

Impact of Encampment Sweeps on People Experiencing Homelessness

December 2022

Homeless encampments occur because there is a pervasive lack of affordable, permanent housing in our communities. As the cost of housing continues to exceed income, the number and scale of encampments is only increasing. Community responses to remove, or “sweep,” encampments are understandable because people are rightly disturbed by the existence of homelessness, especially in the United States.¹ Not only is homelessness a clear violation of human rights, it is a stark reminder of the systemic public policy failures across the housing, health care, labor, and education sectors that have produced [epidemic levels](#) of housing instability.

Encampments can be unsafe, violent, and unhealthy places, and public health officials are rightly concerned about the impact of these congregate settings on vulnerable people. In fact, public health concerns are often used to justify sweeps, especially due to lack of access to running water and bathrooms. **However, encampment sweeps are counterproductive, costly, and harmful.** As communities struggle to address homelessness, direct service providers often observe the negative impacts of sweeps first-hand but may not be in a strong position to advocate publicly against them. Health Care for the Homeless programs (and others delivering direct care to people experiencing homelessness) often must balance [multiple roles](#)—as a service provider, a community leader, and an advocate—with a wide range of community stakeholders. Although striking this balance may be difficult, the HCH community is in a unique position to educate policymakers about the negative impacts of encampment sweeps and call for more constructive, humane approaches to truly end homelessness.

This issue brief describes the impact of sweeps on encampment residents and local communities, and provides recommendations for more constructively responding to unsheltered homelessness.

Factors that Drive Encampments

It may be difficult to understand why people live in an encampment, especially if there are homeless shelters in a community. First, not every community has a full-time shelter, it may not have beds available, it may have [restrictive rules and other barriers](#) that prohibit many from entering, or it may have banned others for prior rule violations. People using shelters cannot bring all of their possessions and may only be allowed one bag. This leaves

¹ A “sweep” is defined here as the forced disbanding of homeless encampments on public property and the removal of both homeless individuals and their property from that area. This could be through an explicit or implied threat of enforcement of criminal ordinances, or use of public health, sanitation, parking enforcement, park or other public space regulations. (Sometimes sweeps are also referred to as a “clean-up.”)

them without the vital supplies they need if the shelter can only accommodate them on a short-term basis. Many shelters cannot accommodate parking, and for those that have vehicles, this jeopardizes a valuable resource needed to regain stability. Often there are requirements to participate in services that are not tailored to their specific needs, or for sobriety, which is difficult to achieve without stable housing.

Second, while some shelters are well-run and fully resourced, others can be unsafe. There are [threats of violence, theft, increased substance use](#) and [sexual harassment by shelter staff](#) and residents. Shelters can also enforce [arbitrary rules, medication requirements, and curfews](#). Shelter residents report [feeling dehumanized](#) in shelters and that shelter staff [engage in infantilization and victim blaming](#). It is understandable that couples or families would not want to be separated at a shelter, and elderly or LGBTQ people may feel especially unsafe. Sexual and economic exploitation are not uncommon. Large, congregate shelters can trigger anxiety or paranoia in those with mental health conditions, and many shelters are in settings that cannot accommodate disabilities, mobility limitations, or medical equipment (such as oxygen tanks or wheelchairs). Bed bugs, lice, and other harmful pests are common. The rigid hours to arrive/leave required by most shelters makes it difficult for people to [maintain employment](#).

For these reasons, people experiencing homelessness may have no choice but to live in an encampment, or the encampment may offer advantages that area shelters do not. Encampments can offer community, safety, security, companionship, autonomy, and pooled resources to meet other practical needs. They can allow a greater sense of agency through self-governance not available in shelter settings. Encampments prevent the need to carry around one's belongings all day and can offer a stability that overnight shelters cannot. Encampments also allow families to stay together and will accommodate pets. Hence, there are many practical, rational reasons why people would prefer to live in an encampment than stay at a shelter.

Sweeps do not end homelessness. Grassroots leaders and direct service providers understand that encampment sweeps cause four general problems:

- **Sweeps damage health, well-being, and connections to care**
- **Sweeps compromise personal safety and civic trust**
- **Sweeps undermine paths to housing and financial stability**
- **Sweeps create unnecessary costs for local communities**

Each of these problems presents significant challenges to those directly impacted by forced displacement, as well as to the service providers who care for them.

