

WORKING PAPER

To Arrest or Not to Arrest: The Costs of Policing Homelessness in Myrtle Beach, SC

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Abstract

Homelessness is a growing social problem in the United States. Although policymakers often ignore the causes of homelessness, increases in the number of people who are homeless across the country have significant economic and human costs. The economic costs refer to those associated with social services, policing, and healthcare. The human costs include the mental and physical well-being of both people who are housed and those who are not. Despite these costs, only 54 percent of American cities have plans for what to do to stem the homelessness crisis. Of that 54 percent, only 30 percent of cities have a housing plan in place. Across the country, municipalities are increasingly using the criminal justice system to ‘punish’ people for being unhoused by arresting them for crimes of survival, such as sitting or sleeping. In this paper, we examine the costs of using policing as an anti-homelessness strategy in Myrtle Beach, SC. This study explores the direct costs of anti-homelessness ordinances in Myrtle Beach. We find that the costs of arresting people for crimes of survival are substantial and continue to increase. Over the long term, investments in rent subsidies and affordable housing, rather than criminalization, have the potential to enhance the physical and mental well-being of the entire community and save taxpayers money.

Keywords:

Introduction

Homelessness is an increasing and growing social problem in the United States. Although policymakers often ignore the causes of homelessness, increases in the number of people who are living without housing have significant economic and human costs (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2024). The economic costs refer to taxpayer-funded outlays associated with social services, policing, and healthcare. The human costs include the mental and physical well-being of both people who are housed and those who are not. Despite these expenditures, only 54 percent of American cities have plans for how to reduce homelessness. Of that 54 percent, only 30 percent of cities have plans that incorporate housing, despite housing being the most critical determinant of homelessness (Einstein and Willison, 2023). The prevalence of homelessness we

see today is not inevitable; local, state, and federal governments have the power to reduce the number of people experiencing homelessness through land use policies and housing strategies, yet very few do (Rothstein, 2017).

Although there are evidence-based solutions to homelessness, many municipalities rely on the criminal justice system to mitigate the problem. Anti-homelessness ordinances, along with their enforcement, are increasing nationwide (National Homelessness Law Center, 2025).

Policymakers may assume that homelessness is a ‘choice’ and use those assumptions when designing ordinances that they believe will force people to “choose” to become housed or to be homeless somewhere else. Cities that want to hide homelessness from the housed community often use the criminal justice system to render people who sleep outside invisible by arresting them for unavoidable human behaviors, such as sitting, standing, and sleeping (National Homelessness Law Center 2025). Policing as an anti-homelessness strategy is currently endorsed by the federal government as well as the Supreme Court, despite the reality that using the criminal justice system to reduce homelessness is both costly and ineffective (National Homelessness Law Center 2025). For example, in the 2024 Supreme Court Decision, *The City of Grants Pass v. Johnson*, the Supreme Court ruled that municipalities can ticket or arrest individuals for sleeping outside, even if no shelter space is available (Howe, 2024).

In this paper, we examine the costs of policing as an anti-homelessness strategy, using Myrtle Beach, SC, as a case study. This study examines the direct costs of anti-homelessness ordinances and compares those costs (largely funded by taxpayers) to the costs of investing in affordable housing alternatives. We find that reallocating taxpayer dollars from enforcing anti-homelessness ordinances toward affordable housing would result in a significant long-term reduction in taxpayer expenditures.

Literature Review

Homelessness in the United States

Every year, cities that receive federal funding for costs associated with homelessness must complete a point-in-time (PIT) count of how many people are homeless in their communities. In 2024, the PIT count found 771,480 people experiencing homelessness in the United States (National Alliance to End Homelessness 2024). This number is over 100,000 more people than the 2023 count and includes a record-high number of people experiencing unsheltered homelessness and an increase in people sleeping in shelters, elderly persons, and people who are chronically homeless (National Alliance to End Homelessness 2024). The record-high number comes at a time when access to housing, mental and physical health care, and jobs that pay a livable wage are declining.

Despite the stereotypes associated with homelessness, which typically depict a person sleeping outside as choosing to do so, lazy, or abusing illegal substances, the reality is that people who are homeless are as unique as those who are housed. For many Americans, a lost paycheck, health emergency, lost job, or death in the family can be the difference between being housed and becoming unhoused.

A significant cause of the current homelessness crisis is the lack of affordable housing. Over the past fifty years, there has been a steady decline in federal support for housing construction for lower-income renters (Authors, 2023; National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2024). In the past five years, median rent has increased by nineteen percent, whereas the median income of renters has only increased by four percent, adjusting for inflation (National Low-Income Housing Coalition 2024).

It is well documented that the majority of people who are experiencing sheltered or unsheltered homelessness have, or qualify for, some income. About half of these have income from employment in the formal sector, while the others receive some form of subsidy, such as Social Security or Disability payments (National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2024; Authors, 2024). A study of over 600 people experiencing homelessness in Myrtle Beach found that not only do most individuals who live in a shelter or outside have some form of income, but the majority of those would also spend their income on housing if they could afford it (Authors, 2024).

A 2024 study by the National Low Income Housing Coalition found that, on average, a person relying on Social Security income can afford only \$283.00 per month for rent, while a full-time worker making the minimum wage can afford \$377.00 per month. There is no place in the country where these individuals can afford a one-bedroom apartment. The study also found that only 34 percent of renters are living in units they can afford, and almost two-thirds of low-income renters pay more than 50 percent of their income in rent (National Low-Income Housing Coalition, 2024).

Over the past decade, there has been an increase in the number of shelter beds and transitional housing units nationwide. Unfortunately, the growth has not kept pace with the increasing number of people who need them (Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2024; Duboise et al., 2025). Although temporary shelters do keep people out of the elements and reduce their risk of arrest, shelters are not a long-term solution to homelessness.

Studies have shown that, over the long run, investing in affordable housing is the most effective and least costly way to reduce homelessness (Tars, 2023). For example, an increase in funding for homeless veterans resulted in a 55% decrease in veteran homelessness since 2009. (Department of Housing and Urban Development 2024). The Veterans Administration found that housing individuals and providing counseling and other supports reduced costs associated with the criminal justice system, drug treatment programs, and emergency mental and physical healthcare (Byrne et al., 2014).

