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Daily OPINION

LOGO BY COLBI LORANGER, ASSOCIATE ARTIST EDITOR/THE DAILY CAMPUS

Homeless people do not owe you explanations



Hostile architecture in the form of benches. Benches were placed in front of the Westbahnhof train station, Vienna to prevent people from lying down. PHOTO COURTESY OF WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

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"Just get a job."

"I feel like it's their own fault."

"If I give them money, they'll just waste it on drugs."

These are all things I have heard in conversations about homeless people. Whether in a big city or small town, sentiments remain the same. Homeless people are just not deserving of our empathy. For some reason, the empathy and values we are taught at a young age are forsaken in favor of casting judgment and assumptions onto complete strangers rather than simply empathizing with people in an unfortunate circumstance. This attitude comes from the judgment American culture has built into its public spaces.

Hostile architecture restricts where people can rest or simply sit down, treating homelessness as some unsightly disease to be shooed out of the public eye. Your exhaustion not only matters less than someone else's discomfort at its sight — it— it is government-funded.

The same judgment follows onto public transport. Someone sleeping on a train with their belongings is suddenly deemed a threat for the crime of not being able to afford a home. In the South, where public transport is less common than driving, stereotypes and judgment are even more common.

As a Texan, the number of times I have heard someone complain about homeless people simply existing on the DART or their buses to Austin is disappointing, but sadly unsurprising. Public transport can be dangerous, but the mere presence of homeless people is not an indicator of danger, especially not when people are just sleeping or sitting with their belongings. Responding to threatening behavior is reasonable; judging others for not having somewhere to go in a society focused on dehumanizing homeless people is prejudice.

The inability to empathize with homeless people is an attitude we should not accept so casually. Empathy does not require an identical life experience. You have been hungry. You have needed sleep. You have wanted privacy, safety and somewhere to rest. Why are those needs suddenly incomprehensible when someone is unable to meet them?

Instead, we scrutinize the unhoused based on broad generalizations. Surely there must be some misdeed we haven't noticed, rather than examining the system that put them here.

We construct our view of an entire person's life from a brief, five-second snapshot on a sidewalk. You cannot and do not know how many applications were submitted — every person called for support, how many shelters they contacted for help or a single thing about their life, struggles and setbacks.

Even the idea that homeless people should "just get a job" is a bold assertion that comes with a list of unanswered questions and assumptions. Where do they shower, wash their clothes or charge their phone? Without organized documents or an address, navigating employment and banking becomes harder.

Then comes the accusation that they must be squandering their money or are spending it on drugs or alcohol. No, not all homeless people are "addicts," but if they are, that fact deserves understanding more than broad assumptions.

People can be genetically predisposed to addiction and even though that susceptibility does not define someone, it still plays a role in recovery and the initial circumstances that led them to addiction in the first place. Demanding that someone overcome a chemical dependence while sleeping outside mistakes deprivation for treatment.

The government should reflect all these understandings about the circumstances behind homelessness.

Instead, New York's MTA is spending $1.1 billion pursuing new fare gates to prevent fare evasion. Fare compliance is not hostile architecture, but it begs the question: Where is the comparable urgency toward accessible housing? A government capable of funding fare compliance and benches that combat lying down can choose to fund subsidized and public housing.

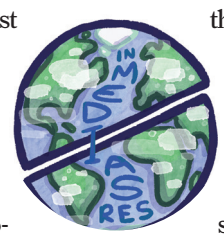
Governments can provide permanent housing without stipulations, invest in subsidized housing or just allocate more towards basic public infrastructure and services like public restrooms and low-barrier emergency shelters. Take, for example, Finland's "Housing First" approach, providing unconditional, permanent housing as a fundamental human right — giving the homeless the stability and foundation to get jobs or recover from addiction.

A car accident, sudden house fire or hospital visit is the only thing standing between you and the person across the sidewalk. No one is asking you to give your life savings to every homeless person on the street. But at the very least, you should understand that they are humans that deserve your respect and empathy.

