

These Fifteen American Cities Are Destroying Homeless Camps Just Days Before Christmas

Cities across the country are waging an unprecedented war against the homeless.

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Christmas is normally known as the time of year when Americans try to be a little more giving, more compassionate, and more altruistic than during the other 11 1/2 months of the year. But in cities across the US, many are simply fighting for the right to exist in hastily-constructed homeless camps. The National Alliance to End Homelessness reports that on any given night, there are [over 578,000](#) Americans sleeping on the streets. At the same time, there are [at least 10 million vacant homes across America](#) that are lying empty.

Here are 19 cities that are going above and beyond to push the most vulnerable Americans out of the public eye during the most compassionate time of the year:

1. Portland, Maine

Earlier this year, Portland [cut funding for the city's homeless shelters](#) after a state audit by Republican governor Paul LePage accused the city of mismanaging funds — a claim city officials deny. After the latest cuts, the city will no longer have the funds to provide overflow space at local motels to homeless citizens who are turned away from overcrowded shelters.

As a result of no shelter space, many of Portland's homeless, and indeed, homeless people across America, build encampments out of spare supplies to provide some semblance of shelter. But throughout the month of December, Portland city officials have been busy [tearing down dozens of homeless encampments](#), providing those depending on them with little options aside from sleeping on concrete.

The city alleged the homeless camps were cleared out for a brush removal project along I-295, and gave the homeless residents sleeping there 24 hours to vacate the premises. "It's sad because they're taking everything away from us," 45-year-old Sherri Ferrier told the *Portland Press-Herald*.

2. Seattle, Washington

One of the most insidious forms of war on the homeless is cloaking it in charity. After openly declaring a "war on homelessness," Seattle mayor Ed Murray authorized two "legal" encampments, which only house roughly 100 people. The remaining encampments will be torn down by city officials. Seattle police are waging a crackdown on all of the "illegal" homeless camps, which are growing exponentially year after year. [According to the Seattle Times](#), police destroyed 80 encampments in 2012, 131 in 2013, 351 in 2014, and 527 as of

November of 2015.

3. Phoenix, Arizona

Phoenix was one of the first states to proclaim it had [ended chronic veteran homelessness in early 2014](#). However, Camp Alpha, the designated name for a homeless veterans' encampment in Phoenix, was recently torn down by city officials. Camp Alpha had been at the same location at 19th Avenue and Hatcher in the Sunnyslope neighborhood of Phoenix for over three months. "It's upsetting, it's sickening to me, and a lot of people here," Aaron Pomrenke, founder of Camp Alpha, told Fox 10 Phoenix. Camp Alpha residents are now looking to find a vacant building to use for shelter and storage of their belongings.

4. Eureka, California

Police in Eureka, California — a liberal haven in the far-northern part of the state — have cracked down on homeless encampments so much that the area's homeless are forced to literally sleep in the swamp. The Marsh, as locals call it, is the coldest, wettest part of Eureka, and is the only place where Eureka police won't enforce the city's no-camping ordinance. Homeless advocates say just leaving the camp requires rubber boots or hip waders due to high water levels.



A homeless encampment in the marshes of Eureka, CA.

Some of the residents in the marsh refuse to stay in the city's emergency homeless shelter, as shelter policy forces couples to separate, and doesn't allow dogs. A [letter to the editor](#) posted to an area blog described the situation as "heartbreaking."

Why don't they leave? Why don't they go somewhere else? Because there is no where else they can go to. Would you leave your dog behind? Would you risk the sum of the possessions you had to leave to a place you did not know? Would you in the cruelest of conditions leave your partner?

5. New Orleans, Louisiana

Homeless residents of New Orleans are also facing a targeted crackdown on homeless encampments. The situation for The Big Easy's homeless has grown especially dire, with many of them working part-time jobs and unable to find alternative shelter, depending instead on charitable nonprofits. "It's very urgent, because not only do we see people that are coming here from out of state that are homeless, but we have a lot of working homeless people here, and they come to our center every morning, to take a shower, to get ready for work," Kenitha Groom-Williams of the Rebuild Center's Lantern Light program [told WWL-TV](#).

Homeless residents have grown to fear what the city's police department calls "sweeps" of encampments. A homeless woman referred to as "Natalie" said personal belongings are often confiscated and not returned. "Well they have done it before, they took my boyfriend's id, they took his phone. It had all our baby pictures in there, or my kids, they took everything," Natalie said. "What do you expect me to do? I got nothing, I'm homeless."

6. Washington DC

A series of homeless encampments near Rock Creek Parkway in Washington, DC was [torn down](#) last month to make room for a sewer project. The city is offering help finding support housing and shelter space for some of the residents who used to camp out near the Watergate Hotel. However, some residents prefer to stay outdoors, citing pervasive theft, violence, and bedbugs in shelter beds.

7. Boise, Idaho

A group of 100 homeless campers in Boise, Idaho were staying in a tent city known as Cooper Court near downtown Boise for several months, but police [cleared the camp](#) in early December.

While the owner of an RV park in Boise had offered space to some of the former residents of Cooper Court to erect a new encampment, he backed out of the deal after residents of the park stated they were fearful of homeless advocates and protesters.

Some of the residents of Cooper Court said they had no choice but to decline staying in Boise's homeless shelters, as some are veterans with PTSD, and others have mental health conditions like schizophrenia, both of which can be exacerbated by the crowded environment at a homeless shelter.

"When they get into a setting like that it can make them behave badly," Homeless advocate Jodi Peterson [told Boise State Public Radio](#). "They can become aggressive because their anxiety level raises so high. So they become banned from shelters."

