

# Clint Olivier: Six ways to battle Fresno's destructive vagrants

By Clint  
Olivier

Nearly everyone in Fresno knows our city's neighborhoods are under siege.

We are facing the greatest crisis since the specter of bankruptcy loomed over City Hall five years ago. The damage done to our city by the homeless is out of control. They have overrun nearly every park, along with hundreds of street corners and shopping centers. The trash and vandalism they leave in their wake are costing residents and business owners hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of dollars in cleanup fees and repairs each year. Complaint calls are lighting up city switchboards, but thus far, City Hall has refused to respond in any meaningful way.

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The federal government claims there are 1,183 homeless people in Fresno, down a jaw-dropping 53 percent from the 2,537 who reportedly roamed our streets two years ago. So what happened to them? The truth is they didn't go anywhere. The homeless are still here and thriving, thousands of them, rifling through our trash cans to steal ratepayer-owned recyclables, panhandling on medians, breaking into our homes and garages, burning down vacant buildings and defecating on our children's playgrounds.

But let's back up. It's important to clarify who these blight-makers are. Allow me to suggest the use of a new word: vagrant. There is a marked difference between a person who is homeless and a vagrant. Homeless people are on the streets temporarily. For vagrants, homelessness is a permanent condition. Homeless people take advantage of programs like Mayor Ashley Swearengin's First Steps Home, while vagrants carry power drills in their shopping carts to break into vacant houses. Homeless people go to the Poverello House or the Fresno Rescue Mission for assistance. Vagrants panhandle for money for cigarettes, alcohol and drugs. Homeless people have fallen on hard times. Vagrants cause hard times for others.

My office receives at least one call a day from residents and business owners who are at their wits' end because of vagrants and the problems they cause. I have been contacted by young people, old people, blue collars, white collars, English-only speakers, Spanish-only speakers, tuxedo shop owners, insurance brokers, car dealers, restaurant owners, undertakers, churches, Masonic lodges and even a psychic.

The No. 1 request to come out of a Young Men and Boys of Color meeting I attended near downtown was to work to keep vagrants out of the neighborhood. They all beg me to do something, anything to help them secure their homes and businesses.

At a Head Start parents meeting at Romain Playground in Central Fresno last week, I met with mothers who are fuming over the encampments that spring up overnight in the park, the piles of trash and feces vagrants leave behind and the danger they pose to kids' safety.

In the past week, a pair of vagrants fought each other outside the classroom door until police arrived. Parents are terrified, and rightly so. Many vagrants use dangerous drugs, carry weapons and have outstanding warrants for a variety of serious crimes. One young mom summed it up very succinctly: "We have to make a change." I agree, Eloisa. And this is for you.



I am proposing six common-sense measures that will immediately begin to remove the chokehold that vagrants have on our city:

- Increase the Fresno Police Department's Homeless Task Force from five to 12 officers.
- Implement and staff a citywide park ranger program to patrol our parks and park restrooms, which have become dens of drug use and filth.
- Begin a public information campaign to discourage residents from giving cash to panhandlers and instead donate to community organizations that fund homeless services.
- Begin an outreach campaign to neighborhood recycling centers asking them to immediately cease accepting recyclables from vagrants.
- Conduct an immediate sweep to reclaim stolen shopping carts from vagrants.
- Convene a committee consisting of the mayor, city manager, city staff, council members and community leaders, similar to the Blight Task Force, to work toward comprehensively addressing vagrancy.

As a community, we have tackled some important topics over the past five years. All pale in comparison to what is taking place largely unabated in our city. Fresno's biggest problem is not that we don't have enough parks; it's that vagrants are destroying the ones we already have.

It's not that we have too many boarded-up houses, it's that they become home to vagrants who do meth and oftentimes burn them to the ground.

The greatest issue we face isn't that City Hall is not business friendly, it's that City Hall is entirely too friendly – to vagrants.

We must act.

Clint Olivier represents District 7 on the Fresno City Council.