



# HOUSE

ON

# FIRE:

HOUSING + CLIMATE CRISIS,  
HOUSING + CLIMATE RESISTANCE



ERIN GOODLING



How is climate change affecting people living unhoused?



How are people living unhoused finding ways to survive, thrive, and fight for a more just future?





More + more people are feeling the effects of climate change.



One of the most serious climate change consequences has been increased intensity + frequency of catastrophic wildfires in the western US. Millions of acres of forest + thousands of homes burn each year.



For generations, west coast Indigenous peoples such as the Karuk, Yurok, and Klamath have used regular prescribed burns to enhance plant + medicine species production, improve hunting conditions, ease travel, influence hydrologic cycles — and protect from the brush build up that fuels larger, hotter, more catastrophic fires. While fire can indeed be dangerous, framing wildfire as a “natural disaster” over which humans have little control is not accurate. Humans have long co-evolved with fire.

You have deer meat, elk, and a lot of times associated with these acorn groves are riparian plants such as hazel, muck orange, or other foods + fibres, materials that prefer fire. The use of these materials is dependent upon these prescribed burns. ... It affects all in a reciprocal manner ... The place becomes a desert without cultural burns.



Beginning in the mid-1800s, the US government instituted fire suppression policies, in an effort to enhance conifer growth and boost timber profits. Laws made it a criminal offense to practice prescribed burn traditions, with dire cultural + ecological consequences.



The effects of nearly two centuries of fire suppression combine with impacts of the fossil fuel industry, suburban sprawl, industrial agriculture, and more. As a result, the western US has become a dangerous tinderbox of dense, low-diversity coniferous forests, susceptible to catastrophic wildfires. But it doesn't have to be this way.



Indigenous people + allies continue to survive, thrive, + fight back against settler colonial fire management regimes + other forms of violence.

People living unhoused are amongst the most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change in the US. Freezing temperatures, extreme heat, hurricanes, winter ice + snow storms, rainstorms, dust storms - and wildfire - all make life very difficult for people experiencing homelessness.



During the fires with all the smoke, there were breathing issues. People in my community were having sore throats and losing their voice. Masks were sold out. People got respiratory distress from it. People were just dealing with it.

... There are people who've been degraded so much from society that they feel like they deserve nothing better... For folks living outside, there's no escape.

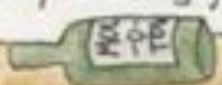


In an interlinked housing + climate crisis, more + more people are becoming unhoused, and more + more are living in fire-prone areas.

Cooking and staying warm with an open flame can be dangerous, especially during wildfire season.



And Vigilantes sometimes take advantage of the commonness of accidental encampment fires. They use arson to evict, terrorize, injure, + murder unhoused people. They wish people living unhoused would disappear, and they know they will likely get away with it.

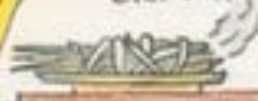


Yet, fire is necessary for survival for many folks living unhoused.

It provides warmth. Sustenance. Community.



It is a life-giving element.



At encampments, self-governed villages, and other places unhoused people create communities, folks go to great lengths to use fire as safely as possible, to mitigate risks.

We do the best we can. We have set rules. No open flames. No cooking inside. And we do have fire extinguishers.

We don't cook in our tents. All cooking is out in the open. We really rely on each other to prevent fires.

We keep the area around our tents tidy. That way, if a fire comes through we can get out more easily.

I lost a few friends due to fire. Now we have a jug of water on hand.

We keep our fire rings away from tents. We're careful smoking during fire season.



Why are so many people living unhoused, and in fire-prone places, today? Between the Great Depression and the early 1980s, mass homelessness did not exist in the US. But by 1985 the federal government



cut funding for affordable housing by nearly 80%, leaving little social safety net.

These cuts occurred within a broader housing + property system that prioritizes profits over people, built on stolen land with the labor of stolen lives. Settler colonialism, white supremacy, and racial capitalism + their uneven impacts are ongoing today. Police continue to carry out their founding mission: protecting (white people's) property.

Indigenous and Black people are over-represented in the unhoused population, as are Latinx people, trans people, queer folks, people with disabilities, elders, and young people. In total, more than 3.5 million people experience homelessness in the US each year. Many more are precariously housed or under-housed, living doubled or tripled up, without running water, or in dangerous structures. People draw on the strengths of each other and their ancestors to survive and fight these systems of oppression.





