**Fighting Anti-Homeless Laws Through Participatory Action Research**

Lisa Marie Alatorre, Bilal Ali, Jennifer Friedenbach, Chris Herring, TJ Johnston & Dilara Yarbrough

ABSTRACT - *150 words*

**Formed in 1987, the San Francisco Coalition on Homelessness has been organizing against the criminalization of poverty for over 20 years. In collaboration with sociologists, we conducted a PAR study about the effects of the criminalization of homelessness in San Francisco. This chapter discusses 1) how our participatory research process enhanced the quality of data and worked as a vehicle for organizing 2) how our project impacted the organization, city, and narrative on the criminalization of homelessness and 3) how we confronted assumptions about expertise as we worked to establish homeless people as leaders and experts in the local policy arena. Our successes, struggles, and process will be useful to other researchers and organizers designing and implementing projects that establish the expertise and leadership of directly affected communities. ((128))**

**Introduction**

Since the 1980s anti-homeless laws that criminalize sleeping, sitting, and panhandling in public spaces have increased across the nation, most rapidly in the last ten years. Since 1987 members of the San Francisco Coalition on Homelessness (COH) have done weekly outreach to unhoused San Franciscans, reported on the impacts of criminalization and advocated for policy change. Yet policymakers and the public were often skeptical of these anecdotal stories of what was essentially an invisiblized process of punishment, with no city agency tracking arrests, citations, or move-along orders aimed at the unhoused, let alone investigating their impacts. Our Participatory Action Research project documented and analyzed the impacts of the rising tide of anti-homeless laws on those experiencing homelessness in San Francisco; a city with more anti-homeless laws on its books than any other California city. The COH in partnership with sociologists affiliated with UC Berkeley Law School’s Center for Human Rights carried out a citywide survey of 351 unhoused individuals in all neighborhoods in San Francisco’s central city, as well as 43 in-depth interviews. We also collected and analyzed data obtained through public record requests from various city departments on policy protocols, citations, and sanitation sweeps.

The survey and interview instruments were directed by COH’s Human Rights Working Group; surveys were conducted by COH volunteers, and the in-depth video interviews were completed by a team of five currently or formerly unhoused peer researchers. The sociologists translated the working group’s questions and goals into a rigorous research design and provided training and direct guidance through the data collection phase. Sociologists completed the technical aspects of statistical analysis and report writing, but the interpretation, presentation of findings, and recommendations were formed through a consensus-based process in the COH’s working group of which both sociologists were members. We shared our findings in an in-depth report and a 15-minute video documentary featuring a selection of interviews completed by the peer research team (see: http://www.cohsf.org/punishing-the-poorest/). The report provides an in-depth analysis of each step in the criminalization of homelessness –interactions with law enforcement, the issuance and processing of citations, incarceration and release – demonstrating how criminalizing homelessness not only fails to reduce it in public space, but actually perpetuates homelessness, inequality, and poverty. The video provides powerful testimony to the analysis. Just as our organizing priorities informed our research questions, these findings have informed our policy advocacy.

This chapter, collaboratively written by human rights organizer Lisa Marie, peer researchers Bilal and TJ, COH director Jennifer and sociologists Chris and Dilara, addresses our experience. We discuss using data collection as a tool for political organizing, establishing homeless people and the COH as experts, and using our research findings to create policy change. Despite many challenges, community based participatory research can provide superior data, more precise analysis, and broader impact than traditional academic studies lacking grassroots partnerships. We hope that our successes and struggles will be useful for other researchers and political organizers who hope to design and implement projects led by directly affected communities.

