

Swept to Nowhere: Experiences and Recommendations from Unhoused People During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Summary

By Denver Homeless Out Loud with contributions and support from a team of community members and surveys of 150 unhoused Denver residents

This report covers the findings of the recent survey conducted by Denver Homeless Out Loud (DHOL) to gather the experiences and input of people without housing who are directly affected by the sweeps in Denver, Colorado. The findings from this survey of 150 people give us a critical foundation for understanding how sweeps are being conducted on the Denver streets and what changes should be implemented. The survey was conducted by DHOL members and volunteers from April 2020 to August 2020. Surveyors were carefully trained to stay unbiased in asking the survey questions.

Key Findings

- Out of the 150 completed surveys, 89.3% reported “Yes” to having experienced a sweep or the city taking property away.
- The number of times respondents had experienced it in the past 6 months ranged from 1-10+ times, with the median response of 3.5 times.
- Less than one-third (29.3%) of respondents reported seeing notice of the sweep posted before it occurred.
- Respondents were asked which of the following types of places they have moved to due to a sweep:
 - Another block nearby (69%)
 - The river (34%)
 - Squatting in a building (27%)
 - A far-off outside location (25%)
 - An outdoor area that was private property subject to trespass charges (25%)
 - A location that was already posted for a sweep (23%)
 - Other (22%)
- When forced to move after a sweep, the majority (54.5%) of people were never able to find a legal place to stay.
- Only 31 respondents reported ever moving to shelter, hotel, staying with a friend, or housing following a sweep. Less than 5% of respondents reported moving to housing.
- 70.4% of respondents reported that they eventually returned to a location from which they had been previously swept.

- 72.6% of respondents reported having property taken in a sweep.
- 29% of respondents reported having all or most belongings taken during a sweep.
- 71% of respondents indicated that they did not know where the storage building was, or how to find out where belongings were taken after a sweep to recover their lost property.
- Less than one-fifth (19.7%) of respondents had gone to city storage. Of those who went, only 19% were able to recover their property from the storage facility.
- When asked how the city should change their policies, 83.6% of respondents requested that the city de-emphasize sweeps altogether, to focus on finding better housing options.
- The large majority of respondents indicated that living in a house was their first choice, a tent was their second choice, and shelter was their third choice.

These findings indicate that sweeps do not connect people with housing or 'services'. They show that people are mostly moving from block to block, are not seeing the notices, are losing valuable property in the process, and are not getting that property back. We include 16 recommendations based on these findings, but they can be boiled down to the following:

- Stop the sweeps
- Provide regular trash services and personal hygiene resources
- Work to create housing instead of sweeps

The full report details other improvements that can be made to the process to move towards actual effective cleaning instead of sweeping human beings from block to block.

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