Damage Health, Well-being, and Connections to Care

Encampment sweeps damage health and disrupt connections to care in that they:

- **Destroy items needed for survival:** Tents, bedding, food, cooking equipment, clothing, shoes, and other items needed for survival are destroyed, thrown away, or removed to a storage facility that residents may not be able to access. Replacing these items may not be possible and takes time and resources away from more constructive solutions.

“Imagine someone kicking in the front door to your house, demanding that you leave, then trashing all your household possessions. That’s exactly what happens when police and city workers sweep a homeless encampment.”

~ David Peery, Co-chair, National Consumer Advisory Board

- **Cause trauma and worsen mental health conditions:** Residents report feeling dehumanized and traumatized after sweeps. Intense fear over subsequent displacement, nightmares, and sleep deprivation after sweeps all contribute to mental health deterioration. The constant fear of anticipating “the knock” of authorities coming to take them away—and never knowing when a sweep will suddenly come—contributes to anxiety and chronic stress. Sweeps also disrupt daily routines and cut off individuals from familiar surroundings and social connections, which can lead to worsening mental health symptoms and increased vulnerability. In this way, sweeps can cause the same mental health instability that policymakers use to justify the forced relocation.
- **Destroy life-saving medications and medical equipment:** Sweeps often destroy vital medications used to treat chronic and acute illnesses, as well as behavioral health conditions. Conditions such as HIV, hepatitis C, diabetes, hypertension, substance use, schizophrenia, anxiety, and depression (among many other health conditions) are especially difficult to manage absent regular medication. Unfortunately, it is often difficult to obtain replacement medications, and residents may go weeks or months without medication—leading to negative health outcomes. Medical equipment, such as wheelchairs, walkers, canes, or other assistive devices, are also lost or destroyed during encampment sweeps.
- **Sever connections to care:** Health care providers (and other direct service providers) often cannot find their patients after a sweep, and have no knowledge of where they might have gone. For some residents, outreach workers coming to an encampment may have been the only service connection that someone was accessing. Hence, the opportunity to engage someone in additional care—however tenuous that may have been—has now been lost.

“Encampment sweeps are especially hard on our pregnant patients. Imagine being pregnant, having all your possessions taken from you, and being forced to go somewhere else without regard to you or your unborn child. Even worse, it severs you from your connection to prenatal care, and increases stress and the risk of miscarriage.”

~Amy Grassette, OB/Perinatal Scheduler, Family Health Center of Worcester, Massachusetts; former Chair, National Consumer Advisory Board; President, NHCHC Board of Directors

- **Undermine trust in service providers.** When service providers are present during sweeps to mitigate harm and attempt to soften the impact of the sweep, residents may view them as complicit. When service providers are not present during a sweep, they may be accused of abandoning their clients. This is a no-win situation for service providers, as they often have no decision-making authority over the sweep itself, yet receive blame from clients who now have difficulty trusting them and engaging in care.

"It often takes years to establish trust, and only seconds to lose it."
~ Kevin Lindamood, CEO, Health Care for the Homeless, Baltimore

Compromise Personal Safety and Civic Trust

Encampment sweeps compromise the personal safety of residents and the broader trust in law enforcement in that they:

- **Increase arrests and assaults of residents:** Encampment residents may avoid calling 911 in life-threatening emergencies to avoid police presence and triggering a possible sweep. While police presence does not necessarily (or even usually) result in increased safety among encampment residents, the inability to use existing public safety systems in emergency situations leaves encampment residents vulnerable to violence. While crime is often used to justify a sweep, crime complaints in the surrounding community have been shown to [remain the same](#) 30 days after a sweep (though former encampment residents experienced a 28% rise in arrests and a 35% increase in the risk of physical assault).
- **Contribute to drug overdoses:** Residents lose both naloxone (Narcan®) and the protective community that would administer the medication in case of overdose. Losing vital medications—such as buprenorphine and mental health medication that might have prevented withdrawal or managed mental health symptoms—may contribute to self-medication with other drugs and contribute to a relapse. Displacement may also cause disconnection from the care team prescribing buprenorphine or make it more difficult to access a methadone clinic. These are some examples why the risk of overdose increases after a sweep, and participation in substance use treatment is disrupted.

