

JENNIFER FOR AUSTIN
Austin City Council
District 10

This is an informational piece written by one of our campaign supporters, Jason Reese. It is representative of my thoughts on the subject of the homeless population crisis we're experiencing in Austin.

REFORMING AUSTIN'S POLICY ON HOMELESSNESS

The words inscribed on a plaque on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty read, "Give Me Your Tired, Your Poor, Your Huddled Masses..." not "*Create Huddled Masses Under Bridges and Overpasses.*"¹ The distinction in these ideologies is paramount to solving the homeless crisis. We were a nation built on inspiring and lifting people up, but we seem to have adopted an overly ideological methodology that yields enablement instead of personal accountability.

Austin has the state seat and flagship university in its backyard. We have tech companies flocking here bringing jobs and prosperity. Yet, we struggle with the basic problem of how to help the less fortunate. We need to have a fair and compassionate enforcement policy to ban public camping. We have to work with, not against, our sister Texas cities and the State of Texas to share ideas and implement programs proven to be successful. We have to track and measure our progress on how we are affecting the homeless based on systemic rates of homelessness, as well as, individual outcomes. We have to be willing to quickly change course if those outcomes are not reducing our unsheltered homelessness population.

The prevailing thought coming out of our current City Council is, "[If you want to help them, house them.](#)"² In this paper, we will show that this is a flawed concept and that housing alone will not solve this problem. Austin has an [annual budget of \\$62M](#) to help the homeless.³ If you were to spread this investment across our homeless population of 2500 people, you will have a budget of \$24,800 per person. That gives each individual enough

¹Lazarus, Emma. "The **New Colossus.**" Statue of Liberty, **New York, New York**. 1883.

²Adler, Steve. July 22, 2019 "Want to stop people from sleeping in public spaces? House them", Austin, TX; Austin American Statesman www.statesman.com/opinion/20190722/adler-want-to-stop-people-sleeping-in-public-spaces-house-them

³Henrickson, Eric."More spending on homelessness than ever, an in-depth look at Austin's proposed plan". September 10th 2019. KXAN. <https://www.kxan.com/news/more-spending-on-homelessness-than-ever-an-in-depth-look-at-austins-proposed-plan/>

money to reside according to the [living wage for Travis County](#).⁴ The problem isn't funding or lack of housing. It's a poor policy.

**Austin must reinstate and humanely enforce its camping ban
because camping is unsafe and harmful to our citizens,
environment and economy.**

Conventional rhetoric claims that the rise in homelessness is caused by the increasing costs of real estate, lack of affordable housing and a preference for warmer weather. These arguments just don't seem to be true. [Studies show](#) that the homeless population will migrate from other cities and states to areas that are more lenient on camping.⁵ Atlanta, Houston, San Antonio, Tampa and Miami are all examples of warmer climates and rapidly accelerating housing costs, but each has been able to stabilize or materially reduce their unsheltered homeless populations. How is it possible that homelessness [decreased over the last decade nationally](#), but increased in cities like Portland, Seattle, Los Angeles, and San Francisco (Four Big West Coast Cities with no camping enforcement)?⁶ The answer has to be rooted in the local policy for each city. Since Austin is the only city in the South or Southeast that does not enforce a ban on urban camping, we are doomed to also become a haven for an explosion of unsheltered homeless persons. If we are not careful, we could end up seeing an influx of a homeless population that will rival the Four West Coast Cities.

Camping is harmful to our citizens, including our homeless, and it's bad for our environment. Homeless-on-homeless [violent crime is up 23% and homeless-on-non-homeless violent crime is up 6%](#).⁷ [The first murder of 2020](#) was of a restaurant worker by a homeless person.⁸ Camping also spreads dangerous and communicable diseases like Covid-19 and influenza. Camping is bad for the environment and it damages our city parks, which are meant for the enjoyment of all citizens. Camping [impacts watersheds](#)

⁴Glasmeier, Dr. Amy K.. January, 2020. "Living Wage Calculator". MIT.
<https://livingwage.mit.edu/counties/48453>

⁵"The State of Homelessness in America," The Council for Economic Advisors, September 2019, 41, www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/The-State-of-Homelessness-in-America.pdf

⁶<https://endhomelessness.org/homelessness-in-america/homelessness-statistics/state-of-homelessness-2020/>