Rather than reinstate old levels of affordable housing — or give land back, institute reparations, or reimagine a new, more liberatory housing system — the go-to solutions to homelessness have been shelters and criminalization.



Criminalization is the practice of evicting, citing, fining, arresting, + incarcerating people for conducting basic survival activities in public.



Harrassed, cited, or arrested for sleeping

82%

For sitting or lying down

77%

For loitering (aka standing still)

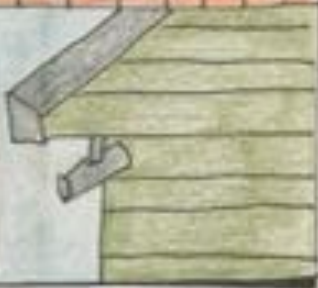
75%

Every single one of the largest cities in the US have laws making it illegal to sleep, sit, hang out, or share food in public space. In 2017, more than half of all arrests in Portland, OR were of people living unhoused, for instance.

In a survey of nearly 6700 people living unhoused across 5 western US states, the overwhelming majority had experienced criminalization.

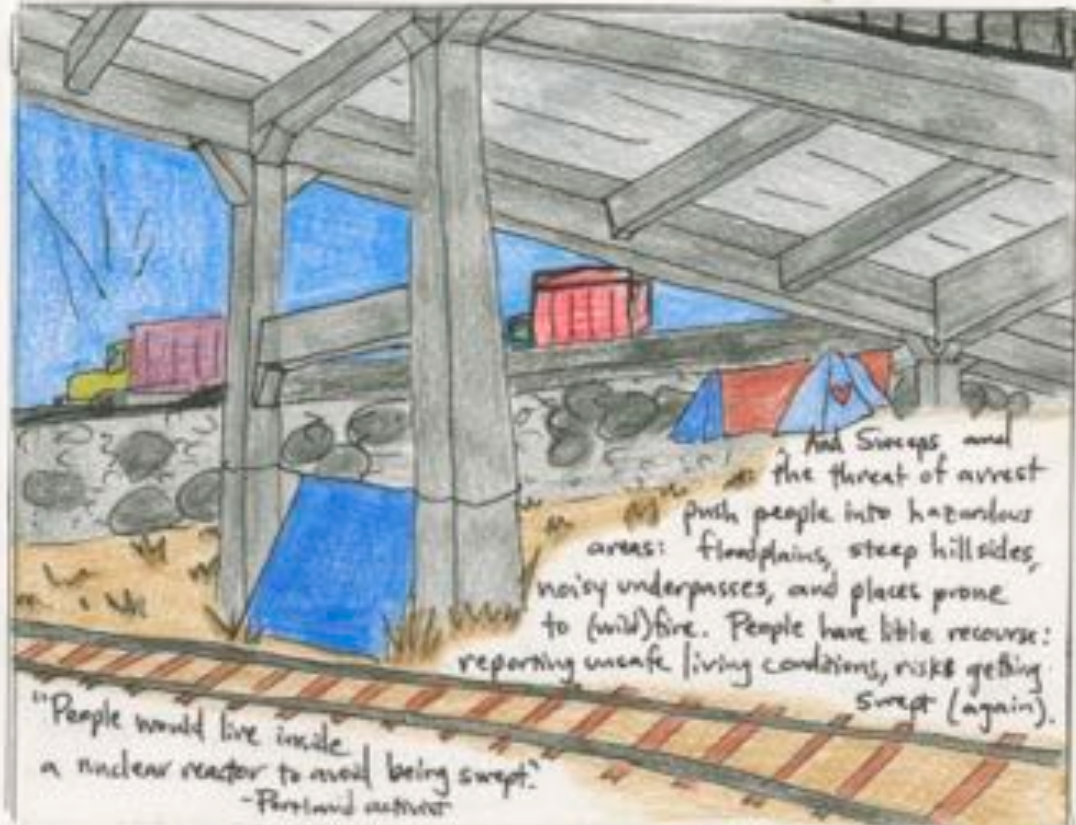
NO  
CAMPING  
ALLOWED

TOW  
NOTICE



Sweeps + the constant threat of sweeps are integral to criminalization. Sweeps - existing - banish people from their neighborhoods + cities. They cause people to lose survival gear, ID, medicine, treasured mementos, communities. Trapping people in an endless cycle of displacement, sweeps are incredibly traumatic.





