

## **Criminalization of Homeless Cycle** by **Richard R. Troxell**

For the last several years, business owners in American inner cities have felt besieged by people experiencing homelessness. People having lost their last worldly possessions are drawn to populated areas where they hope to find work, pick up cast off items, collect discarded aluminum cans for recycling (about \$.40 on the pound at the time of this article) and approach citizens with means for “spare” change.

Having long ago grown weary of waiting for a solution that will “save their business patrons” from requests for financial help, they have taken action. For years these central business communities have been devising and sharing with other businesses in other municipalities new city ordinances they call “quality of life” ordinances. They outlaw camping, sitting, lying down, obstructing sidewalk passage, panhandling, solicitation, loitering, and aggressive panhandling. The National Coalition for the Homeless has been documenting these ordinances against the homeless for years and then ranking the cities relative “meanness” (see [www.Nationlhomeless.org](http://www.Nationlhomeless.org)). Due to the number of “quality of life” ordinances passed against the homeless in Austin, TX; the city has held the title ranging from the 8th to 13th meanest city for years.

In October 2007, the city of Austin already possessing an anti-aggressive panhandling ordinance on the books, set out to ban panhandling throughout the entire city on all levels. While House the Homeless, Inc. does not promote panhandling, but they will fight to the end for a person's right to solicit their fellow human beings for help. This has been going on since the beginning of time.

House the Homeless acting in collaboration with other organizations, rented a school bus and took fifty people to City Hall to defend themselves. But rather than simply decry the proposed expansion of the anti-panhandling ordinance, HtH attacked the city's entire “programm” that it has launched against the homeless. This was best illuminated by then Assistant City Manager, Joe Lessard, who was quoted and caught on tape at a City Council work session when he declared, “Make no mistake about it, our goal is to make these people leave town.” We describe their “programm” as the **Criminalization of Homelessness Cycle**, and it works thus:

1. It begins when downtown businesses (they are the very businesses driving these ordinances) pay poor working people less than a living wage. They pay them so little that they can't afford the basics of life: food, clothing, shelter, and they become homeless.
2. They remain homeless because the social response is wholly inadequate in Austin, Texas with only 607 emergency shelter beds for every man, woman, and child when there are 4,000-6,000 homeless people in the estimation of the city/county health department. This mirrors cities throughout the nation.

3. The businesses and their cronies on City Council, then pass laws against the condition of being homeless (i.e. no sitting, no loitering, camping, no lying down, no solicitation..., “Quality of Life” ordinances for which these poor people then receive \$200+ fines.

4. The businesses and their special interest City Council members create a totally separate court system just to deal with “quality of life” violators called “Community Court.” In lieu of paying the fines that they can’t afford, homeless people are turned into a **free labor force** for the city when they must perform “community service.” First businesses won’t pay a living wage, and when they become homeless and powerless, they just *take* the labor of people experiencing homelessness.

5. Then when people have no alternative but to petition their fellow citizens for financial help (i.e. Panhandling) the downtown businesses and City Council label them as “criminals” and decry their survival activity of pan-handling as unsafe while allowing others at the same time to conduct identical activities such as firemen walking recklessly in traffic in their fund raising efforts.

6. The cycle is completed and their continued homelessness is assured when people experiencing homelessness can’t get a job or rent an apartment because of all of the “Quality of Life” tickets and warrants issued against them. As an employer, who would you hire? If you were a landlord who would you rent too?

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