⁷ Asmussen, Jacob. February 12, 2020. "New Data Reveals Austin's Homeless Violent Crime Is Rising": <https://texasscorecard.com/local/new-data-reveals-austins-homeless-violent-crime-is-rising/>

⁸Osbourne, Heather. January 4, 2020. "South Austin Stabbing". <https://www.statesman.com/news/20200104/south-austin-stabbing-suspect-in-fatal-attack-is-homeless-police-say>

and runoff from unsanitary areas pollutes our waterways and spreads disease.⁹ When watching this [Windsor Park video](#), you can clearly see the direct impact camping has on the environment.¹⁰

Camping is bad for the economy. [Visitors are getting accosted](#), and tent cities (now coined “Adlervilles” after the Mayor) are impacting tourism.¹¹ [Altercations](#) are impacting our downtown businesses and the safety of their employees.¹² The current \$62M annual budget is failing and more money is being earmarked to toss at the problem. If the camping ban is not part of the strategy, the city is only going to continue hemorrhaging money. Downtown businesses, residents and real estate are being financially impacted as patrons and residents don’t want to be inundated by human waste or verbally berated as they walk around town. New transplants moving to Austin from the Northeast and West Coast are electing to live in the suburbs instead of the urban core due to the now visible Adlervilles that line our overpasses and our famed Cesar Chavez Boulevard, directly across from City Hall.

We must partner and coordinate with our fellow Texas entities and follow models with proven results.

Our Austin Mayor and our Texas Governor don’t see eye-to-eye on many issues. However, Texas is ready to help whenever a crisis gets out of control. Seemingly, the state’s resources should be easy to access. Both the state seat and flagship university are based in the heart of Austin. What’s good for Austin is good for UT and Texas and vice-versa. It’s a gigantic missed opportunity when these closely located entities don’t work together to address common concerns and goals.

Our Mayor’s feud with the Governor is causing a scenario where Austin will be swimming upstream against the efforts of our state, sister cities and flagship university. Governor

⁹Oak, Molly & Livengood, Paul. February 7, 2020. “MAP: KVUE uncovers illegal Austin homeless camps undergoing cleanups by Austin Watershed” www.kvue.com/article/news/local/homeless/austin-homeless-camps-locations-watershed-cleanups/269-c07fb00e-68b5-453f-8b5a-91b5d76ebf45

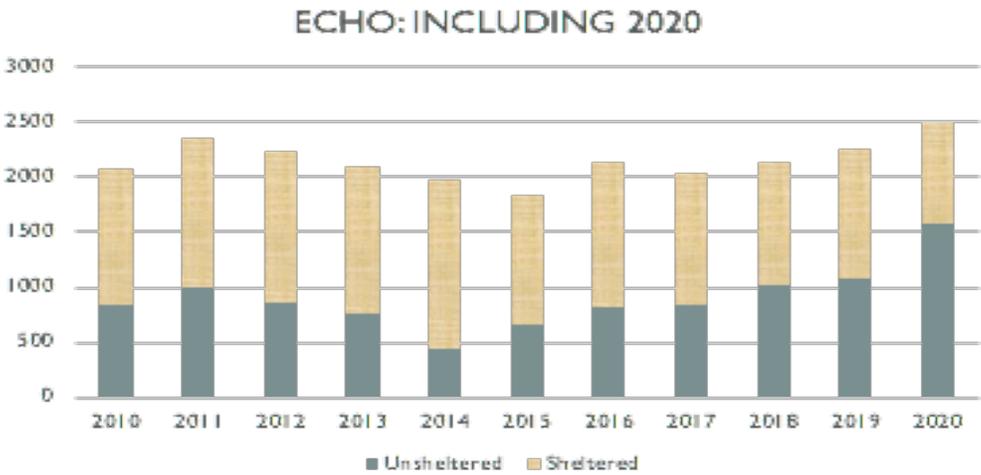
¹⁰Ludlow, Kevin. “Massive problems in the Windsor Park creek” August, 2020 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xbsXgU6PO6U&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR2gKSULChKDLVRu-WbXnjl5JRorZMP0VEksUjlbMpB7QJHgMCGXqxGGDY>

¹¹Kendall, Jennifer. October 14, 2019. “Woman visiting Austin attacked by man believed to be homeless” www.fox7austin.com/news/woman-visiting-austin-attacked-by-man-believed-to-be-homeless

