

# DIRTY DOZEN MEANEST CITIES IN THE US

The National Coalition for the Homeless has been shocked by the number of cities engaged in raiding encampments of people who are otherwise unhoused, throwing away valuables (medications, food, personal or historical papers) of those without anywhere else to go.

In response to the pandemic, and efforts to reduce COVID spread in crowded emergency shelters, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) asked cities to hold off enforcing anti-camping ordinances. There continue to be so many of us who do not feel safe going to a congregate living facility. Unfortunately, most available shelter continues to be in large congregate settings, especially as emergency hotel rooms are closing. People who were or are becoming priced out of their housing are having to choose between crowded shelters or sleeping outdoors.

Unfortunately, most cities disregarded the advice of the CDC and began arresting and moving people out of sight in late 2020. This escalated in 2021 and today NCH has documented at least 66 cities or counties sending police/sheriff deputies out to arrest and harass those who have no other viable housing options.

NCH has studied many of these localities and has come up with a Dirty Dozen, based also on discussions with advocates and people experiencing homelessness from around the country. Each one of the Dirty Dozen cities are regularly harassing those who stay outside and have been engaging in sweeps for over a year. Each one of these cities has a severe lack of affordable housing, including long waiting lists for subsidized housing, while rents and evictions are both on the rise. Every one of these cities has an inability to house everyone requesting assistance, even in emergency congregate facilities.

In determining these Dirty Dozen cities, we also took into account levels of harassment and danger felt by people forced to live outdoors. Unfortunately, the cruelty of local police forces was a factor in developing our ranking system, and especially police-led harassment during extreme weather conditions. We also took into account the amount of violence reported against those on the streets, as well as the level of frustration by local advocates in trying to work with the elected officials to come to better solutions. A final factor taken into account when determining this list was reports from the field on how many people lost their lives while waiting for housing.

# DIRTY DOZEN MEANEST CITIES IN THE US CONT.

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The Dirty Dozen Meanest Cities in the United States is meant to highlight that neglect and hostility towards those without housing is leading to more people dying while homeless in one of the richest countries on the planet.

Of note is that there are a few cities like Pittsburgh (<https://nationalhomeless.org/how-not-to-sweep-pittsburgh/>), Cleveland and Santa Fe that have not engaged in sweeps during the pandemic, but rather have worked hard to house those living outside. Unfortunately, we could not find enough cities to show a similar list of the "Dozen Nicest Cities for those who stay outside." Our view is that an ideal community is one that does not allow anyone to live without safe, decent, accessible and affordable housing; and one that protects and promotes each resident's civil and human rights.

There are just a few cities - Pittsburgh, PA; Cleveland, OH; and Santa Fe, NM - that have not engaged in sweeps during the COVID-19 pandemic, but rather, have worked to house those forced to live outdoors. However, we have not found evidence of enough cities doing similar to share a list of the "Dozen Nicest Cities" for those who are unhoused.

**Truly, an ideal community is one where no one lives without a safe, decent, accessible and affordable home; and where each and every resident's civil and human rights are protected and promoted.**

# DIRTY DOZEN MEANEST CITIES IN THE US CONT.

## 1. LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

The scale is what puts LA as the meanest city in the US. Housing is so expensive in the city and many neighborhoods are forcing police actions against those who cannot afford the rents. Sweeps on Venice Beach in recent years have been especially brutal. Many gentrified neighborhoods in the city are demanding that law enforcement get people off the sidewalks. One of the first and largest sweeps in the LA region since the beginning of the pandemic took place in Echo Park. As a result of being displaced, a number of those who had formerly lived in the encampment community lost their lives, and only a few ever got into housing.

Instead of learning from the Echo Park sweeps, Los Angeles City Council recently voted to prohibit lying, sleeping and storing property in public areas within 500 feet of schools and daycare centers, adding to the list of places where those who are unhoused cannot rest. From San Pedro to the West Valley to Hollywood and Downtown, the unhoused community is moved from neighborhood to neighborhood at a huge cost for the city, leaving less money for housing. Los Angeles is also home to the infamous Skid Row which is a symbol of neglect for the past 30 years. Every day, many of those ignored and forgotten by our society have identification, medicine, and blankets tossed into the trash by sanitation workers while being escorted away by police. The interviews that Invisible People conducts with those on the streets of LA are heartbreaking. Many have to start over because all of their valuables are tossed every two weeks. Los Angeles is the current Homeless Capital of the United States.



