

The US Federal Government Has Abandoned Evidence-Based Policy on Homelessness: Europe Must Not Follow

The Trump administration has dismantled longstanding, evidence-based strategies to address homelessness, promoting instead criminalisation and enforced treatment. These approaches are ineffective, harmful, and incompatible with protecting human dignity. FEANTSA stands with US organisations resisting this change and urges Europe to continue choosing policies grounded in evidence and compassion.

In June 2024, the Supreme Court Decision *City of Grant's Pass v. Johnson* laid the groundwork for states and cities to pass new legislation criminalising unsheltered homelessness. The Court held that a statute criminalising sleeping outdoors on public property does not violate the Eighth Amendment's prohibition on cruel and unusual punishment. It was a landmark case permitting the criminal punishment of homelessness and many cities have since introduced bills to this effect.

Federal action has since intensified the shift towards punishing homeless people. On the campaign trail, Trump promised to end the “nightmare” of cities “surrendered to the homeless, drug addicts, and the violent and dangerously deranged”.¹ He outlined his plan to ban urban camping, arrest and relocate people living outside to institutions, where treatment for drug addiction and mental health would be imposed. He argued that this would be more effective and better value for money than “housing the homeless in luxury hotels without addressing their underlying issues”.²

Homelessness was used as a justification for the deployment of the national guard in Washington D.C. Mass clearance of encampments ensued during the 30-day federal takeover of local law enforcement. Trump then issued an executive order *Ending Crime and Disorder on America's Streets* (2025). It ordered the reorientation of federal government funding away from Housing First, towards more conditional housing assistance and enforcement of public safety laws. It mandated the expansion of involuntary civil commitment and restriction of harm reduction efforts, as well as new data sharing obligations. The edict did not announce any new funding.

The Continuum of Care programme is the largest federal funding programme on homelessness in America. In November 2026, the Department for Housing and Urban Development withdrew and replaced a two-year notice of funding opportunity under the programme. The new notice interrupted funding that was due to be rolled over and introduced major changes. It brought in a cap on spending on permanent housing at 30% of programme resources. The National Alliance to End Homelessness estimates that more than 170,000 people will lose their housing & support because of this cap.³ Incentives were offered for investment in alternative approaches like transitional housing and treatment. Penalties were introduced for using racial preferences or recognising transgender people. Local governments and non-profit groups challenged the notice in court, which HUD has temporarily withdrawn for revision.

Whilst some States and cities are resisting this change in direction, others are embracing and driving it. The measures described above constitute a dramatic shift. They are justified by a narrative that homelessness is caused by mental illness and substance abuse, the solution to which is incarceration and enforced treatment. Most homeless people do not have mental illness or substance abuse issues, although the rates are much higher than amongst the general population. According to HUD, 22% of adults experiencing homelessness in America in 2024 had a serious mental illness, whilst 18% had a substance abuse disorder.⁴ The fact that mental illness and substance use frequently co-occur with homelessness does not mean that they cause it, nor that incarceration and enforced treatment are effective solutions. A major study of homeless people in California found that 37% reported using any illicit substance regularly in the last 6 months.⁵ This means that 63% were not regularly using. Furthermore, an estimated 21% of regular users surveyed wanted, but were unable, to receive treatment. Tellingly, political rhetoric about en-

forced treatment has not been matched by proposals for massive investment in drug treatment or mental health services, whilst deep cuts to Medicaid are likely to worsen access to healthcare for people experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

In recent decades, Europe has taken inspiration from the United States on Housing First, which began in New York and is now a recognised best practice across the EU. As homelessness rises on both continents, the US policy reversal offers a stark warning: abandoning evidence leads to more harm, not solutions. The Housing First model has become a flashpoint in debates about homeless policy in the US under Trump. An intervention targeting people experiencing chronic homelessness,ⁱ Housing First provides subsidised housing with very few behavioural conditions imposed. Housing First services offer, but do not require, engagement in treatment for addiction or mental health issues. Housing First has enjoyed bi-partisan support since it was first introduced as federal policy under George W. Bush. The Trump administration considers the approach a failure.⁶ Many evaluations show that Housing First is highly effective in helping chronically homeless people get and keep a home. Critics say that most of the evidence on housing retention is relatively short term and point to the lack of proof that Housing First generates any consistent positive health or social impact. Housing First has been a key element of success in efforts to reduce veteran homelessness.⁷ Given the broader failure to prevent homelessness and the fact that Housing First is only available to 16% of people experiencing homelessness,⁸ it is hardly surprising that it has not led to an overall reduction in homelessness.

FEANTSA is alarmed by the current shift towards punitive and coercive responses to homelessness in America. It appears to have become a highly symbolic issue for Trump's agenda. FEANTSA encourages European citizens, policymakers, and organisations working on homelessness to be vigilant about similar approaches taking stronger hold in Europe. Such measures are dehumanising, harmful, and costly. They represent a backwards step that will not reduce homelessness or the harm it causes. In the context of the European Affordable Housing Plan and forthcoming Anti-Poverty Strategy, European decision-makers and communities have an opportunity to redouble their efforts on homelessness and show that the European social market economy can uphold its promises of fairness, protection of human dignity and leaving no one behind.

i Chronic homelessness means long-term or repeated homelessness combined with disability



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Endnotes

- 1 **Agenda47: Ending the Nightmare of the Homeless, Drug Addicts, and Dangerously Deranged** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ISTu6JRtJTI>
- 2 **Ibid.**
- 3 **National Alliance to End Homelessness (2025) State and Local Impacts of HUD's Housing Cuts: Data Visualization, Interactive resource demonstrates the consequences of harmful new policies, Homelessness Research Institute, Published on November 25, 2025 at** <https://endhomelessness.org/resources/research-and-analysis/housingcuts/>
- 4 **HUD (2024) CoC Homeless Populations and Subpopulations Report**
- 5 **Assaf, RD., Morris, MD., Straus, ER., Martinez, P., Philbin, MM., & Kushel, M. Illicit Substance Use and Treatment Access Among Adults Experiencing Homelessness. JAMA. 2025;333(14):1222-1231. doi:10.1001/jama.2024.27922**
- 6 **DeParle, J. Trump Says 'Housing First' Failed the Homeless. Here's What the Evidence Says, New York Times, 25/12/2025, available at** <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/12/25/us/trump-housing-first.html>
- 7 **Evans, W.N., Kroeger, S., Palmer, C., & Pohl, E.: Housing and Urban Development-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing Vouchers and Veterans' Homelessness, 2007-2017, American Journal of Public Health 109, 1440-1445, <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2019.305231>**
- 8 **Culhane, D., Fowle, M., & Moses, J. (2025). How Much Would It Cost to Provide Housing First to All Households Staying in Homeless Shelters? National Alliance to End Homelessness.**