**Improving Data and Analysis through Collaboration**

 Community based research is often perceived as biased and therefore less methodologically sound than research carried out by professional academics. But in fact, the leadership of directly affected communities can make research more robust. In this study, a combination of personal knowledge of housing deprivation and training in social science research methods improved the quality of data collection and analysis. It was very important that our data be collected in an unbiased way, and that our findings be taken seriously, so the sociologists followed the same training and design protocols as they would in their academic studies. After sociologists not affiliated with the COH reviewed our questionnaires, Dilara and Chris provided a 90-minute long training for 30 volunteer proctors, including local service providers and unhoused members of the COH, covering each survey item. Proctors practiced using a script to introduce the research project in a way that would not bias responses. We used the COH’s organizational knowledge to assign locations to each survey proctor in order to capture the most representative sample possible of people who had experienced homelessness in the last year (see COH 2015 for more detailed discussion of survey methodology). After the survey phase, currently and recently unhoused peer researchers conducted oral history interviews about interactions with law enforcement with 43 more currently unhoused participants. Dilara and Chris provided eight hours of formal methodological training, covering recruitment and informed consent, pre-screening, interviewing and effective follow-up questions, supportive listening, and writing post-interview summaries. Weekly research team meetings provided a forum for discussion of the process and mutual support.

While this academic training and design made for a more rigorous study than the COH’s past reports, the COH’s institutional knowledge, legitimacy among the unhoused, and its members’ intimate knowledge of homelessness improved the quality of data collection. Survey proctors were deeply familiar with unhoused communities, making them better able to recruit and connect with survey participants. Their practical knowledge from the streets and shelters allowed them to access otherwise hidden groups. Their personal experiences and affiliation with the COH, a trusted poor people-led organization, gave proctors substantially more credibility among unhoused respondents, who were rightfully suspicious of “poverty pimping.” Many unhoused San Franciscans suffer from “research fatigue,” persistently being questioned for program evaluations, or governmental and scholastic studies that often employ paid contracted proctors. Yet, because the COH conducts outreach almost every day checking in on encampments, listening to what the unhoused think about city policies, and offering peer-based legal advice about citations, many respondents were not only willing to participate, but did so more openly and honestly.

 The practical and experiential knowledge of homelessness among peer researchers was even more beneficial in conducting the in-depth interviews. The peer researchers included three women, two men, two transgender people and three cisgender people. One of the peer researchers was white, one Latina, one multiracial and three Black. We ranged in age from early twenties to early sixties. Peer researchers stayed in shelters, on the streets, in transitional housing, and in a community land trust at the time of the study. Shared experience with those we interviewed and intimate knowledge of criminalization allowed peer researchers to connect with participants quickly and ask thoughtful follow-up questions in ways that would require far more training for academics or other professionals. This was especially important as participants were being asked sensitive questions about criminal records, illegal activities, and often traumatic experiences.

Initially, we assumed that peer researchers would recruit from their own social networks, and that each researcher could connect with unhoused peers who had similar experiences based on race, gender or age. Although our research team successfully forged connections with other unhoused people that often felt empowering, we found that certain commonalities could make interviews traumatic. One peer researcher found her interviewee’s experiences of victimization similar to her own past experiences, triggering unwanted memories and feelings of panic. At first, she tried to push through doing interviews, but when she finally shared her feelings with another member of the research team, we agreed that it would be best to stop any interviews that felt too difficult or triggering.

To take care of ourselves while completing the interview portion of our project, some of us had to seek out and interview people outside of our networks, with different identities and experiences. Sometimes, we had to stop the interview to take a break, ground ourselves in the now. We talked about how to end an interview early using words that would feel caring and respectful to the interview participant.

After completing the surveys and interviews, we discussed our findings and their implications in our weekly Human Rights Workgroup meetings. These meetings included anywhere between 10–30 people, many of whom were unhoused, as well as COH staff and volunteers. For the survey data, Chris and Dilara presented tables and graphs and facilitated discussions to interpret patterns and trends. For the interviews, TJ and Bilal worked with Lisa Marie to present excerpts to the workgroup for discussion. Together the sociologists and organizers collaboratively analyzed this data, with the sociologists being careful that the group’s interpretations stood up to alternative hypotheses and met scientific criteria of validation, while the workgroup provided a diversity of interpretations grounded in experience. This collaborative approach provided a richer and more accurate analysis than could have been completed by scholars or organizers alone.