*Protesting massive Echo Park Sweeps in 2021 that displaced 200+ people.*



# DIRTY DOZEN MEANEST CITIES IN THE US CONT.

## 2. SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA

San Diego has a division of police officers that spend most of their shift harassing, citing and sweeping homeless people in the remote areas of the city as well as on the downtown sidewalks. There is an all-out war on those who are struggling to survive on the streets because they can't afford the rents. It is especially troubling to see the city's frequent homeless encampment sweeps where perfectly good wheelchairs, bicycles, and tents are thrown away. San Diego also has a significant lack of affordable housing with prices for rent soaring out of control. Instead of working to provide housing and services, the main response from the city to homelessness has been law enforcement. San Diego also has one of the largest homeless veteran populations in the US and these individuals who served in the military are also being frequently harassed.

There is always an unnecessary amplification of hostility and tension when a person with a gun shows up at a tent to evict someone. San Diego has also regularly gone after people living in vehicles, especially RVs, and frequently tows this housing of last resort. There is ongoing litigation in the city around the towing of RVs. Cars, RVs and other vehicles may not be a permanent or ideal housing solution, but vehicles are often one last resort that many have to feel safe and be out of the elements after they lose their home. Given the city's lack of caring and real solutions, it is no surprise that the San Diego region set a record by having almost 500 people die while homeless in 2021.



*Memorial for  
hundreds of San  
Diego residents  
who passed away  
while unhoused.*

# DIRTY DOZEN MEANEST CITIES IN THE US CONT.

## 3. MIAMI, FLORIDA

Miami makes its way to the top of the Meanest Cities list having been documented throwing away the ashes of loved ones along with many other valuables of those forced to sleep outside. The Miami city council was presented with horror stories from doctors who saw the level of need and suffering on the streets. Those elected officials ignored these pleas for help, instead voting to continue sending police out to harass people experiencing homelessness. Miami has been involved in numerous lawsuits regarding bad homeless policies, and now is attempting to ship their problem to an island outside of the city where sewage is processed.



It is extremely expensive to live in Miami, but it is also an extreme waste of money to chase people around the city for being unable to afford expensive housing. The city has a long history of attempting to make it illegal to be without housing and have tried to make it difficult to distribute food, provide care to those outside and to stay in contact with those outside. The city has a tourist-first policy and thus attempts to keep those without housing out of sight of visitors. Miami has shown repeatedly that they will put profits over people when it comes to social services and medical care.



# DIRTY DOZEN MEANEST CITIES IN THE US CONT.

## 4. AUSTIN, TEXAS

Austin is the state capital of Texas so while state officials are sympathetic to the outrageous price of housing, there are also state and national forces working to criminalize people for not having permanent homes. The Governor and his funders are demanding harsh treatment of people experiencing homelessness, and have threatened to step in to enforce local zoning restrictions if the city does not act.

Out-of-control rents have been ignored in policy discussions for a decade in Austin, so the significant rise in homelessness did not just happen during the pandemic, but has become more visible over the last few years. Law and order advocates invested lots of money in a voter initiative which then passed to demand that the city enforce an anti-camping ban. Any opposition to the measure was successfully silenced with threats and intimidation. Everyone is afraid to speak up against these draconian policies and their horrible impact on those struggling to afford rent. Those who promote sweeps are often swayed by myths about people experiencing homelessness and distorted statistics that paint those without housing as safety risks. This is simply an attempt to hide the problems facing Austin and the lack of an effective response by local leaders as well as state lawmakers.



*Protesting regressive policies proposed by Austin that hurt people who have been forced out of their homes.*

# DIRTY DOZEN MEANEST CITIES IN THE US CONT.

## 5. SACRAMENTO, CALIFORNIA

Sacramento is a city that often purports to have compassion but in reality is causing great harm to those struggling to afford housing. Most actions made by the city leadership only prolong a person's homelessness. The city shelters are at capacity and turn people away, and the city has stopped helping those living outside. The city regularly throws away the valuables of those who live outside, erroneously thinking that giving a warning notice to those in tents is somehow more compassionate. They have decided that internment camps in an industrial section of the city is an effective response to homelessness. They seem to have given up on trying to reduce discharges from health care facilities to the streets, or on trying to bring down the high cost of rent.