Targeted housing policies have reduced homelessness in other populations as well. For example, Chattanooga, Tennessee, reduced its homeless population by almost half in 2023 by following similar steps to those used by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Using American Rescue Plan funds, Chattanooga educated its residents, expanded its eviction prevention program, created a low-barrier shelter, increased community outreach, and analyzed its data to identify who was falling through the cracks, enabling better service to low-income residents (Chattanooga Office of Homelessness and Housing, 2025).

A program in Denver, Colorado, has also seen success. In 2016, Denver launched the Supportive Housing Social Bond Impact Initiative. This program provided participants with a permanent

housing subsidy without any conditions attached. After one year, 86% of participants remained stably housed. After two years, 81% remain housed. A study of the program compared 361 people who were chronically unhoused and receiving traditional services to 363 who were placed in supportive housing over five years and found that program participants had a 34 percent reduction in police contacts and a 40 percent reduction in arrests compared to the control group. After two years, there were 40 percent fewer emergency room visits and a 155 percent reduction in doctor's office visits among the housed participants compared to the non-housed participants. The study concluded that housing costs the city approximately \$6,800 less annually per person (Urban Institute, 2021). The supportive housing program ended chronic homelessness for participants and came close to eliminating the cost of the homeless-jail cycle. (Urban Institute 2021).

A study by the National Alliance to End Homelessness found that an investment in Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) resulted in a 30 percent decrease in chronic homelessness between 2007 and 2014. Permanent Supportive Housing combines housing with case management, providing individuals with the support they need. Due to the additional support, PSH reduces medical costs, emergency room visits, and jail stays and is more effective than housing alone in helping individuals achieve financial, physical, and mental independence (National Alliance to End Homelessness). In a meta-analysis of PSH in the United States and Canada, Jacob et al. (2023) found a median annual savings of \$18,247 per person in the United States and \$17,751 in Canada when using PSH compared to leaving people outside or in temporary shelters.

Criminalization of Homelessness

Despite the evidence of housing as an anti-homelessness policy, over the past decade, there has been an increase in the criminalization of homelessness. Repressing the movement of homeless individuals is a common strategy for 'cleaning up' cities (Grainger 2021).

Cities that criminalize acts associated with homelessness typically justify their actions by using a broken windows philosophy. The idea behind the broken windows theory is that if cities clean up the visible signs of disorder, they will prevent more significant crimes from occurring. Theoretically, if people are held accountable for their 'crimes,' they will be less likely to commit larger crimes, and others will be deterred from committing any crime at all (Kelling and Wilson 1982). Thus, if the activities performed by people who are experiencing homelessness are criminalized, fewer people will 'choose' to become homeless. This theory relies on the assumption that people are choosing to commit crimes. When applied to homelessness, however, the behaviors that are criminalized are often those that are necessary life-sustaining activities, such as sleeping or sitting (National Homelessness Law Center 2014).

Today, almost all states (48) have quality-of-life laws in place that target individuals experiencing homelessness (National Homelessness Law Center, 2021). Quality of life laws regulate behaviors associated with homelessness and work to exclude homeless individuals from specific areas, even if they do not specifically ban homelessness. These laws include prohibitions on sitting, sleeping, standing, loitering, loafing, and vagrancy (National Homelessness Law Center 2021). Cities experiencing redevelopment are particularly likely to focus on policing individuals' behaviors to keep homelessness out of the public view (Schweik 2008; Herring 2019).

The National Homelessness Law Center (2025) found that nationwide, bans on camping increased by 92 percent between 2006 and 2019. During this same period, anti-loitering ordinances increased by 103 percent, and there was a 50 percent increase in ordinances prohibiting individuals from sleeping in public. The same study found that bans on sleeping in vehicles increased by 213 percent. Laws forbidding people from sharing food with others and sitting or standing in public have also increased (National Homelessness Law Center 2025). Numerous cities also have laws against public urination and defecation, even though in most places, few or no public restrooms are typically available.

Studies show that criminalizing behaviors associated with homelessness does not reduce homelessness, make society safer, or save communities money (Tars, 2023; Dholakia, 2024). Typically, studies find the opposite—arrests often prolong episodes of homelessness. If a person has temporary accommodation or a job, a single arrest can put their housing or employment at risk. Despite this, people who experience sheltered or unsheltered homelessness are eleven times more likely to be arrested nationwide than people who are housed (Vera Institute of Justice 2015). In Los Angeles, the likelihood of arrest for crimes associated with homelessness is even higher. In a 2018 study of Los Angeles, researchers found that people experiencing homelessness were seventeen times more likely than housed individuals to be arrested, mainly because all their activities are visible to the public (Homeless Policy Research Institute 2023).

For example, if a public park is only open until 6:00 pm, a person would be breaking the law if they are sleeping, standing, or sitting in the park after this time. Cities may post 'No Loitering' or 'No sitting, standing, or stopping' signs to deter people from certain areas while also providing law enforcement with a legal justification to ticket or arrest individuals who linger beyond their welcome. While these policies show the public that the police are working to control 'crime,' they also reinforce the idea that people who break these ordinances are criminals. Additionally, laws related to necessary human behaviors disproportionately affect people who are sleeping outside because, without a home, they are forced to practice these behaviors in public. These ordinances effectively make it illegal for people who are homeless to be in areas where the policies are enforced (Bickford 2000).

When individuals break quality-of-life laws or ordinances, authorities may ticket them, arrest them, and/or confiscate or destroy their property. The seizure of an individual's personal belongings may make it more difficult for them to exit homelessness. When encampments are destroyed, people often lose all their financial and legal documents, including their birth certificates or IDs (Duboise et al. 2025). These documents are difficult to replace for people who are housed and almost impossible to replace if an individual does not have a stable address. The loss of personal belongings and documents creates an additional economic and financial burden for the person who was arrested. Additionally, if people are employed, missing days at work may result in job loss. If they retain their job, the confiscation of their personal belongings may make it more challenging to commute to work, particularly if they rely on a now-confiscated car or bike for transportation to and from their place of employment (Duboise et al. 2025).

