

No place for mobile homeless

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People sleeping in their cars ain't news.

That's what a man living in a Volvo wagon in Seattle's "rolling slum," a car-camping colony in Ballard, told me two years ago. I met him while writing about the mobile homeless — people moneyed enough to own a car, but too poor to pay the rent. They park in industrial parts of town and make a life of it. Many work jobs. The story two years ago was that 100 or so had congregated in Ballard. It was Hooverville on wheels.

The story today is quite different. The problem is worse, and, if possible, even more invisible than it was before.

The number of car campers has surged. Last month, social-service groups held the One Night Count. For 20 years volunteers have tallied who is living on the streets.

This year they found that urban car camping soared 25 percent in King County. In Seattle, it's up 45 percent. The mobile homeless now are by far the largest group sleeping on this city's streets.

Yet out in lower Ballard, near where the Ballard Bridge touches down, the streets are mostly empty. The other night, in a 12-block area, I found only five people overnighing in vans or campers. The old rolling slum is gone.

What happened is the city told them to beat it.

"There were a lot of complaints from businesses and from Mars Hill Church," said Beth Miller, head of the Ballard Chamber of Commerce. "There were so many camped on the street that there wasn't much room for anyone else to park."

So the city put up signs: "No Parking. 2-5 a.m." That roused them all out of there.

It's true something had to be done. The Ballard colony had grown out of control. It was bigger than a tent city, yet unregulated. Trash was strewn around. Campfires were set on sidewalks. Two denizens died of heroin overdoses.

But here's the thing: All the city did was put up signs and then enforce them. At which time the slum predictably rolled off to ... somewhere else.

"We don't know where they went," Miller says. "We've heard that some moved into the residential areas."

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"It all seems shortsighted to me. We work to push the problem out of here. But then of course it moves over there."

A homeless advocate I spoke to called the city's crackdown "a cruelty campaign." To me it seems less cruel than dumb.

Faced with its own rolling slums, here's what a smarter city did. Santa Barbara, Calif., started a "Safe Parking" program. It allows people to park overnight in a dozen lots owned by the city, churches and businesses.

There are lots of rules. You have to have car insurance. No more than five vehicles per lot. You must leave in the morning.

Police there say the program hasn't ended street camping, but it is working. So why don't we try something like it here?

Because we don't want to be too inviting to the homeless?

Because it's dehumanizing to just give them parking lots?

Because the path of least resistance is to put up no-parking signs?

I don't know. I'd guess it goes to what that guy living in his Volvo said. People sleeping in cars ain't news. It wasn't story enough to matter much then. And it still ain't today.

Danny Westneat's column appears Wednesday and Sunday. Reach him at 206-464-2086 or dwestneat@seattletimes.com.

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