**Advancing Community Organizing through Data Collection**

The survey and interview process simultaneously advanced the Coalition’s mission of outreach, education, and political organizing. After completing the survey and interview, many people asked about the Coalition’s latest campaigns and learned how to get involved in supporting local initiatives to curb criminalization and the statewide “Right to Rest Act,” which was being heard in the California Senate that spring. Several participants who had been given citations learned about the Coalition’s “citation defense” program and received advice about how to get their tickets dismissed. We also distributed pamphlets about people’s rights when interacting with police. Through the survey and interview processes, hundreds of people experiencing homelessness in San Francisco learned about the work of the Coalition on Homelessness. As we invited participants to join in the fight against criminalization, the research process itself facilitated community organizing and amplified the COH’s ongoing outreach.

However, we were also reminded that romanticized ideas of “community” or “solidarity” don’t always reflect lived experiences of identity. Some members of the research team struggled because they felt targeted and marginalized within the larger unhoused community. One member of our team, a Black transgender woman, initially experienced verbal harassment from unhoused people she was trying to recruit to be part of the study, and ended up dealing with this problem by making herself a very official-looking COH Researcher name tag to emphasize her special role and gain more respect.

In contrast, another member, a Black cisgender man, adopted an informal style. He told his interview participants that he was camping on the street and explained how this was because of the injustice of the capitalist system. For this researcher, shared identities provided a basis for shared political action. While participants in the study had varying degrees of interest in discussing how broader political and economic systems produce homelessness, we found that the research process provided an opportunity for dialogue about common experiences of injustice. This is particularly important in unhoused communities, where race and gender-based divisions and myths about individual responsibility and deservingness can preclude broad-based political organizing. Collaborative data analysis provided additional opportunities to frame shared experiences of criminalization in terms of state violence rather than individual failure.

**Constructing expertise**

In an era of extreme poverty and a culture that tends to blame people for their own suffering, it is more urgent than ever for social scientists to develop ways to ethically and effectively engage marginalized people in research**.** A primary goal of the project was to make the intellectual labor of unhoused people visible and to make policymakers view unhoused people as experts on homelessness. In a context where many people making policy decisions about unhoused people’s lives are white, middle class, able-bodied and cisgender, calling attention to unhoused people’s expertise also helps ensure that our campaigns challenge white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and ableism. One political tactic for achieving this goal is having unhoused members of our research team be the most visible as we present our findings, and for academic researchers to be less so. Whether meeting with city supervisors, the district attorney, police chief, community groups, or university classes, peer researchers actively opposed the social stigma attached to the unhoused by presenting the research they conducted.

 Except for a few strategic instances in which we needed to get key stakeholders’ support more expediently than deeper conversations would allow, we talked about audience members’ hidden assumptions. We asked them to see us all as experts-- not just the white people, housed people, cis people, or academics. We named the danger of reifying racist sexist and classist notions of expertise. And we reflected on our mistakes to make sure we do better next time. This section contrasts the way we presented ourselves to different audiences to draw lessons about the construction of expertise based on academic credentials vs. lived experience.

 In almost all of our fifty plus presentations, peer researchers presented sections of the report and we prioritized our goal of presenting unhoused people as experts, even if that brought skepticism from biased audiences. Sometimes, however, we strategically marshaled our privilege and academic affiliations to prioritize getting our message across to audiences that we thought would dismiss unhoused presenters. Strategic use of unearned privilege is a double-edged sword. We constantly weighed the tension between our goals of establishing unhoused people as experts on homelessness and establishing the credibility of our research among those more likely to believe academics than unhoused people. We challenged assumptions about methodological rigor and expertise explicitly, encouraging audiences to question their biases about who can be an expert. On a few occasions, we made regrettable decisions about how to present ourselves and our project.

As the lone white male academic on our team, Chris attended countless meetings with police and bureaucrats who were willing to engage with his authoritative assertions of our research findings. Chris’s confident and informed speech, coupled with his embodied identities and affiliation with an elite academic institution, helped him become a broker of information in the local homeless policy sphere, a role that was unavailable to most other team members. His connections with a variety of local bureaucratic actors—facilitated by his role as a professional researcher-- gave him power to which unhoused activists did not have access. “Chris has that white guy charm,” we’d joke, simultaneously exasperated by the more respectful way police officers, city supervisors, and other officials responded to white middle class masculinity and grateful that our team of women, poor people, queer and trans folks and people of color could strategically marshal Chris’s embodied identities.