Not only is it likely that the individual will lose their possessions if they are arrested, but they will also typically incur a criminal record, which becomes a state-sanctioned negative credential that can follow them throughout their lives (Duboise et al. 2025). Having a criminal record can make one ineligible for public housing and may reduce their employability compared to their

previous status. The outcome of criminalizing homelessness is that people who are sleeping rough are typically channeled into minimum wage, insecure, or seasonal jobs that are paid under the table or lose their ability to find employment altogether.

The Setting

Demographics

In this study, we examine the costs of criminalizing homelessness in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. In June 2024, there were 40,535 permanent residents living in the 23.6 square mile city limits of Myrtle Beach (U.S. Census Bureau 2024). Approximately seventeen percent of full-time residents fell under the official poverty line (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024). The 2024 annual Point in Time Count of Homelessness identified 1,060 people experiencing homelessness in the continuum of care (COC), which includes Myrtle Beach (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2023). Most of the people counted in the COC were within the city limits of Myrtle Beach. The number of people who are homeless is likely underestimated, however, as the Point in Time (PIT) count is known to undercount the number of people who are homeless.

Housing Affordability

Horry County's (The county that includes Myrtle Beach) *Imagine 2040* plan outlines the demographics and economy of Horry County, of which Myrtle Beach is a part, and sets goals for the future (Horry County Council 2019). The plan found that, compared to comparable counties in the state (Richland, Charleston, and Greenville Counties), Horry County has fewer employed individuals, fewer employers, and a smaller overall payroll. Writers of the *Imagine 2040* plan found that county residents would need to work at least 80 hours per week at a job paying minimum wage to afford a one-bedroom apartment (Horry County Council, 2019). The plan describes the situation in which many workers in the tourism industry find themselves.

Most of the economy in Horry County is related to Accommodation and Food Services (23.1% of jobs) and Retail Trade (17.6% of jobs). The average weekly wage of workers in the Accommodation and food service sectors is \$315 (\$7.87 per hour). This wage equals just \$16,380 per year if the employee works forty hours every week of the year. While the retail trade salary is somewhat higher at \$441 per week (approximately \$11.03 per hour), the salary in both sectors is far less than what workers need to afford a one-bedroom apartment while working full-time (Horry County Council 2019). Employees in tourism and retail jobs are seldom able to work 40 hours per week year-round, as demand falls when tourists leave the area during the winter months. The lack of affordable housing and year-round employment that pays a living wage leads to higher rates of homelessness than would otherwise be the case (Authors 2023).

The rising cost of housing has been exacerbated by an increase in the number of people living in Myrtle Beach, mainly due to an influx during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the past, many low-wage seasonal workers would stay in single-room occupancy motels (SROs), particularly in the winter when their pay declined and room rates were low. Many of these motels, however, have been demolished in the past three years, as Myrtle Beach is currently undergoing a period of redevelopment (Brewer 2025; Nelson and Richardson; Livingston 2022). In some cases, the city cites health or safety issues as justification for closing motels, while in others, eminent domain is

used as a reason for closure (Livingston 2022). The result, regardless of the justification, is that fewer low-income residents have a place they can afford to live.

About half of the people in Myrtle Beach who are experiencing homelessness are employed. Most of the rest have some income from Social Security, disability, or retirement benefits that they can use to cover their housing costs. Most importantly, over the past nine years, the majority of people we surveyed would eagerly spend their income on rent if the rent were affordable (Authors, 2025).

Shelter Space

People who lose their housing and do not have friends or family to turn to often seek a public shelter to stay in. In Myrtle Beach, however, there are not enough shelter beds for even a small percentage of individuals who become homeless each year. Although there has been a significant increase in homelessness in Myrtle Beach, shelter space is limited. No new shelters have been built in decades, and low-barrier shelters are not available in the entire county.

Myrtle Beach has men's, women's, and family shelters, but each tends to stay full, and all are high-barrier shelters. The men's shelter has 119 program beds and 22 for overnight stays (New Directions 2025). The program beds are reserved for men who have a substance use disorder, and men must quit their jobs for 30 days to be a part of the program. Due to the relatively new anti-substance use disorder program at the men's shelter, the number of shelter beds for someone who does not have a substance use disorder has declined over the past four years. There are 22 beds reserved for overnight stays, but men must stand outside until 8:00 pm to hope that they can get a bed for the night (Authors 2025). In the morning, the overnight guests must leave by 6:00 am.

The women's shelter is situated in a large house with twenty-two beds across seven rooms (New Directions, 2025). The shelter is not handicap accessible and does not accept domestic violence victims. This shelter allows residents to stay for months at a time, thereby limiting the number of available beds at any one time. Additionally, there is a family shelter that has room for fifty-five individuals in family units (New Directions 2025). The family and women's shelters are both high-barrier as well, limiting who can use the services these shelters may provide.

The lack of shelter space, combined with the shrinking number of affordable housing options in the county, means that people with low or unstable incomes, or those who are working in seasonal jobs, are more likely to become homeless than in the past. The length of time someone is homeless is also increasing. The longer someone is unhoused, the more difficult it becomes to rehouse them.

Anti-homeless Ordinances in Myrtle Beach

When people are evicted or cannot find affordable housing, and there is no shelter space available, they are forced to figure out how to live outside. As we outlined earlier, anti-homelessness ordinances have proliferated nationwide, making it illegal to sit, stand, use the bathroom, or sleep in public, even if there are no alternatives available. Myrtle Beach is no different. According to one city official, "If they are uncomfortable, maybe they will choose to

be homeless somewhere else" Authors 2025). For many people without a home, there is no choice. If one has no resources, it is tough to pick up and leave to go to a new city. Additionally, many people in Myrtle Beach who live outside have jobs, families, and deep social ties that would not be available if they left to try their luck elsewhere.

The criminalization of homelessness in Myrtle Beach is a significant factor in people's lives. Jane (age 53) described how she feels when it starts to get dark outside, "I walk all night. I cannot sit down. If I sit down, I will get arrested. I don't like the jail. I don't want to go back there again."

Although the mental and physical toll these ordinances have on individuals is challenging to quantify, Carla (age 45) explains how the combination of anti-homelessness ordinances has affected both her financial and mental health, "Every time I am arrested for living in my car, I lose something. I lost my job, then my car. All my stuff was in my car. Now, I am too tired from wandering around all night, and it is hard to look for another job. I am pretty sure I am depressed."