And Sweeps and the threat of arrest push people into hazardous areas: floodplains, steep hillsides, noisy underpasses, and places prone to (wild)fire. People have little recourse: reporting unsafe living conditions, risks getting swept (again).

"People would live inside a nuclear reactor to avoid being swept."  
-Portland activist

Everyone, from politicians to business owners, environmentalists to homeowners, advocate for a compassionate response to homelessness. Yet, "concerns" about public safety and the welfare of unhoused people often end up simply justifying MORE Sweeps.

**COMPASSIONATE MENTAL HEALTH**

**Deputy mayor for public safety moves RV**

**EMERGENCY**

**SE camp puts resident in danger**

**SHOOTS**

**TOXIC SO**

**WILDFIRE**

**SHEDS**

**TOILETS**

**WATER POLLUTED**

**CARE COURTS**

**FLOODING**

**PUBLIC HEALTH**

with debris + fire, Camp is a safety risk for residents

Concerns about fire safety are especially weaponized, providing justification to sweep + further criminalize people with nowhere else to go.

"The camp was high-risk," says police chief. "Moving it out is for resident's own good."

9

Complementing criminalization, shelters are the other main way our society has attempted to mitigate the effects of visible homelessness.

In fact, in many ways, shelters are little but an extension of the carceral system. For so many people, for so many reasons, shelters are simply not a viable option. And without a pathway to actual affordable housing, shelters do little to solve homelessness.

### SHELTER RULES

- 1) 9pm curfew.
- 2) No pets.
- 3) No couples.
- 4) 1 bag only.
- 5) Line up at 7pm, opens at 8pm.
- 6) Mandatory church service.
- 7) Max stay: 7 days.
- 8) No trans people.
- 9) No complaining.
- 10) 3% chance of housing placement.



All of this - sweeps, criminalization, shelter rules, climate change, exposure to hazards, (wild)fire - impacts some people living unhoused in different + more intense ways than others, along lines of race, gender, immigration status, (dis)ability, and more. Decisions about where to sleep, how much to carry, with whom to hang around, + whether or not to strike a match, for instance, weigh heavy on the minds of most unhoused folks. And such decisions can be especially pivotal for those who are particularly vulnerable to trauma and premature death at the hands of the police + the structures they protect. 10



The Southern Oregon city of Medford and surrounding areas have been ground zero for the fire politics that sit at the intersection of racialized homelessness and climate change.



When Covid-19 began in spring 2020, officials segregated unhoused people to sections of a 20-mile trail called the Bear Creek Greenway. They instructed people to shelter in place, and provided food and port-a-botties.

In late summer 2020, the Alameda and Obonchain fires burned 4,000+ homes in the Medford area, as well as stretches of the greenway.



People affected by the fires found strength in each other. Many found refuge together with others, forming communities in nearby store and restaurant parking lots.

Hawthorne Park is one place where people came together to support one another in the aftermath of the fires. Earlier in the summer, at the start of the national uprisings for racial justice, the park had become a mutual aid hub. People committed to the Black Lives Matter movement converged to support unhoused neighbors and uplift multiple issues intersecting with racial injustice.



After the fires, local right-wing militia groups began terrorizing park residents and spreading rumors that BLM activists were "running the park" and had started the Almeda Fire, and that no one there was a "real" fire victim.



On September 22, twenty-four police cars arrived at Hawthorne Park. Officers told everyone the park was closed and they had to leave immediately. They arrested eleven residents and supporters, including an NPR reporter who had been covering the wildfire.

A local activist explains:

There's already this existing tension... going up to the 2020 election. People are starting to worry. There's a civil war about to break out. Tension is just fucking high. And then people don't believe in climate change. Other people are like, "we've never experienced this before, so it must be related to the communists taking over Hawthorne Park."



7 months later, in April 2021, Medford officials made it a crime to sleep or camp in many places — including along the Bear Creek Greenway. Infractions became punishable by \$500 fine and 30 days in jail, as Class C misdemeanors.

FROM THE DESK OF BRIL MITTON  
MEDFORD DEPUTY CITY ATTORNEY  
...  
Prohibiting sleeping on the greenways during fire season is for the protection of unhoused individuals as well as other community members....



Medford police began sweeping people off the greenway in earnest, including T-bone. T-bone was a "central pillar of support" for the entire unhoused community, providing safe camping space, a communal place to congregate, food, + medical supplies. T-bone and supporters fought to resist his eviction; 3 were arrested.

