

Performance Audit of the City’s Response to Homeless Encampments Since the Unsafe Camping Ordinance

Why OCA Did This Study

To address the growth of homelessness, the City of San Diego (City) passed the Unsafe Camping Ordinance (Ordinance), which restricted camping in public spaces. Many stakeholders were uncertain of its potential consequences, such as if more people would accept shelter, or if encampments would be pushed into other areas of the City, remote locations, or far from services.

We incorporated these concerns into this audit. Specifically, we conducted a performance audit of the City’s response to homeless encampments since the adoption of the Unsafe Camping Ordinance with two objectives:

1. **Determine if the City efficiently and effectively uses its resources to respond to homeless encampments since the adoption of the Unsafe Camping Ordinance; and**
2. **Determine if the City’s personal property storage and disposal processes in relation to the Unsafe Camping Ordinance are practiced equitably.**

This audit does not evaluate the Ordinance itself, but rather the City’s operational response to encampments and the effects of the Ordinance.

What OCA Found

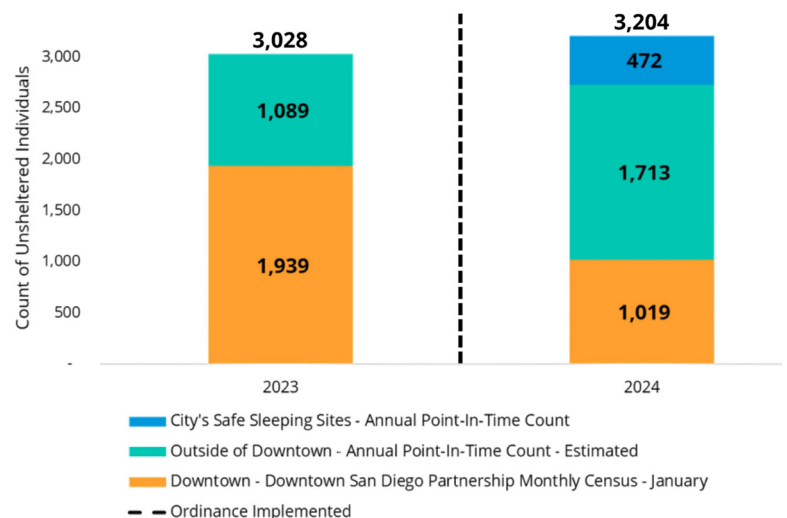
Question 1: Did the unsheltered population decrease in the City of San Diego since the implementation of the Unsafe Camping Ordinance?

- The unsheltered population, as defined by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, did not decrease across the City since the implementation of the Ordinance.
- The Ordinance and the opening of the City’s safe sleeping locations **appear to have reduced the number of people living in public areas.**
- External factors, such as uncertainty of future federal and State funding, impact the City’s ability to provide more shelters.

Question 2: Did the unsheltered population move from downtown to other areas of the City of San Diego after the implementation of the Unsafe Camping Ordinance?

- Monthly census counts showed a substantial decrease in the unsheltered population downtown after the Ordinance.
- Reported encampment locations did not significantly change; however, the City received an average of 13 percent more encampment reports in the two years after the implementation of the Ordinance, compared to the two years before.
- The number of encampment reports did not appear to substantially change around schools, parks, open spaces, and shelters with Ordinance signs.
- **While shelter referrals increased after the implementation of the Ordinance, City shelter space, including safe sleeping, was limited; therefore, most requests for shelter could not be met.**

Exhibit 5: After the Implementation of the Ordinance and the Opening of Safe Sleeping Sites, a Significant Portion of the Downtown Unsheltered Population Likely Moved to the Safe Sleeping Sites and Other Areas

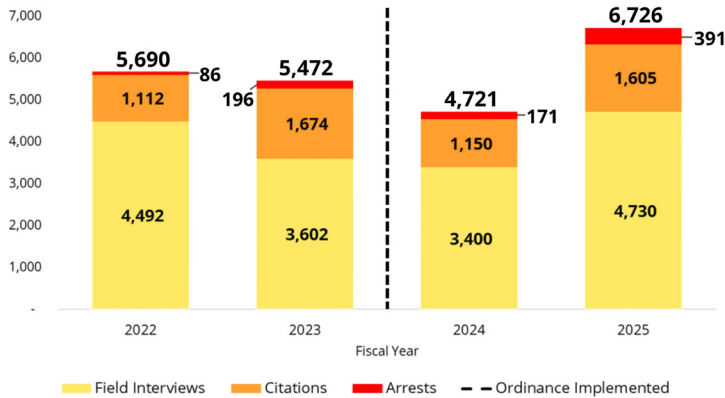


Source: OCA generated based on monthly census count data published by Downtown San Diego Partnership and published annual Point-in-Time Count data.

