

Time to revamp Oregon's destructive drug laws

The travesty of the so-called War on Drugs plays on a constant loop, destroying lives, families and communities, and starting over with each generation. It continues, seemingly on autopilot, despite decades of evidence showing it be a social, economic and environmental disaster.

EDITORIAL

And most people get that. Which is why it's no surprise that a poll of 600 registered voters in Oregon, funded by ACLU of Oregon, found a vast majority – 73 percent – favored making simple drug possession a misdemeanor with access to treatment, rather than a felony.

As it stands now, felony charges for possessing even the most trace amount of drugs can carry stiff penalties and years, even decades, in prison. For about 1,500 Oregonians every year, drug possession charges are their first felony conviction, and one out three of those new felons have no prior criminal record, according to the Oregon Criminal Justice Commission.

And Oregon's African-Americans are disproportionately ensnared by felony drug possession laws – more than double the rate of whites in 2015, all to preserve a relic of political posturing.

The gravity of a felony conviction goes far beyond a point-

in-time behavior, a category of offense or punishment. It's attached to one's identity for a lifetime. A felony shuts people out of housing and employment options. It can jeopardize future access to critically needed services, even food stamp assistance. It is a sentence that is far more likely to aggravate a person's addiction or drug use than correct it.

Indeed, serious crimes should have consequences, but let's repeat: One in three of those new felons have no prior criminal record.

Oregon lawmakers have the opportunity to correct this destructive practice with HB 2355, which would de-felonize low-level drug possession charges, reform sentencing policies, and emphasize public health and safety. Large, commercial quantities of drugs would still be felony offenses, but user-quantities of drugs would be treated as misdemeanors. The bill also gives the state critical data to identify patterns in profiling, along with training on identifying implicit bias.

Oregon needs this law. Its policies advance years of work in Salem to correct drug laws and the racial disparities they create.

We waste too many lives and spend too much money creating felons in our society. Let your local representative know you support HB 2355.

Right to Rest bill's end leaves people's lives in the balance

A newly released ACLU of Oregon report, "Decriminalizing Homelessness: Why Right to Rest Legislation is the High Road For Oregon," finds that there is an entire legal infrastructure in Oregon that makes basic survival in public spaces illegal.

The report analyzed local laws in 69 communities and cities throughout Oregon with populations above 5,000, and found that there are 225 laws that create clear barriers to life-sustaining activities and legalize unfair and harmful treatment of people experiencing homelessness.

The report outlines that beyond the approximately 125 laws that outlaw some form of sleeping in public spaces

throughout Oregon – restrictions extend to those who have security of a car, bus, trailer or RV. Thirty-one cities in Oregon restrict sleeping in one's vehicle even if it's in normal parking place and posing no safety hazard.

There are 11 communities in Oregon that ban panhandling, and another 48 communities and two counties have laws against sleeping or sitting on sidewalks.

Anti-homeless or poor laws have existed for centuries. Oregon is no different. It used to be illegal to live in idleness or without employment or having no visible means of support in Oregon. In many ways, not a lot has changed.

The reality is if you're homeless in many communities throughout Oregon, you're driven into urban environments. For one, there are little to no services available in many of rural or suburban communities. Secondly, as the report clearly outlines, if you're homeless, you're clearly not welcome.

The times are a changing in Portland, or are they? For nearly 40 years of modern-day homelessness, Portland has grappled with how to handle homelessness through a public-safety lens. We've covered all of the bases in that time – from a more lenient harm-reduction approach to the flat-out criminalization of the people on the streets through sidewalk laws and heavy enforcement.

I like to remind people that it's not that there are more homeless people in our neighborhoods than anytime over the past couple of decades. It's simply that our neighborhoods have changed.

The Pearl and the inner Eastside of Portland used to be areas of town that people experiencing homelessness could bed down. The Pearl was an empty warehouse district and the inner Eastside had not yet seen development. Today, both of those neighborhoods are off limits. More so, Old Town is gentrifying rapidly.

The result is tent camping that is dispersed throughout the city. Our parks that have become a last refuge.

The mayor has said that he's not for tent camping, but the reality is there's not a lot the police and the city can do about it. After all, we are experiencing a housing crisis and are on the verge of facing massive funding cuts by both the state and federal government.

While, creating more and more shelter beds is costly, enforcing laws that make homelessness illegal is even more costly.

Advocates and city officials should avoid going back to an era where fighting over these laws was commonplace. We should all be working toward affordable housing and leveraging resources to support people having a safe place to call home. A fight over criminalization in Portland would be disastrous and one that I wouldn't look forward to having.

