

Homeless Camping in Austin: A Modest Proposal

This winter, I'm a visiting scholar at the University of Texas. Though Austin is gorgeous, visitors can't help but notice vast homeless villages scattered throughout the city. Local sources tell me that this is driven by Austin's repeal of the ban on homeless camping. One of the economists I've met here has written a Swiftian proposal for reforming Austin's approach. The author prefers to remain anonymous, but this is printed with his permission. Engage your sense of satire, and enjoy!

By using a signature sampling technique, the city of Austin kept the initiative to reinstate Austin's camping ban off the November ballot. As such, it is a good time to evaluate who exactly benefits and who pays the costs of the repeal of the camping ban. The city would not have prevented the issue from being on the ballot if they were confident that the people of Austin would support continued homeless camping, so there seems to be some constituency for reimposing the ban, while the aggressive efforts by the city to promote homeless camping suggests the existence of a powerful constituency in favor of such camping.

Fortunately, it is relatively easy to see who bears the costs and who reaps the benefits of the camping ban repeal. Traveling around Austin, it is quite clear that much of the new camping takes place under highway overpasses and on highway right of ways. This information is very valuable in understanding who benefits and who pays for the camping policy. Highways are a classic "disamenity" in urban economics; people will pay to avoid living near highways due to increased noise, traffic, and pollution. The equilibrium implication of this fact is that neighborhoods near highways tend to be poorer. This situation is not necessarily something to be concerned about. Any growing, dynamic economy will reward different skills differently, and the fact that those with fewer resources choose to save money on housing by living in less desirable neighborhoods is somewhat inevitable.

This logic, however, does not justify policies that make such neighborhoods worse; at that point, the city government is changing the rules and in effect expropriating wealth, in the form of home values and unpriced amenities like safety, from lower income Austinites. Where, then, is this transfer going? One could argue that the benefits of the policy accrue toward the homeless themselves, but this conclusion is not clear. While economists tend to view increasing the available choices to individuals as improving their welfare, there may be an exception for those caught in the depths of mental illness and substance abuse. In any case, the idea that the homeless have sufficient political clout to enact such radical policies strains credulity.

Thus, there must be another constituency that values homeless camping and has enough influence to get such policies passed. Again, the recent history of the ballot initiative is informative. The political, social, and academic elite of Austin is the primary relevant constituency for permitting homeless camping, and they receive the most unambiguous benefits of the policy through smug self-satisfaction while bearing none of the costs. True, these total benefits are dwarfed by the costs to those living in lower income areas, but the relative political power of the two groups leads to the policy being enacted despite the costs outweighing the benefits. The camping ban repeal is thus both inefficient and regressive; the overall benefits are small relative to the costs, and the benefits accrue to the wealthy while the costs are borne by the poor.

What, then, to do about the inequities generated by the removal of the homeless camping ban? The first thing to note is that appeals to local government are useless; it is exactly those running the local government, formally and informally, who benefited most from the camping policy change. Thus, we must appeal to authorities above the local level. Fortunately, the State of Texas has at its disposal multiple tools that can lead to a more equitable outcome and that, crucially, can make sure that those receiving benefits from the policy are the ones paying the costs. We can even achieve this without appreciably changing the opportunities available for homeless camping. The state has significant authority, separate from local authorities, over both highway right-of-ways and the University of Texas campus. The Governor should immediately instruct the Department of Public Safety to clear out all campsites from highway right-of-ways while at the same time prohibiting the University from enforcing any prohibitions on camping, loitering, or solicitation. Transportation of persons and property from the right-of-ways to campus could be provided free of charge.

This policy might lead to some disruptions on campus, but it would be no worse than the disruptions faced by lower income Austinites who find such camps popping up near their homes and places of work. And, certainly, faculty at UT are at the pinnacle of the social elite in Austin and among the strongest supporters of the repeal of the ban. They benefit the most, and they should pay the costs. It would be admittedly jarring to see faculty harassed and threatened on their way to teach classes, but faculty themselves have enthusiastically supported policies that have imposed such harassment and threatening behavior on less privileged Austinites, as is well documented in the viral video circulating regarding the Windsor Park neighborhood. Surely “marginalized” working class individuals who provide important services to our economy deserve to have at least the same level of safety and security as those who write about the tribulations of the marginalized classes from the comfort of their own offices.

Perhaps one would counter this argument by pointing out that faculty tend to earn higher incomes and live in more expensive housing than the working class, thus paying more in

taxes to the city and thus deserving greater protection. But, this argument breaks down; the academic elite lives largely off of taxpayer money, either directly through state funding of the university or indirectly through the funding of general university operations through “overhead” charges against federal grants. How much of this government funding eventually ends up getting passed on to the local government in the form of taxes should not really play a role in determining who deserves the most protection by the local government. The logic might be different when comparing high income productive workers with low income productive workers, but when comparing low income productive workers to high income “workers” with heavily subsidized lifetime sinecures we can hardly conclude that higher incomes warrant greater public services.