Question 3: Did the number of citations, arrests, and prosecutions for encampments increase after the Unsafe Camping Ordinance?

- SDPD uses a progressive enforcement model to encourage acceptance of shelter and services.
- After the implementation of the Ordinance, **the proportion of SDPD contacts for encampments that resulted in arrests slightly increased while the proportion that resulted in citations decreased.**
- There have been minimal prosecutions for violations of the Ordinance.

Exhibit 13: Most Violations of the Ordinance, Encroachment, and Illegal Lodging Resulted in Field Interviews Rather Than Citations or Arrests, Before and After the Implementation of the Ordinance

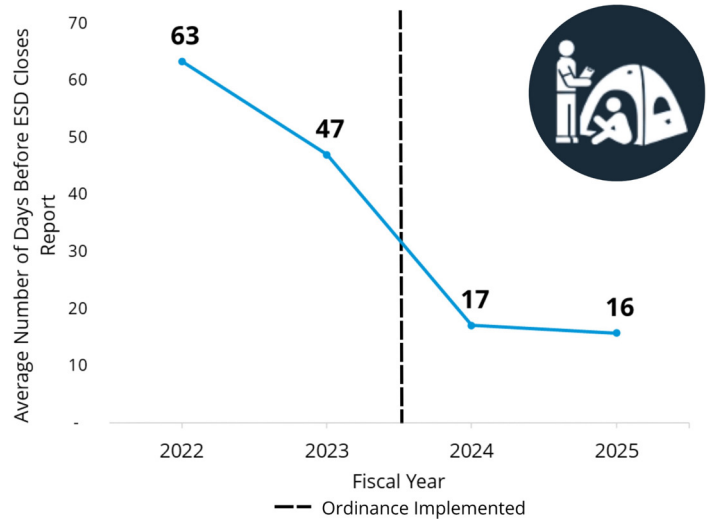


Note: This graph includes some contacts that resulted in multiple field interviews and citations for more than one violation. Source: OCA generated based on data SDPD provided from the Automated Regional Justice Information System (ARJIS).

Question 4: Did City departments work and coordinate in their response to encampments, after the implementation of the Ordinance, in accordance with the goals in the preamble of the Ordinance?

- **City departments regularly collaborated to effectively respond to encampments** and their prioritized responses to encampments aligned with the Ordinance and best practice.
- **Both SDPD and ESD responded more quickly to Get It Done encampment reports** after the Ordinance. In FY2024, ESD averaged 17 days to respond to an encampment report, compared to 47 days in FY2023. SDPD averaged 10 days to respond in FY2024, compared to 17 days in FY2023.

Exhibit 15: ESD Significantly Reduced Its Response Time to Reported Encampments



Source: OCA generated using Get It Done report data from the City's Open Data Portal.

Question 5: Does the City equitably store personal items from abatements?

- Extending the notice period prior to abatements allowed people more time to remove their belongings from encampments.
- Like most benchmark cities, San Diego stores items from abatements and its policies include examples of items it may store.
- **The City could further ensure accessibility by providing personal item impound notices in multiple languages.**

What OCA Recommends

We made **two recommendations** to ensure the City's item retrieval process is as accessible as possible. Specifically, ESD should:

- **Require a periodic review of its list of items City does not store**, and consider other cities' item storage policies and items that people frequently inquire about, even if they were not stored; and
- **Provide access to impound notices in Spanish and consider other commonly spoken languages** across the City.

ESD agreed to both recommendations.

For more information, contact Andy Hanau, City Auditor, at (619) 533-3165 or cityauditor@sandiego.gov.