

# A Better Solution To Homeless Encampments

A Guide for Policymakers and Community Leaders for Reducing Street Homelessness  
By CSH

Communities are struggling with managing unsheltered homelessness, which is rising and becoming more visible. Some states and cities are responding by passing laws or ordinances that make living on the streets or parks a criminal offense. Others are clearing encampments in the interest of public safety or are directing funding for "sanctioned encampments" and other interventions that offer no guarantee of services or access to permanent housing.

CSH offers a better solution for state and city lawmakers that can reduce homeless encampments and get people into stable homes and off the streets.

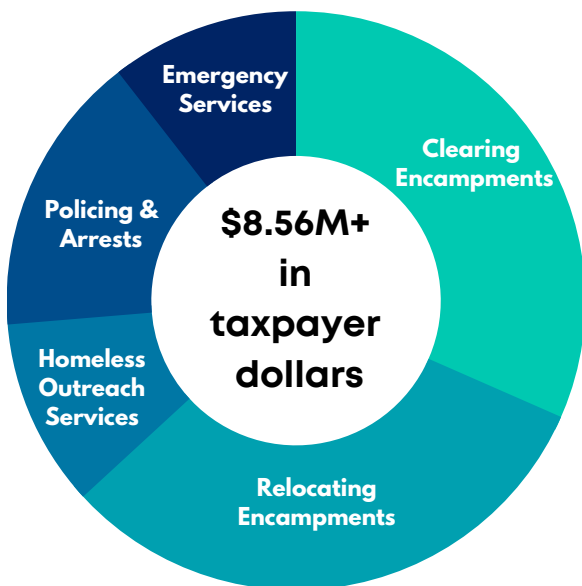
**Increasing the use of policing, jails, psychiatric hospitalizations, and camping sweeps does not add financially.**

**Responding to encampments can cost upwards of \$8.56 million.<sup>i</sup>**

Cities and states carry the cost burden since federal funding for homelessness cannot be used for policing or cleaning encampment locations.

Investing in and scaling short-term interventions will not solve homelessness. Funding crisis-based institutions does not reduce the number of people experiencing homelessness, and the cycle of homelessness-arrest-jail-emergency care will continue to generate high public costs.

Further, clearing encampments without connecting people to housing and services doesn't solve the problem, it just moves it to other parts of your city.



## Clearing or Sanctioning Encampments is Costly, Harms People, and Promotes a Cycle of Street Homelessness

### A Repeating Cycle



Crisis response services, shelters, mandated encampments, and institutional settings like psychiatric hospitals or jails are expensive and inefficient at providing the necessary support to address long-term housing and health needs. Often, individuals without housing are arrested, placed into involuntary psychiatric holds for a brief time, then discharged back into homelessness. **With no connection to services or housing opportunities, these individuals will cycle through these systems again and again.**

The costs associated with encampments are put to better use by investing in cost-effective strategies that have shown to repeatedly reduced street homelessness in communities across America.

### How Cities are Opting for Cost-Effective Solutions

Responding to homelessness through emergency response systems and institutions including emergency shelters, law enforcement (police, courts, 911, jails/prisons), and emergency healthcare services (ambulances, emergency departments, and detox facilities) **can cost the jurisdictions \$15,000 or more annually per person.**<sup>ii</sup> Yet, cities can choose an alternative.

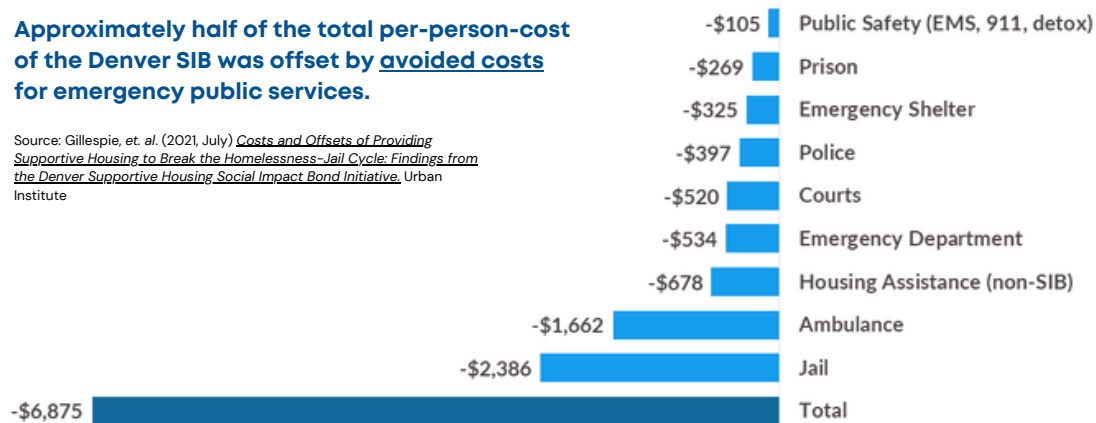
Policymakers looking for ways to respond to unsheltered homelessness can look to examples that center people, focus on connecting short-term interventions to long-term housing solutions, are rooted in equity, and promote pathways to economic mobility.<sup>iii</sup>

