

Bristol County Sheriff: “Punishment, incarceration aren’t solutions to homelessness; they are intensifiers”

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This opinion is a response to the City of New Bedford requiring lodging house licenses and upgrades to the sober houses throughout the city.

SCOTUS Ruling and Debtor’s Prison

“Never in the history of crime and punishment has any place in the world ever incarcerated its way out of a crime problem. Jails and prisons deal with the aftereffect of crime, not the causes of crime. Needlessly incarcerating people is costly to taxpayers and can have a criminogenic effect on people incarcerated. The key word is ‘needlessly.’

Neither punishment nor incarceration are solutions to homelessness; they are intensifiers.

Why am I writing about this? I want to shoot down a bad idea before it gains traction.

The recent Supreme Court ruling in *Grants Pass v. Johnson* makes it easier for communities everywhere in the US, including in Bristol County, to fine, ticket, or arrest people experiencing homelessness, even when there is no adequate shelter available. Punishment as a solution throws gas on a fire we want to put out.

Let's say a municipality passes an ordinance to fine, ticket, or arrest someone residing in a public space.

Now, what happens if someone residing in a public space without an alternative does not pay a fine or ticket?

A judge may sentence you to serve time for failure to pay. This is a debtor's prison. This isn't good for anyone.

Now taxpayers are paying tens of thousands of dollars to house, feed, and provide medical care to someone who didn't have a place to call home and didn't squat on someone's private property. Moreover, once a homeless person adds a criminal conviction to his or her record, getting a job and getting back on his or her feet is exponentially more difficult.

We should build shelters with wrap-around services to get people back on their feet, not punish them.

When a community proposes the NIMBY ordinances of "no vagrants in our community", remember that a solution to homelessness that leads to punishment and incarceration is the worst way to go."-Paul Heroux, Sheriff of Bristol County.