IN MEDIAS RES: IN THE WEST BANK, THE WRONG WORDS FOUND

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In June, 200 prominent Israeli leaders signed an open letter to their government, led by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, demanding that it stop the attacks made against innocents in the West Bank by Israeli citizens. Among the signatories were two former prime ministers, over three dozen retired air force generals, the head of the nation's foreign and domestic services, a Nobel Laureate, several rabbis and one of Israel's most revered novelists, David Grossman.



In the face of Israel's ongoing war in Palestine, such defiance towards the government and the actions it has pursued in the West Bank is rare. Several signees of the letter are considered "hawks" in the conflict and have previously demanded further action in the conflict. What brought them together, however, was a shared outcry of what they referred to as "Jewish terrorism": the ongoing unlawful and violent displacement of Palestinian citizens, pursued by Israeli citizens building illegal settlements in sovereign territory. These Israeli citizens have been dubbed "settlers" by both their government and international legal authorities.

This term is highly inappropriate in the wake of the sustained violence and ethnic cleansing being undertaken by so-called "settlers." In short, a stronger and more accurate word is needed to hold these criminals linguistically accountable.

The issue with the term arises from its inherently positive connotation, cemented in history by the expansionism of the 19th-century American empire. During the United States' "Manifest Destiny" era, "settlers" was the word used to describe the pioneers who set out towards the untamed frontier, fantasized in the popular imagination as the "Wild West."

Historically, the word "settler" has been associated with a sense of rugged independence, bravery and self-reliance, granted by the tales of the Oregon Trail, Davy Crockett and spaghetti westerns. For Israeli "settlers," this term could not be further from the realities of the West Bank, where the actions of these renegade citizens have seen expansive state support. In an April 2025 visit to an illegal Israeli settlement, two Israeli ministers — Bezalel Smotrich and Orit Strock — distributed 19 state-funded all-terrain vehicles (ATVs), cameras and night-vision equipment to "settlers" in the Hebron area. The ministers went on to assure the "settlers" they had the support of the state government in spreading Zionism across the West Bank; the project was coordinated by the Israel Defense Forces.

Similarly, after the October 7th attacks, the Israeli government distributed military fatigues and assault rifles to its "settlers," making them harder to distinguish from figures of legal authority to indigenous Palestinians. In the West Bank, there is no stalwart individualism or idealistic resourcefulness to be found. There is only state-supported colonialism, with citizens being used as agents for the takeover and annexation of a foreign territory.

Further issue with the term "settler" is taken with its placement in the Terra Nullius mythos of empty land. Traditional narratives frame settlers as builders who clear wilderness, establish farms and build towns within the context of an untamed land. These settlers are often depicted in propaganda as bringers of civilization, order and light. A prominent example in history of this trend is John Gast's infamous "American Progress" painting, which has become synonymous with the genocide of the Indigenous peoples of the west.

Once again, this definition could not be further from the realities of occupied Palestine. Countless cases have categorized Israeli "settlers" as stealing and occupying land, homes and ranches in an unadventurous crime that finds itself similar in spirit to violent armed squatting. This historical trend has been followed since the creation of the state of Israel. During the Arab-Israeli war of 1948, Zionist paramilitaries and the Israeli military dispossessed and estimated 750,000 Palestinians of their land in a violent cleansing referred to in Arabic as "the Nakba," or "the Catastrophe." In the 80 years since, no civilization has been built by these violent acts. All that has changed has been the theft of centuries of family history and cultural ties to land stolen by "settlers" and the Israeli military.

"Terrorist" has begun to enter the public lexicon as a replacement for the word "settler." On Saturday, The United States ambassador to Israel condemned "settler" violence as an act of terror. The "Jewish terrorism" described by June's letter has previously been popularized by numerous Palestinian rights advocates. The definition fits. The United States Department of Homeland Security describes a "terrorist" as any individual participating in terrorism, defined as "a premeditated threat or act of violence against people, property, environmental, or economic targets to induce fear or to intimidate, coerce, or affect a government or civilian population." Whether this term will be applied at the international level remains to be seen. What is clear, however, is that the term "settler" must go.