



# The Role of Sanitation and Waste Management in Local Responses to Homelessness

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The rapid growth in America’s unsheltered population — especially in west coast cities — has created highly visible unsheltered homelessness, and accompanying public disorder, in many communities (Dunton et al. 2021; de Sousa et al. 2023). This reality creates a conundrum: housing — access to stable, affordable housing and necessary social and medical services — is the only successful way to end homelessness (National Academies of Sciences Engineering and Medicine 2018; Raven, Niedzwiecki, and Kushel 2020). Yet, in the face of rising unsheltered homelessness, local leaders often experience pressure to respond to health and safety concerns related to unsheltered homelessness through alternative city agencies, like sanitation departments. They may deploy more enforcement strategies such as encampment clearance without adequate notice or housing being available; property confiscation; relocation of unhoused people; and waste removal. While unsheltered homelessness presents many distinct challenges, including threats to public and individual health and safety, encampment clearance without providing housing options for residents does not end homelessness (Kushel and Moore 2023).

This policy brief investigates the involvement of sanitation agencies in response to homelessness in cities across the country. We amass a wide array of data, including details of the roles of Departments of Public Works, Sanitation, and/or Waste Management Departments in response to homelessness from the nation’s 100 largest cities. We find that the sanitation agencies are frequently involved in implementing city responses to homelessness, and such responses are most often distinct, or isolated from, primary municipal homeless policies such as homeless plans:

- Seventy-two percent of municipalities enlist sanitation institutions as a part of their response to homelessness.
- Fifty percent of sanitation policies involve the police. In America’s 50 largest cities, 68 percent of sanitation responses involve police.
- Of the 100 largest cities, the majority of sanitation strategies target encampment abatement (63 percent); including property confiscation, and physical removal of unhoused individuals from areas. Ninety percent of the 50 largest cities describe encampment abatement as the primary goal of sanitation responses to homelessness.
- Nearly half (41 percent) of sanitation strategies in the 100 largest cities include coordinating referrals to social or medical services. However, efforts where sanitation strategies link back to any type of shelter — permanent or temporary — occur in just one in 10 municipalities’ sanitation responses.

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## UNSHELTERED HOMELESSNESS, SANITATION, AND ENCAMPMENT MANAGEMENT

Unsheltered homelessness is highly visible, and presents social, political, health, and safety challenges. Despite this, most unhoused people do not live on the streets (National Academies of Sciences Engineering and Medicine 2018, Appendix C; de Sousa et al. 2023). They either live in temporary shelters, or in unstable housing arrangements such as couch-surfing with friends or family. While these individuals and families face immense challenges and experience worse outcomes on a variety of dimensions, their day-to-day lives are largely invisible to the general public (Chapin Hall University of Chicago 2018).

While unsheltered homelessness is a challenge nationally, it is disproportionately clustered in west coast communities. Many communities outside of the West have adopted either informal, or in a smaller number of cases, formal policies requiring the production of enough temporary shelter beds to accommodate people who are unhoused (Colburn and Clayton 2022; Hoch 2000). So, while New York City, for example, has a sizable, unhoused population that rivals or exceeds many west coast cities in some years, its Right to Shelter laws mean that the homeless population is sheltered, and thus less visible.<sup>1</sup>

By 2019, homeless encampments in the United States had grown to levels that the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) noted “had not been seen in a century.”<sup>2</sup> The problem has only become more severe in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. In response to HUD and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines on the reduction of disease spread that warned against congregate shelters, many communities moved away from the traditional shelter model during COVID-19, opting in many cases for sanctioned encampments.<sup>3</sup> This shift led to a major increase in encampments—and associated mental health and substance use disorders (Cawley et al. 2022; Nicholas et al. 2021). In 2021, HUD commissioned a series of policy reports investigating encampments and potential solutions (Dunton et al. 2021) and established formal Encampment Management policies.

