

Home is where you hang your hat, if the Supreme Court agrees.

For many, home means sleeping in a dwelling. For others, home means living and sleeping on the street. A new Supreme Court ruling favors the former.

On June 28, 2024, the Supreme Court reaffirmed the definition of 'home', granting authorities the right to enforce public sleeping and camping bans. The ruling allows state and local leaders to impose fines, arrest people experiencing homelessness, and threaten jail time for those who refuse to move indoors. These changes to the law will allow cities and states to remove unsafe encampments. The goal is to improve health and public safety for all in the community.

Many U.S. cities with high rates of homelessness, especially on the West Coast, are relieved to hear this ruling. Open drug use, untreated mental health issues, and unsanitary living conditions are serious concerns for those experiencing homelessness and housed residents alike. Hopefully, the Supreme Court's ruling will enable city officials to improve the living conditions and quality of life for housed and unhoused residents by setting and enforcing clear boundaries.

Many officials on the West Coast agree with the sentiments expressed by the Mayor of San Diego, Todd Gloria: "This ruling brings much-needed clarity to how the city can enforce our laws against unsafe encampments; however,...we intend to continue to pursue additional beds...to help people off the street and get them connected to care and resources" (<https://fox5sandiego.com/news/local-news/san-diego-mayor-responds-to-supreme-courts-homeless-encampmentsdecision/?ipid=promo-link-block4>).

While the Supreme Court's decision permits cities and states to implement punitive measures, many hope interest groups will focus on how these changes can enhance rehabilitation and support for the homeless. For example, the City of San Diego is already exploring alternative measures to meet the demand for shelter. With the cost of living increasing across the country, the proximity to the US-Mexico border, and the year-round mild weather, San Diego County is home to over 10,000 unhoused people. Beginning in June 2023, the city opened two campgrounds for homeless San Diegans and "established the Safe Sleeping Program, which offers safe, legal space as an alternative to traditional congregate shelters for people experiencing homelessness" (<https://www.sandiego.gov/homelessness-strategies-and-solutions/services/safe-sleeping-program>). Such programs intend to provide security, bathrooms, showers, meals, and connections to housing for people experiencing homelessness.