

United States



Urban experiments

Down, not out

DENVER
Many American cities are grappling with homelessness. One offers a solution

DENVER'S MAYOR is Mike Johnston, with a "t". Its unofficial "mayor of the streets" is Mike Johnson, with a teardrop tattoo and a soft voice—your correspondent can barely hear him over a karaoke performance of a Guns N' Roses song in the cafeteria of one of Denver's new homeless shelters. For years, Mr Johnston's life was a haze of pills, heroin and street living. Now he spends his days helping Denverites like him find shelter or a place to detox. That is easier than it used to be: Denver's tent camps have largely disappeared. Homelessness in America declined by 3% between 2024 and 2025, yet the number of people without a home is still 31% higher than it was before the covid-19 pandemic. Since 2020 tents have proliferated, particularly in warm western and southern cities where people can camp year-round. This is a problem—for the homeless people who lack shelter, for locals who feel their cities have been overtaken by encampments, and

for Democrats, who run many big cities and whom Donald Trump blames for urban chaos. Early evidence suggests Denver, led by Mr Johnston, a Democrat, may offer a solution. In recent years policies on homelessness have swung between extremes. Officials struggled to balance compassion for society's most vulnerable—many of whom suffer from mental illness or drug addiction—with the concerns of residents and businesses tired of tiptoeing around faeces and needles. Inaction led to a political reckoning in cities such as San Francisco, where the mayor in charge while homelessness and public drug use ballooned was ousted by a moderate reformer. A growing number of cities are offering a blunt solution. In 2024 the Supreme Court ruled in *Grants Pass v Johnson* that it was not cruel and unusual to punish homeless people for sleeping outside when they have nowhere else to go. More than 300 municipalities have since enacted camping restrictions, an approach with its own challenges. Business owners may be happier, but camping bans too often shift the homeless into hiding, hospitals and jails. Denver has had a camping ban on the books for years, but saw its unsheltered population surge nonetheless. In 2023, when Mr Johnston took office, nearly 1,500 people were living on the streets, a large number for a city with fewer than 730,000 residents. "People are moving out of blue cities that don't solve this problem," the mayor explains. So he declared a state of emergency over homelessness. Since then the number of people living outside has fallen by 64%. For several years overall homelessness continued to creep up (see chart) with some people sheltered but not permanently housed. Yet Denver recently turned a corner there, too. The city's total

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number of homeless fell by roughly 12% between 2025 and 2026.

Like many ambitious policies, Denver's plan has depended on targeted investment and relentless focus. First, the city used funds from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), Joe Biden's pandemic stimulus bill, to buy and lease new shelters. Roughly half of the \$158m the mayor's office reported spending on its initiative came from the federal government. New hotels and tiny-home communities added roughly 1,000 shelter units.

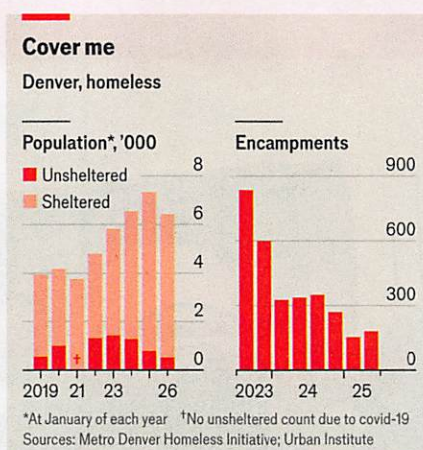
Chester Burney has been living at the Aspen, a converted hotel, for 16 months. "After my wife died, I spiralled," he recalls. "It's nice to have somewhere you can try to get back on track." Crucially, the programme includes not just housing but support. Each floor has "care co-ordinators" who help "guests" get new IDs, food stamps and housing. Mr Burney now works at a burger restaurant and is planning to move into his own place in August. At another project, Elati Village, tiny homes were built in a city car park for \$25,000 apiece. The usual NIMBY concerns may have been eased by a preference for neat cottages over camps.

"This entire block was encamped," says Cole Chandler, the head of Denver's Department of Housing Stability. He's starting at a post office where a tent city, home to more than 100 people, used to be. Now, the streets are clean. Rockies and Cubs fans amble towards the ballpark for an afternoon baseball game. The new shelters allowed officials to bring entire encampments inside at once. In many cities homeless people sometimes decline shelter because they can't bring their pets or belongings. So Denver allowed that.