The growth in unsheltered homelessness and encampments has meant an increasing role for sanitation agencies in cities’ homelessness response. Sanitation crews have often been a part of major city encampment removals; alongside police officers, sanitation crews are responsible for property confiscation and disposal (Goetz 1992; Speer 2016). Sanitation agencies also frequently work alongside public health officials as encampment clearance has also historically been used as a strategy for managing disease outbreaks (Culhane 2010; Glasser and Bridgman 1999).

The realities of unsheltered homelessness influence the policy choices cities make in how they respond to homelessness. While unsheltered homelessness comes with a variety of public safety and public health concerns, employing Departments of Public Works, Waste Management or other Departments of Sanitation to engage in encampment removal (absent housing) does not end homelessness; instead, sanitation responses in isolation effectively push the problem away, to a different area, to be addressed at a different time (Beckett and Herbert 2012; Kushel and Moore 2023). Yet, unsheltered homelessness may make cities more likely to pursue reactive sanitation strategies, as opposed to preventative, long-term solutions, like housing, for a number of reasons.

1 Holder, S. and K. Capps. “What Ending the ‘Right to Shelter’ Could Mean for New York City’s Homeless Population.” Bloomberg CityLab (Jun. 2, 2023) via <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-06-02/new-york-city-s-right-to-shelter-mandate-for-homelessness-faces-new-test>

2 U.S. Department of Housing & Urban Development. “Homelessness Among People Living in Encampments.” Office of Policy Development and Research (Apr. 5, 2021) via <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/encampments.html>

3 Examples of communities using sanctioned encampments during COVID-19: <https://www.latimes.com/homeless-housing/story/2021-05-07/san-francisco-tests-campsites-homelessness-solution>; <https://www.cbsnews.com/colorado/news/homeless-camps-church-parking-lots-sanctioned-camps/>; [https://dmhhs.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/dmhhs/page\\_content/attachments/COVID%20Encampment%20FAQ\\_Final\\_9.4.20.pdf](https://dmhhs.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/dmhhs/page_content/attachments/COVID%20Encampment%20FAQ_Final_9.4.20.pdf)



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First, unsheltered homelessness generates complaints from (largely housed) residents and businesses to whom local politicians are responsive. Experimental evidence has shown that direct exposure to visible homelessness reduces public support for social welfare spending, rather than producing sympathy for less privileged community residents (Clifford and Piston 2016; Sands 2017). This research aligns with longstanding perceptions of persons experiencing homelessness as ‘deviant’, or homelessness as a result of individual problems and failures (Hoch and Slayton 1989; Sylvester, Haeder, and Callaghan 2022). From this perspective, politicians and bureaucrats responding to elected officials may be more likely to pursue enforcement-based sanitation responses that focus explicitly, and sometimes exclusively, on the visibility of homelessness.

In addition to political perceptions, encampments create public safety, public health, and sanitation needs. All of these necessitate municipal responses (and expenditures) (Dunton et al. 2021). Encampment management and abatement are costly (Batko et al. 2020). In communities with sizable encampments, responding to acute encampment concerns may lead financially over-burdened local governments to engage exclusively in crisis-response, encampment removal policies to respond to public pressure to address the issue. Even in those cities inclined to pursue ambitious housing policy agendas to ameliorate homelessness, cities with limited resources may be unable to do so due to the staffing and fiscal burdens imposed by an immediate encampment crisis (Herring 2019). Cities responding to short-term fiscal constraints with punitive policies may, in fact, be making policy decisions that do not serve their communities’ long-term financial interests: preventative policies like housing are less expensive in the long-term than punitive, or enforcement focused, responses (Perez 2023).

