These big numbers are more than real estate figures; they are real people—families with children, people in ill health, the elderly. But rather than trying to help them, cities are issuing “sit/lie bans” and “public commons for everyone” laws, which make it illegal to “loiter” in a public space. Criminalizing these simple acts and making them subject to police harassment and arrest is an egregious violation of the civil liberties supposedly guaranteed by our democracy. Yet it happens to homeless people all the time.

In a survey of 716 homeless people in 13 different communities, the Western Regional Advocacy Project (WRAP) found that 78 percent reported being harassed, cited or arrested for sleeping; 75 percent for sitting or lying on the sidewalk; and 76 percent for loitering or hanging out. Only 25 percent said they knew of a safe place to sleep at night.

This nationwide pattern has escaped civil rights protections because the ordinances are drafted very carefully to appear as if they apply equally to all people, but enforcement is very much impacted by a person’s skin color, housing status, economic class, and mental health. These laws were skillfully developed to withstand judicial scrutiny while criminalizing poor and homeless people. Or as French novelist Anatole France observed, “The law in its majestic equality, forbids the rich as well as the poor to sleep under bridges, to beg in the streets and to steal bread.”

BID Credo: Non-Consumers Not Welcome

Paul Boden, director of WRAP, attributes the motivation behind these draconian laws to the rise of the Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) all over the country. Business owners are seeking “to create safe and friendly shopping environments by making sure there’s nobody there who is not shopping,” says Boden.

Members of BIDs tax themselves and use the revenue to hire private security people—called “ambassadors”—who wear special uniforms and look helpful and friendly. In reality, their function is to police the BIDs, which are “privatizing large segments of our community and removing the people that they feel are not business-friendly and tourist-friendly,” observes Boden, adding that “it’s absolutely frightening [how the] business community is running major sections of our cities.”
Janny Castillo, community builder at BOSS (Building Opportunities for Self-Sufficiency), says: “We are constantly engaged in the struggle to have the plight of those that are living on the streets, the homeless people, recognized. The challenges that they go through, the way the police and the city comes up with these laws that actually are designed to move them off the street, it’s illegal basically, even if there’s a law for it. It’s just inhumane.”

It’s even worse than denying people their civil rights, she says. “It’s all about the right to exist. It takes away the little bit they have left, which is their dignity, their respect.”

April Fool’s at the Union Square BID

To build awareness of the plight of the homeless amongst us and generate sympathy, WRAP and a number of other activist organizations called for a Day of Action on April 1, in cities across the United States and Canada. It was to be a day of nonviolent resistance to the efforts of business owners to create a private security force to harass and persecute the poor and homeless and enable corporations to gain control over our communities.

According to a press release from WRAP, the date was chosen because poor people were going to play “an April Fool’s prank” at Union Square in San Francisco, where several of the largest and richest corporate-controlled businesses have created a BID, hiring private security forces to drive away the “visibly poor.” WRAP was joined by Occupy SF, St. Mary’s Center, Food Not Bombs, and other groups that afternoon to convey their message in a number of creative ways, including dance and music by groups, such as Dancing Ambassadors and Brass Liberation Orchestra. A satirical skit featuring “BID ambassadors” in uniforms rounding up and arresting people who looked homeless and their subsequent triumphant jailbreak was received with great cheering from the crowd.

Hopefully, this bit of street theater will encourage more vigilance over the kinds of laws our cities try to pass and help to bring about more compassion for the people without homes who are being made criminals simply for sitting down, sleeping, or asking for help, says Boden. Above all, he adds, the homeless are targeted as being bad for business, which in modern America is an unforgivable offence.

Archdiocese Evicts Homeless from Vacant Building

At 5 P.M. on April 1, several hundred housing activists were joined by a busload of people from Occupy Oakland on a mile-long march to take over a vacant building at 888 Turk Street and set up a homeless community. The two-story building owned by the Archdiocese of San Francisco has been unoccupied for a long time. About 100 housing activists entered the building to occupy and reclaim it as a service and housing center for unhoused people. A banner unfurled from the top of the building and clearly directed at church officials read: “Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses.”