FREE CAMPING

EVERY ONE DESERVES PLACE TO SLEEP

STOP THE SWEEPS



Camping bans and criminalization all very much fits in with fire suppression and settler colonialism that's caused destruction of the environment, that's caused these fires. We live in a region with a fire ecology; that's the fucking reality... I'm interested in how we can change this narrative around the causes of fire. That we should choose between [protecting] people and the environment is a bullshit paradigm... Unhoused people are who climate change and criminalization are affecting MOST.

<sup>the concept of private</sup>  
Totally. And property is so venerated in this country that those without property to call their own are seen as a threat to property values by their mere presence, but also by the very act of survival outside of — but in relation to — a privately propertied world. Even as it burns.



Let's re-cap: Catastrophic wildfire is one of the most severe consequences of climate change. And such wildfires, themselves, exacerbate homelessness, burning thousands of houses constructed in fire-prone areas each year.

And yet, fire is necessary for surviving life unhoused in many places.

And yet, cooking and staying warm with an open flame can be dangerous — especially given wildfire risks, and **ESPECIALLY** given society's commitment to warehousing and criminalizing, rather than supporting people living unhoused.



When unhoused people are impacted by (wild) fire, they are even often denied FEMA + Red Cross support!

Instead of...

- Working with unhoused communities to mitigate fire risks.
- Halting colonial timber management regimes.
- Cutting greenhouse gas emissions.
- Defunding police.
- Funding a robust, housing-based social safety net.
- Returning stolen land.
- Abolishing prisons.
- Paying reparations.

... people living unhoused are criminalized, pushed into fire-prone places, blamed for wildfires, and swept again.





In Madford and all across the US, people are banding together to stop the sweeps + bring an end to the criminalization of racialized poverty, to abolish police and prisons. People are fighting for housing for all, land back, racial justice, reproductive justice, climate justice, and more.



And in the midst of these struggles, we are building a new world in the shell of the old. People are creating self-governed communities; Mutual aid networks; Relations of reciprocity with each other, the land, and non-human species. People are helping each other to survive and live out dreams of a more just world.

# House Keys Not Sweeps

## Campaign Demands

1. End the practices of sweeping encampments, towing vehicles, and stealing and destroying belongings and structures houseless people create to keep themselves and their communities safe from the elements.
2. End the criminalization of houseless people, without justifying other types of criminalization, by ending the practices of move-along orders, harassment, ticketing and arresting houseless people for existing outside.
3. Immediately halt government support of the hate and violence perpetuated by vigilante groups.
4. Create and fund access to sanitation and hygiene infrastructure that adequately and quickly responds to the growing number of houseless people.
5. Create and fund a full array of health care treatments, including harm reduction resources that appropriately respond to the needs of poor and houseless people.
6. Create affordable housing units for poor and houseless people, providing adequate funding for the development and maintenance with long term subsidies.
7. Overturn unjust policies and procedures that deny access to deeply affordable housing based on economic status and lived experiences of extreme poverty including homelessness.
8. Stop all revenue collection and public funding of BIDs.
9. End all funding of and support for hostile architecture that limits people's ability to access and utilize public spaces.



[www.wraphome.org](http://www.wraphome.org)

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**Page 16:** To learn more about the national House Keys Not Sweeps campaign, created and led by organizations led by and accountable to people living unhoused, go to [www.wraphome.org](http://www.wraphome.org).

## About this Project

*House On Fire: Housing & Climate Crisis, Housing & Climate Resistance* grew out of RESTING SAFE, a project of Right 2 Survive (R2S). With a mission to educate people about the civil, constitutional, and human rights of people living unhoused, R2S is a Portland, Oregon-based grassroots organization led by unhoused and formerly unhoused people and supporters. R2S has established two self-governed houseless communities in Portland, has helped develop similar communities in over a dozen US cities, and has been integral to a national grassroots movement for "House Keys Not Sweeps". For more on RESTING SAFE, go to [www.restingsafe.org](http://www.restingsafe.org).