Unfortunately, poverty is the last acceptable stigma in the United States. As a country that instills the American Dream ideology, many people assume that if someone is homeless, they did not work hard enough (Authors 2023). The individual is often blamed for what is, in fact, a structural social problem. Anti-homeless ordinances affect the lives of individuals, both mentally and financially, but they also have financial and social consequences for people who are not experiencing homelessness.

In the following sections, we will describe how we calculated the costs of anti-homelessness policing in Myrtle Beach and present our findings. The results are based only on costs that we can calculate using the data we have access to. Similarly, our findings will likely underestimate the actual costs associated with homelessness, just as the undercounting of homelessness prevalence does.

Methods

This paper was created by examining five years' worth of publicly available arrest records for individuals arrested within the city limits of Myrtle Beach. We included only cases in which people were arrested, charged, and tried in front of a judge in the Myrtle Beach Municipal Court. We only included people who were listed as having no address, General Delivery, or homeless, and had an arrest associated with homelessness in our dataset.

We began by reviewing the Daily Crime Reports for each day from January 1, 2020, through December 31, 2024. We found this information on the City of Myrtle Beach's Police to Citizen website, Police 2 Citizen (Myrtle Beach Police Department 2024). We did not include violent crimes or drug crimes in this dataset. The list of arrests contained in the dataset is listed below.

1. Disorderly conduct (except when a danger to self or others)
2. Loitering (except for drug trafficking)
3. Public intoxication
4. Improper park use (sitting, walking in the park after dark, or sleeping)
5. Camping

6. Sleeping in public
7. Sitting on beach access
8. Public urination
9. Trespass
10. Sleeping in a vehicle
11. Trespass Authorization Enforcement
12. Pedestrians on Highway
13. Other minor 'crimes' not listed above (These are incidences that alone included less than one percent of cases, such as public urination, improper beachwear, etc.)

The Police 2 Citizen website provided us with the names of people arrested, the charges, and the locations of each arrest. The Police to Citizen website leaves out some information we were looking for, however. For the rest of the information included in this paper, we logged into the Horry County Public Index of Arrests.

When we logged into the Horry County Public Index website, we first needed to choose the court we were interested in and the date. We selected all arrests that were reviewed by a Myrtle Beach Municipal Judge between January 1, 2020, and December 31, 2024. We then searched for each person's name in our previous Police 2 Citizen database. From our Public Index search, we were able to add the name of the Myrtle Beach municipal judge who presided over the case, the police officer involved, the age and race of the person arrested, and the sentence imposed. We were also able to confirm that the individuals arrested were considered homeless at the time of arrest.

Calculating Costs

Once we had completed our dataset, we added the cost of each arrest to the original file, using a similar methodology found in previous studies on the cost of criminalization (Howard et al., 2015). First, we found the salaries of the arresting officers for each case and the salary of the judge who tried the case using an online national database of government employee salaries (Govsalaries.com). Employees can be searched by name and year of service. Thus, we were able to account for increases in wages between 2020 and 2023 to use in calculating the cost of arrests. The salaries for 2024 were not included in the dataset, so we used 2023 salaries for both 2023 and 2024.

We examined the salaries of the arresting officers because each arrest entails a significant amount of time talking to the defendant, driving them to jail, attending court, and completing paperwork. We calculated their hourly salary and multiplied it by two hours to estimate the time they spent on each case.

Judges who hear each case must review each case file, hold one or more hearings with the defendant, and issue a penalty or dismiss the charges. We included one hour of salary for each judge deciding each case. We did not have access to other costs, such as those incurred by court bailiffs and other courthouse personnel, so the hourly salaries are likely an underestimation. However, we did not find a study that showed how to calculate the fixed costs for each case.

We then added the daily bed rate and daily medical costs to the dataset. The costs of incarceration were calculated by multiplying the number of days the person charged spent in jail,

both waiting for their case to be heard and serving their sentence. We did this by using the average daily cost of incarcerating people in South Carolina. The South Carolina Department of Corrections (2025) reports that the average cost of incarcerating an inmate is \$110.46 per day.

Unlike daily costs, which are a set estimate of the cost per bed for incarceration, the medical costs associated with incarceration vary by individual (Howard et al., 2025). While some people may not need any medical attention, others may need substantial intervention even if they are only incarcerated for a short time.

Our calculation of medical costs was modeled after the extensive study by Howard and colleagues (2015) on the costs associated with criminalizing homelessness in three Washington cities. The most recent medical cost for Horry County was reported in a 2018 news article (Kummerer 2018). In this report, Kemmerer (2018) found that J. Rueben Long, the Horry County jail, contracted with a medical group for services, which billed them \$2,508,000 per year. Taxpayers fund this. A 2024 news article reported that the daily jail population was 792 (O'Dare 2024). Thus, we multiplied the number of jail nights by \$8.68 to obtain an estimate of medical costs. The following is the calculation we used for daily medical costs:

$\$2508,000 / 365 \text{ days} = \6871.24 per day

$\$6871.24 / 792 \text{ inmates} = \$8.68 \text{ per inmate, per day.}$

The final numbers we used to calculate the total cost for each year are shown below. The letter A represents the arresting officer's hourly salary. We multiplied the hourly salary of each police officer by two hours (2) as an estimate of the time spent arresting and processing each person, as well as completing paperwork after arrest. We included one hour's salary for each judge (B). Salaries for police and judges were gathered from govsalaries.com.

The local jail is 22 miles from Myrtle Beach. A round trip to the jail and back for each individual who spent time there is 44 miles, more than one gallon of gas for most city vehicles. Although the entire gallon is unlikely to be used if the individual is not taken to the county jail, we included an average of \$3.00 for a gallon of gas for each arrest that resulted in jail time. This number is indicated by (C). This is likely an underestimation of the transportation costs. It does not include the time spent on the salary of the person transporting individuals to the jail or the additional maintenance required for vehicles traveling back and forth to the jail regularly.

The letter E represents days in jail for individuals who received jail time as a sentence. This number was multiplied by 110 for the total daily bed costs. The daily medical costs are indicated by E(8.68), which corresponds to an average daily medical cost of \$8.68, as shown above.