"Stigma against drug use pushes people into isolation, and that's a recipe for an unwitnessed overdose. When we take away encampments, we take away a community that can serve as a first line of defense against a potential death when an overdose happens."

~ Yoela Tepper, Substance Use Specialist, The Night Ministry, Chicago

- **Push residents into more dangerous, isolated environments:** After a sweep, residents are often pushed to more remote and isolated locations that are difficult for service providers to access. Unsafe water supply, lack of bathroom facilities, and austere terrain create additional safety risks for people who have nowhere else to go. This is especially dangerous in severe weather when the sweep likely destroyed survival

equipment such as tents, blankets, and clothing, which allowed them to be protected from weather while living outside.

- **Cause widespread fear:** Communities increasingly are using helicopters, drones, and other devices designed to terrorize people living outside and disperse them from the encampment. These approaches only cause pervasive fear and trauma, and should never be used to monitor and/or clear an encampment.
- **Increase hostile interactions with the police:** Sweeps erode already precarious relationships between homeless communities and law enforcement. It is not unusual for police to inconsistently enforce rules during or between sweeps. Residents have been given citations without being told what local ordinances they violated. Sweeps also put police (often armed) directly into conflict with encampment residents, who are understandably upset and defending their personal property. This dynamic dramatically increases the likelihood of incarceration and violence.

“Forced displacement of encampment residents is traumatic for both unsheltered persons and our staff. Patient care is often disrupted, and individuals are placed in more precarious and dangerous living environments. Our HCH providers struggle with the moral injury of being associated with displacing people without adequate resources. It is difficult for providers to build trusting relationships that can survive these displacements and even harder for us to continue caring for traumatized patients.”

~ Aislinn Bird, MD, Director of Integrated Care, Alameda County Health Care for the Homeless, Oakland

- **Disproportionately impact BIPOC groups and people with disabilities:** People experiencing homelessness are [disproportionately](#) Black, Brown, or Indigenous, especially those experiencing [unsheltered homelessness](#). People with disabilities comprise [24% of those experiencing homelessness](#) and often have medical conditions or mobility issues that make sweeps especially dangerous. Local officials must acknowledge the racial disparities affiliated with homelessness as well as the potential for violations of the Americans with Disabilities Act inherent in sweeps, and pursue responses that uphold principles of equity, fairness, and accommodation.
- **Violate rights:** All people living in the United States are protected under the Fourth Amendment of the Constitution from unreasonable search and seizure, and by the Eighth Amendment from excessive fines and cruel and unusual punishment. Seizing property, imposing a fine, and/or arresting someone because they are existing in a public space violates their rights.
- **Contribute to stigma:** Sweeps clearly communicate to the larger community—and to people experiencing homeless themselves—that they have little worth and are only “throw away” people. Sweeps also promote a callous societal norm toward people without homes, which makes it acceptable to not recognize the rights and value of other human beings.

Undermine Paths to Housing and Financial Stability

Encampment sweeps undermine paths to stability in that they:

- **Destroy vital records:** Residents lose driver's licenses, birth certificates, social security cards, and other vital records during sweeps, which often cannot be replaced due to cost or difficulty subsequently verifying identity. Without these documents, it is often not even possible to enter a public building to seek replacements, or apply for jobs and housing. The process of replacing vital records can take 6 to 8 months to complete. Not having identification can also cause negative police interactions.

"When someone's belongings get taken away, that sets us back in providing care. These folks are already living a difficult life on the streets so when these sweeps occur, it makes it that much more difficult to engage with our clients and continue medical services as well as case management needs."

~ **Kyanna Johnson**, Lead Street Medicine Outreach Worker, Night Ministry, Chicago