The reality is Portland is working to thread the needle. It's not perfect, but we're trying to find the right balance.

Unfortunately, the Right to Rest Act (House Bill 2215) did not get a chance in Oregon.

The Right to Rest Act sought to end the criminalization of rest and accompanying violations of basic human and civil rights for all people. This legislation would have protected the following rights and prohibit the enforcement of any local laws that violate these rights:

- Right to move freely, rest, sleep and be protected in a public space.
- Right to rest in public spaces and protect one self from the elements in a non-obstructive manner
- Right to reasonable expectation of privacy of your property in public spaces
- Right to occupy a legally parked vehicle.
- Right to share food and eat in public.

Of course, in a time when the poor are demonized for being poor and the homeless are increasingly seen more as a burden than human beings or Oregonians – it's not surprising.

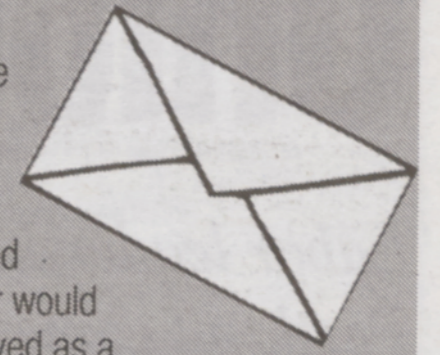
"At the end of the day, this bill deserved a hearing," said Paul Boden, Director of the Western Regional Advocacy Project. "The practice of law-enforcement targeting people experiencing homelessness has to be stopped. These laws have to become a part of the past. People's lives are depending on it."

It's true. People's lives are depending on it.

In a time when our community can't provide affordable housing, mental health services and stability for its own residents – the idea of criminalizing people that fall through the safety net seems cruel. And it is. It's downright cruel.

Write in

If you would like to have something that you've written published in our pages, or would like to get involved as a member of our reporting staff, contact Managing Editor Joanne Zuhl at 503-228-5657, joanne@streetroots.org. We ask that all submissions include the author's name and contact information, if available.



Street Roots

211 NW Davis St.
Portland, OR 97209
503-228-5657
Fax: 503-227-3117
www.streetroots.org
www.news.streetroots.org
Hours: 7:30 a.m.-3 p.m. Mon.-Fri., 7:30 a.m.-2 p.m. Sat. and 7:30-1 p.m. Sun.

Advertising

Interested in advertising in Street Roots?
Contact Israel Bayer at israel@streetroots.org

Staff

Executive Director Israel Bayer
israel@streetroots.org
Managing Editor Joanne Zuhl
joanne@streetroots.org
Vendor Program Director Cole Merkel
cole@streetroots.org
Operations Director Sarah Beecroft
Development Director Sarah Cloud
Program Assistant Meghann Van Pelt,
Jesuit Volunteer
Development Assistant Patricia Romero
Editorial Assistant Monica Kwasnik
Reporters Emily Green, Suzanne Zalokar,
Sarah Hansell, Leonora Ko, Jared Paben,
Amanda Waldroupe, Stephen Quirke
Photographers Diego Diaz, Joe Glode,
Arkady Brown
Canvasser Desmond Hardison

Board of Directors

Chairman Brad Taylor
Vice-Chairman Rachel Langford
Treasurer Heather Stadick
Secretary Dan Jones
Directors Rich Rodgers, Michael Anderson,
Sandra Hahn, John Brown, Nels Johnson and
Alison Hallett

Volunteers

Jan Bayer, John Barker, Stacey Heath, Anjali Rathore, Zoe Klingmann, Dan Jones, Dennis Hogan, Monica McKune, Susan Wolfe, Lucas Hawthorne, Thomas Buell Jr., Jeanie Lunsford, Yasmin Amirsoleymani, Jason Cohen, Tom Ray, Doug Spangle, Susannah Kamala, Jon Raymond, Diana Richardson, Cherie Manning, Paul and Madeline Gefroh, Mary Anne Joyce, Del Shawn Davidson, Gillian Floren, Mark Oldani, Meg Holden, Bridget Brown, Cody Travels, Bianca Butler, Robb Hengerer, Alex Cherin, Tom Vandell, Grace Gallagher, Jenny Farres, Evan Firsick, Camber Hansen-Karr, Miranda Woods, Henry Brannan and Helen Hill. If you're interested in volunteering with Street Roots, please submit a volunteer application at streetroots.org/volunteer. Or you can call for more information at 503-228-5657.



DIRECTOR'S DESK

By Israel Bayer

Israel Bayer is the executive director of Street Roots. You can reach him at israel@streetroots.org or follow him on Twitter @israelbayer.