

# A Crackdown on the Poor and Hungry

Concerned about “quality of life” appearances, cities across America are cracking down on the homeless and the hungry, reports Dennis J Bernstein.

By Dennis J Bernstein

Activist and author Keith McHenry, who co-founded Food Not Bombs in Boston in 1980, says cities across the U.S. have begun to take various steps to “criminalize” the homeless and those who try to help them.

I spoke to McHenry, author of *Hungry for Peace: How You Can Help End Poverty and War with Food Not Bombs*, in the seaside city of Santa Cruz, California, where he says there is an ongoing crackdown against Food Not Bombs workers as well as those who they are trying to feed.

“The most common government response to the suffering of those being forced into homelessness is for local authorities to make laws against being homeless,” said McHenry. “Laws against sleeping, sitting, asking for money or what officials call ‘Quality of Life Crimes,’ living outside and lower[ing] the quality of life of those fortunate enough to not yet be forced out into the streets.

“Another [tactic] is to pass laws seeking to end the sharing of meals to the hungry in public ... hoping that by hiding the ‘problem’ of seeing so many of our neighbors living [on the streets], it will go away. Over 70 cities have passed laws regulating or banning the sharing of free food with the homeless outside.”

According to a recent report from the Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies, 21.8 percent of the nation’s children and 15 percent of the population overall are poor and often hungry. Despite the growing needs of the homeless, the Federal government continues to cut vital services and assistance meant to help the most at-risk among us, said Jennifer Jones, Executive Director of the Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies (FPWA), including “funding cuts for meals for homebound seniors, vocational training programs for those who’ve lost their jobs, food for low income families, and the list goes on. At a time when our nation needs to protect people from continued and increasing hardship, and support economic growth, the Federal government has imposed sequestration cuts and proposes further budget cuts that take us backwards.”

According to the National Center on Family Homelessness, using the most recent data from the U.S. Department of Education and the 2013 U.S. Census, at least “2.5 million children in America – one in every 30 children – go to sleep without a home of their own each year.”

I spoke to Keith McHenry in Santa Cruz on Feb. 23 about the continuing attacks

on those who have devoted themselves to distributing free food to the poor, homeless and hungry.

Dennis Bernstein: Please talk a little bit in general about what you do in terms of trying to give out food. And a bit about how the need for food has increased in recent years.

Keith McHenry: Recently, I've been involved in this project called the Freedom Sleepers, with the right for people to sleep in Santa Cruz. And it's illegal now to sleep here between the hours of 11 at night and 8:30 in the morning, outside, in a vehicle, or in the streets, or anywhere in the parks.

And the number of people that you see coming to our meals, it's just always getting larger and larger. And downtown Santa Cruz, like many ... downtowns—L.A., I was just down there—it's incredible the amount of people living on America's street.

There's a study that just was reported in the Washington Post... and several articles about homeless children. There's estimated to be, using the federal government's own statistics, 2.5 million homeless children in America.

DB: ...2.5 million homeless children.

KM: It's just astounding. It's heartbreaking. To me, it's starting to have that sense of [Charles] Dickens, or the Great Depression, or something like that.

DB: ...sort of the look of the Third World, because you begin to see more and more whole families on the street.

KM: Absolutely. And you see entire little villages, and camps. And so, Food Not Bombs, and many other groups, are out on the streets serving free food. And what we do is we collect free food that can't be sold from grocery stores, and we make vegan meals that we share on the streets, under a banner that says Food Not Bombs, with a literature table with information.

And, of course, right now, information on immigrants' rights and information on how to resist all the crazy things that are going on, as a result of the election of Trump. But also, we were doing that under Obama with his wars, and so on.

So, it's just a ramped-up continuation of this resistance that we've been doing for 30... it'll be 37 years this May 24th. And the numbers for Food Not Bombs groups is just growing by leaps and bounds, all over the world. There's like three groups in Turkey, for instance, that are being arrested, for feeding people out on the streets, as part of the general clamp down after the coup

attempt.

But Food Not Bombs in America has been having tons of trouble, as well. And, most recently, Tampa, Florida, arrested seven volunteers. But the outrage, world-wide, was just so huge that the district attorney dropped the charges.

And right now, as we're speaking, there's a meeting to try to figure out... with the city, to try to figure out what to do about Food Not Bombs. But, fortunately, those young people there, are just so impressive and so amazing, that they are not going to bend to the will of the authorities. Which is, basically, to try to get you to get a permit that then, in our experience, they withdraw as soon as they want to get rid of you. And then they use that as "Oh, well they had a permit, but they did something wrong, now they don't have it. Now it's our legitimate right to harass them."

