The Criminalization of Homelessness in Chicago
By Emily Porter and Dr. Blackmond-Larnell

Abstract:
Community organizations report that Chicago was experiencing a rise in homelessness before the global pandemic, which pushed more people into a state of homelessness. City leaders admit to needing more resources to address the larger number of people living on the street. History, however, shows that cities often turn towards policies the criminalize the homeless when the "problem" becomes more visible, overwhelming public spaces and spreading into wealthier spaces thereby threatening local revenues and electoral security of officials. In this study, we will examine the occurrence of these types of crime and spatial differences in the communities where these "crimes" occur. City governments must consider providing free housing in wealthier spaces rather than arresting and incarcerating some of the cities’ most vulnerable residents and confiscating their property.

Research Question, and Significance:
• How does Chicago criminalize homelessness?
• Do interactions with the CJS perpetuate homelessness in folks who already experience it?

Homelessness a national epidemic which impacts the lives of many folks. Most recent report from the U.S. The Department of Housing and Urban Development showed that approximately 2.1 million people experienced homelessness in 2017 (Peng et. al. 2020). The government has continually failed the homeless populations while simultaneously further perpetuating homelessness in the US. The federal government has left most aid for homeless people to state, local, and nongovernmental agencies. Subsequently, these smaller scaled aid programs have largely failed most of the homeless populations. The homeless community in the US has been rising since the 80s, various policy implementations have arisen but have been disastrous. Therefore, cities have been left to deal with the growing homeless populations, and the disorder created. Many cities have put anti-homelessness policies into action but, through vast research these policies have not only exacerbated the issue, but also criminalize the mere existence of homeless people in cities.


Methods:
• Analyzed Chicago city ordinances and laws related to homeless related crimes.
• Homeless related crimes defined: Any crime that in effect, criminalizes the actions that unhoused individuals engage in as means of survival. Some examples are anti-pan-handling laws, laws barring sleeping or camping in public spaces, barring encampment in certain areas of the city, move along orders, banning of sleeping in cars, and anti-loitering laws.

Discussion and Results:
Chicago has numerous laws in the books that are flagged to be “anti-homeless” laws:
• Aggressive Panhandling Ordinance: The ordinance essentially barred people from ‘aggressively’ asking for money near several locations including CTA train/bus stops, near ATMs, and outside of businesses, however they never defined aggressive in the ordinance.
• Move Along Orders and Street Sweeps: The City of Chicago has been engaging in ‘street cleanings’ where unhoused individuals’ belongings are routinely discarded as trash. This raises major concerns for homeless folks. During the street cleanings these folks would often lose important legal documents, clothes, blankets, tents, and medicine. These items are essential to their survival and would make it harder for these people to re-find their footing in society (Wadas 2015, 62).
• Incarceration and interactions with the Criminal Justice system further perpetuates poverty due to court fees, tickets, or fines. Further, interactions with the law exacerbate the problem of homelessness, and creates a cyclical cycle of housing insecurity in the city. People who have been to prison are almost 10x more likely to be homeless compared to the general population due to lack of access to public housing, lack of job opportunities with adequate pay, and social isolation (Vera.org).

The implementation of nation-wide anti-homelessness policies are in place. Some state and local level governments have no idea how to go about the issue of homelessness, and creates a cyclical cycle of housing insecurity in the city. People who have been to prison are almost 10x more likely to be homeless compared to the general population due to lack of access to public housing, lack of job opportunities with adequate pay, and social isolation (Vera.org).

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