- **Prevent gainful employment:** Sweeps destroy tools, uniforms, and other job-related items, which often cannot be replaced and may result in job termination. Relocation can also cause loss of access to nearby transportation points and prevent people from commuting to work.
- **Create criminal records:** Arrests resulting from sweeps then create criminal records, court dates and fines, community service judgements for minor offenses, and can result in jail time. Criminal records prevent people from obtaining housing vouchers, make people ineligible for some assistance programs, and bar them from many employment opportunities. Jail time can also result in job loss and/or interrupt medical treatment.
- **Jeopardize housing opportunities:** Ironically, sweeps undermine the likelihood of obtaining permanent housing. People living in encampments have likely been assessed for housing opportunities and entered into the community's [coordinated entry system](#). After [years of waiting](#), it is not unusual for a housing voucher to become available but go unused (and then the case closed) because the encampment where the client had been living has now been cleared and residents cannot be located after being dispersed.
- **Sever connections with community:** Those experiencing homelessness are often invisible to the broader community, or [held in contempt](#). Encampments can offer a community of peers where none exists elsewhere. Sweeps destroy this community, and only further the isolation and alienation that accompanies homelessness.
- **Damage hope:** Sweeps are traumatic and dehumanizing, and they very clearly communicate to residents that they are not wanted and their lives (and their property) have no value. This is especially true when sweeps are clearly conducted for political gain, and no attempt is made to improve the quality of life for those living in the encampment. Understandably, this makes people reluctant to seek or accept services in the future. Unfortunately, it is this same dynamic that furthers the stereotype that people experiencing homelessness do not want help.

Create Unnecessary Costs for Local Communities

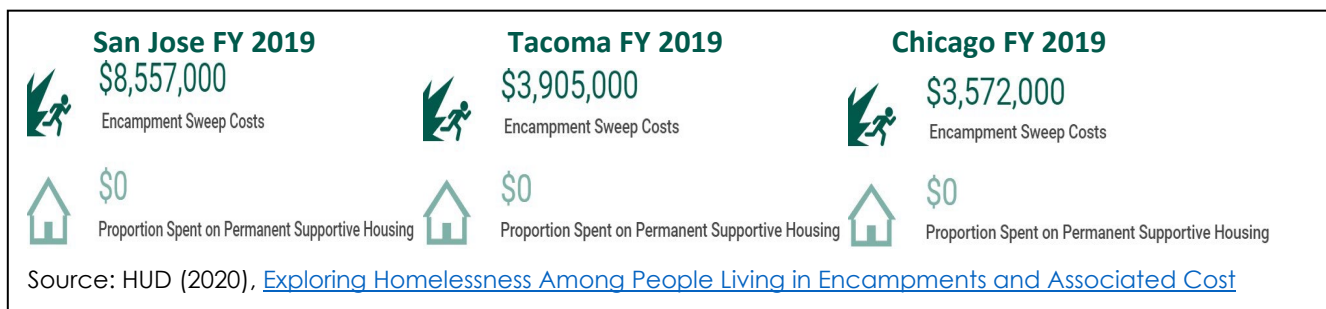
Encampment sweeps create high costs for communities and undermine broader goals in that they:

- **Cost millions of dollars:** Sweeps incur exorbitant costs for local communities, who must pay for bulldozers, city personnel, police, signs, fencing, court costs, storage of seized property (if offered), and other expenses. Unfortunately, none of these tax-payer expenditures creates new housing, nor do they solve homelessness. Health care providers and other non-profit community organizations spend thousands of dollars each year replacing identification, medications, and other items lost to sweeps.

“Every time a sweep happens, it only disrupts the health care system and adds to the criminal justice system—and that costs taxpayers a lot of money. But housing folks saves millions of dollars every day.”

~ **Paul Tunison**, Housing and Community Program Specialist, Shasta County, CA

- **Divert money from solutions such as housing:** Sweeps only shift time and attention away from constructive solutions such as building affordable housing units.



- **Increase incarceration costs:** The conflicts inherent with encampment sweeps only increase arrests and court-involvement for people who are homeless. Minor offenses such as disorderly conduct and trespassing contribute to the overall high costs of incarceration. Conversely, [arrests decrease](#) after people enter supportive housing.
- **Undermine population health goals:** Health care providers are increasingly held responsible for the health care outcomes of their patients. When sweeps damage connections to care, undermine medication and chronic disease management, and compromise other health outcomes for larger groups of patients, insurers and health care providers have difficulty demonstrating improvements in care. Hospital and emergency department utilization may also rise. All these factors have financial implications for providers, the larger health care system, and public health goals.

“Encampment sweeps disrupt our ability to find our clients during outreach and often create gaps in care. The loss of medications and identifying documents—coupled with the inability to engage with their care teams—make it hard for people to get off the streets. It also has harmful effects on both the physical and mental well-being of those experiencing unsheltered homelessness.”

~ **Joy Fernandez de Narayan**, Street Medicine Team Manager, Mercy Care, Atlanta

Recommendations: H.E.L.P.S.

