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Criminalizing the Homeless



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That Los Angeles has a homeless problem [printer version](#) probably does not qualify as news to many area residents. But that problem is growing, and it's part of a national trend. This year's survey by the U.S. Conference of Mayors, in fact, showed demand for beds increasing by 19% in 2002, the steepest rise in a decade. Thirty-two percent of shelter requests by homeless families in Los Angeles could not be met in 2002. And the Conference described the gap between demand and availability of emergency shelter in Los Angeles as "severely large." The increase in joblessness, a tightening housing market, the collapse of the state budget and health care system, and the five year deadline many "workfare" families will be passing this year all promise to contribute to the problem.

How are communities responding to this crisis? Unfortunately, compassion isn't the reigning mood. Cities across the nation, led by many in the Southland, are reacting with policies that advocates say are making the misfortune of being homeless a crime.

The City of Santa Monica, for instance, recently passed a law that would make it a crime to feed a homeless person – anyone who hands out food to the public on a public street or sidewalk without the permission of the city faces a \$1,000 fine or up to six months in jail. Los Angeles City Councilmember Jan Perry also introduced a motion to restrict feeding homeless people in public. Los Angeles, Palmdale, Pomona and Riverside have all either passed or are considering measures that make camping outside or sleeping outside misdemeanors.

In Los Angeles, the effort to criminalize sleeping outside is led by the Central City Association, a business group that has found allies on the City Council. In November, the Association released a report calling for an anti-camping ordinance. The Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority recommended "emphatically... that this policy cannot and should not be enforced unless adequate facilities are available, to provide a bed for each homeless individual who is removed from an encampment."

ACLU/SC Pomona Valley Chapter activists unsuccessfully fought an anti-sleeping ordinance in Pomona. Chapter leader Rose Ash pointed out to the City Council that demand for beds

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