## SANITATION RESPONSES IN CITIES ACROSS THE UNITED STATES

Despite long histories of homeless encampments in the United States, we know almost nothing about the role of sanitation in urban homelessness policy. There is little to no scholarship, to our knowledge, that explores the connection between sanitation and housing or homeless policy.<sup>4</sup> Very few mayors (only two percent) house their dedicated homelessness staff in their public works or sanitation departments.<sup>5,6</sup>

We collected sanitation policies, plans, and statements, from municipal websites in the 100 largest cities,<sup>7</sup> coding for whether or not sanitation departments include formal or informal roles and responsibilities regarding homelessness. In addition, we coded other local agencies involved in sanitation responses, including social services, housing, and police, and the policy goals of particular sanitation responses (including addressing the needs of persons experiencing homelessness, responding to public health/safety concerns, or responding to citizen complaints).

The overwhelming majority of cities involve sanitation departments or programs in their municipal response to homelessness. Sanitation policies and programs are also mostly distinct, or isolated from, designated municipal homeless policies and programs. Seventy-

4 Chris Herring (2019) finds that local sanitation agencies are involved with the police criminalization of unhoused persons in San Francisco.

5 Einstein, K.L. and C. Willison. “Mayors and America’s Homelessness Crisis: 2021 Menino Survey of Mayors.” Boston University Initiative on Cities (Jan. 2022) via <https://www.surveyofmayors.com/2021-menino-survey/>

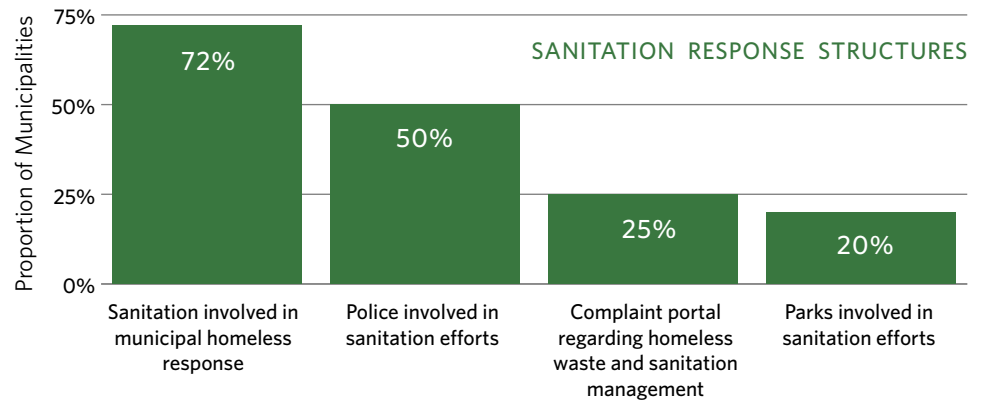
6 This is reflective of staff present in cities who are dedicated to the needs of persons experiencing homelessness, and what Department those staff are located in (e.g., 12% of Mayors have a city-level department of homeless services whereas most cities place their staff dedicated to the needs of persons experiencing homelessness in different departments).

7 City websites were triangulated with Municode, city codes of ordinances, and in some cases local news outlets, for mentions of city sanitation agencies (e.g., Public Works, Sanitation Department, etc.) in homeless responses and/or explicit policies outlining role of city sanitation agencies in responses to homelessness.

two percent of municipalities enlist sanitation institutions as a part of their response to homelessness (see Figure 1)<sup>8</sup>

Many cities include detailed sanitation plans, policies, or procedures. Los Angeles, for example, describes a three-step approach to their sanitation strategy: “1) *Outreach and notification*; 2) *Sidewalk cleaning and clean-up of public safety hazards*; 3) *Maintenance of cleaned streets, including a comprehensive outreach component*.”<sup>9</sup> In most cities, sanitation responses are not linked to primary municipal homeless policies on city websites. Of the 100 largest cities nationally, only 54 have dedicated homelessness plans. Only 26 percent of those 54 homeless plans mention issues related to sanitation even once in their plans<sup>10</sup>.

