

The Trinity Bellwoods crackdown was not surprising. But there is a better way to respond to encampments

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FULL TEXT

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Last month, in the early morning hours, city workers began clearing out the homeless encampment in Toronto's Trinity Bellwoods park. Protesters, in the face of a large police and private-security presence, moved in quickly to stop them, with some people pulling down temporary fencing erected to prevent access to the area. The day ended with numerous arrests and criminal charges, including assault on an officer. A police drone watched it all from above.

From our vantage point, the skirmish at Trinity Bellwoods was not surprising. If anything, it was predictable. And it certainly will not be the last. As researchers of policing and homelessness, we have seen an unmistakable rise in homeless sweeps and encampment crackdowns since the late 1990s. This response to visible poverty results from a collision of forces, both in Canada and the United States: the decline of affordable housing and mental-health services, and local governments' desires to revitalize business districts, boost tourism and attract high-income residents.

It's not cruel to clear park encampments

Cities across Canada grapple with how to respond to growing homeless encampments

For many, these goals are thwarted by people living outdoors. City leaders often see no choice but to ask the police to clear tents and their occupants from the path of progress. In San Francisco, the police receive roughly 100,000 911 calls about homelessness each year. Portlanders call the police about unwanted people once every 15 minutes. One of our recent studies found that in Los Angeles, the police are twice as likely to issue homelessness-related tickets in gentrified neighbourhoods.

Public hostility and police aggression toward encampments have reached historic intensity thanks to COVID-19. Urbanites are understandably eager for normalcy after closings and lockdowns. Business owners and residents have returned to their shops and public parks only to find them serving as a last refuge for the unhoused. The divide feels inevitable - almost as if it's the natural order of things: business associations, homeowners and police on one side, people living unsheltered, advocates and protesters on the other.

Although the two sides' demands feel incompatible, they might not have to be. What if we could revitalize commercial and green spaces - and respond to residents' concerns about safety and disorder - all while providing meaningful life-saving resources and housing security to our neighbours living in encampments?

This isn't just a possibility, it's a reality - at least in one city. At the height of the pandemic, a coalition of community-based organizations in Seattle launched an initiative called JustCARE for precisely this purpose. Initially funded mainly through federal pandemic relief monies, it offers a radically different model for attending to

those deemed most inconvenient to city life.

Here's how it works: JustCARE identifies encampments that generate significant numbers of complaints and 911 calls. With the goal of averting a police response, JustCARE outreach workers step in to address housed neighbours' concerns. They then assess camp residents' needs, build trust and ultimately offer supportive interim housing in the form of private rooms, currently in local hotels. This is much different than traditional congregate emergency shelters, which come with shared living spaces and bathrooms, cots and threats of potential violence. Research shows that people living outside typically decline such options, or spend only a short time indoors before returning to the streets.

JustCARE also provides harm-reduction-oriented, 24/7 case management. This includes mental and physical health care, Naloxone and syringe exchanges, dental care, optometry, veterans' resources, financial management assistance and even enrollment in community college. Most camp residents accept these services. Case managers and dedicated safety teams use creative problem-solving and de-escalation techniques to keep the peace within the hotels.

One of us recently co-authored a developmental evaluation of JustCARE's first six months of operations. The preliminary findings are encouraging. Nearly all participants who reported previously engaging in illicit survival strategies, such as theft or drug sales, said they stopped or reduced this behaviour. Many addressed long-standing mental and physical health challenges, reporting notable improvements in their emotional and psychological well-being.

Case managers - many of whom draw on relevant lived experience - support participants in securing benefits, connecting with loved ones, obtaining ID documents and clearing outstanding criminal legal issues. Some participants have moved on to independent permanent housing or back in with family, and many more are poised to do so in the coming months.

As impressive as these early findings are, we have been even more struck by how quickly JustCARE managed to unite both sides of the raging battle. Those who live and work near former encampments are thrilled with the initiative's effective yet humane response.

There is perhaps no better evidence of this shift than a recent press conference convened by councilmember Andrew J. Lewis in downtown Seattle, just one day prior to the clash in Trinity Bellwoods. The scenes in these two cities could not have been any more different. Standing in front of a newly reopened dinner theatre across the street from the home of the Seattle Symphony, Mr. Lewis was flanked by a once unfathomable coalition of business owners, residents and JustCARE providers and participants. They took turns applauding the initiative and thanking their former adversaries.

"We're here to say that this model is going to get downtown back to business," Mr. Lewis announced. "This model is going to give agency to our neighbours who are experiencing homelessness, and give them the resources that they need."

Some of the loudest praise came from those who, only a year ago, were among the most vocal advocates of homeless sweeps.

Rachel Smith, president and CEO of the Seattle Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce, was one of those voices. "We've too frequently seen negative community reactions between those in our community living unsheltered, and those in our community trying to reopen their businesses and storefronts and attract customers," she said. "We need successful interventions like JustCARE to address homelessness in a way that allows business owners to reopen their doors and doesn't result in shuffling people from one street corner to the next one. We're celebrating success today."

Ms. Smith's sentiments make sense given Seattleites' long-standing frustrations. For years, they have called 911 to complain about issues related to encampments. Like a broken record, police officers have sometimes shown up and dispersed camps, only to see them rematerialize within a matter of days, if not hours. Even when housing advocates are able to prevent or interrupt sweeps, no progress is made in addressing the deeper challenges faced by camp occupants.

Now, people such as Ms. Smith have been won over by visible and lasting improvements. In interviews, leaders of business and resident organizations said they have even stopped turning to the police to solve their problems, dialling JustCARE staff instead.

Of course, this holistic intervention costs money. According to recent estimates, JustCARE's price tag is a little less than \$50,000 U.S. annually for each relocated person, with most of that going to hotel rooms and intensive case management. But the cost is not scaring away the potential supporters.

Lou Bond, owner of a large commercial building in the heart of Seattle's Pioneer Square, has seen the return on investment first-hand. "We need more money toward this. We need to be able to take care of the entire city this way so that we can get back to business." He says it is time for city council, and even local businesses and residents to ante up. "To be able to reach out and to be able to bring in help, that's what we need more of. And there's not enough of them [JustCARE-model initiatives] so we need to be able to help fund this."

Time will tell whether the business community maintains its current zeal. As the county acquires its own housing facilities, the price for the JustCARE model will fall. And newly available, postpandemic federal funding makes a similar approach possible on a much larger scale, without shifting resources from other worthy causes. But down the line, more controversial measures, such as progressive tax reform, may be required. Still, the fact that so many business leaders have come to appreciate the limits of police sweeps is an important step forward.

In the broader context, JustCARE manages to accomplish what once seemed impossible: supporting disadvantaged communities, beautifying public space, reinvigorating the economy and improving public safety all without relying on the police.

If the past year of mass protests has made anything clear, it is that police involvement comes at incredible cost, especially for homeless people (who are disproportionately people of colour) and others with behavioural health issues. In the United States, nearly half of all people killed by the police are disabled, and more than half of police killings occur in incidents that stem from a 911 call. JustCARE offers perhaps the most promising approach for reducing those numbers. Far more investments in affordable permanent housing and mental-health care will be vital. But while the battle lines have been drawn for decades, JustCARE suggests the possibility of redrawing them entirely.

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