

THE PRESSURE ON PEOPLE LIVING ON THE STREETS IN BARCELONA GROWS

Barcelona's Pla Endreça initiative has intensified pressure on homeless individuals, forcing displacement and increasing police interventions. Reports from Arrels Foundation reveal belongings being confiscated, routines disrupted, and fines imposed for survival-related actions, such as "lack of cleanliness." While residents express concern for the mistreatment of homeless people, the Ombudsman warns that prioritising "excellence in public space" negatively impacts those who live on the streets. The need for social workers in municipal operations has been highlighted as a potential solution.



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Residents notice daily the increasing transformation of Barcelona into a city geared towards tourism. The battle over the use of public spaces and the fight of various groups to prevent private capital from taking over them is everlasting. So far this year, the “Ajuntament de Barcelona” (Barcelona City Council) closed Parc Güell for locals to host a private Louis Vuitton fashion show, shut down one of the city’s main streets for a Formula 1 race, and is now hosting America’s Cup, which has led to relocation, cancellation of local activities, and even the need for accreditation to access the neighbourhood.

This **conception of the city as a place to visit rather than live directly impacts residents, including those who live on the streets.** The host of big events in public spaces has come with the implementation of the so-called “Pla Endreça” (Clean-up Plan), which has made life even more difficult for those living on the streets, resulting in more fines and violations of their rights. Announced as a flagship initiative at the beginning of the current mayor’s term, it’s a municipal package that has led to the enforcement of ordinances affecting street life: civic, environmental, animal ownership, and public space regulations.

In July 2023, **the Ajuntament de Barcelona announced the beginning of the first phase of the “Pla Endreça,” aimed at cleaning up public spaces and increasing municipal police presence, linking cleanliness with security.** For the homeless people that Arrels Foundation assists, this phase has translated into actions where police and municipal cleaning services forcibly remove them from where they sleep or usually stay.

Threatening to throw away their belongings or doing so without warning, soaking people resting on the street, and throwing their blankets, cardboard, documentation, mobile phones, or medication in the trash are just some of the actions described by people we know who live outdoors. They also report that municipal police appear more frequently than before, often daily, and at the same time. In some cases, they have even been threatened with having their pets taken away or fined because of it.

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'We've noticed increased police presence, especially in areas where people gather to sleep,' explains the Arrels street team, 'This disrupts the routines of those living on the street, many of which are tied to their survival: people have to stay on guard and wait for the Guàrdia Urbana (Urban Police) to arrive, for the cleaning to happen, wait for the ground to dry, and then put their things back in place. This can lead to missing turns at soup kitchens or losing access to basic services.'

FINED FOR A "LACK OF PERSONAL HYGIENE"

'I think some officials have me on the list. A police officer is supposed to serve the people, not harm them. I feel like it's an abuse of power. I've been fined for drinking in public, for shouting, for spitting...'

These are the words of Juan Antonio, someone we know through Arrels, who has accumulated about fourteen fines since the "Pla Endreça" started. Some are for things like *dropping cigarette butts on the street or for lack of cleanliness and personal hygiene*, 'they give me fines like they're just scraps of paper. How am I supposed to pay what they're asking?', he wonders.

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According to [the latest Arrels report on the situation of people living on the street in Barcelona](#), seven out of ten people living out in the open have no income. Since the "Pla Endreça" came into effect, the people we assist have received a total of around thirty fines. While the number has not increased compared to previous years, the amount to pay has been significantly higher. At Arrels, we know of individuals living on the streets who have accumulated thousands of euros in fines.

'In the streets, you're not supposed to stay; you should leave Barcelona.' This is the phrase that Víctor (pseudonym) recalls being told by the municipal police officer who fined him while he was asking for money. 'I don't have any money; I try to manage on my own to eat. Those of us who are on the streets, they move us, so we go somewhere else. What sense does it make to kick you off the street when that's where you live?', he reflects. Víctor has also been fined for publicly displaying his dog, something that hurt him deeply, as he has a strong bond with the animal and loves it dearly – 'They threatened to take him away from me. I explained that the dog lives with me and that if I leave the house for eight hours, he comes with me,' he says.

Ombudsperson: 'the pursuit of "excellence in public space" sought by the Pla Endreça... could have a negative impact on homeless people, for whom public space is not only a shared space but also the space where they live and where they lack basic necessities.'

CONCERNED NEIGHBOURS

Last year, Arrels conducted a survey aimed at the general public. Notably, 78% of Barcelona residents surveyed agreed with the idea that municipal ordinances should protect, rather than penalise, those actions that homeless people must do to survive on the streets.

One example of this perspective is given by Josep, a volunteer at Arrels who is concerned about the situation of a person he sees every day near his workplace. 'I work right next to the spot where a young girl stays. She sleeps there, takes some cardboard, and builds her little shelter. My wife and I help her whenever we can. But for the past few months, the police and cleaning services come every day at 8:30 a.m. and go straight to clean the spot where she stays. Recently, they threw away all her belongings: her backpack, her phone, the clothes I had brought her. They keep doing it; they only clean the spot where she stays. They're not even trying to hide it anymore,' he explains.

To highlight this situation, in November 2023, Arrels submitted a complaint to the "Síndic de greuges de Barcelona" (Ombudsman of Barcelona), listing some of the actions made under the "Pla Endreça". The Ombudsman expressed concern that 'the pursuit of "excellence in public space" sought by the Pla Endreça, with a focus on cleanliness and order, could have a negative impact on homeless people, for whom public space is not only a shared space but also the space where they live and where they lack basic necessities.'

Regarding police activity, the Ombudsman notes that 'police actions targeting homeless individuals have intensified,' specifically those who 'sleep or remain in public spaces,' coinciding with 'the beginning of the Pla Endreça.'

Additionally, the Ombudsman's resolution recommends that police actions be recorded to ensure documentation and traceability: 'The Ombudsman's Office has not been able to confirm any changes or improvements that the 'Pla Endreça' might bring concerning the municipal social teams operating in public spaces,' it says, adding that it is necessary to 'consider the inclusion of social workers in joint operations between the Guàrdia Urbana and cleaning services.'