Cities like Denver,<sup>iv</sup> Boston,<sup>v</sup> and Dallas,<sup>vi</sup> among several others, have all successfully reduced unsheltered homelessness by using a **public health approach that brings together coordinated outreach, health systems, and housing partners to respond to increases in unsheltered homelessness.**

The **Denver Social Impact Bond (SIB) Initiative** was a five-year randomized control trial of 724 individuals experiencing homelessness. Half received housing and services interventions, and the other half (the control group) did not. When comparing the costs for using emergency services between the two groups, the City and County of Denver could offset almost half of their total cost of the housing intervention by reductions in emergency services. **Those who received outreach while on the street and offered a pathway to housing, cost the city and county \$6,875 less by avoiding engagements with costly emergency response systems and institutions.**

Approximately half of the total per-person-cost of the Denver SIB was offset by avoided costs for emergency public services.

Source: Gillespie, et. al. (2021, July) *Costs and Offsets of Providing Supportive Housing to Break the Homelessness-Jail Cycle. Findings from the Denver Supportive Housing Social Impact Bond Initiative*, Urban Institute



## Cities Demonstrating Housing Solutions Work

These examples from cities across America demonstrate that when outreach teams work to engage individuals alongside housing partners with hotel rooms and housing vouchers and move people off the street, cities can avoid paying for government-sanctioned encampments and emergency services. When response teams engage individuals with support, rather than arrest or corral them in encampments, they are also more likely to accept services and housing, which is the only way to break the cycle and over-reliance on costly emergency response systems and institutions.<sup>vii</sup>

Successful strategies for reducing homelessness also require more affordable housing and services investment. Increasingly more states are leveraging federal resources like Housing Choice Vouchers and working with landlords to maximize their usability, setting aside Low-Income Housing Tax Credits for supportive housing pipeline development, and updating their Medicaid plans to cover supportive tenancy services for individuals. By maximizing the share of federal resources employed, state and city investments can be more targeted to supplement the federal funds.

**For more information or to explore ways to quickly respond to a homeless crisis in your community, please contact us at [policy@csch.org](mailto:policy@csch.org).**

## Citations

i Dunton, L., Khadduri, J., Burnett, K., Fiore, N., Yetvin, W., Abt Associates (2021, January) *Exploring Homelessness Among People Living in Encampments and Associated Cost: City Approaches to Encampments and What They Cost*. U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Office of Policy Development and Research (PD&R).

ii See *Analyzing the Cost and Offsets of Denver's Supportive Housing Program* [https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/104495/analyzing-the-costs-and-offsets-of-denvers-supportive-housing-program\\_2.pdf](https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/104495/analyzing-the-costs-and-offsets-of-denvers-supportive-housing-program_2.pdf).

iii See *Rapid Response to Homeless Encampments. A Guide for Policymakers and Community Leaders*. <https://www.csch.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/CSH-Rapid-Response-to-Homeless-Encampments.pdf>

iv See *Breaking the Homelessness-Jail Cycle with Housing First: Results from the Denver Supportive Housing Social Impact Bond Initiative*. <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/breaking-homelessness-jail-cycle-housing-first-results-denver-supportive-housing-social-impact-bond-initiative>

v See *What Other Cities Can Learn from Boston's Public Health Approach to Homelessness*. <https://www.usich.gov/news/what-other-cities-can-learn-from-bostons-public-health-approach-to-homelessness/>

vi See *Ending Homelessness for People Living in Encampments: Lessons from Dallas, TX*. [https://www.usich.gov/resources/uploads/asset\\_library/Encampments-Case-Study-Dallas.pdf](https://www.usich.gov/resources/uploads/asset_library/Encampments-Case-Study-Dallas.pdf)

vii See *Housing First Breaks the Homeless Jail Cycle*. <https://www.urban.org/features/housing-first-breaks-homelessness-jail-cycle>.