¹²Oak, Molly. July 11, 2019. “Caught on Camera: Man says alleged homeless person attacked him outside of Downtown Austin office building” www.kvue.com/article/news/local/caught-on-camera-man-says-alleged-homeless-person-attacked-him-outside-of-downtown-austin-building/269-a2b4e3bb-af47-40bf-84e8-eb66b11f29b9

Abbott committed to help clean up state [parks, highways and overpasses](#).¹³ Other Texas cities led by Houston are lobbying the state for health and drug services, while our Mayor and Council are looking to the [wrong cities for results](#).¹⁴ Instead of looking to West Coast policy, we should be looking no further than inside our own state for proven solutions.

Houston, Texas has [reduced its homeless population by 54%](#)¹⁵ and San Antonio has [reduced its downtown homeless population by 80%](#),¹⁶ while Austin’s homeless population is up 11% (see exhibit below). Houston’s tough love strategy is to create housing while banning street camping. One year after Austin’s camping ban was repealed, something really interesting happened. Outdoor camping *increased* by 40% and sheltered homelessness *decreased* by 20% (see exhibit below). This telling statistic documents that when the camping ban is not enforced, homeless persons will choose camping over sheltered services. This is hardly a successful outcome.



¹³ Weber, Andrew. October 18, 2019. "Gov. Abbott Move To Clean Up Homeless Camps Under Bridges In Austin". <https://www.kut.org/post/gov-abbott-moves-clean-homeless-camps-under-bridges-austin>

¹⁴ Eubank, Britny & Oak, Molly. July, 20, 2019. "Mayor Adler visiting LA, Seattle to discuss transit initiative, homeless". <https://www.kvue.com/article/news/local/homeless/mayor-adler-visiting-la-seattle-to-discuss-public-transit-initiative-homeless/269-5d8a2106-9c5d-4316-9a10-b2008f30f1b4>

¹⁵ Garnham, Juan. July 2, 2019. "Why homelessness is going down in Houston but up in Dallas". <https://www.texastribune.org/2019/07/02/why-homelessness-going-down-houston-dallas/#:~:text=While%20redevelopment%20has%20maybe%20made,area's%20homeless%20population%20since%202011>

¹⁶ Garnha, Juan. August 13, 2019. "Greg Abbott said San Antonio could teach Austin how to help homeless people. Experts Agree". <https://www.texastribune.org/2019/08/13/whos-helping-homeless-more-austin-or-san-antonio/>

¹⁷ Echo Point in Time Count 2020: www.austinecho.org/about-echo/homelessness-in-austin/

San Antonio bans urban camping and built the [Haven for Hope](#) to streamline, measure its results, and better organize its nonprofit ecosystem. San Antonio built this 22-acre facility miles outside of town, away from the congested city center, where it has the space for 184 non-profits onsite to provide the services each person needs. San Antonio's system works not only because of its coordinated system, but because the city strictly enforces the camping ban in the most expensive areas of the city; such as the Riverwalk and downtown tourism attractions.

Housing and programs are not as effective without enforcement and are shown to be more effective when combined with active enforcement.¹⁸ Austin also has a fragmented approach with organizations like Caritas, ARCH and Mobile Loaves & Fishes' Community First! Village each taking its own approach to solving the crisis. Austin needs to follow San Antonio's lead and relocate its services to a lower cost, less densely populated area of the city. Let's sell the highly desirable and inhospitable property (where these organizations are located) for top dollar and put those funds to good use. The Governor dedicated [five acres of parkland](#) near ABIA five miles off of highway 183, and it has onsite sanitary facilities.¹⁹ The site needs more investment with shade and shelter, but it's a step in the right direction and can serve as a potential comprehensive site for integrated services. Developing low-cost housing alternatives protects persons experiencing homelessness from the most expensive and dangerous part of the city. This provides a safe haven where our citizens in need can get proper services, while reducing the risk of harm to themselves and others.

