In a nation where the wealthiest one percent today claims its biggest share since 1928, a startling trend is taking place. A number of major cities are enacting laws that prohibit life-sustaining activities like panhandling, solicitation or begging in public spaces. These laws don’t discriminate. Whether you’re feeding a 9-year-old or a 69-year-old, it’s considered a punishable offense.

In Dallas, a recent ordinance penalizes charities, churches and other organizations that serve food to the needy outside of designated areas of the city. Anyone in violation can be fined up to $2,000.

Ouch.

In Santa Monica, California, a notorious law literally bans offering even a cookie to any member of the “public” without a city permit.

Other cities, including Atlanta and Miami, have issued or are considering measures to deter groups like churches and communities of faith from continuing with their food ministries in parks and on the streets.

Here at the National Coalition for the Homeless, we think such laws are criminal. You can read our new report, “Feeding Intolerance: Prohibitions on Sharing Food with People Experiencing Homelessness,” at www.nationalhomeless.org.

“Our cities haven’t had so many homeless people since the Great Depression.”

- City of Philadelphia

Little wonder it’s getting harder for elected officials to sweep the problem under the table and out of public view. It seems those homeless people just won’t go away. That includes more than 300,000 kids. They’re at least one-fourth of the current homeless population.

With so much prosperity in our nation, how did this happen, anyway? During the 1980s, the typical homeless family was a single mom on welfare. Today, more and more of the working poor are being forced to turn to emergency shelters, which are overcrowded and often dirty and unsafe.

According to the Institute for Children & Poverty, in New York City alone, one-third of requests for shelter by homeless families were denied in 2007. Which doesn’t make staying together any easier. Some kids are put in charge of their younger siblings to beg on the streets.

Some run away from violence and abuse. Some are simply abandoned by parents no longer able to feed, cloth, shelter or protect them.

We can’t afford to continue leaving America’s young people in the hands of the law. There’s no future in it.

When minors are arrested and charged under these various anti-feeding measures, they develop a criminal record. It becomes harder to obtain employment, or supportive housing, which, on average, costs two to three times less than jail.

Not all the news is bad.

For the first time, communities are talking of ending homelessness along with developing ten-year plans to do so.

Virtually every city in the nation has considered innovative model programs, such as Housing First, to help people get out of the desperate cycle of poverty and homelessness.

To be effective in the long-term, these programs must go beyond the pilot stage.

“You can’t fill an empty stomach with sympathy.”

- Andrew Bernstein, The Observer

Can one of the world’s most prosperous nations afford to starve its young minds, let alone their stomachs?

Well, an agriculture bill that would have boosted funding and food-stamp allotments has languished in Congress, where no one seems to go hungry or need a place to sleep every night.

Equally alarming, donations from a federal program that buys excess crops from farmers and gives them to food banks have fallen drastically, contributing to our nation’s worst emergency food shortage in years.

With the constant search for food and shelter, it’s no surprise the Institute for Children & Poverty reports half of all homeless children attend three different schools in one year.

If they attend school at all.

With over 75 percent of homeless kids performing below grade level in reading, the National Coalition for the Homeless (NCH) constantly fights for their equal treatment in the public school system.

Our efforts have directly contributed toward amendments to the Education for Homeless Children and Youths program, which entitles homeless kids to a free, appropriate education.

Through intensive lobbying efforts on Capitol Hill, we have secured funding for this landmark effort, which mandated the elimination of barriers to enrollment, attendance and success in school.

There’s so much more to do, especially during this critical election year.

Please become a member of NCH and join us in bringing America home. Consider making a financial contribution to support our efforts, too.

Lend a helping hand to America’s homeless people before it becomes a real crime.

Ask the presidential candidates what they plan to do about homelessness, and tell them what you’d like them to do.

http://obama.com/cty/download/index.php


Contact the Coalition at: info@nationalhomeless.org

or phone 202.263.8852 www.nationalhomeless.org

We depend on the kindness of strangers.