Academic-community collaborations are not uniform nor are there clear definitions of “academic” or “community.” These essentialist notions elide the complex subject positions that all of us hold based on our race and gender identities, class background and experience in a variety of institutions. For example, Dilara and Chris had to learn to accommodate one another’s gendered self-presentation styles. At the beginning of the project, both were graduate students in sociology. However, many outsiders assumed that Chris was the only professional researcher on the team. Reflecting on their different approaches as academics and members of the COH, we noticed that Chris spoke about the research in an authoritative style that underscored his personal contributions. In contrast, Dilara spoke about the research using “we” statements that downplayed her central role in study design, analysis and writing. Over the course of our collaboration, the academic researchers learned to accommodate each other’s styles, with Chris consciously trying to ensure that the way he presented himself did not erase the contributions of other team members and Dilara working to become more visible as a professional researcher.

The academic researchers were invited in 2018 to present our findings to the visiting United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty. Dilara was eager to use her new credential as a university professor to bolster the work of the Coalition and lend academic credibility to our project. She felt honored to have been invited to present to the U.N. Rapporteur, and excited to be at an activist event doing something that felt meaningful after a long semester of soul-crushing academic committee work. She had dressed for the occasion in her most professional-looking blazer, and to be extra prepared, had typed out notes for this presentation we’d all done dozens of times.

Before the presentation, Dilara noted that she was presenting on behalf of the research team led by unhoused researchers, and that peer researchers TJ and Bilal were in the room. In other contexts where we were presenting as a team, this standard introduction felt like enough to establish unhoused people’s status as experts. Dilara launched into the “Punishing the Poorest” Powerpoint.

         At the end of the presentations, there was an “open-mic” for anyone who wanted to speak. The founder of Poor News Network, whose concept of “we-search” by and for poor people was an inspiration for our project, looked directly at Dilara and Jennifer and told us that she was tired of hearing about research, because we already know everything we need to know to take action. Another prominent housing and disability justice activist wondered why everyone invited to speak was a service industry, legal, or academic professional. Why had this event centered elite voices and marginalized the voices of directly affected people?

Debriefing the following week, Dilara told Bilal about the horror she felt seeing unhoused people waiting in line to speak after her panel presentation, and Bilal agreed that many of the unhoused activists in the room felt deeply hurt seeing yet another “community event” privileging a group of “suits” (including Dilara in her blazer alongside the service providers and lawyers) chosen to speak on their behalf. How could we prevent similar situations from happening in the future? In her excitement to be part of the event, Dilara didn’t check to make sure that the event was representing the voices of directly affected communities. She realized that if she had, she could have suggested that a different team member, one who was currently unhoused rather than a stably housed professor, take her place on the panel. It is academic researchers’ responsibility to make sure that the presentations they are part of do not (however unintentionally) perpetuate harmful hierarchies and exclusions. When we see that we’re part of an “expert” panel of academics, lawyers, and service providers analyzing issues that no one on the panel has personally experienced, we can step back and reflect to the event organizers and ourselves that we need to make this change.

Although it is important to avoid exclusions like the ones described above, strategic deployment of unearned privilege can at times be useful. In a few instances, Dilara and Chris strategically performed their academic expertise and white middle class embodied identities to advance the Coalition’s policy change goals. A few hours after the presentation to the U.N. rapporteur, we presented to the San Francisco Police Commission. As we decided who would cover the different sections of our findings, Jennifer told Dilara: “The more you cover, the better. You’ll have more credibility than I do because you’re a professor.” Dilara laughed, thinking that much of what she knew about local politics and policies she learned from Jennifer, whose knowledge came from over 20 years of experience in local policy advocacy and at the COH. For the Police Commission, Dilara strategically performed her role as the expert professor, conscious of the temporary subordination of the long-term goal of establishing unhoused people as experts on “homelessness” to the more immediate goal of getting the police commission to enact policy change. The key difference between Dilara’s performance of professor for the U.N. rapporteur in the morning and the police commission in the evening was that one was at a community event in which the context meant it had unintentionally exclusionary outcomes, and the other was an intentional choice by the team to strategically use Dilara’s Ph.D. to convince people who would invest authority in this credential. We couldn’t immediately change the Police Commission’s stereotypes about homeless people, but we could give them the facts in a way they would find credible, using Dilara and Chris’s academic voices and credentials.

