



Will Taylor, 32, cleans up the campsite of a friend before Rapid Response Bio Clean removes the belongings during a sweep in Portland, Ore., Thursday, July 27, 2023. (AP Photo/Craig Mitchell/Idyer)

Cracking Down on Homeless Encampments

Advocates say that's not the answer

(AP) — Tossing tent poles, blankets and a duffel bag into a shopping cart and three wagons, Will Taylor spent a summer morning helping friends tear down what had been their home and that of about a dozen others. It wasn't the first time and wouldn't be the last.

Contractors from the city of Portland had arrived to break down the stretch of tents and tarps on a side street behind a busy intersection. People had an hour to vacate the encampment, one of more than a dozen cleared that July day, according to city data.

Whatever they couldn't take with them was placed in clear plastic bags, tagged with the date and location of the removal and sent to an 11,000-square-foot (1,020 square meters) warehouse storing thousands like them. "It can get hard," said Taylor, 32, who has been swept at least three times in the four years he's been homeless. "It is what it is. ... I just let it go." Angelique Risby, 29, watched as workers in neon-yellow vests shoveled piles of litter into black garbage bags. Risby, who has been homeless for two years, said she was prepared for a drill

she's done multiple times. "Everything that I own," she said, "can fit on my wagon." For homeless people, sweeps can be traumatizing. They often lose identification documents, as well as cell phones, laptops and personal items. They lose their connection to a community they've come to rely on for support.

Tent encampments have long been a fixture of West Coast cities, but are now spreading across the U.S. The federal count of homeless people reached 580,000 last year, driven by lack of affordable housing, a pandemic that economically wrecked households, and lack of access to mental health and addiction treatment. Homeless people and their advocates say the sweeps are cruel and a waste of taxpayer money. They say the answer is more housing, not crackdowns.

In contrast, Portland clears some 19 encampments every day on average, according to the mayor's office. Crews have shut down nearly 5,000 camps in the city of 650,000 since November 2022, but residents continue to report new clusters that need to be dismantled.

Crews have even found bodies of overdose victims in tents, said Sara Angel, operations manager for the contractor that clears encampments for the city. "If we never cleaned a camp in the city of Portland, I just don't know what Portland would look

like," she said. "I don't think that we're making it better by moving them, but I don't think that we're making it worse." Removing encampments is costly — an expense more cities, counties and states have to budget for. Several cities queried by the AP provided some cost breakdowns, but officials at others said comprehensive costs were difficult to get given the multiple departments involved, including police, sanitation and public health.

Roxanne Simonson, 60, said she had a panic attack during one of the four times she was swept in Portland. She recalled feeling dangerously overheated in her tent. "I started yelling at them, 'Call an ambulance, I can't breathe.' And then I changed my mind, because if I go, then I would lose all my stuff," she said. Kieran Hartnett, who's lived in the neighborhood for seven years, said there was fighting, drug use, open fires and vehicle break-ins around the encampment. Some tents were on grass just outside his house, which was particularly stressful when people started acting in erratic ways. He hopes the people moved from the site are getting help.

"I understand the argument that clearing them just moves them to somewhere else, and they don't really have a better place to go," he said. "On the same account, I feel like you can't allow things to just fester." "There's not a good solution to it," he said.

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