

SHOULD THE LAW CRIMINALIZE HOMELESSNESS?

In 2024, Kentucky passed House Bill 5—"The Safer Kentucky Act"—over Governor Andy Beshear's veto, in an effort to reduce homelessness. The law makes activities associated with homelessness, such as sleeping on park benches or camping in public spaces, illegal. Police can issue citations, and repeat offenses require a court appearance, where individuals must pay fines or serve jail time. Unlike approaches that prioritize increasing access to housing, this law relies on police enforcement, existing shelters, and court oversight to encourage unhoused individuals to improve their situation. Two years in, this raises concerns about whether punishment is an effective way to address homelessness.

The 2025 statewide K-Count found 5,789 unhoused people on a single night. 35% had no shelter.

In Louisville, there are 800 shelter beds and approximately 1,600 unhoused people.

Categories Among KY Residents Experiencing Homelessness

Families - 20%

Age 55+ - 21%

Veterans - 9%



YES, THE LAW IS JUSTIFIED

HB5 creates incentives for unhoused people to seek stability. With Kentucky's unemployment rate decreasing, finding a job is more achievable, and combined with existing homeless shelters, permanent housing is a realistic goal for many. Under the law, people cited must attend court regularly and show evidence they are improving their situation; fees may be waived if someone cannot pay. This ongoing monitoring encourages responsibility, and enforcement has visibly cleared large encampments in cities like Louisville, which makes shared spaces safer for everyone.

NO, THE LAW IS NOT JUSTIFIED

The law punishes people for being homeless without addressing the root causes. New shelters are not being built, and in some counties there are none at all. Without enough housing options, the law sets people up to fail. Hundreds of unhoused Kentuckians have been cited for illegal camping, but providers report enforcement mainly scatters unsheltered people farther from the services meant to help them, and unsheltered homelessness has continued to rise since the ban took effect. Money spent enforcing this law would be better used to build shelters and expand housing instead of criminalizing homelessness.