



# ATLANTA'S STREET SWEEPS



Photo by Matt Barnett  
via Creative Commons

# Street Sweeps



## How Atlanta is displacing the displaced

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**P**rior to the coronavirus pandemic, in January 2020, there were 3,000 people who were homeless in Atlanta. While the 2021 count was canceled due to COVID-19 and the 2022 count has not been released, advocacy groups expect that the numbers have skyrocketed since the beginning of the pandemic.

During this crisis, the city of Atlanta has been conducting street sweeps of homeless encampments. A street sweep is a forced removal of homeless people and their property from an area. If people are unable to move in time or are not present, their possessions are thrown away. The sweeps are enforced by the Atlanta Police Department. The sweeps are unscheduled and give people on the street very little time to move.

Victor, a 62 year old homeless man who sleeps on the corner of Central Ave and MLK Jr. Dr., said, “They’ll be there with the truck and the city workers and officers, and you have five minutes to vacate wherever you’re sleeping at.”

**A street sweep is a forced removal of homeless people and their property from an area.**

Sunny Leon, an organizer at the mutual aid organization Sol Underground, described the sweeps. “Sometimes they will just throw it away even if you’re trying to take it with you because you’re not doing it fast enough. So essentially it’s just forced displacement,” they said.

Sol Underground is heavily involved with supporting unhoused people impacted by the city’s street sweeps. According to the ACLU, “Homeless sweeps are costly and ineffective and make homelessness worse, not better.”



Central Ave and MLK Jr Dr near the State Capitol // Photo from Google Maps

Other cities that conduct sweeps such as Los Angeles, Portland, and Seattle, post advance notices warning of upcoming street sweeps. In Atlanta, the city conducts sweeps with no prior announcement. Leon stated, “We don’t get that. The cops just show up early in the morning between 4 and 8 a.m., before they have any witnesses and [conduct sweeps]. They like to do it on cold days, rainy days, winter. They also like doing it when they see that someone has come out and given new tents.” Sol Underground spent approximately \$5,000 on new tents in July, and within three days they had all been taken.

A legal primer published by the ACLU stated, “Courts have held that failing to give sufficient notice before a sweep, so people can act to keep their property safe, or destroying property during a sweep, violates the rights of homeless individuals.”

Additionally, a case from the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals found that “Simply because the property is left unattended while an individual performed necessary business such as using the restroom or attending court does not render the property ‘abandoned.’ Homeless individuals retain

full rights to their unattended property and its immediate destruction violates the Fourth Amendment.” The Fulton County Sheriff’s Office, the office responsible for the sweeps near the capitol, did not respond to a request for comment.

In addition to street sweeps, the city placed barricades on popular spots to prevent homeless people from setting up tents and sleeping in that area. “They put these brick barriers all the way down by the Capitol to the church to stop people from sleeping there,” Victor said.

**“By forcefully displacing people, you are now ripping them away from their communities”**

Leon argued that this displacement is very harmful “by forcefully displacing people, you are now ripping them away from their communities,” they said. Leon described how being alone while homeless is very dangerous, making it easier to be robbed,



assaulted, and arrested.

Victor stated that nearly every shelter in Atlanta, a church by the Capitol where he used to sleep, and even warming centers kick unhoused people out between 4:30 and 5:00 a.m. These organizations often do this in order to clean up, but this still has a serious impact on unhoused people. Afterwards, Victor tries to find a place to sleep, but if that's not possible he has to just walk around the city. Additionally, ever since the pandemic began, the church where Victor used to sleep has stopped letting unhoused people spend the night inside. Victor says he now sleeps by the capitol because it feels safe compared to other locations.

**According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Atlanta does not have enough affordable housing units. Atlanta has seen an increase in housing, but housing costs, rent payments and property taxes have all also increased.**

The Atlanta Homeless Union recently won month-long hotel stays for 40 people, intended to be for the people sleeping on the sidewalks near the Capitol. However, there were several issues with the process. First, many of the people who received hotel rooms were not the same people that had been living near the Capitol. Also,

the organization that was providing the hotels would only give rooms to people with IDs, which is a major barrier to entry for unhoused people. Victor adds, "I think they took about 30 people. There's triple that down there. They let them stay for 30 days and after that, that was it." Leon adds that only housing people for a short amount of time can be actually harmful, as their old space is often taken when they return, causing more displacement.

According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Atlanta does not have enough affordable housing units. Atlanta has seen an increase in housing, but housing costs, rent payments and property taxes have all also increased.

Addressing the city, Victor said, "Why aren't you trying to get housing? I've seen where they talk about building these apartments and such and such. Well, check this out, we're not gonna be living in there."

Additionally, Leon supports diverting funding from other places to housing. However, they are not confident in the city's ability to do that, but advocates for giving funding to mutual aid organizations to help those in need more directly.

Victor said that mayors always promise to help the homeless, but once elected they fail to live up to their commitment. In fact, the only time Victor noticed interaction from city officials was when they cleared the street leading up to the mayoral and council elections.

When asked what the city could do to help unhoused people, Victor said, "Evidently the shelters are not working, so we have to find something that will work."

One suggestion he gave is converting buildings to be housing for homeless individuals. "Let's get one of these buildings. And let's house the homeless and get them help, have social workers there - to find out what they need," he said. The city has been making efforts to build more affordable housing, however Victor states, "It's just so slow."

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To help on a personal level, Victor suggested that housed people ask the mayor and council members questions. Sunny Leon had recommendations as well. "If you don't have time, but you have money, give money. If you don't have money or time, but have an Instagram, repost. And even if you don't have any of those, there are unhoused people in your general vicinity in your community. Become friends with them," they said.

In closing, Victor emphasized, "Homeless people are people too. They have the same emotions as you. They get depressed, they get happy. We're not the monsters people try to make us to be," he continued, "I just need a little help up, not a hand out."

## Atlanta Homeless Union Demands



Housing



Water/Sanitation



A Seat at the Table



Healthcare

Source: Atlanta Homeless Union Twitter Account