All quotes except those on page 2 come from phone interviews with self-identified houseless community representatives across the US, mainly connected to self-governed communities, conducted between August 2018 and September 2019 by Lisa Fink and Erin Goodling as part of the larger ongoing participatory action research project, RESTING SAFE. Interview questions focused on the kinds of environmental hazards people face across the US; the relationship between hazard exposure and criminalization; and how communities are working to mitigate hazards. Fire rose to the top as one of the most common hazards mentioned, and certainly one of the most complex: within the nearly 50 interviews that we conducted, more than half of participants described fire danger as "concerning" or "very concerning". To supplement phone interviews, we took detailed fieldnotes when fire arose as a concern in day-to-day work with R2S and other grassroots groups, including during the 2020 wildfires and during mutual aid outreach from summer 2020 through summer 2021; conducted a handful of additional interviews explicitly focused on (wild)fire with unhoused people and supporters in spring 2021; and consulted fire and homelessness-related media reports from 2016-2021.

This zine would not have been possible without the contributions and collaborations over the years of many people who have worked on the RESTING SAFE Project, including Lisa Fay, Ibrahim Mubarack, Jeff Liddicoat, Hannah Buehler, Lisa Fink, Scout Zabel, Alex Gillow-Wiles, Laquida Landford, Aileen McPherson, Quinn Bicer, Nava Rastegar, Chris Hawn, Nathan McClintock, Melanie Malone, Anthony Levenda, Dillon Mahmoudi, Sarah Jewett, Amy Coplen, and other supporters. Thanks are also due to T Edward Bak, Jade Arrellano, and Haruka, for feedback on the zine. Critically, the work of the Western Regional Advocacy Project is integral to depictions of criminalization portrayed here.

RESTING SAFE has received support from the Antipode Foundation, the National Science Foundation, the Union for Concerned Scientists, Social Justice Fund Northwest, and Meyer Memorial Trust.



# FIRE SAFETY

Waystostaydry,  
Keepwarm, and cook,  
With Fire Prevention as Priority.



### Preventive measures:

- Be VERY cautious about using any combustible (candle, sterno can, etc.) in a small space, especially tents; gases can linger.
- Lack of ventilation can cause carbon monoxide poisoning and death.
- Do NOT fall asleep inside a vehicle with the engine running.
- Do not leave fires and candles unattended.
- Candles tip easily; tents are highly flammable.
- Use caution! Highly flammable items include: Tents, tarps, tent waterproofing, over-charged batteries, matches left in the sun or in a hot vehicle.
- Designate a place for cigarette butts, filled with water or sand.
- Be especially cautious in dry conditions—even vehicle exhaust sparking can create brush fires.

### Behavioral precautions:

- **Develop a fire escape plan; clear a path; make sure everyone in your site knows the plan.**
- Designate one person on trash duty each day; develop a system and hold each other accountable.
- Make sure that everyone in your group knows how to extinguish a fire.
- Move slowly near fires.
- Be cautious with long hair and loose clothing.
- Avoid starting fires while intoxicated.

### Propane cooking:

- **Store propane tanks away from fire and heat, in the shade. Tanks can explode, even when empty!!! Do not store extra tanks.**
- Periodically check for faulty hoses, bad, connections, leaks.
- Remember: water will NOT put out a grease fire; have a bucket of sand or dirt close by. If possible, get a fire extinguisher.

### Wildfires:

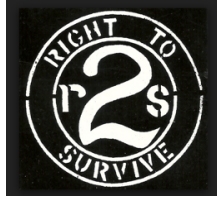
- Stay hydrated!
- Get a "N95" mask if possible, otherwise cover mouth and nose with a wet washcloth or bandana

### Lightning:

- If at all possible, **go indoors**. If not, stay at lower elevations, avoid mountain tops and steep slopes. **Do not stay in your tent.**
- **Crouch in a tight ball, close to the ground; wear rubber soled shoes.**
- Seek cover in forested areas; stay away from tall trees in open areas
- Avoid metal fences, power lines, handrails, and other metal objects.

RESTING  
SAFE

[www.restingsafe.org](http://www.restingsafe.org)



# FIRE SAFETY

**Above all: Keep your camp clutter-free, including clothes, papers, bags, etc. This is one of the most important fire prevention measures you can take!**

### Campfires:

- Clear all debris from the area
- Make your fire pit at least 30 feet from tents, clothes, flammable furniture, etc.
- Create a ring out of large rocks (NOT river rocks—they can explode), a steel drum, or something similar
- Have fire suppressant prepared, nearby: dirt or sand.
- Sparks cause fires; keep area clear of leaves and debris.
- Do NOT leave fires unattended. Put out fire fully before leaving.
- Designate one "fire-tender" each day/night, who cares for the fire and commits to staying awake
- Only put wood and paper in your campfire; no glass, river rocks, lighter, aerosols, etc.