**Figure 1. Homelessness Policies in Sanitation Departments in U.S. 100 Largest Cities**



Sanitation strategies frequently feature the police, and the enforcement and punitive policies that police involvement typically entails.<sup>11</sup> As shown in Figure 1, 50 percent of sanitation policies involved the police. This figure was higher in the larger cities we studied: in America’s 50 largest cities, 68 percent of sanitation responses involve police.

8 Formal roles include detailed plans, policies, or procedures outlining the roles and responsibilities of sanitation agencies in local responses to homelessness. Formal roles for sanitation agencies were listed explicitly on 40 city websites. In 20 cases, local news websites or Facebook pages of city officials pulled from the municipal website search directly discuss in detail the city’s sanitation agencies as a part of the response to homelessness, including (in all cases) quotes or statements from local government actors describing the response and/or procedures (e.g. Albuquerque NM: “They’ll remove any trash or debris that’s there and pick up needles,” said Huval [Deputy Director of Housing and Homelessness]. “They just make sure the area is in good condition,” she said... the encampment team, along with Parks and Rec, and Solid Waste goes out there every morning, during the week, to give campers notice and clean up the park.” (<https://www.krqe.com/news/politics-government/the-process-behind-removing-homeless-camps-from-public-places/>). Informal roles include references or discussion of the role or responsibility of sanitation agencies, absent detailed plans, policies, or procedures for the agency. 11 city websites list local sanitation agencies as a part of responses to homelessness in this less clear, or informal capacity (e.g., Richmond Virginia Homeless Outreach Team in the city’s Police Department lists the Department of Public Works as a ‘partner’ in their efforts, without further detail (<https://www.rva.gov/police/project-hope>)). In just two cases local news articles directly mention the city paying for sanitation services to clear encampments, one (Newark) through a Business Improvement District/public private partnership, thus coded as informal, “3rd Precinct Community Service Officers R. Barbosa and J. Tavares, in response to numerous complaints regarding a homeless encampment at Lafayette and McCarter Highway, contacted Commercial District Services and assisted with the area cleanup” (<https://nextdoor.com/agency-post/nj/newark/newark-police-department/3rd-precinct-community-service-officers-conduct-community-cleanup-174462290/>).

9 City of Los Angeles. “Operation Healthy Streets (OHS).” LA Sanitation & Environment via [https://www.laci-tysan.org/san/faces/home/portal/s-lsh-es/s-lsh-es-si/s-lsh-es-si-ohs?\\_adf.ctrl-state=3yh2w9exs\\_1&\\_afLoop=2597935296362606&\\_afWindowMode=0&\\_afWindowId=null](https://www.laci-tysan.org/san/faces/home/portal/s-lsh-es/s-lsh-es-si/s-lsh-es-si-ohs?_adf.ctrl-state=3yh2w9exs_1&_afLoop=2597935296362606&_afWindowMode=0&_afWindowId=null); Outreach conducted during Sanitation strategies may be conducted by Sanitation agency workers, or by partner agencies involved in the Sanitation response, such as Social Services or designated Homeless Outreach services. In some cases, cities do not specify which agencies are conducted outreach during Sanitation responses, only that outreach occurs.

10 We discuss these homeless plans in greater depth in Policy Brief 1: Cities, Zoning, and the Fragmented Response to Homelessness.

