

Link Between Homelessness Criminalization and Expanding Surveillance Raises Concerns

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A growing body of research and advocacy reports highlights a troubling pattern in how homelessness is being addressed in cities across the United States. Policies that criminalize unhoused individuals are increasingly being implemented alongside surveillance technologies, prompting civil liberties advocates to raise alarms about privacy and discrimination concerns.

According to a recent report by the Surveillance Technology Oversight Project (STOP), municipal governments are increasingly using tools such as facial recognition, biometric data collection, predictive policing, and closed-circuit television (CCTV) networks to monitor people experiencing homelessness. STOP Executive Director Albert Fox Cahn argued that these tools, often marketed as public safety solutions, result in further marginalization and contribute to what some describe as “poverty policing.”

The report finds that law enforcement and city agencies in major urban centers, including New York City, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, are employing high-tech surveillance systems in homeless encampments. These systems track individual movements, identify faces, and collect personal data. In many cases, the information is gathered without the consent or knowledge of those being monitored. This raises constitutional concerns, particularly regarding the Fourth Amendment, which protects against unreasonable searches and seizures.

The expansion of these technologies appears to coincide with legal and policy changes that make it easier to cite, arrest, or displace unhoused individuals for activities such as sleeping in public, loitering, or panhandling. Civil rights organizations argue that this approach criminalizes poverty rather than addressing its root causes. Meanwhile, tech companies continue to market surveillance tools to municipalities as efficient ways to manage urban populations.

Fox Cahn emphasized in his statement that “being homeless is not a crime,” and warned that surveillance will not solve systemic issues like lack of affordable housing or access to mental health services. The STOP report calls for stricter regulation of surveillance technologies and urges cities to invest in long-term housing and support systems instead.

While supporters of public safety measures argue that surveillance helps prevent crime and maintain order, critics caution against expanding the surveillance state at the expense of civil liberties. The report suggests that vulnerable populations are disproportionately affected by these systems, with little oversight or accountability regarding how data is used or stored.

As the national debate continues over homelessness and public safety, this intersection between surveillance and criminalization is drawing increased scrutiny. Policymakers are now being urged to consider the implications of surveillance policies on civil rights and to focus more resources on humane, effective solutions to homelessness.

