

Spatiotemporal Analysis Exploring the Impact of Homeless Encampment Sweeps on Crime in Denver, Colorado, 2019-2023

Background/Purpose: In 2022, approximately 580,000 people experienced homelessness in the United States. In response, many cities have implemented “camping ban” policies enforced by “sweeps” of encampments. Sweeps have been cited as a strategy to protect public health and safety. However, there is mixed evidence that sweeps are effective in reducing crime.

Methods: We performed a retrospective (November 1, 2019 to July 17, 2023) pre-post spatiotemporal analysis using administrative data from Denver, Colorado. We used the Knox test statistic to detect excess clustering and change in total crime, as well as crime stratified by National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) category, within spatiotemporal proximity to sweeps.

Results/Outcomes: At a citywide level, sweeps are not associated with clustering or changes in crime within 7-, 14-, and 21-day periods. Sweeps are associated with greater than expected crime within a hyperlocal area, both before and after the sweep. Within a 0.25 mile radius, sweeps are associated with a decrease in crime. This decrease is driven by auto theft and public disorder, while murders and assaults increase.

Conclusions: Encampment sweeps concur with times when crime is spiking near the encampment. Citywide, sweeps do not have an effect on crime, while locally, they appear to reduce minor crimes while increasing crimes against persons. Sweeps appear to be reactive to crime and ineffective in preventing or reducing it.