$\text{Costs for each arrest} = A(2) + B + C + D(110) + E(8.68)$

Once we had our methodology in place, we calculated the annual cost of arresting people experiencing homelessness using the calculation above. In the findings section, we supplement the data with quotes gathered from over 600 interviews with individuals experiencing homelessness conducted over nine years.

Limitations

Before reviewing our findings, it is worth noting that our results are likely to significantly underestimate the costs associated with the criminalization of homelessness. We did not include fixed costs, such as maintenance and upkeep of buildings, salaries for individuals working in the courthouse or jail, or costs associated with public defenders and prosecutors for those requesting a jury trial.

Additionally, the arrest data we include is limited to the publicly available data on the Horry County Public Index website and does not cover citations. It also does not cover the physical and mental health costs to the individual, or the loss of the individual's personal belongings or employment that often results from being arrested. Thus, this report underestimates the minimum costs of anti-homelessness ordinances and provides a considerable understatement of costs. The number of people cited is likely higher than those arrested. However, we do not have access to cases where an officer cited someone for a crime associated with homelessness but did not arrest them, or cases where an individual was not brought before a judge. We only included individuals who were *both arrested and charged* and did not have an address at the time of their arrest. We only included people who were listed with an address of "homeless" or "general delivery." We did not include people who may have been experiencing homelessness but still had an ID at the time of their arrest. It also does not include individuals who were arrested but not charged with a crime or those who received citations instead of an arrest.

Findings

Demographic Information

Table 1 presents the demographics of individuals arrested and charged with crimes associated with homelessness, meeting the specified criteria, from January 1, 2020, to December 31, 2024. It also shows the charges associated with the arrest. We did not include arrests of people who were considered a danger to themselves or others, or arrests indicating that there was any violence involved.

Table 1. Demographics and Arrest Rates for Specific Crimes from January 1, 2020, through December 31, 2024

Variable (N=6219 Arrests)	Number	Mean	Range	Std Deviation
Number of Individuals	1467			
Gender				
Male	4338	.71	0-1	.42
Female	1889	.29	0-1	.18
Age	6219	45.71	19-82	12.91
Race				
Black	1809	29.1	0-1	.45
White	4338	69.8	0-1	.46
Other	71	1.1	0-1	.11
Number of Arrests			1-103	
Charge				

Begging/Panhandling	69	.01	0-1	.10
Public Intoxication	1459	.23	0-1	.42
Open Container	283	.05	0-1	.21
Camping	135	.02	0-1	.15
Trespassing	1479	.24	0-1	.43
Trespass Authorization Enforcement	761	.12	0-1	.33
Loitering	667	.11	0-1	.31
Disorderly Conduct	462	.07	0-1	.26
Sleeping in Public	325	.05	0-1	.22
Pedestrian on Highway	179	.03	0-1	.17
Store property in public	84	.01	0-1	.84
Park Violation	161	.03	0-1	.16
Other	160	.03	0-1	.160

From 2020 through 2025, 1467 individuals were arrested and charged with crimes associated with homelessness 6,219 times. There were more males (71%) than females (29%) arrested. About seventy percent of the people were white, and twenty-nine percent were black, and about one percent were identified as other (Native American, Hispanic, Asian). The ages of the people arrested ranged from 19 to 82, with an average age of 45.71. Although most people were arrested only once, there were quite a few people who were arrested regularly. The number of arrests of each person over the five years included in this study ranged from 1 to 103. The person who was arrested 103 times was arrested, on average, every 17 days for five years. [ss1]

Reasons for Arrests

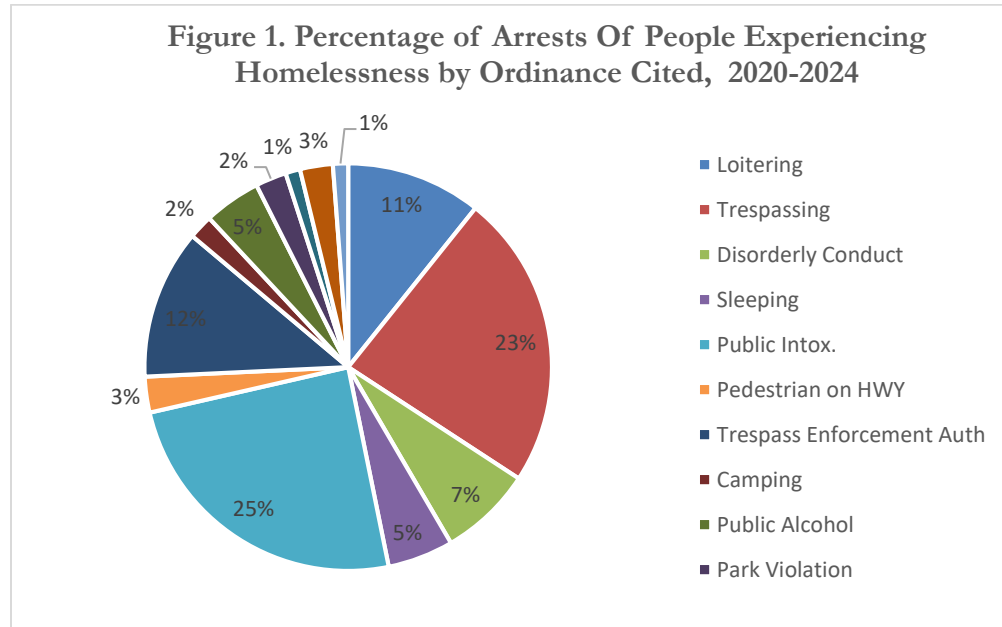
Table 1 also shows the reasons people were arrested. Figure 1 presents a graphical display of the information provided in Table 1. The highest incidence of arrests was for trespassing. Trespassing, combined with the Trespass Enforcement Authorization program, constituted over a third (36 percent) of all arrests. [v] The next highest incidence of arrest was for public intoxication (23 percent), followed by loitering (11 percent. One hundred seventy-nine people were arrested for the charge 'Pedestrian on Highway' (Three percent of the total). Other categories include storing property in public (1%), disorderly conduct (7%), sleeping in public (1%), camping (2%), park violations (3%), and open containers (5%). Interestingly, people were arrested for begging or panhandling only 69 times over a five-year period. The common perception of the public is that people who are experiencing homelessness are a nuisance because they harass people when panhandling. In Myrtle Beach, however, this activity, although not every day or rarely, results in an arrest. The category of "other" included behaviors such as urinating in public, wearing a thong swimsuit, changing clothes in the bathroom, and blocking businesses.

