

# Science

FINDINGS

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*“Science affects the way we think together.”*  
*Lewis Thomas*

## Making a Home in the Forest: Nonrecreational Camping on National Forests and Grasslands



Over the past decade, the frequency of nonrecreational camping has become more noticeable nationwide on national forests. This has resulted in increased trash and resource degradation that is costly to remediate and affects the experience of other users of the area. Photo by Monika Derrien, USDA Forest Service.

*“To give aid to every poor man is far beyond the reach and power of every man... Care of the poor is incumbent on society as a whole.”*

—Benedict Spinoza, Dutch philosopher

Caring for the Land and Serving People—this has been the mission of the U.S. Forest Service since the agency’s creation in 1905. Who these *people* are has evolved over the years to encompass an even greater spectrum of society. People are communities that depend upon the national forests for economic revenue. People are recreationists seeking the national forests to connect with nature or fish. People are those who use the national forest to engage in cultural practices of

hunting and gathering. People are Americans and citizens from other countries.

Yet, in spite of this ever-expanding concept of people, there still remain people who are overlooked and underserved.

As a research social scientist with the Pacific Northwest (PNW) Research Station, Lee Cerveny studies people and how they interact with a national forest to inform how the Forest Service may better serve the public. Her research interests span how forest collaboratives can be more effective to how human values can inform forest planning.

Ten years ago, she and other scientists and recreation managers from the Pacific Northwest attended a recreation-focused, daylong workshop at the invitation of Cheryl Friesen, the

### IN SUMMARY

Homelessness is often associated with urban areas, yet since the Great Depression, national forests have served as a refuge for individuals and families. In recent years, more people are living on the national forests and grasslands, whether by choice or because of economic circumstances. Unfortunately, the presence of nonrecreational campers affects the experience of other users and results in increased levels of trash and resource degradation that can be costly to remediate.

In 2015, Lee Cerveny, a research social scientist with the USDA Forest Service, Pacific Northwest Research Station, and Joshua Baur, a professor at San Jose State University, surveyed law enforcement officers nationwide to determine how frequently they encountered nonrecreational campers and in what settings, the effects of nonrecreational camping on the natural and social environment, and their ideas for how to address these challenges.

Transient retirees comprised the largest group of nonrecreational campers, followed by displaced families, and homeless individuals, whom law enforcement officers encountered on their rounds. Economic instability was perceived to be a contributing factor for residing on the national forest, followed by drug and alcohol abuse, and mental health concerns. The Willamette National Forest in Oregon is using this information to better equip frontline employees when interacting with nonrecreational campers. Additionally, emerging research on nonrecreational camping is focusing on the health considerations of living outdoors.

science liaison between the National Forest System and PNW Research Station. After a morning session in the classroom discussing recreation management issues, the group visited the McKenzie River area on the Willamette National Forest in Oregon.

Even a decade later, Cerveny still recalls one particular site on that field trip. It was a bridge where a number of campers had congregated. While some campers sought the site as a temporary respite in nature, for other campers, the site was their home. These were nonrecreational campers and forest dwellers, people who were chronically or temporarily homeless.

“That’s the first time I had really thought about this issue of people residing on national forest lands,” Cerveny says. “I was curious about knowing why this was happening. What are the living conditions these people are experiencing there? How did this particular gathering of people choose this site? What does it mean for land managers caring for the site?”

## Seeing the Overlooked People

The ranger leading the talk explained that the bridge served as a roof, the river as a water source, and there was a bus stop a quarter mile down the road. Cerveny described experiencing a lightbulb moment as the answer came to her: “They can live here but still travel to Eugene or Springfield for services.”



Stay violations were the most frequently cited unlawful activity by law enforcement officers of nonrecreational campers. Photo by Lee Cerveny/USDA Forest Service.

## Key Findings

- Homelessness and nonrecreational camping occur in every Forest Service region at different rates. Homeless camping appears more common in the Southwestern Region (R3) and Rocky Mountain Region (R2), with rising rates in the Southern Region (R8). Encounter rates were higher in forests near urban areas.
- More than 38 percent of law enforcement officers (LEOs) encounter nonrecreational campers on a weekly basis. Another 38 percent reported encounters 1 to 3 times per month. Nearly half (48 percent) of LEOs stated that encounters with nonrecreational campers had increased in the past five years.
- The nonrecreational camper most often identified in the survey were transient retirees living in campers. Nearly half of LEOs (47 percent) encountered transient retirees at least monthly. Other frequent types included groups of homeless adults, solitaires, and families. Drug and alcohol use, mental health issues, and economic problems were contributing factors for living on the national forests.
- Nonrecreational campers were most attracted to dispersed areas (55 percent) and no-host campsites (29 percent), with far fewer in developed campgrounds. Road access, fresh water, and visibility were commonly mentioned site features. The most frequently observed impacts mentioned by LEOs included trampled soil, trash, cut or cleared vegetation, erosion, and pollution of streams.

She spent a couple years mulling over the topic of nonrecreational campers. A chance meeting with a Forest Service law enforcement officer (LEO) prompted her to ask if he was witnessing homelessness on the forest he patrolled. “He said they were,” Cerveny says. “It was a growing problem, and they were unsure what to do. I decided I needed to look at this situation to understand it a bit more.”