8. Mendota, California

In late November, a homeless encampment near Mendota in the Central Valley area of California, which has been in place for roughly a year, was [torn down](#) at the request of the local water district. While police gave advance notice to the camp's residents, roughly 20 campers were forced out of the area by police and private security.

"I feel sad because I didn't come more here. I feel like they're my family. Sometimes they talk about their problems with me. They will live in the streets again in the cold and rain," Cathilic volunteer Maria Hernandez told the Merced Sun-Star.

9. Kissimmee, Florida

Approximately 40 homeless people camping on a piece of property in Kissimee were [forced to leave](#) earlier this month after the property owner learned a handful of registered sex offenders were among the residents in the encampment. Now, the bulk of those campers have no place to go.

"We thought we were homeless," one camper told WFTV. "Now we're really homeless."

"I wish I had better news to say," Kissimmee city commissioner Jose Alvarez said. "There's really nowhere we can put them."

10. Tucson, Arizona

In Pima County, Arizona, just outside of Tucson, a homeless camp that's been in place [since 1999](#) was torn down in early December. The Pima County Sheriff's Department cited numerous complaints filed with the state Department of Environmental Quality over alleged illegal dumping, straining local budgets, as the reason for the eviction. Residents who chose to leave upon request were offered services. However, those who didn't were threatened with imprisonment.

"If they don't leave, we will arrest them for trespassing and then their belongings will be confiscated," Pima County Sheriff Chris Nanos told News 13 Tucson.

[Tucson News Now](#)

However, budget concerns will likely be amplified the more homeless people are jailed. The cost of processing a new inmate is \$300, and each prisoner costs \$85 per day to house.

At least 21 encampments have been torn down by local sheriffs so far this year.

11. Salinas, California

In Salinas, a city near the California coastline, the war on the homeless has intensified to the point of the local city council passing a resolution allowing the city to [steal homeless people's possessions in the middle of the night](#), while contracting with a private company to demolish encampments. The city will be spending between \$175,000 and \$200,000 per year contracting with Smith and Enright landscaping services, who will be tasked with confiscating and storing the possessions of the homeless.

While the city isn't charging a storage fee, isn't confiscating necessary medication, identification, sleeping bags, and pillows, and is allowing all items to be reclaimed, advocates say it's just one more burden homeless people are forced to endure for simply not having a place of their own to store their belongings.

Attorney Anthony Prince, who is suing the city claiming the anti-homeless ordinance is unconstitutional, says the window is wide open for the city to ignore the rules in seizing property.

"We are getting reports that the city is already violating its own ordinance and destroying without notice or opportunity to contest the seizure," Prince wrote.

12. Oakland, California

On December 3, in the middle of pouring rain, the California Highway Patrol [enlisted prison labor](#) to clear out a homeless encampment under the I-880 highway in Oakland. Prisoners were forced to throw mattresses, pillows, tents and sleeping bags in garbage trucks.

"We got nowhere else to go, and it's raining," a camper identifying himself as Kevin, who had lived under the bridge for months, told the East Bay Express. "We had something under the bridge, out of the rain. We cleaned up the area, and we're not bothering nobody."

"This is our property," said a California Department of Transportation supervisor at the scene who didn't identify himself. "They're trespassing."

13. Honolulu, Hawaii

Approximately 300 homeless residents of Honolulu have lived in an encampment along the Kakaako shoreline for years. The camp is one of the longest-lasting in the US. But this month, city officials will enter into a deal with private companies to “sweep” the Kakaako encampment and [evict all of the residents](#) who call it home. However, the city has had trouble finding a bidder, as contractors don’t want to deal with the resulting PR problems.

Eight private contractors recently turned down the HCDA’s request to submit bids on how much they would charge to clear encampments. The agency acknowledged that at least some of those contractors may not have wanted the high-profile publicity that comes with clearing out a homeless encampment.

14. Dallas, Texas

A sad and ironic story comes out of Dallas, Texas, where a homeless encampment in “Old City Park” was recently [destroyed by local police](#). The irony is because the 27-acre park is a museum popular for showing how residents used to live in the 1800s, and the people who lived in the tent city just removed by local officials lived in far worse conditions than residents 150 years ago.

“They drink, they do things, they harass the staff here, they’ve been inappropriate around the children and it’s just this constant barrage of garbage,” museum board member Michael Przekwas told CBS Dallas-Fort Worth.

But the homeless residents in the park claim that the accusations against them are unfounded.

“We don’t bother them, all we do is sleep,” said park resident Vanessa Spurlock.

15. New York City

Homelessness in the nation’s largest city is so bad that homeless people are [using LaGuardia airport’s terminal B as a permanent residence](#). Some employees of the LaGuardia food court say homeless people have lived in the airport for a long-term basis — one wheelchair-bound man and his partner have lived in terminal B for 5 years, according to CBS New York:

Vendors who could not speak on camera said as many as 50 homeless people are living in the Central Terminal at LaGuardia – eating, sleeping and even bathing there.

“It’s safe. It’s clean. It’s heated. It’s air-conditioned. There’s food there,” said former Department of Homeless Services Deputy Commissioner Robert Mascali.

Mascali said even if limited shelter space were to open up, many of the homeless residents there would opt to instead live at the airport, and not have to worry the crowding, acts of violence, and chaos that comes from a large number of people, some with mental health issues, co-habiting in a small space.

As evidenced by the nationwide crackdown on encampments, America's homelessness crisis has been dealt with largely out of fear, rather than compassion. America's homeless population has been pushed to the margins of society, having to live in swamps and airports. Will the world's richest country continue down this path, or recognize the right to exist for the most marginalized of its citizens?

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