Over the past decade, we have interviewed over 600 individuals who are sleeping outside or in a shelter. One of the most prevalent themes in our interviews, aside from the need for affordable housing and jobs that pay a living wage, is the effect that the criminal justice system has on their mental health and financial well-being. Although much of the public perception of homelessness is that people choose to be arrested so that they have a bed and food to eat, our respondents went

out of their way to stay out of sight. Individuals report walking all night or hiding to avoid arrest. Chrystal (age 39) describes how she feels at night, "I walk and walk, and walk. If I sit down, they will come, they will arrest me. It's very scary in jail. I do not want to go back there. I can sleep a little during the day, but I walk all night, so I don't get picked up."

The fear of being arrested can affect an individual's mental health and cause people who live outside to feel stigmatized. Joe (age 40) explains, "They'll tell you to leave even if you're quiet. You go through the whole 'shalom' again. You're up all night long. It is tiring. And you can't sleep during the day—just on the grass. If you don't have a place to sleep, it is scary to lay your head down." This account vividly captures the cycle of displacement and exhaustion due to the lack of safe, legal places to rest. Sara (age 52) had a similar statement, "I just want to go to sleep without being harassed by the police in Conway. It's more in Myrtle Beach. I heard this morning that the police [are] cracking down on the homeless. If you're sleeping in public, they'll flat-out arrest you, and I'm not about that life... I'm a peacekeeper. I don't really do drama or violence." This speaker articulates how simply trying to rest in public can result in arrest and how fear of police enforcement adds to the daily stress of being unhoused.

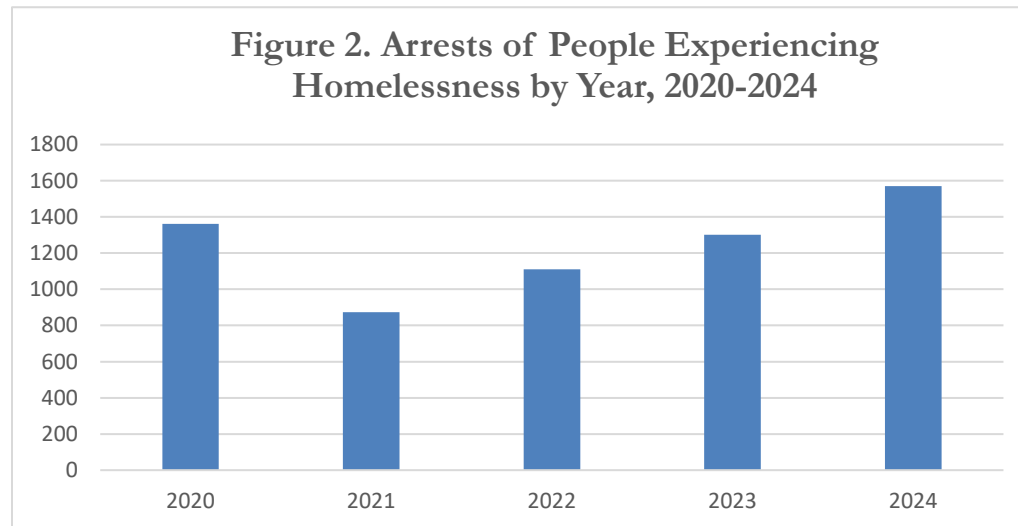
Interview participants also comment on the reasons they believe led to their arrest. Jamie (age 39) believes the city wants to hide the prevalence of homelessness from the tourists who come in every summer, "We are seeing it right over this weekend. That's what they're doing... they probably got almost a hundred people in jail. They will not let them go in front of the judge until after the holiday... just to keep 'em off the street." Sally (age 32) agrees, "They want us to go to jail. Myrtle Beach wants us out of here."



Trends

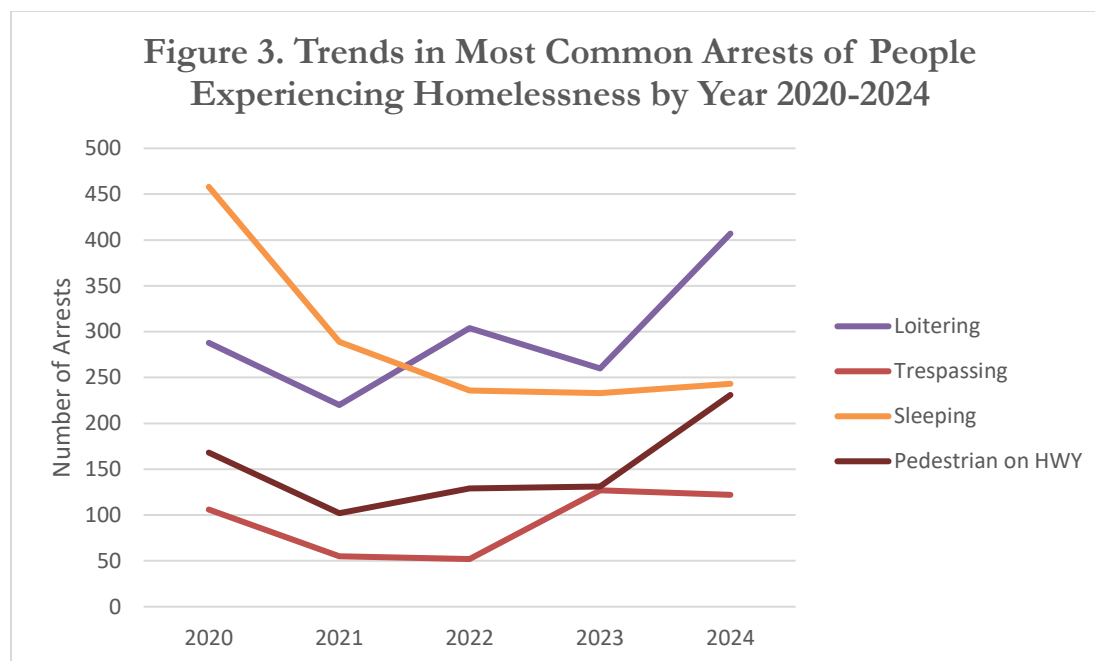
Figure 2 displays the number of individuals arrested each year since 2020. In 2020, 1,361 people were arrested. The number dropped significantly during 2021, when only 873 people were arrested. The drop in arrests was likely due to the COVID-19 pandemic. During the COVID-19

pandemic, there were fewer tourists at the beach, but motels still needed to generate revenue. Thus, more SRO (single room occupancy) units were available for both individuals and agencies to rent rooms. The increase in funding during the COVID-19 pandemic, along with the need to prevent people from getting sick, meant that more resources were allocated to try to keep people from interacting with each other. Fewer people sleeping outside meant that fewer people were found and arrested by police.