Sacramento is another state capital where state legislators come to all the wrong conclusions as they drive by those living in tents. The biggest concern of local leaders seems to be how to get around a federal court decision that prohibits cities from arresting anyone living outside if there is not enough shelter available. Sacramento has embraced combining law enforcement with social services going back on promises to provide safe, decent and voluntary places to exist in the city. In the last Great Depression, we built a safety net for seniors to be able to stay in housing after retirement and not end up on the streets. That system is crumbling because rents are so high that many frail and elderly are dying on the streets of Sacramento.



*Sweeps in Sacramento, and across the country take a steep toll on those who are already experiencing the trauma of homelessness.*



# DIRTY DOZEN MEANEST CITIES IN THE US CONT.

## 6. ATLANTA, GEORGIA

Atlanta is a city that seems to have been at war with its homeless population for the past 30 years. City resources were incredibly ill-prepared to deal with the huge rise in people living outside after COVID. As in many cities, vulnerable people have found that living outdoors is safer for avoiding contracting COVID. Atlanta was especially hard hit, because they had never really constructed a social safety net for those who cannot afford the ever increasing cost of rent. In addition, shelters have closed and the city of Atlanta has not embraced alternatives to shelter.

One of the best examples of how mean Atlanta has become to those without housing is the number of hostile architecture fixtures within the city. Spikes and huge boulders have been installed under bridges and public spaces to prevent humans from sitting or lying down to rest. Officials in Atlanta have even gone so far as to convince local and state governments to make camping illegal in every community in Georgia. Rents and evictions are skyrocketing, and the city has only offered more police to harass unhoused folks. Once you regularly use law enforcement in place of social workers, it is impossible to rebuild the trust of those forced to live outdoors.



*Atlanta shows an example of hostile architecture, placing large boulders where people used to take refuge.*



# DIRTY DOZEN MEANEST CITIES IN THE US CONT.

## 7. PHOENIX, ARIZONA

Because Phoenix is a city built in a desert, it is one of the most brutal cities to live in without housing. Every year that advocates have tracked homeless mortality rates, Phoenix always has a large numbers due to extreme weather deaths. As climate change continues to heat up temperatures, the dire need for indoor spaces, especially in very hot locations, will only increase.

However, instead of cooling centers or housing, city officials in Phoenix have only increased encounters between the police and those trying to survive outside. In fact, the U.S. Department of Justice opened an investigation against the City of Phoenix and their police department and specifically cited their ill-treatment of people who are homeless or who have a mental health condition. There was a proposal in the last state legislature session that would make it illegal for anyone to sleep on public property. Though the legislation did not pass it is expected to be reintroduced or revised during a special session.

Phoenix is another large city that does not have emergency shelter capabilities to serve all of its residents who are becoming displaced by the high cost of housing. The city did very little during the height of the COVID pandemic to meet the needs of those who were not able to safely use congregate shelters



*The high number of temperature-related deaths in Phoenix show the uneven affect of climate change on people who are unhoused.*

# DIRTY DOZEN MEANEST CITIES IN THE US CONT.

## 8. WASHINGTON, DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

Washington, DC is another city that presents itself as compassionate, but advocates and people who live outside or in shelters will disagree. Every day, national lawmakers who have access to trillions of dollars drive by the large number of tents near Metro stops and in local parks. While our Federal legislators have failed to provide needed housing investment for the entire country, the District of Columbia local government is also lacking a compassionate and housing-focused response to homelessness.

Local advocates have seen a sharp rise in violence against those who are without housing, which started when the local government began their pilot of “moving” encampments. Along with assisting on sweeps the city has done very little to curb the gentrification of certain neighborhoods displacing long term residents for higher income households typically from outside the District. The DC government has done all it can to try to house as many as possible and had a decent response to COVID, but still insists on using law enforcement to address a social service problem. They do give warnings, but one week is hardly a comfort to the men and women trying to survive the heat and trauma of living in a tent. There are many more people sleeping outside compared to 5 years ago, and the cost of housing is out of control in the region. It is more and more difficult for the homeless service workers to afford to live in the region, much less anyone is the overall service industry. Even with one of the highest minimum wage rates in the country, housing is unattainable for anyone making less than \$25 per hour. But the city continues to allow law enforcement to harass those forced to live outdoors.