The relationship between the city, the state and the university provides a combination that very few cities can rival. The University of Texas has been begging the city of Austin to take action. Our city's policies are directly impacting the safety of UT students. Located in the heart of Austin, UT has had numerous tragedies with student and homeless encounters. In 2016, a young student was [sexually assaulted and murdered](#)²⁰ by a homeless person, previously dropped off by an out of town police officer in Austin. As recently as August of 2020, a [freshman was verbally assaulted and the victim's father was threatened with a knife](#)²¹ on the day the father was moving his freshman daughter

¹⁸ Haven for Hope: <https://www.havenforhope.org/>

¹⁹Tatum, Carrington & Andu, Naomi. February 27, 2020. "Abbotts state run camp for the homeless in Austin to be taken over by nonprofit with new shelter plans". <https://www.texastribune.org/2020/02/27/greg-abbotts-camp-austins-homeless-will-be-run-nonprofit/>

²⁰McCausland, Phil. July 20, 2018. "Man found guilty in killing of Texas college student Haruka Weiser". <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/man-found-guilty-killing-texas-college-student-haruka-weiser-n893316>

²¹Ramkisson, Jaclyn. August 19, 2020. Man accused of pulling knife on UT freshman's dad, threatening to kill him during move-in". <https://www.kxan.com/news/crime/man-accused-of-pulling-knife-on-ut-freshmans-dad-threatening-to-kill-him-during-move-in/>

into her dorm and dropping her off for the first time. Many students and parents are avoiding the University of Texas due to the city's issues causing the university to work harder to get top academic and athletic recruits. We have to take care of our young minds so that we keep the outlook bright for the future of our city. Instead, we are telling them that their future is less important than allowing others to abuse drugs and harm citizens as they please.

We have to focus on the numbers and let the numbers drive the solution.

We have to invest in and confer with our partners around platforms like the [HMIS data-tracking system](#).²² A large percentage of the growth in the homelessness experienced by Seattle, Portland, San Francisco, and Los Angeles has been from homeless persons moving from regions with strict policies to cities with lenient policies placing a larger burden on those cities and citizens. According to a [2018 HUD report](#), homeless persons choose unsheltered options because there is autonomy and access to illegal substances.²³ With no accountability, people are going to continue to take the path of least resistance. We have to flag and document repeat offenders as they roam from community to community. We need to sanction cities who bus their homeless population to other cities because they don't have the compassion to help solve the problem themselves. Keeping an eye on the data is the only way to make this possible.

We have to be watchful of our outcomes and transparent about our results. Reducing unsheltered homelessness needs to be the objective, because unsheltered persons are the most vulnerable and the most likely to harm others. Prior to 2020, Austin's homeless numbers had remained relatively stable despite its continued record population growth. It's indisputable that the camping ban repeal has created a material and significant negative deviation. Austin continues to grow and was the [6th fastest growing city](#) in the country in 2019 of *any size*. It was also the fastest growing *large* city for the 9th consecutive year in a row in that same year. As of February, 2020, there were [37 planned building towers and 21 one of those towers will visibly change the skyline of the city](#). If we do not take action now, our homeless crisis will quickly spiral out of control in the most dense section of the city. Under immense pressure from its citizens, the Austin Mayor and Council [reinstated limits on camping](#) signaling that they knew they had made a grave error.²⁴ However, the partial ban is only causing confusion and the campers are again boldly pushing the limits and continue to camp in parks and watersheds.

²² <https://www.hudexchange.info/programs/hmis/>

²³ US Dept. of Housing.2018.Understanding Encampments of People Experiencing Homelessness and Community Responses.Pg. 4-7 www.huduser.gov/portal/sites/default/files/pdf/Understanding-Encampments.pdf

²⁴ Weber,Andrew.October 17, 2019.“Austin Reinstates Limited Bans On Camping And Resting In Public”.<https://www.kut.org/post/austin-reinstates-limited-bans-camping-and-resting-public>

We must compassionately care for those experiencing homelessness while protecting the health and safety of the majority other citizens. We must reinstate and actively enforce the camping ban in the city so that we can give our programs and our non-profits a chance to take hold and produce results. We must hold our city leaders accountable by documenting and measuring the success of our programs to fight homelessness. Based on recent stats, our city programs seem to be perpetuating homelessness and fostering unrest while increasing the funding for their current statistically unsuccessful policy. We have to partner with our great state, fellow Texas cities and the University of Texas to join forces to solve this statewide problem and humanely care for the less fortunate.

Austin is making radical unchecked changes. It's imperative that we stay vigilant and put an end to "solutions" that lack accountability or successful outcomes.