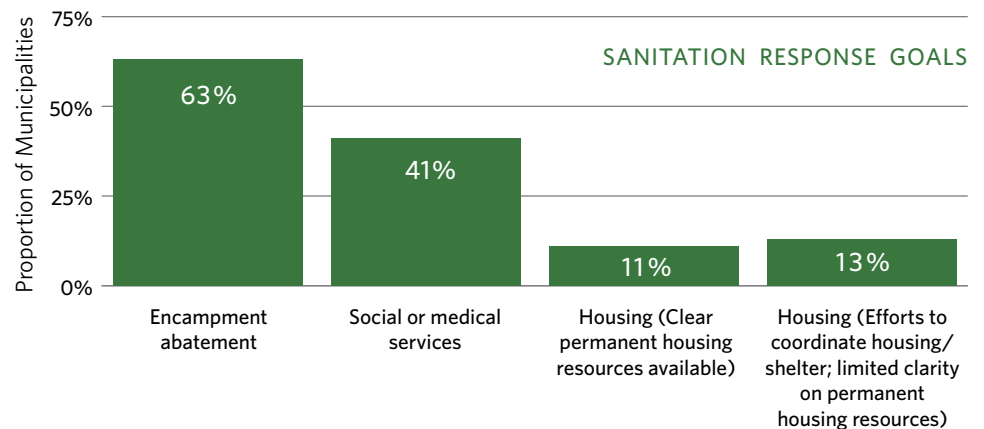
11 Dewald, A., K.L. Einstein, and C. Willison. “Policing and the Punitive Politics of Local Homelessness Policy.” Boston University Initiative on Cities (May 2023) via <https://www.bu.edu/ioc/2023/05/31/policy-brief-policing-and-the-punitive-politics-of-local-homelessness-policy/>



*“This policy establishes guidelines and procedures for the removal during off-street cleanings of items improperly stored by homeless persons on certain public property [...] The off-street cleanings will be conducted by the Department of Family and Support Services, the Police Department, and the Department of Streets and Sanitation [...] Unless the homeless individuals encountered during the cleanings are trespassing or obstructing the public way, the City will not force them to move from their location.” — CHICAGO POLICY AND PROCEDURES FOR OFF-STREET CLEANING.<sup>12</sup>*

Sanitation responses consistently emphasize encampment removal in their policy goals. As shown in Figure 2, the majority of sanitation strategies target encampment abatement (63 percent). Ninety percent of the 50 largest cities describe encampment abatement as the primary goal of sanitation responses to homelessness. Encampment abatement refers to the removal of property and people, in camps or encampments across cities. While most sanitation strategies do include warning times before encampment closures, nearly all engage in forced removal of property; this includes property confiscation, and physical removal of unhoused individuals from areas.

**Figure 2. Homelessness Policy Goals in Sanitation Departments in U.S. 100 Largest Cities**



Importantly, nearly half (41 percent) of sanitation strategies include efforts to coordinate with social or medical services, mostly through outreach or referral programs (see Figure 2). However, efforts linking sanitation strategies back to any type of shelter — permanent or temporary — occur in just over one in 10 municipalities’ sanitation responses. New research has demonstrated that encampment sweeps with housing referrals have a very low success rate of housing placement (e.g., only 5% in New York City) (NYC 2023).

Finally, one structural feature of sanitation strategies further reflects the persistent feature of citizen complaints in policy responses to homelessness. As shown in Figure 1, 25 percent of cities overall (and 35 percent of cities that involve sanitation in their homeless response) include their own formal complaint mechanism for citizens to report encampments, or ‘waste’ associated with persons experiencing homelessness. New York City, for example, outlines a detailed mechanism for reporting encampments, and the ensuing process:

<sup>12</sup> City of Chicago. “City Policy and Procedures Governing Off-Street Cleaning.” Department of Family and Support Services via [https://www.chicago.gov/content/dam/city/depts/fss/supp\\_info/CPSA.pdf](https://www.chicago.gov/content/dam/city/depts/fss/supp_info/CPSA.pdf)

*“You can report homeless people who have established encampments [...] Encampments are often under bridges or in remote areas where groups can isolate. In New York City, obstructions and encampments are not allowed [...] Officers from your local police precinct will respond within 4 hours [...] DHS (Department of Homeless Services) will work to assess and address the condition with city agency partners, such as the Department of Sanitation (DSNY) and the Parks Department. Throughout the process, DHS will engage with the individuals at the site to offer services and support, including protecting and safekeeping any valuable belongings.”<sup>13</sup>*

A sizable minority of city sanitation bureaucracies thus appear directly engaged in responses to resident complaints about unhoused people.

## CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Decades of evidence from around the world demonstrate that housing is the best way to end homelessness, and punitive strategies absent housing promote cycles of homelessness.<sup>14</sup> Despite this, we find that sanitation is a primary component of many cities’ response to homelessness. Sanitation strategies emphasize encampment abatement, including the removal of property and persons experiencing homelessness themselves. Half of all sanitation responses involve police, while less than half involve social services or public health agencies. Only just over one in ten cities include referrals to housing of any kind (temporary or permanent) in their sanitation responses.

Formal roles for sanitation agencies in city responses to homelessness are more common than city-level homeless plans (Dewald, Einstein, and Willison 2023). Yet, sanitation homelessness policies are often separate from cities’ “primary” responses to homelessness described in their homeless plans, listed on city websites. Cities thus may have fragmented responses, where traditional responses to homelessness and evidence-based housing solutions work separately, governed through different agencies and processes, alongside sanitation strategies.

One reason for fragmented, and potentially divergent policy responses to homelessness in many cases, is that local governments face political pressure from residents and businesses to remove visible reminders of homelessness (Berkeley Law Policy Advocacy Clinic 2018; Forrest 2018; Herring 2014, 2019; Willison 2021) — a reality that promotes more punitive approaches. Our data illustrate the importance of citizen and business complaints in sanitation responses to homelessness in certain communities.

In some cities, sanitation strategies are being leveraged to establish ‘sanctioned encampments’ where people experiencing homelessness are permitted to live in unsheltered locations and sanitation crews provide waste management services in lieu of any type of housing or shelter (Jordan 2023; Przybylinski 2024). Such approaches may seem like a compromise between concerned residents and businesses and unsheltered people. But, sanctioned encampments do not end homelessness; they simply reduce civil or criminal penalties for sleeping outside and designate specific locations for encampments. Sanctioned encampments run the risk of becoming a permanent fixture of local responses to homelessness where areas zoned for encampments with hygiene facilities are prioritized at the expense of permanent housing solutions. In such cases, homelessness will not end without housing.

To get around potent political pressures, the federal government must push for greater coordination between homeless agencies, housing, and sanitation and policing. Some cities, such as Washington, DC, are piloting policy responses requiring access to supportive services



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<sup>13</sup> City of New York’s NYC 311 Portal: <https://portal.311.nyc.gov/article/?kanumber=KA-02253>

<sup>14</sup> (Batko et al. 2020; Gaetz, Scott, and Gulliver 2013; National Academies of Sciences Engineering and Medicine 2018)

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photo: Ringo Chiu / Shutterstock.com

and housing before sanitation agencies remove encampments.<sup>15</sup> Going forward, cities should design policies around an evidence-based endpoint for homelessness — housing — rather than solely visible behaviors or outcomes associated with unsheltered homeless. The federal government should create strong incentives (or requirements) that encourage cities to pursue such policies that, in the long term, will best serve the needs of all residents (including unhoused people) and local businesses. ■

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Federal financial incentives for encampment removal only when long-term housing is available.
- Local sanitation agencies should engage directly with local homeless and housing departments when designing and implementing policy responses to homelessness.
- Strengthen resources available, from federal government, state and local, to housing and homeless departments to improve capacity and investments in evidence-based solutions to end homelessness.

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**Community Solutions** is a nonprofit committed to creating a lasting end to homelessness that leaves no one behind. It leads Built for Zero, a movement of more than 100 communities in the United States working to measurably and equitably end homelessness. Using a data-driven methodology, these communities have changed how local systems work and the impact they can achieve. To date, 14 communities have reached a milestone known as functional zero, a milestone for making homelessness rare and brief. Learn more at [www.community.solutions](http://www.community.solutions) or follow [@CmtySolutions](https://twitter.com/CmtySolutions).

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