*Downtown DC underpass where art displaced people who were using the underpasses for refuge.*



# DIRTY DOZEN MEANEST CITIES IN THE US CONT.

## 9. SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA

San Francisco is another city that hides behind a “compassionate” veneer. In reality, the city’s primary response to homelessness is and has been a police response. The holes in the social safety net have become more pronounced and more visible in the last two years as the city caters heavily to real estate and downtown interests. However, a report issued by the Board of Supervisors in February 2022 found that police were sent to address issues associated with those living outside between 9,000 and 10,000 times per month.

While strong community organizing has led the city to invest a good deal in solutions, it has fallen short of addressing the affordable housing crisis in any real way. Rents are extreme in San Francisco. A recent voter initiative demanded that the city tax wealthy corporation to provide a 25% increase in funding for housing and shelter. However, the city has also continued to invest heavily in strategies to disappear and displace poor people.

San Francisco is now at the forefront of employing private unregulated “security guards” to terrorize those who stay outside. Business Improvement Districts are quasi-governmental sponsors of these “security guards,” who have no oversight and are not responsive to freedom of information disclosures or the other procedures of all the other public law enforcement personnel.



*San Francisco has consistently violated the rights of people forced to live outdoors, while also doing very little to resolve the city's affordable housing crisis.*

# DIRTY DOZEN MEANEST CITIES IN THE US CONT.

## 10. NEW YORK CITY, NEW YORK

The scale of the issue is what puts New York City in the top ten meanest cities. NYC was once the capital of homelessness in America but was forced to make progress, as early as the 1980's, through lawsuits and public pressure.

But the current Mayor (who was formerly a member of law enforcement in the city) has moved the city backward with a huge increase in sweeps. This is despite the fact that New York City maintains the highest percentage of shelter beds per capita, and that the City did a tremendous amount at the start of the pandemic to put people who were homeless into hotel rooms. Unfortunately, this hotel-based COVID prevention program was prematurely ended right before the omicron surge.

Previous administrations have swept the tents of residents unable to use the shelter system, but Mayor Eric Adams has doubled down on this failed and cruel policy. He has done nothing to improve the shelter conditions or control the escalating numbers of evictions. He has sent the police out as a response to those who cannot afford housing and those who are improperly discharged to the streets by the medical facilities. His history of working in law enforcement makes it his first response to a social service problem.

All the cities on this list have a higher than average rate of mortality among those who experience homelessness. New York City is no different, with large number of unhoused folks who reportedly die as a result of chronic health conditions or untreated addiction needs.



*New York City has one of the highest average housing costs in the nation, but continues to mistreat people who are priced out.*



# DIRTY DOZEN MEANEST CITIES IN THE US CONT.

## 11. SEATTLE, WASHINGTON

Seattle is a human rights city that claims compassion, but in practice, people experiencing homelessness are being harassed and are dying from preventable conditions on a regular basis. Seattle has long used law enforcement to address homelessness, and has recently increased forcibly displacing people forced to live outdoors. Seattle advocates have worked tirelessly to oppose these draconian policies, offering data and other evidence to counter current policies, but to no avail. There has been very little done to adequately address the unreasonably high cost of housing, inflation, or the increases in eviction. An already strained medical system does not have the capacity to care for the high numbers of people in need. Those with life threatening and deadly illnesses are being discharged back to the streets.

While it is widely known that those experiencing homelessness are disproportionately victims of crime, officials still propagate the myth that homeless individuals attract crime. Frequently, law enforcement is used to perpetuate the narrative that those who are homeless are criminals as well. Those who have lost their housing are punished with forcible displacement and potential criminal charges or must wander the city looking for a safe and quiet place to rest. The abuse of those experiencing homelessness is strategic. The City tries breaking up encampments and destabilizing relationships within these communities.

While the city received federal housing vouchers and millions in emergency COVID relief to augment its homeless social services, it was not enough to bridge the income gap of lower income workers. With full knowledge that there is not the capacity to offer equitable or adequate shelter/housing/or emergency accommodations, Seattle quietly moves people around the city to protect tourists and the wealthy from having to see the cost of inaction and neglect of the affordable housing crisis.



