

Portland has criminalized poverty, mental illness

Now we know: More than half of the people arrested in Portland last year were homeless.

Rebecca Woolington and Melissa Lewis reported in *The Oregonian* on June 27 that unhoused people comprised 52 percent of arrests last year.

While it was clear that people struggling with homelessness face too many arrests, I was stunned to read that these arrests account for the majority.

DIRECTOR'S DESK

By Kaia Sand



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The fact that the poor are policed is, unfortunately, a defining characteristic of this city. It's dystopic, and it has to change.

Some people will interpret the high rate of arrests among houseless folks to mean that people on the streets are criminals, and that's that, but consider how homelessness itself is criminalized.

The ACLU of Oregon issued a report last year documenting 224 laws around the state that target people who are homeless. It identified laws that target people for sleeping in public places, for begging for money and for loitering. In other words, ACLU of Oregon researchers identified laws that matter only if you are homeless.

The largest number of arrests *The Oregonian* recorded was connected to property, drugs and other low-level crimes.

And importantly, more than a quarter of all arrests were based on missed court dates, probation and parole violations – procedural crimes. When people are without an address or a stable place to sleep, receiving correspondence about court dates is nearly impossible.

You can imagine how the arrests would simply compound. Say a person is arrested for trespassing because they are homeless. With no property to legally sleep on, it is easy for people to be caught trespassing.

Then they miss a court date because they don't have an address to receive information about a court date. One arrest leads to another.

The mess grows. It's stressful and overwhelming and expensive. People feel powerless.

Across the nation, people of color and poor folks are profiled and incarcerated at disproportionate rates. The justice system, in

fact, structures injustice. While *The Oregonian* report does not show how these statistics break out according to race – something we need to find out next – African Americans and Native Americans are disproportionately homeless.

The ACLU of Oregon has called on Portland Mayor Ted Wheeler and Police Chief Danielle Outlaw to investigate reports of police profiling and harassing of homeless individuals in downtown Portland. I urge them to pursue this.

And how are housed Portlanders contributing to this problem? Do you have friends and neighbors who make demonizing remarks about homeless Portlanders, and who are quick to report camps as nuisances?

Please do not give up trying to undo these stigmas. People who are poor are dehumanized, and it is up to all of us to honor their humanity and insist that a city that rewards the rich and punishes the poor is not a just city.

People need to think twice before calling to report camps. Call the city, and you could be initiating a traumatic camp sweep. Call the police, and you could be initiating arrest.

The city of Portland increased the police force in its new budget. Until massive changes are made, this fact makes me shudder. Too large a portion of our police budget pays to make life harder for the poorest of Portlanders.

What if we took a portion of Portland Police Bureau's \$276.8 million budget for this coming year and applied it to housing and supportive services for those who are frequently arrested instead?

While it's easy to get fired up over individual circumstances, let's work on a systemic level, striving for more harm reduction, such as safe injection sites – not drug arrests. Let's work for more mental health support – not abandon people to their turmoil.

And let's fight and fight and fight to have more places where people can sleep and eat and flourish. One constructive approach right now is to pass the Metro Housing Bond this November, which would put \$652.8 million into affordable housing.

Instead of making a call to report a camp, make a call to support the Yes for Affordable Housing campaign.

It is absurd to pour money into policing homeless folks, rather than striving to house more people. There's good work to be done, but policing the poor just means there's so much more work to do.

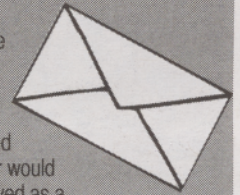


PHOTO BY KAIJA SAND

Portland police stand near the perimeter of Village of Hope camp after sweeping it in February.

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