The reality is, you don't need a permit to do this. We don't get paid. It's just a gift... an unregulated gift of love. And it would be like trying to issue permits for people doing anything to help their community, out of their own free will. Fortunately, we've been able to push back, attack after attack. Orlando, Ft. Lauderdale, Arcata, California, San Francisco, and now there's even efforts in Southern California and some of those small cities, like Corona, where they're trying to outlaw outdoor distribution of free food.

So, it's a growing municipal effort nation-wide to try to make this illegal and difficult, or impossible, for people to feed the hungry, with some kind of a theory that if you stop feeding people, they will disappear.

DB: They will go get a job with their kids. Like they didn't just lose their job. Like there aren't so many people who have been permanently out of work. There are so many struggles. We see this all the time. Keith, about how many times have you been arrested for giving out free food?

KM: The San Francisco authorities said I have been arrested 94 times, there. And that the district attorney at the time, Carlos Smith, said I did 500 days in jail. And then I was arrested twice in Orlando, for feeding people, and did 18 days there, which was even more brutal than the 500 days that I did in San Francisco, because Florida jails are just unbelievably horrible. Horrible. In fact, somebody thought I should make a Lonely Planet guide to city jails in America, [which] I might do.

DB: Now, there is clearly... and I'd like you to talk a little bit about this Keith. There's clearly an attempt, they're continuing collaborations, cities, states... to criminalize both homelessness, and then the folks who become the supporters, like yourself, like people who provide food. This is sort of part of

a trend, right?

KM: Right. It is. And there's this odd thing where there's... at least one consultant, and then possibly more, who are going around, helping cities, at a cost of \$5,300.00/month, solve their homeless problem by removing outdoor food service. And the most recent one was Phoenix, Arizona, where they actually... the Phoenix Human Resource Department, last September, did this thing called the Street Feeding Collaborative to educate faith and community based groups about why feeding can do more harm, than good.

And the kind of the leader of this, or the most prominent spokesperson for this theory, that feeding people outside will encourage them to stay homeless, and that somehow eating indoors will essentially get them access to addiction services. And his perspective—this man, Robert Marbut from San Antonio, Texas—is suggesting that basically people are on drugs or alcohol, and if they'd just get off of drugs and alcohol, by going to one of these multi-service centers, they'd get help, they'd get access to housing, they'd get drug treatment, and so on. But, if you feed people outdoors they won't get those services.

And he's really pushing this idea, but it's been sadly, for him, a failure. And that's where, and sadly for the homeless people that actually have tried to... that have been either denied food because people have been stopped from feeding people, or who also end up in these programs, and actually don't get the help that is so promised.

And most famously he has a program... he started a project that cost \$100,000,000 to start up, in San Antonio, Texas, called Haven for Hope. And, even in the last 12 months, there's been news reports ... that actually the homeless population is just huge in San Antonio, and way beyond the capacity of Haven for Hope. And Haven for Hope is in financial trouble, and it's just actually not a solution.

And I know, here in Santa Cruz, California, most of the people that eat with us actually do eat indoors at St. Francis, Monday through Friday, when they're open. And they're not getting drug rehab or any kind of housing. We have a Housing First program, which most of these do.

And very few people actually, ultimately do get housing. You hear huge stories all the time of like "Well, I went to this meeting, that meeting, and I had this voucher, and that voucher, blah, blah, blah. And after 3 years I never got any housing." And you hear this day in and day out from people on the streets.

So these programs really aren't working and, from Food Not Bombs's perspective, is that we should be out there building solidarity between the housed and the unhoused, so that we're humanizing the people, rather than dehumanizing people

living on the streets. And that we make the point that we have to change all of society.

It's not a matter of tweaking this or getting a drug rehab program there. We saw, when we started 37 years ago, very few homeless Americans. And now, eight years of Reaganomics, and then all the other neo-liberal economic policies, have resulted in millions of people living on our streets. And with Trump, it's likely to be much, much worse. So, that's where the solution really is.

DB: I think, Keith McHenry, one of the most troubling things that I've seen, and I've seen it repeatedly in the context of the work that you all have done, witnessing it through film that oftentimes the authorities, the police, will come and literally take the food out of hungry people's hands, they'll impound all the food, and then they'll just throw it in the garbage in front of hungry... this is sort of what they do. Why do they do that?

