



No link between homeless villages and crime rates, Guardian review suggests

Guardian study of two US cities finds crime is likelier to go down than up in neighborhoods that host city-sanctioned encampments

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Thacher Schmid in Portland, Oregon

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They stood in a rainy parking lot under fir trees, 60 homeless men and women, young and old, patient and weary. The glow of a single lightbulb outside the “office” - a shack of plywood, duct tape and plastic sheeting - illuminated their faces.

It was the 9pm check-in at a homeless village called Right 2 Dream Too in Portland, Oregon. The code of conduct was read aloud. Then the roll call began: one by one, people showed ID and stepped through the chain link fence, towards portable toilets, bedrolls, warmth, sleep and safety.

Most people don’t associate this kind of order and security with homelessness. Indeed, homelessness and criminality are often conflated. But a Guardian investigation in two US cities where such highly organized homeless villages are common, Seattle and Portland, found that their presence was not generally accompanied by a rise in crime in their neighborhoods. In fact, crime was likelier to go down.

For five of 11 villages surveyed, crime in a broad range of categories decreased in the surrounding neighborhood after they were established. In four cases, any change was small, within single digits. In two, crime increased.

The Guardian's data is "consistent with the position that homeless villages are not generators of crime", said Kenneth Leon, a criminologist at George Washington University, and could be part of a "crime prevention ecosystem".

The numbers show "there's no evidence homeless encampments add to crime", wrote Mike Males, senior research fellow at the Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice in San Francisco, calling the figures "an important finding".

There is a distinction between these villages and the ad hoc, curbside agglomerations of tents and tarps that have come to symbolize the surging homelessness crisis in many cities across the western US. All these villages have the sanction, explicit or tacit, of officials, are largely self-governing, and have defined boundaries and codes of conduct.

Take Othello Village, comprised of 29 tiny homes, which was established on the border of two residential southern Seattle neighborhoods in March 2015.

Sharon Lee, executive director of the Low Income Housing Institute in Seattle, which sponsors seven "tiny home" villages, including Othello, said the property used to be a "hot spot" - "a vacant, derelict, dilapidated lot full of trash and garbage [where] people would do their drug deals".

Now, Lee jokes, it's a "gated community". It has a fenced perimeter, gatehouse, locking doors, foot patrols, arbitrators for squabbles and "eyes on the street".

Using Seattle and Portland crime statistic "dashboards", the Guardian pulled crime rates for the neighborhoods in which Othello and the other homeless villages are located, comparing the number of incidents that occurred before and after their establishment.

In Othello's case, crime in the two Seattle neighborhoods it straddles went down an average of 31%, versus a 4% rise citywide.

Lee believes the the creation of an organized village engenders a psychological shift. People "literally cry when we show them that they can move into a tiny house and give up their tent", she said. "If you go to a village and there's food and you can shower and there's a warm place and you can keep your place and lock the door, it takes away your need to hustle or commit a crime or go in a store and steal some food."

Neighbors have noticed. "It keeps getting better," said Manzil Pradhan, manager of Jim's Market and Gas, a gas station and mini-mart next to Othello Village. "Now when I work here at night, it's good. I can get out after midnight; I feel safe now."

Camp residents also take measures to keep crime down. In Portland, residents of Right 2 Dream Too perform foot patrols. On a recent night, a man named Leo L, 59, carried a walkie-talkie and what he calls his "extra hand", a picker-grabber to snare trash and cigarette butts. He never carries a weapon.



Rows of tents at Camp Second Chance, a city-sanctioned homeless encampment in Seattle. Photograph: Jae C Hong/AP

"Believe me, if we see something going on, it's going to be handled," he said. "We don't tolerate nothing."

When Right 2 Dream Too moved in mid-2017 to its current home in Portland's commercial Lloyd Center neighborhood, crime went down 10%, versus a 7% citywide rise. Crime went up 28% in the neighborhood it vacated.

"I love these guys being here," said a man in a guard shack near R2DToo who requested anonymity because he wasn't authorized to talk to media. "A lot of people were really skeptical, but they've been cool. I don't even find needles out here any more."

The Texas State University criminal justice professor Marcus Felson said the data indicated such villages could serve to “contain” crime.

“In general, removing problems from outdoor and public locations to more concealed locations is good for community life - even if the problems are not solved,” Felson said. “Such removal minimizes conflicts and escalations, including police contacts.”

Police spokespeople in both cities declined to discuss the findings. The Portland police spokesman Sgt Chris Burley said the city did not track crimes around authorized encampments, and that crime rates for an entire neighborhood did not necessarily reflect crime trends at specific locations within that neighborhood.

But the Seattle police sergeant Eric Zerr, whose team reaches out to people living in impromptu tent clusters, vehicles and under bridges, said he was “very hopeful” about the village model. “It’s just safer there.”

Researchers stressed that the data did not show a causal relationship between the villages and lower crime.

“It doesn’t settle the question, but with all academic things, we always say more research is needed,” George Washington University’s Leon said.



Othello Village. The crime data is grist for the mill in the debate over city-sanctioned homeless villages. Photograph: Jenny Riffle for the Guardian

On occasion, camp residents are alleged to commit serious crimes. And in two Seattle neighborhoods, crime significantly increased after a homeless village was established: in the Georgetown neighborhood, crime rose 31%; and in Ballard South, it climbed 17%.

Experts aren’t certain of the reasons. In the Georgetown neighborhood, the assistant police chief Marc Garth-Green told the Seattle Times in December he wasn’t sure why property crimes had risen to fourth-highest in the city. In those areas, isolation and lack of social services could push crime up.

The crime data is grist for the mill in the debate over city-sanctioned homeless villages. San Jose and Oakland, in California, are ploughing ahead with them, while San Diego recently constructed huge group tents and Las Vegas is repurposing shipping containers.

Yet there are profound concerns over living conditions. The former head of the US Interagency Council on Homelessness, Barbara Poppe, for example, compares such villages to refugee camps.

“I don’t think it should be sitting comfortably for anybody in the wealthiest country in the world to say: ‘Yes, we should be creating semi-permanent shantytowns,’” said Eric Tars, senior attorney at the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty. “But they can actually play a productive role.”

The following date ranges were used in comparisons: Tent City 5: November 2012 - February 2015 compared with November 2015 - February 2018. Othello Village: March 2012 - February 2015 compared with March 2015 - February 2018. Tiny House Village: January 2013 - February 2015 compared with January 2016 - February 2018. Georgetown Village: March 2016 - February 2017 compared with March 2017 - February 2018. Licton Springs Tiny House Village: April 2016 - February 2017 compared with April 2017 - February 2018. Camp Second Chance: April 2016 - February 2017 compared with April 2017 - February 2018. Tent City 3: November 2016 - February 2017 compared with November 2017 - February 2018. Ballard Nickelsville: November 2012 - February 2015 compared with November 2015 - February 2018. Kenton Women’s Village: June 2016 - February 2017 compared with June 2017 - February 2018. Right 2 Dream Too: June 2016 - February 2017 compared with June 2017 - February 2018. Hazelnut Grove: May 2015 - September 2015 compared with May 2016 - September 2016.