



PHOTO BY KENNY JACOBY

CRIMINALIZING HOMELESSNESS

Data show the unhoused are disproportionately ticketed in Eugene

More than one of every four people ticketed or arrested by Eugene police for minor crimes last year were homeless or lacked a permanent address, according to *Eugene Weekly's* analysis of city court records.

The court records also reveal that more than one-third of the minor cases involved people who lacked a permanent place to live at some time in the past three years.

Eugene officials have long struggled with the city's homeless population, public safety downtown and a shortage of social services. Police are often on the frontline of dealing with the homeless, many of whom face addiction and mental health issues. The city and police say they work to balance helping people while enforcing the law.

But social service advocates have also complained for years that Eugene police have "criminalized" homelessness.

The Human Services Commission in 2016 counted 1,451 homeless people in Lane County. The city of Eugene estimates the real number is higher — nearly 3,000 people in the community have no home to return to at night.

At most, the homeless in Eugene make up about 2 percent of the people living here, but they were defendants in more than 35 percent of the court cases in 2016, according to *EW's* analysis.

City officials and the Eugene Police Department acknowledge they have not studied how often the city's homeless face charges, court judgments and even jail time.

"What would be the purpose of that?" EPD Chief Pete Kerns says. "I don't need to know the numbers. We know that enforcement alone isn't going to improve safety because the conditions that lead to homelessness aren't going to be addressed through enforcement alone."

"I don't know the numbers," Vinis says. "I don't have any basis on which to judge it. I'm sorry; I don't know how many [tickets] they give. I haven't asked for it. I guess I could get it if I asked for it, but I just haven't. It hasn't come to me automatically."

"They don't ask the question because they don't want to know the answer," says Jennifer Frenzer, vice chair of the Eugene Human Right Commission, a longtime critic of police enforcement against the homeless. "If they had to look at the numbers they would see they would have to change their ways. And they do not want to change their ways."

City Councilor Emily Semple says she has heard of no overt policy from the police to target the homeless, but that heavy enforcement of policies like the camping ban disproportionately affects the homeless population.

"I think the hope is you can make people feel so uncomfortable that they'll go someplace else," Semple says. "The problem is that there's no place else to go."

Without a doubt, police face a difficult job in dealing with the homeless and other people who frequent downtown. Police and city officials say officers work with many people who lack housing to help them find shelter, medical attention or other needs. Officers say that citing or arresting people is often the last resort.

How often they do so is revealed in court records. Most citations and charges for misdemeanors brought by Eugene police go to the city's municipal court.

Our analysis looked at more than 1,800 people who were cited or charged by Eugene police for non-traffic violations in 2016, and the court records show that at least 25 percent lacked a permanent address at some point last year.

These records included those that list "general delivery" for the defendant's address. In those cases, court mailings go to the local post office.

In other cases, court records list "transient" or an address for a social services agency, such as White Bird Clinic, Catholic Community Services and St. Vincent De Paul Service Station. *EW* didn't count records as non-permanent addresses when the address line was blank, or where the defendant was listed as in jail or prison. (See sidebar for a detailed explanation of our analysis.)

The data show that 71 percent of the charges against the homeless or those without a permanent addresses come from a short list — criminal trespassing and drinking illegally in public lead the list, followed by violations of park rules, third-degree theft, prohibited camping and disorderly conduct.

The profile of charges looks different for people who aren't homeless: Those same charges make up only half the cases brought against people who have a permanent address on file.

Social service advocates say the homeless, by virtue of trying to stay alive, are most vulnerable to charges such as trespassing, violating park rules and camping.

"The cost of continually criminalizing surviving without shelter is just the wrong way to prioritize the use of city

AT MOST, THE HOMELESS IN EUGENE MAKE UP

ABOUT 2 PERCENT OF THE PEOPLE LIVING HERE,

BUT THEY WERE DEFENDANTS IN

MORE THAN 35 PERCENT OF THE COURT CASES IN 2016.

Yet police and city officials continue to make policy decisions about dealing with the homeless and safety issues downtown without knowing how often the police bring charges against people who lack a permanent address.

Mayor Lucy Vinis says she has asked for and received information from Kerns about the number of citations for illegal camping outside the parks, but did not have information for or ask about the ratio of citations issued to homeless people relative to all citations issued.

staff and resources," says Heather Sielicki, who serves on the city's Homelessness Work Group. "Using law enforcement to address a social problem is not the right idea, and it's not working."

"There's intent here, and it's ridiculous," says Kathy Walker, who is unaffiliated with the city but has dedicated her life to helping the homeless. "[The police] are trying to chase them out of town. I've been homeless before, but it wasn't a war like it is now."