KM: Well, you know ... I think that that is done to try to make it so uncomfortable and embarrassing for people to live in the cities, that they somehow get a bus ticket and go to somebody else's city to be their problem. [The] city council, here in Santa Cruz, had an agenda item surrounding the issue of homelessness, and they had two things. One was this Housing First program which has been a horrible failure. And the other was funding bus tickets out of town.

[...]

It's just really troubling that people are living on the streets, and then the city government's policies are like, let's get rid of them, or let's hide them, or something like that. And in Santa Cruz there are two groups that are like citizen groups connected to the police. And one of them is the Legalize and the other is Take Back Santa Cruz. And Take Back Santa Cruz is actually really a neo-fascist organization. And homeless people report being beaten by them, and the other thing that's happening is related...

DB: ...what do you mean being beaten? They come right up on the street and beat them, or, throw them around?

KM: They beat them up. Yeah, they punch them and stuff. And we've been getting report after report ... these people after they push the people around, and everything, and hit them, say "if you're not out of here, we're coming back with a baseball bat to beat you up."

And the other thing, on Tuesday night [Feb. 21]—it freaked me out immensely—when feeding people outside of City Hall, people kept coming in their stocking feet, without shoes. And it turns out people are stealing the shoes of homeless

people. Now, maybe its homeless people stealing other people's shoes because their shoes got stolen, but the rumor on the street says that some non-homeless people are just... [they] see you sleeping in a doorway...

DB: ...it's a way of torturing, and abusing and forcing the issue.

KM: Yeah, just like Frank Jordan, in San Francisco, in the '90s, when he was Mayor. He had a thing called Quality of Life Enforcement Matrix Program. And one of the aspects of that program was for the police to surround a group of homeless people, in a park usually, Golden Gate Park, Civic Center, something, and confiscate everybody's shoes. And here they're confiscating, officially the police are confiscating people's belongings. They're taking their bedrolls, their sleeping bags and everything. And they wake people up, like over and over again, every night.

And, again, on Tuesday and Wednesday morning [Feb. 21 and 22], it was shocking to see the park rangers, Santa Cruz City park rangers, going and harassing homeless people, waking them up. And we've even had reports of homeless people being woken up in the middle of the day when it's legal to sleep.

It reminds me of like what they do at Pelican Bay [State Prison], or in control units in the SHUs in prisons [Special/Security Housing Units, ie. solitary confinement], where they wake you up over and over again. And no wonder people go kind of bonkers...

DB: ...and isn't it in Santa Cruz, Keith, where they use these noise making/buzzing machines that were meant to chase out insects? And they use them to drown out with noise, to intimidate, and run homeless people out, is that true?

KM: Yeah, they have. ... The city manager's office, which is really the people behind this cruelty to the homeless. And they're working with the downtown business association, the downtown alliance, and so on, and developers, and a bunch of the city councilors put \$10,000 or \$15,000 into buying what they call mosquito boxes. So at a certain time, at night, under the bridges and parks, this loud, deafening, nauseating sound goes off – you just can't possibly stay there. And they did that without public comment, or anything. It just became a downtown improvement budget item. And then the next thing you know they're holding a press conference saying how wonderful it is they got these mosquito boxes.

And so, this chasing Food Not Bombs away aspect of it, while the city council seems to be intimidated a bit because we are really, fortunately, very loved by the people here in Santa Cruz. These two right-wing groups are allies with the

majority on the council.

And so, they are really pushing, and the thing that they ... so far in the last... since the first of the year, we were told by the police that there's all these complaints, and we had to meet with them. So, finally, we met with them and they showed us all these e-mails that they got, about, oh, that we left trash after a meal, and actually we clean up and the Post Office people claim the cleanest times are after a meal. And then same at City Hall. The people that clean up City Hall find that, after we serve food there, there's virtually nothing around after we clean up. So that's totally a phony complaint.

And, in fact, the bags of household garbage [that] have been laying around the Post Office when we arrive, and I've had to pick it up, and it's clearly white kitchen garbage bags full of Drano and things like that. Things that homeless people and Food Not Bombs would not be leaving on the street. And they take photos of them and email it to all the politicians.

**Dennis J Bernstein is a host of "Flashpoints" on the Pacifica radio network and the author of Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom. You can access the audio archives at [www.flashpoints.net](http://www.flashpoints.net).**

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