Arrests (with charges and convictions) have increased every year since 2021. In 2022, there were 1,110 arrests. This increase is likely due to the reopening of the tourist industry and the decrease in federal COVID-19 funding. Also, in 2022, the City of Myrtle Beach began purchasing motel properties for its redevelopment plans, thereby reducing the availability of low-cost SROs (Duncan 2023). In 2023, 1,302 people were arrested, charged, and convicted; in 2024, the number spiked to 1,570.

The majority of the individuals we interviewed have some form of income, whether it is from a job, Social Security, or Disability Benefits, and most would be happy to allocate what they can afford from their income towards rent. For example, Henry (age 66) explained, "I have a social security check, but these days it only covers rent or food---not both. If I pay rent, I have nothing left. Now that I am homeless, I can't even pay rent. Nobody will rent to me. I don't make enough money." For low-income workers, retirees, and people who are receiving income for a disability, the money coming in is not enough to afford rent, food, and the other items necessary to live. There are just not enough affordable rental units available. As funding for rent subsidies and permanent supportive housing diminishes, along with a reduction in available rooms, more people will likely be sleeping outside, thereby becoming more visible to the police and more likely to be arrested.



Cost of Arrests

There are many factors associated with policing homelessness that we are not able to estimate; thus, this report outlines the bare minimum costs associated with arresting people for quality-of-life crimes. Using the methodology outlined in the Methods section, we found that not only are arrests increasing, but the cost of arrests is also increasing. Figure 4 shows the total costs of the arrests included in our dataset by year. In five years, the total minimum cost for arresting people who were experiencing homelessness was over six million dollars (\$6,156,894.78). The amount spent each year was partly due to the increase in arrests, but a significant percentage of the increase was attributed to the rise in police officer salaries.

One day, we were walking with Jericho (age 28). He looked despondent when we passed one of these motels. He said, "I don't know why we can't use one of these for a better shelter. There isn't room at the one shelter we have." Danny, (age 56) also commented, "Nobody has used this (boarded up building) for months and months. People would rent rooms from here if they opened it, and we could afford the rent. It is a wasted space now, and we are the ones getting arrested."

Figure 4. Minimum Cost Spent on Arresting Individuals Experiencing Homelessness 2020-2024

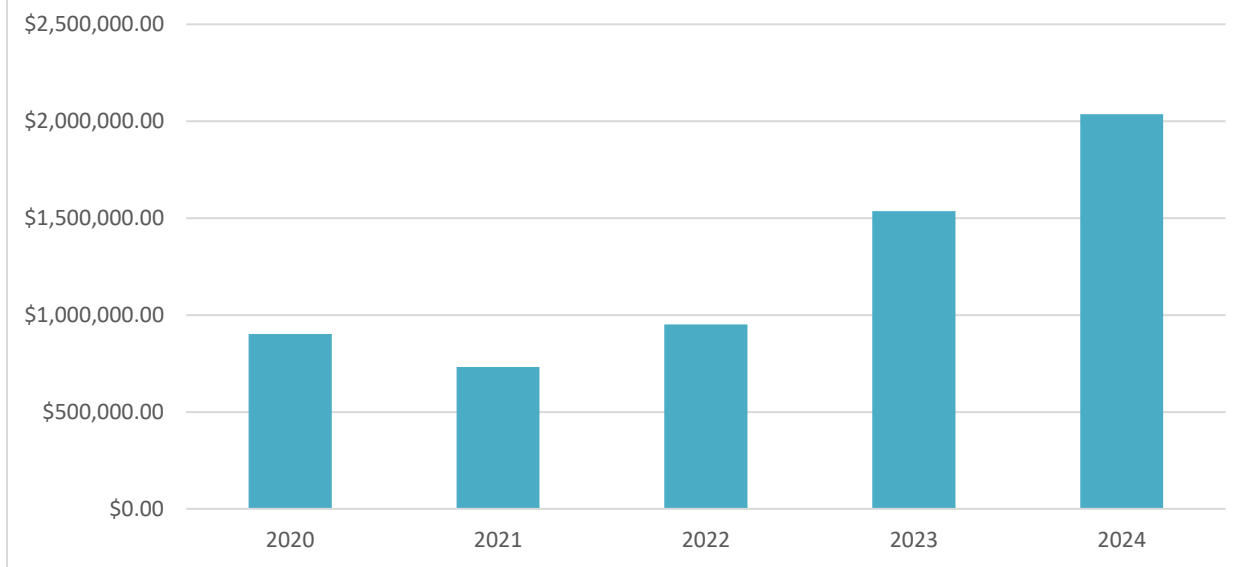


Table 2 breaks down the total cost for each item, calculated for each year. Over half of the money spent on arresting people for quality-of-life crimes occurred in the past two years alone. Once again, these numbers do not include the cost of citations or the time spent responding to medical emergencies.