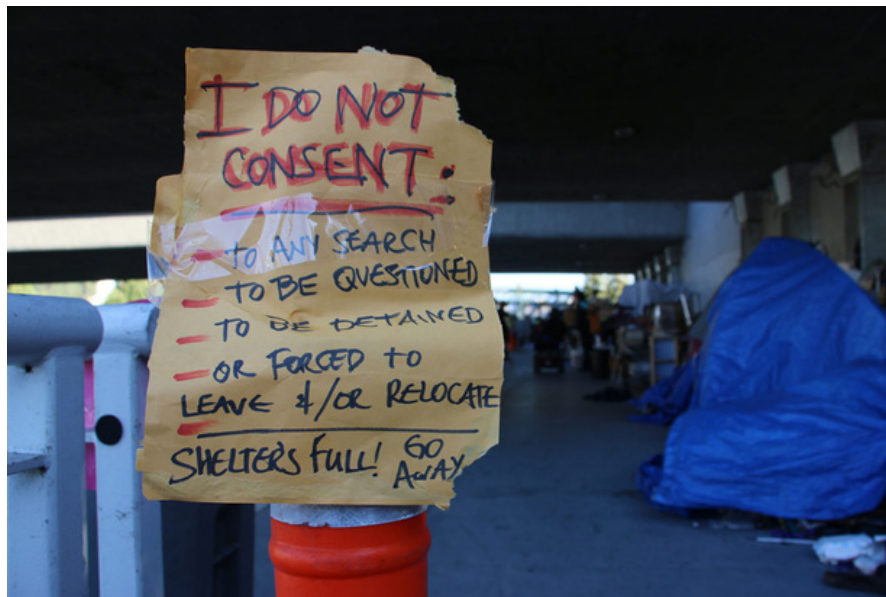
*One of many recent destructive sweeps in Seattle.*

# DIRTY DOZEN MEANEST CITIES IN THE US CONT.

## 12. OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA

Rounding out the Dirty Dozen Meanest Cities is Oakland, California, which has regularly harassed people living outdoors, often shipping off to industrial sections of the city. Oakland makes the list because of utter neglect of the population of people who do not have a permanent home. There seems to be territorial disputes among state, local and transit officials about who needs to take responsibility, resulting in very little assistance, and lots of vitriol against folks forced to live outside.

While rents in Oakland have not risen to the levels seen across the bay in San Francisco, the lack of affordable places to live are a long standing problem. Many of those struggling to stay alive are refugees from San Francisco, but city officials have not done much to address the lack of affordable housing or safety for those struggling with finding emergency help during COVID. Further, Oakland has allowed the ongoing harassment and sweeping of outdoor encampment communities. Oakland is a city adrift without a plan for addressing the many thousands who cannot find a stable place to sleep.



*After pausing for COVID, Oakland ramped up sweeps early in 2022.*



# DIRTY DOZEN MEANEST CITIES IN THE US CONT.

## DIS-HONORABLE MENTIONS

### STATE OF TENNESSEE

In August 2022, it became the first state to make it a felony to pitch a tent in a location not meant for camping. It is critical that we understand that people who are forced by structural economic conditions to live outdoors are **not camping** for leisure. Some jurisdictions are not enforcing the law yet, but it is a troubling trend that we anticipate seeing cities from Tennessee on the list soon.

### STATE OF MISSOURI

Missouri state legislators have passed a similar piece of legislation that attacks those living outside, and almost every social service provider operating in the state. It outlaws the federal priorities for addressing homelessness and will result in a decrease in state funding for many of the larger communities in the show me state or as it will soon be called the "Show-Me-What-Not-to-Do-State." We anticipate St. Louis and Kansas City joining the above list as soon as this law begins to be implemented.



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## About National Coalition for the Homeless

The National Coalition for the Homeless is a national network of people who are currently experiencing or who have experienced homelessness, activists and advocates, community-based and faith-based service providers, and others committed to a single mission: To end and prevent homelessness while ensuring the immediate needs of those experiencing homelessness are met and their civil rights are respected and protected.

Contact NCH with questions: Donald Whitehead, Executive Director,  
[dwhitehead@nationalhomeless.org](mailto:dwhitehead@nationalhomeless.org).