Once the city cleared tents from an area, it closed that part of downtown to camping. Mr Johnson, the mayor of the streets, now attends a call each morning where officials discuss reports of new camps and plan their outreach. If someone erects a tent "you might be there for a day, if you're lucky," says Ana Miller, an advocate for homeless Denverites. Ms Miller laments this change. Yet the mayor (both mayors, in fact) might consider her testimony proof that the plan is working.

Denver's early success is not without qualifications. A double homicide rocked the Aspen shelter in 2024. About one-third of people who leave city-owned shelters end up in jail, back on the streets or dead. "Our biggest challenge right now is the throughput into permanent housing," admits Mr Johnston. A city budget crunch comes as the federal government is cutting housing vouchers and Medicaid, America's health insurance for the poor.

Indeed the biggest question for cities may be how much progress they can make without federal help. Mayors routinely



watch experiments elsewhere and adapt them for their own cities. "I like to think of Denver as the quintessential pragmatic approach," says Samantha Batko, who has been evaluating the city's policies at the Urban Institute, a think-tank. She suggests that local governments can make gains, even without ARPA dollars, by co-ordinating outreach and tracking new camps in real time. Indeed, Dallas saw success with a similar approach. Other mayors are eager to act. Mr Johnston recalls how three contacted him in a single day to ask about Denver's homelessness plan. "We want to do this," they told him. ■

Congressional elections

The politics of war

WASHINGTON, DC

Iran will loom over the midterms

NOVEMBER'S MIDTERM elections were always going to be difficult for Republicans. The last time the incumbent president's party gained seats in Congress in a midterm election was in 2002, when Americans rallied around George W. Bush after the September 11th attacks. Donald Trump's war in Iran will have a different impact. That's in part because Mr Bush's "war on terror" eventually left many Americans sceptical of foreign entanglements. It's also because this particular entanglement has been phenomenally unpopular, and will have stubborn after-effects.

Questions about the deal remain (see Middle East & Africa section), but a few things have become clear. The war has come at a cost to American treasure and prestige. Having burned through munitions, America's ability to deter other enemies has been weakened. The conflict has frayed its alliances and shocked global oil markets. For many on Capitol Hill, there is

also the vexing question of how the war's end will affect their job prospects.

Just 27% of voters thought America should attack Iran, according to an *Economist*/YouGov poll conducted a week before the first strikes. Mr Trump's magnetism within MAGA is such that Republican approval for the strikes jumped from 56% to 76% in the week after the attacks. However, wider support failed to materialise. By early June approval of the war was negligible among Democrats (7%), low among independents (18%) and had even slackened among Republicans (59%). A poll conducted on the eve of the deal's announcement showed that more than half of self-identified MAGA supporters thought the country should push for one as soon as possible.

However, the deal gives Republicans on Capitol Hill little relief, as a matter of policy or politics. A handful are blunt in their assessments. "Reagan is rolling over in his grave", said Bill Cassidy, an outgoing Republican senator. "Giving billions of dollars to theocratic lunatics who want to murder us is not a good idea," observed Ted Cruz, another Republican senator. Many Republican colleagues share their concern, more quietly. MAGAsphere critics are less shy. On June 17th Ben Shapiro, an Iran hawk, called the deal "a disaster". Tucker Carlson, another right-wing commentator, said the conflict was ending "not a moment too soon", but that the agreement made Iran a "major player".

The biggest concern, for vulnerable Republicans, is the war's effect on prices. News of a deal sent average petrol prices falling by about 12% from their peak in May, but they remain 35% higher than before the war. It will take time to clear Hormuz of mines and return crude output to pre-war levels. America also has fewer buffers against another supply shock. Since March the administration has tried to blunt high oil prices by releasing barrels from the Strategic Petroleum Reserve. It is now emptier than at any point since 1983, leaving Mr Trump less able to respond should talks with Iran falter or a summer hurricane disrupt American refineries.

For Democrats, this is a political gift. "It combines both an unwanted foreign military adventure with a direct hit to household finances," enthuses a senior Democratic aide. "I can't overstate how big of a political disaster this is for any Republican." Republican strategists remain optimistic, at least on the record. "Politically, the midterms are light-years away," insists Charlie Gerow, a Republican strategist from Pennsylvania. "If it's off the front pages for four or five months, I don't think this is going to have a political impact," says Ford O'Connell, a Republican strategist. The party's best hope may be a big new distraction. Mr Trump has many talents, but that is his speciality. ■