Rather than sweep encampments, local jurisdictions should implement strategies that focus on constructive solutions to end homelessness using a H.E.L.P.S. framework:

<p>H</p>	<p>House People: Housing is the solution to homelessness. Without it, forcibly displaced people still require shelter from the elements, and will only improvise new encampments to meet basic human needs. Officials should reallocate funds previously used for sweeps to low-income affordable and/or supportive housing options for encampment residents. Preserve personal autonomy and decision-making and do not force encampment residents into shelters.</p> <p>Importantly, shelters are <u>not</u> housing.</p>
<p>E</p>	<p>Earn Trust: Officials should involve encampment residents in all decisions that affect their safety and well-being, and engage them in inclusive community spaces free of stigma and fear. Communities should prioritize housing and demonstrate how they are meeting community needs. Providers can advocate against sweeps, and develop safety and continuity of care plans with their clients so if there is a sweep, they have a path back to treatment and a trusting relationship.</p>
<p>L</p>	<p>Limit Police: Law enforcement should not be used to clear encampments, and homelessness should not be criminalized. Minor offenses should not be used as a reason to remove someone from their residence. Law enforcement should partner with residents (and service providers, if appropriate) on conflict resolution practices and receive training on trauma-informed approaches. Take steps to use mobile crisis teams before resorting to police involvement and use 988 for mental health emergencies instead of 911.</p>
<p>P</p>	<p>Prevent Sweeps: Stop encampment sweeps because they create severe harm, are counterproductive, and victimize vulnerable people who are trying to survive. Do not remove residents' property. These actions disrupt connections to care, compromise safety and civic trust, undermine paths to independence, and create unnecessary costs for local communities.</p> <p>Sweeps do not end homelessness.</p>
<p>S</p>	<p>Support Service Interventions: Ensure health care and other services providers are able to maintain access and deliver care in encampments. Adopt a street medicine approach to meet people where they are and engage them in care. Do not ask them to participate in forcible relocations, or mandate they engage in treatment (or other services) as a condition of shelter/housing. Provide encampments with public restrooms, mobile showers, period products, handwashing stations, pest control, trash cans, and regular municipal trash pick-up to maintain a healthy environment. Provide access to drinking water and allow food distribution. Providers can keep copies of vital information such as birth certificates, identification documents, and Social Security cards in patient records so copies are available in case they are destroyed.</p>

Conclusion

As communities respond to unsheltered homelessness, it may be tempting to forcibly “sweep” encampments because they can be unsafe, and are troubling reminders of nationwide systemic policy failures. Homelessness itself is upsetting, most especially to those experiencing it directly. Unfortunately, encampment sweeps do not end homelessness. Instead, they only create more problems, such as damaging connections to care, compromising safety and civic trust, undermining paths to independence, and creating unnecessary costs for local communities.

Instead, communities should consider the perspectives of those directly impacted by sweeps and the health care and other service providers who work with them. Halting sweeps in favor of providing permanent housing, limiting police involvement, and facilitating access to low-barrier services will have greater, more productive results than forcible displacement of vulnerable people.

“Displacing people from their safe spaces is literally a “Groundhog’s Day” effort with the City and County clearing encampments from one location to the other and the residents moving back and forth. Unless the bureaucrats join the effort to create more access to homes, it’s just an ongoing game of Whack-A-Mole.”

~ Rhonda Hauff, CEO, Yakima Neighborhood Health Services, Yakima

Additional Resources

There is a need for more research on homeless encampments and the harms that forced sweeps have on people experiencing homelessness as well as the larger community. In addition to the resources lined above, the publications below can offer additional information to inform community responses:

Think Tank and Journal Articles

- **SSM-Qualitative Research in Health (2022)** | [Harms of Encampment Abatements on the Health of Unhoused People](#): Describes effects of sweeps on people experiencing homelessness, including loss of property and medical necessities, relocation to isolated and dangerous environments, increased interpersonal conflict/self-policing, and greater hostile interactions with police. These effects of sweeps disrupt continuity of care and outreach workers ability to access patients and PEH are less likely to accept formal help after the trauma of sweeps. (Chang, et al.)
- **Journal of General Internal Medicine (2022)** | [Health Impact of Street Sweeps from the Perspective of Health Care Providers](#): Uses in-depth qualitative interviews with medical providers and outreach workers to discuss how encampment sweeps impact patient-provider relationships and follow up care. Describes how loss of material possessions and relocation to geographically isolated areas impact health, wellbeing, and sense of community. (Qi, et al.)