Table 2. Breakdown of Costs Associated with Arrests of People Experiencing Homelessness by Year 2020-2024

Year	Medical	Judge	Officer	Jail	Gas	Total
2020	\$5,5656.16	\$67,950.34	\$69,842.28	\$705,320.00	\$4,083.00	\$902,851.79
2021	\$4,6767.84	\$43,479.30	\$45,863.23	\$592,680.00	\$2,619.00	\$731,409.37
2022	\$6,0838.12	\$54,398.55	\$61,449.48	\$770,990.00	\$3,330.00	\$951,006.15
2023	\$10,0462.32	\$65,634.91	\$92,180.06	\$1,273,140.00	\$3,906.00	\$1,535,323.29
2024	\$13,5104.20	\$78,710.00	\$105,630.00	\$1,712,150.00	\$4,710.00	\$2,036,304.20
Total	\$398,828.64	\$310,173.10	\$374,965.05	\$5,054,280.00	\$18,648.00	\$6,156,894.78

The trend in arrests, and ultimately the cost of these arrests, is going up. As most people who experience homelessness have some income, it is likely that if even half of these costs were spent elsewhere, homelessness could be reduced in Myrtle Beach. For example, using just the cost of arresting people, and not including the costs of citations or other expenses not listed here, 102 people could be offered \$1,000.00 in monthly rent subsidies for five years, or 204 people could benefit from \$500.00 in monthly rent subsidies. These subsidies could be used to support people who are unstably housed, preventing them from becoming homeless, or to supplement the income people receive from work, Social Security, or Disability, or for down payments to help them become rehoused. The redirected costs from citations that are not examined here could be

redirected to expand shelters, mental and physical health clinics, or the needs of people who are chronically homeless.

In addition to cost savings, there is considerable evidence that locations offering affordable housing alternatives have positive benefits for all who live in these areas.

Conclusion

The data presented in this study demonstrate the substantial financial and human cost of criminalizing homelessness in Myrtle Beach. Over six million dollars were spent on arresting individuals for survival-based behaviors over five years without a meaningful impact on the number of people experiencing homelessness. This indicates that current approaches are not only ineffective but also unsustainable. The city could use the funds more effectively to support permanent supportive housing, shelter expansion, and health services—expenditures shown to reduce homelessness and costs in other cities.

Additionally, our findings indicate that the majority of people arrested are not criminals but individuals with income who simply cannot afford housing. Criminalization can prolong instances of homelessness by disrupting individuals' lives, employment, and draining their financial resources. Moreover, it arrests and stigmatizes people's very existence. The alternative—investing in affordable housing and supportive services—has been proven to reduce homelessness and is a more compassionate and cost-effective path forward.

Myrtle Beach, like many cities, is committed to investing in redevelopment. We urge city leaders to include expenditures dedicated to expanding resources to residents experiencing housing insecurity. Ending homelessness is not an insurmountable challenge; it is a matter of political will and resource allocation.

Anti-homelessness ordinances do not impact the root causes of homelessness, lack of affordable housing, mental and physical health care, and jobs that pay a living wage. Additionally, there is a mountain of evidence that shows that anti-homelessness ordinances may compound the problem and lengthen the time many people are homeless (National Alliance to End Homelessness 2025). Criminalizing behaviors associated with homelessness is expensive for taxpayers, does not solve the root causes of homelessness, and can lengthen the time people are unhoused. In this study, we examined the costs associated with arresting individuals for violating ordinances related to living outside. For some of the violations, such as trespassing and sleeping, the people arrested likely had no other options. Humans must sleep and sit. If there is nowhere to do that legally, they have no choice but to break the law.

The City of Myrtle Beach's current approach is not working. Homelessness will not disappear without a significant investment in humans. Although there may be substantial short-term costs, the long-term benefits will save lives and likely save the city money. It is not something that cannot be done. The city is currently making significant investments in its redevelopment projects, hoping that in the long term, the tourist industry will thrive. We suggest that they do the same for the low-income population. Policing does not address the underlying cause and serves only to remove people from public view. Although some costs of criminalization are

quantifiable, other psychological costs are not as easily measured. Because criminalization fails to address the root causes of homelessness, the costs to the public will only grow with time. If there were affordable housing and healthcare, these costs would be reduced not only for the year but year after year, and these costs would be mitigated.

Significant investments in affordable housing will, in the long term, result in a more prosperous population and likely save the city money. We suggest the following:

Policy Recommendations

1. Invest in Affordable Housing

- Allocate funding toward the development of affordable rental units and the rehabilitation of vacant motels and buildings for long-term housing.
- Partner with nonprofit agencies and private developers to increase the supply of low-income housing and support inclusionary zoning policies.

2. Expand Shelter Capacity and Lower Barriers

- Increase funding for shelter expansion, with a special focus on low-barrier shelters that serve individuals with pets, disabilities, or behavioral health issues.
- Develop gender-specific and trauma-informed shelter options, especially for women and survivors of domestic violence.

3. Redirect Funds from Criminalization to Services

- Reallocate resources currently used for policing and jailing people experiencing homelessness to fund supportive housing, case management, and outreach.
- Limit the enforcement of quality-of-life ordinances that criminalize basic survival behaviors such as sleeping, sitting, and using public restrooms.

4. Create Local Rental Assistance Programs

- Provide more flexible, short-term rent subsidies for individuals and families at risk of homelessness.
- Support eviction prevention programs and landlord mediation services to keep people stably housed.

5. Address Barriers to Rehousing

- Reform background check and rental policies that prevent individuals with non-violent criminal records from accessing housing.
- Streamline processes for obtaining IDs and critical documents lost due to encampment sweeps or arrests.

6. Improve Public Communication and Education

- Launch public awareness campaigns to reduce stigma and misconceptions about homelessness and the role of policing.
- Promote narratives that humanize homelessness and highlight effective solutions rooted in housing and health care.

These recommendations reflect a fundamental shift in how homelessness is addressed—away from punitive, reactive measures and toward proactive, evidence-based solutions rooted in housing, health, and human dignity. By investing in strategies that prevent homelessness and

support recovery, Myrtle Beach has the opportunity not only to reduce public spending but also to create a more just and inclusive community.

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Endnotes

[ii] The PIT count relies on volunteers to find and count people who are experiencing homelessness on a specific night in January each year. This number underestimates the number of people who are experiencing homelessness as it only includes people who are found during the count and who agree to give interviewers their information. It also only counts people who fall under the official federal definition of homelessness which does not include people who are staying in motels or couch surfing.

[iii] We did submit a Freedom of Information Act request to the County for this information, but they informed us that it would be difficult for them and would cost us \$7,000.00, so we decided to create the dataset on our own.

[iv] This is the most recent number we found. The sum spent on medical services is likely higher today.

[v] The Trespass Enforcement Authorization program allows police officers to ticket or arrest people who are trespassing at specific businesses without a complaint being filed. This is a relatively new program between businesses and the police.

[ss1]Check this