“There is no reason why any building should be vacant when people have no housing,” said Emma Gerould, a member of Occupy SF, adding that the archdiocese should be more sensitive to the extent of poverty in the community and allow the building to be used.

George Wesolek, speaking for the archdiocese, admitted that the building—which was used to hold music classes—has been vacant for 18 months. But archdiocesan officials signed a citizen’s arrest order on charges of trespassing and graffiti. Shortly after noon on Monday, April 2, police in riot gear ripped down the barricades set up by the demonstrators, entered the building, and arrested over 75 people. The archdiocese has since boarded up the building again and announced plans to bring in private security forces.
Race, Poverty and the Environment (RP&E) is Urban Habitat’s national journal of social and environmental justice, founded in 1990.

For over two decades we have covered how low-income people and communities of color are organizing to win equality and justice. Multiracial, multi-issue organizations capable of uniting constituencies for social justice action have never been more critical. RP&E is a longtime and crucial connection point for advocacy groups, regionally and nationally.

Visit urbanhabitat.org/rpe to subscribe, order back issues, read from our archives, sign up for our quarterly newsletter, and catch up on the latest research and news in environmental, economic and transportation justice.

In 2010, RP&E forged print-web-radio collaborations with local and national radio outlets with production facilities in the Bay Area. Radio RP&E features in depth interviews and speeches from the movement for racial, economic, and gender justice.

Annual Subscriptions: $20/individual, $40/institution. Back Issues: $10/issue The complete archive collection, which includes over 60 issues from 1990 to present, is also available for $250.

urbanhabitat.org/subscribe

Race, Poverty & the Environment
A Project of Urban Habitat

Our online archives are available at urbanhabitat.org/rpe. In addition, back issues of the journal will be available via the comprehensive online academic journal archive JSTOR beginning in 2013.

urbanhabitat.org/subscribe
Race, Poverty & the Environment

the national journal for social and environmental justice

Editor Emeritus
Carl Anthony
Publisher
Connie Galambos Malloy
Editor & Art Director
B. Jesse Clarke
Assistant Editor
Merula Furtado
Layout & Design Assistant
Christine Joy Ferrer

Urban Habitat Board of Directors
Allen Fernandez Smith
President & CEO, Urban Habitat
Joe Brooks (Chair)
PolicyLink
Romel Pascual (Vice-Chair)
Mayor’s Office, City of Los Angeles
Tamar Dorfman (Treasurer)
Public Health Institute
Carl Anthony
Co-Founder, Urban Habitat
Wade Crowfoot
Governor’s Office of Planning and Research
Malo Andre Hutson
Department of City and Regional Planning
University of California, Berkeley
Debra Johnson
San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency
Felicia Marcus
Natural Resources Defense Council
Asha Mehta
Leaderspring
Arnold Perkins
Former Director, Alameda Public Health Department

Organizations are listed for identification purposes only.

Subscribe to RP&E
Annual subscriptions are $20 for individuals; $40 for institutions. (Free for grassroots groups upon request.)

Subscribe online at urbanhabitat.org
Or send subscription checks to: RP&E, 1212 Broadway, #500, Oakland, CA 94612.
Libraries can use subscription services available from EBSCO, SWETS, and Harrassowitz.

ISSN# 1532-2874

©2012 by the individual creators and Urban Habitat. For specific reprint information, queries, or submissions, please email editor@urbanhabitat.org.

In the interest of dialogue, RP&E publishes diverse views. Opinions expressed are not necessarily those of the editors, Urban Habitat, or its funders.

RP&E is a member of The Media Consortium, a network of leading independent journalism organizations in the U.S. working together to strengthen the role of media in creating a democratic society. In addition to our online archive at urbanhabitat.org/rpe, back issues of the journal are available via the comprehensive online academic journal archive JSTOR.