- **BMC Public Health (2022)** | [Health Risk Associated with Residential Relocation Among People who Inject Drugs in Los Angeles and San Francisco, CA: A Cross-sectional Study](#): Describes the impacts of health the 30 days following an encampment sweep or residential relocation. Discusses reduced substance use treatment, increased risk of violence and nonfatal overdose, more frequent experiences with jail/incarceration, and heightened food insecurity. (*Chiang, et al.*)
- **Journal of Evidence-Based Social Work (2022)** | [Impact of a Homeless Encampment Closure on Crime Complaints in the Bronx, New York City, 2017: Implications for Municipal Policy](#): Presents a study of crime complaints 30 days before and after an encampment sweep. Researchers found no difference in crime complaints after encampment closure. (*Alan and Nolan*)
- **Kaiser Health News (2020)** | [Sweeps Of Homeless Camps Run Counter To COVID Guidance And Pile On Health Risks](#): Discusses infectious diseases such as COVID-19 and Hepatitis A that spread and are left untreated when encampment sweeps occur. CDC guidance warned against closing encampments during the public health emergency.
- **Urban Institute (2020)** | [Alternatives to Arrests and Police Responses to Homelessness](#): Highlights examples of constructive community approaches to homelessness, examine the connection between unsheltered homelessness and the criminal legal system, explore the negative social and monetary costs of using punitive approaches, and review the evidence around the following nonpunitive responses to unsheltered homelessness. (*Batko, et al.*)
- **Urban Institute (2020)** | [Unsheltered Homelessness: Trends, Characteristics, and Homeless Histories](#): Analyzes the population and geographic trends of unsheltered homelessness, characteristics of people living unsheltered, and the costs of unsheltered homelessness. (*Batko, Oneto, and Shroyer*)
- **Housing Policy Debate (2018)** | ["It Was Like I Lost Everything": The Harmful Impacts of Homeless-Targeted Policies](#): Contains feedback from interviews with people who had been forcibly moved and outlines interconnected ways that enforcements of sit-lie and nuisance policies harmed have homeless households. (*Darrah-Okike, et al.*)
- **City and Community (2014)** | [The New Logics of Homeless Seclusion: Homeless Encampments in America's West Coast Cities](#). Presents a study of 12 encampment sites across 8 municipalities that examined exclusionary policies. Discussion of encampment sweeps as a way to marginalize people rather than offer a solution to homelessness. (*Herring*)

Government and National Partner Publications

- **Housing Not Handcuffs (2022)** | [Policy Toolbox](#): Provides a resource toolkit about how to connect with advocacy allies in the fight against criminalization of homelessness.
- **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2022)** | [Guidance on Management of COVID-19 in Homeless Service Sites and in Correctional and Detention Facilities](#): Acknowledges the risk of severe COVID-19 because of underlying medical conditions

and lack of access to health care. When community rates are high, guidance recommends encampment closures should only be conducted as part of a plan to rehouse people living in encampments, developed in coordination with local homeless service providers and health departments.

- **National League of Cities (2022)** | [An Overview of Homeless Encampments for City Leaders](#): Explains why people live in encampments, community responses, challenges associated with encampment clearings, and recommendations for cities to pursue.
- **U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) (2020)** | [Exploring Homelessness Among People Living in Encampments and Associated Cost](#): Describes how some cities are responding to homeless encampments as of 2019, synthesizing findings from a literature review, telephone interviews with nine cities, and site visits to four cities. A major focus of the report is the strategies that Chicago, Houston, San Jose, and Tacoma are using to attempt to reduce the phenomenon of encampments and provide assistance to encampment residents, and what those cities are spending on activities related explicitly to encampments.
- **HUD (2019)** | [Understanding Encampments of People Experiencing Homelessness and Community Responses](#): Documents what is known about homeless encampments as of late 2018, based on a review of the limited literature produced thus far by academic and research institutions and public agencies, supplemented by interviews with key informants.
- **National Homeless Law Center (2017)** | [Tent City, USA: The Growth of America's Homeless Encampments and How Communities are Responding](#): Illustrates the number of encampments, city responses, best practices, case studies, and legal standards.