the homeless no place to sleep outdoors safely and legally at night, forcing them into hidden spots or to seek indoor options that don't exist, according to a report written by a University of Colorado Denver political science professor.

In collaboration with the Denver [Homeless](#) Out Loud (DHOL) community group, Associate Professor Tony Robinson, Ph.D., compiled survey results of 512 [homeless individuals](#) regarding the Unauthorized Camping Ban. The 80-page report details the background of the ban,

[survey results](#) and [policy recommendations](#) in the wake of one of the nation's most severe laws against public homelessness.

The Denver City Council passed the ordinance in May 2012 under pressure from members of the downtown business community who argued that the growing number of homeless camping on the 16th Street Mall and Civic Center Park was impacting business and harming the perception of Denver.

Robinson and DHOL presented their study to the Denver Homeless Commission today (Tuesday, April 2) and will hold a press conference at 10 a.m. Wednesday in Denver.

Among the study's findings:

- 59 percent of respondents said it has become more necessary to avoid police after the ban; 4 percent report police being more helpful.
- 53 percent said they feel less safe in Denver since the ban; 6 percent feel more safe.
- 79 percent who used to sleep downtown regularly now avoid the area far more; 69 percent said they now seek more hidden places to sleep at night.
- 50 percent their sleeping habits have been negatively affected.
- Though there has been a reduction in outdoors sleeping, the decline is minor. Before the ban, 72 percent of survey respondents said they sometimes or always slept outside in Denver, as compared to 64 percent reporting outdoor sleeping after the ban.
- No arrests have yet taken place under the ordinance, though citing and arresting people for other code violations and moving homeless people along through oral and written warnings are very

common.

The statistics reveal a deteriorating quality of life for most of Denver's homeless since the ban passed. "That's a key finding," Robinson said. "There was a reason people were sleeping on 16th Street before (the law). It was safe, well lit and patrolled by police. This law has changed all that."

Camping ban supporters said the ban would improve the quality of life for the homeless by connecting them with health alternatives. Ban enforcement follows a series of steps: 1) determining if there are other violations that the camper should be cited for; 2) issuing the violator an oral warning to quit covering themselves, and/or to "move along"; 3) issuing a written warning; 4) attempting to connect the homeless person to services before arrest.

However, the latter step of intervention rarely occurs, the study found. Instead, the ordinance criminalizes activities necessary for survival, without providing alternatives.

"They're just spending their time in constant motion," Robinson said of the homeless. "Some of them are trying to get into shelters, but 75 percent say they've been turned away frequently because of lack of space."

A shortage of shelter space is especially acute for homeless members of the LGBT community, couples without children, fathers without children and the mentally ill, Robinson said. "We're 48th in the nation for not having enough service beds to care for mentally ill homeless persons."

The study recommends four actions:

1. Space should be designated in Denver that guarantees homeless individuals safe, outdoor places to sleep and engage in other survival activities. This space should be well-lit and accessible to homeless services downtown.
2. Increased funding should be developed for programs that address homelessness, ranging from rapid response services for [homeless people](#) in crisis to the development of permanent low-income housing units.
3. Dedicate new revenue streams to the "most under-served unsheltered populations" and to the "most effective" programs in reducing homelessness.
4. Change the camping ban enforcement protocol to emphasize provision of services rather than oral and written warnings to desist from "camping" or to "move along."

The U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness has singled out these types of law as being cruel and counterproductive, Robinson said.

"We know there will be hundreds of homeless out there tonight, so we either turn our heads and pretend they're not there—being forced to make the impossible choice between shelter or criminality—or we admit the reality and find a clean, safe place where our residents can live with us," he said.

Provided by University of Colorado Denver

Citation: Camping ban proves counterproductive and cruel (2013, April 2) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2013-04-counterproductive-cruel.html>

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