National Homelessness Law Center Reveals Strong Public Opposition to Punishing Homelessness Amid Housing Crisis

72% of Survey Respondents Reject Jailing, Ticketing, and Fining People for Sleeping Outside When No Other Shelter is Available

Washington, D.C., April 18, 2024 — As the Supreme Court prepares to hear Johnson v. Grants Pass, the National Homelessness Law Center (NHLC), in partnership with the Housing Narrative Lab, has released critical survey findings on the state of public opinion surrounding the case and related attempts to arrest, fine and ticket people who experience unsheltered homelessness.

The study, conducted by Lake Research Partners, found that adults nationwide connect the high costs of housing with homelessness and reject jailing, ticketing, and fining people for sleeping outside if there's no shelter available by 72%.

“Rent is too expensive, wages are too low, and we have seen decades of failed housing policies,” said Jesse Rabinowitz, Campaign and Communications Director at NHLC. “It’s not surprising to see that survey respondents agree with us that arresting or punishing people for experiencing homelessness makes things worse. The real solution is providing people with housing they can afford and the support services they need to become stable.”

Key Highlights:

Public Overwhelmingly Opposes Punishing Homeless People

- 72% of adults nationwide reject jailing, ticketing, or fining people for sleeping outside if there's no shelter available, including 65% of Republicans, 67% of Independents, and 80% of Democrats. Half (51%) strongly oppose.
- A majority (58%) believe policing, ticketing, fining, and jailing further marginalizes people experiencing homelessness and ends up making problems worse.

Housing Costs and Homelessness Connection:

- An astounding number of survey respondents have personal experiences with the issues at the heart of this case. Two-thirds (66%) of the survey respondents have a personal connection to housing instability (either having personal experience or know someone with personal experience).
• Almost three out of five people (59%) have a personal connection to homelessness.
• 61% of respondents said rent or the cost of housing being too expensive for people to afford is a major factor that contributes to people sleeping or living outside.

People are Willing to Vote the Issue

• If a candidate for elected office favored a plan to have the police arrest homeless people on the streets, a solid majority would be less likely to vote for them (65% less likely, 49% much less likely). This is true across partisan lines: 56% of Republicans, 68% of Independents, and 71% of Democrats would be less likely to vote for a candidate who favored this type of plan.

• If a candidate for elected office opposed a plan to have the police arrest homeless people on the streets, 61% would be more likely to vote for them, including 31% who would be much more likely to vote for them.
  ○ At least half of people across partisan lines would be more likely vote for this candidate – 57% of Republicans, 51% of Independents, and 68% of Democrats.

The Public Wants Real Solutions:

• To ensure everyone has a place to live, nearly 9 in 10 (88%) support repurposing available spaces that stand empty, like office buildings or hotels/motels, into housing options that are affordable (63% strongly support).
• Ensuring any future housing development that receives federal, state, or local government funding and incentives includes homes that are affordable to people at different income levels is a priority for 85% of respondents, with 57% strongly supporting this idea.

The study, aimed at understanding public attitudes towards the punishment of unsheltered homelessness, involved a nationwide QualBoard and a subsequent dial survey of a representative sample of 1,302 adults across the country. The research included a QualBoard of 24 adults conducted March 6-7, 2024, and a national online dial survey of 1,302 adults conducted March 25 to April 2 (see methodology below).

For media inquiries and more information about the survey data, please contact Justin Wilson at justin@risepublic.com.

ABOUT THE NATIONAL HOMELESSNESS LAW CENTER
The National Homelessness Law Center (NHLC) is at the forefront of the fight against homelessness in America. Our mission is to fearlessly advance federal, state, and local policies to prevent and end homelessness while fiercely defending the rights of all unhoused persons. We work to shape and advance policies at the federal, state, and local levels aimed at preventing and ultimately ending homelessness. By fostering partnerships, influencing policy, and mobilizing communities, the NHLC is dedicated to transforming how society addresses
homelessness, striving for a future where everyone has a place to call home. Learn more at homelesslaw.org.

Survey Methodology
Survey respondents were drawn from an online panel and screened to be adults residing in the United States. To ensure the sample reflects attributes of the actual population, the base sample was weighted by region, gender by region, age, race, race by age, race by gender, party identification, party identification by gender, and education. The Black oversample was weighted by gender and age. The Latino/a oversample was weighted by age and party identification. The Asian American Pacific Islander sample was weighted by gender, age, party ID, and education. The oversamples were weighed down into the base to reflect their actual proportion of adults in the U.S. Because the sample is based on those who initially self-selected for participation in the panel rather than a probability sample, no estimates of sampling error can be calculated. All sample surveys and polls may be subject to multiple sources of error, including, but not limited to, sampling error, coverage error, and measurement error. If this poll were conducted among a probability sample, then the margin of error would be +/- 3.1 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence interval.