 The benefits of activist scholarship are not only to community organizations seeking deeper understanding of the causes of the oppression they’re fighting against. People considering professional research careers also benefit from doing applied work in the service of social justice. When we first started discussing the citywide survey that resulted in our “Punishing the Poorest” report, Dilara was disillusioned with mainstream sociology’s focus on depoliticized analyses with no policy impact. When we came up with the idea for a citywide survey of unhoused people’s experiences of criminalization and displacement, she had been volunteering at the COH for two years, and had collaborated with Lisa Marie, TJ and the Human Rights workgroup to design and coordinate a smaller-scale study of policing and displacement. Before she started doing research with the COH, Dilara was considering leaving her Ph.D. program to focus on more applied anti-poverty work. Inspired by the political analysis of the COH’s Human Rights Work Group, Dilara once again became excited about the potential of research to produce knowledge that could help transform conditions of oppression. Chris, who had also worked in advocacy and policy fields before entering graduate school, felt similarly alienated and isolated carrying out a lone ethnographic study for his dissertation. Unlike conventional academic work, doing research designed to instigate social change felt useful, meaningful and worthwhile. Being able to use their academic skills to bolster the COH’s campaigns renewed Chris and Dilara’s commitment to research as an integral part of activism and organizing.

**Funding research to end poverty? The contradictions of human rights research**

Funding work to end poverty is complicated because funders prefer to back service-oriented work, especially short-term or “immediate needs” rather than investing in long-term solutions and policy-oriented work aimed at infrastructural changes. At the COH, we are committed to work based on the needs and asks of our communities – not the vision of a funder. Most funders take a top-down and ameliorative approach, while we focus on a bottom-up approach to challenge the conditions that produce poverty. Attempting to build the political power of our unhoused members makes our goals incompatible with the priorities of many funders. Our groundbreaking work of political organizing and policy change often fails to produce the “evidence-based” examples and quantifiable outcomes that most funders require.

 As an under-funded, grassroots organization, we are used to doing a lot with a little. In the past, we successfully launched unfunded PAR Projects, but the SIF grant made our project stronger, more impactful, and farther-reaching. The SIF grant specifically allowed compensation for peer researchers, an academic researcher to coordinate peer researchers, and research participants; it covered printing costs for report development, and refreshments for launch events and trainings. As a poor people led organization, we frequently experience the denial of academic-type funding towards our community organizing efforts. Instead, we see those resources fund work that will likely never impact the lives of those being studied. All too often we are asked to speak at academic gatherings to study poverty, events that are often flush with free food and wine, and where researchers who have never been without housing are provided with monetary support for which our currently unhoused researchers are not even eligible.

A clear example of this happened when Chris and Dilara were awarded a research fellowship from UC Berkeley Law’s Human Rights Center. This was an award for which only current University of California law students or doctoral researchers were eligible. Chris and Dilara’s fellowship presentation at Berkeley Law’s Human Rights Center was the first time they had presented the project without the peer research team. We remarked on this fact in our presentation, pointing out TJ sitting in the audience rather than onstage with the fellows. We noticed that day the abundant spread of catered appetizers, lunch, coffee, tea, cookies, and wine meant for academic fellows at the University of California, a sharp contrast from our COH Human Rights Work Group meetings where unhoused organizers’ stomachs growled because we had no organizational budget for food to serve during our lunchtime meetings.

By supporting academic researchers who dedicate their time to human rights work, fellowships like this one indirectly subsidize the allocation of academic time and energy to human rights organizations. Without additional financial support, Chris and Dilara would have struggled to balance their own needs for income with their commitment to the COH as long-term unpaid volunteers. The fellowship also provided us with a prestigious affiliation that increased our research team’s credibility when presenting our project to city officials. Ironically, however, the funder’s requirements for academic affiliation excludes the communities whose human rights are the topic of our research.

After the fellowship, Chris and Dilara were invited to apply for a summer writing residency. When we asked if TJ could apply, the fellowship coordinator said that he was not eligible. In other words, a human rights organization was inviting housed members of our research team to access free housing and meals in a beautiful retreat center, while TJ, an unhoused peer researcher and full-time journalist who does his writing each day in the loud and hectic environments of the COH office and temporary homeless shelters, was not eligible to apply.

With the SIF funding, the COH could finally pay currently and recently unhoused people for their research and activism. We were limited by the punitive requirements imposed by workfare bureaucracies, careful that the monthly stipends did not exceed allowable income in ways that would cause members of our research team to lose government benefits. Nonetheless the SIF grant was a welcome change from our frequently demoralizing experiences with funders and affirmed the project’s broader goals of establishing the expertise and leadership of directly affected communities and producing rigorous research to fight the criminalization of homelessness.

**Using research findings to support policy change**

Our research findings challenged a number of popular beliefs about the criminalization of homelessness. First, there was the general myth that San Francisco is a liberal city that does’t criminalize homelessness, but only enforces anti-homeless laws on those whose behavior threatens public safety. However, our survey found that the majority of San Francisco’s unhoused were impacted: 70% had been forced to move and 69% cited in the past year, with nearly a quarter receiving five or more citations. Surveys and interviews revealed how citations and move-along orders resulted in a cycle of bench warrants, revoked drivers licenses, denials of housing, and increased people’s exposure to violence and illness that prolonged homelessness. The report also challenged official statements and popular beliefs that the enforcement of anti-homeless laws pushed people into services through “tough love.” Of the 204 respondents who had been displaced by the SFPD only 24 reported being offered services, which mainly included band-aid referrals that reinforced punitive practices, for example handing out a sandwich or a pamphlet accompanied by warnings that if the person did not leave the area, they’d be cited or arrested. The COH knew these to be myths prior to the research, but now we had data to articulate the immense social suffering caused by anti-homeless laws.

Since the release of our policy report in 2015, we have presented this research to thirteen city agencies and commissions, each of the city supervisors, six state senators, investigators from the US Department of Justice reviewing San Francisco’s police department, and in over a dozen community forums. In the days following its release, six newspapers dedicated entire articles to our report findings, and we are frequently cited in local media coverage about homelessness. Transforming the media narrative is crucial for public advocacy. Public opinion drives anti-homeless policy and enforcement, so public education is just as critical as the immediate policy gains. The COH continued to use the report and its findings with media in the local, national, and even international coverage of the mass eviction of a tent city leading up the 2016 Super Bowl. The study and video have been featured in over a dozen educational and community presentations at local universities and homeless service centers. Wide local media coverage of the report helped reframe the discourse around the city’s approach to clearing unhoused encampments from a “quality of life” issue for the housed, to a human rights issue for the unhoused.

The widespread media coverage and ability to gain an audience with agency directors, city supervisors, the district attorney, public defender, police chief, police commission and the Local Homeless Coordinating Board did not rely mainly on the power of the findings or our academic credentials, but was made possible by the community and political ties of the COH.

Just as the COH’s political ties gave our research a greater impact, our affiliation with academic institutions made policymakers take our work more seriously. In much of our anti-criminalization work in San Francisco and California, we have been met with resistance. Many policymakers have even refused to accept that criminalization is a primary policy response to homelessness and visible poverty, let alone acknowledge that criminalization harms unhoused and marginally housed people. This project provided groundbreaking research demonstrating that criminalization is a pervasive and primary response to poverty, and documenting how criminalization affects unhoused communities. The launch and dissemination of our final report and video had lasting impacts both in media coverage of criminalization of homelessness, and on local policy.

 One clear policy gain was convincing the city’s District Attorney to end the practice of issuing warrants for unpaid fines for Quality of Life violations and dismiss those already on the books. Peer researchers and organizers met with the DA’s office multiple times about our findings and recommendations. Since then over 30,000 warrants for quality of life violations were dismissed. Unpaid fines related to quality of life violations no longer result in the issuance of warrants or the revocation of drivers’ licenses. This policy change means that thousands of unhoused and poor San Franciscans are not prosecuted for being visibly poor, and the city is no longer able to collect money or time from these folks due to their housing status. To help preserve the quickly diminishing rights of people currently living in their vehicles, we also used our data to lobby successfully for the reduction of fines and fees when someone’s home is impounded.

 The report’s findings provoked a city supervisor to request the Legislative Analyst’s Office study the cost of criminalizing homelessness. The revelation that San Francisco spends over $21 million a year to police and prosecute unhoused residents spurred a hearing on the criminalization of homelessness at the Board of Supervisors.  Our findings of widespread search and seizure of property resulted in a general order from the Chief of Police, and new interest by civil rights attorneys in challenging the city sanitation crew’s policy of sweeping encampments. And our presentations have garnered new support for California’s Right to Rest Act, statewide legislation proposed as part of a coordinated campaign by members of the Western Regional Advocacy Project. Most of all, the study gave the COH a new legitimacy that has increased our political and policy capital across our work.

Our report also helped initiate and inform the first proposed legislation in the city of San Francisco to partially decriminalize homelessness. The legislation, drafted in part by our research team, was designed to halt the destruction of property, requiring the city to post warning before camp evictions, and offer shelter, housing, or an alternative safe location before issuing citations. The proposed legislation also requires the city to provide garbage removal and portable toilets to encampments, thus resolving public health emergencies used as a pretext to force eviction. We predict our research findings will help garner support for the future passage of this proposed legislation.

 Most of our work has been positive in shifting opinions and rolling back criminalization, but we have also found it difficult to hold our political ground while supporting incremental shifts in harmful policies. Following our report release, we met repeatedly with various city agencies. This included many meetings with the San Francisco Police Department (SFPD) and Police Commission about how to reduce the volume of housed people’s 911 and 311 calls to complain about unhoused people’s existence in public space. Sometimes our findings were co-opted to push for a watered down political goal. For example, when we met with law enforcement officials and explained our recommendation that the city divest completely from criminalization efforts, law enforcement met this request with a promise of a shift from citations to a kinder, gentler “warning.” Our team was divided about how to respond. Although warnings are less harmful than citations, they continue the damaging policies of displacement and ignore that police contact is inherently harmful: homelessness should not be a police issue.

The COH is always grappling with this tension between reform vs. abolition. We try to prioritize long-term change and support reforms that don’t give more power or allocate more funding to policing and incarceration. Even as we worked with city agencies to institute moderate reforms, we also organized with partner organizations for more radical change. Our research findings provided useful talking points in a successful grassroots campaign against the construction of a $320 million new jail in San Francisco. Toward the end of 2016, this campaign was ultimately successful in defeating the proposal for the construction of a new jail and relied heavily on data and recommendations from our project as evidence. Our data clearly showed the cyclical relationship between lack of housing and incarceration. Many of our policy recommendations were used in the “No New SF Jail” campaign’s demands, including ending money bail and prosecution of “quality of life” infractions. These are now part of larger campaigns to reform the San Francisco criminal (in)justice system.

Despite these important gains, criminalization of homelessness continues unabated in San Francisco and throughout the United States. In direct response to our proposed legislation to decriminalize homelessness, supported by four of the eleven city supervisors, the opposing faction devised an “anti-camping” ordinance as a ballot initiative, which passed by a voter majority. Although some cities, such as Indianapolis and Seattle, have recently passed ordinances intended to reduce criminalization, our experience in San Francisco shows this to be incredibly difficult. Even in “left-coast” San Francisco, we found that more immediate gains are possible with agency technocrats who can make internal reforms, or by assisting local legal struggles protecting the rights of the poor.

The limits and barriers to local reform that we found in our research suggest that we must continue pushing for policy solutions at the state and national level.  Since 2013, a coalition organized through the Western Regional Advocacy Project (WRAP) has had bills presented at state legislatures in Oregon, Colorado, and California called the Right to Rest Act that would make it illegal to cite or arrest people for resting in public spaces when shelter is unavailable. While no bill has been successfully passed, the legislation is increasingly becoming a point of distinction in progressive credentials among left-leaning politicians and political groups, in forcing them to support or oppose a right to rest and has squarely shifted the concept of “the criminalization of homelessness” from a social movements slogan into the lexicon of journalists, lawyers, politicians, and policymakers. Just as our work has supported this legislative campaign, we hope that future research will do the same.