In 2015, Cerveny reached out to Oregon State University to establish a research agreement, eventually partnering with Joshua Baur, then a postdoctoral researcher in the College of Forestry and now an assistant professor at San Jose State University. Together they did a literature review on the topic of homelessness on national forests. One relevant study conducted in central Oregon 20 years earlier identified three types of forest dwellers: economic refugees who were families and individuals temporarily or permanently unemployed or unable to find affordable housing, voluntary nomads who were individuals or families living on public lands by choice, and separatists—individuals seeking seclusion.

Cerveny and Baur knew that from their discussions with LEOs there were other types of individuals living on the national forest, such as students who commuted to school, concession workers, or forest workers. And because “there was very little relevant literature, that was another click in my mind that this needs some attention,” she says.

Although there was little research on the topic, this wasn’t because homelessness on the national forests is new. According to Cerveny, “This has been happening for generations since the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression, but then it was temporary or numbers were

smaller, and it wasn’t talked about.”

Concurrently with the literature review, another fortuitous conversation with a national program lead in the Forest Service’s Law Enforcement and Investigations program, confirmed to Cerveny that while LEOs around the country recognized homelessness as a serious problem on national forests, they lacked understanding of the extent of the issue. Her colleague expressed support of a survey to learn what LEOs were observing and use that information to inform law enforcement efforts.

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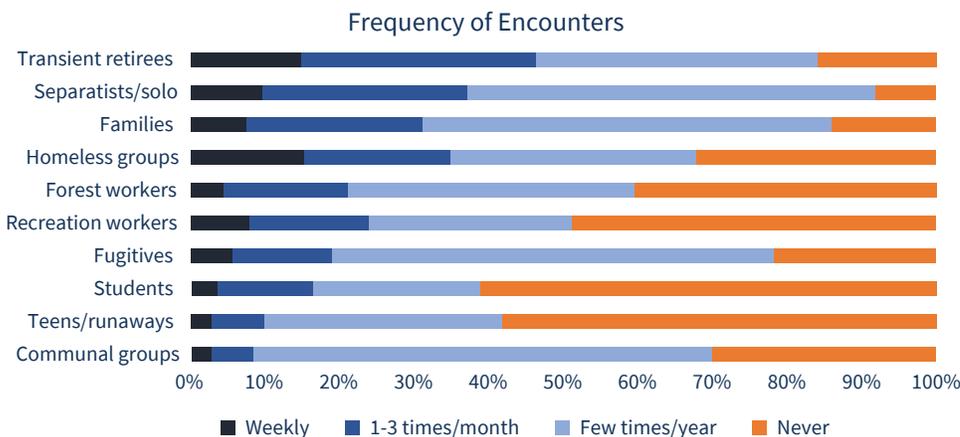
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**Types of Nonrecreational Campers and Definitions,  
Based on Conversations with Forest Service Law Enforcement Officers<sup>a</sup>**

Nonrecreational camper types	Definition
Transient retirees	Individuals who appear to be elderly or retired and live in campers or recreational vehicles
Solitary or antisocial individuals	Individuals who are living alone; some may be survivalists or separatists or antisocial
Homeless adult groups	Informal gatherings of homeless adults, where group members may come and go
Families	Family groups of multiple generations, parents with children, or single parent families
Forest workers	Workers in logging, commercial harvest of mushrooms, berries, or floral greens
Seasonal recreational or amenity workers	Recreational guides, ski instructors, or outfitters working in outdoor recreation or tourism
Fugitives	Individuals with outstanding warrants or who are wanted by law enforcement
Students	Undergraduate or graduate students at universities who live in the national forest while they attend school
Teens, gangs, or runaways	Groups of teenagers or young adults who may be runaways; some may be formal or informal “gangs”
Communal groups	Organized and informal groups that intentionally choose to live in the forest and which may be nomadic

<sup>a</sup>Adapted from Cerveny and Bauer 2020.



Survey results indicating the frequency with which Forest Service law enforcement officers encountered different types of nonrecreational campers. While transient retirees were the group with highest number of weekly encountered, solitaries and families were only encountered less than once a month. Adapted from Cerveny and Baur (2020).

Cerveny and Baur designed a survey that was sent to all Forest Service LEOs and special agents nationwide.

Although the goal was learning about homelessness on the national forests, the word *homeless* was deliberately not used, replaced instead with nonrecreational camper. “We wanted to understand more broadly who’s living in the forest and why, and what are the implications of that,” Cerveny explains. “The word *homeless* conjures up images in people’s minds of a certain population. We were interested in broadening this out, moving away from this idea of homeless to nonrecreational camping.”

Survey questions included the type of nonrecreational campers observed, frequency of officer encounters, locations of nonrecreational encampments, setting features associated with camping choices, and the implications of these residential sites on the natural environment as well as other users visiting the forest. They received 290 completed surveys, a response rate of 49 percent that pleased Cerveny. “That was a really good response rate because we could feel more confident in our data,” she says.

Analyzing the results revealed LEOs had frequent encounters with nonrecreational campers: more than 38 percent had weekly

encounters, while another 38 percent reported encounters one to three times a month. LEOs reported that the most frequent encounters were transient retirees, and other frequent groups observed included groups of homeless adults, solitaries, and families.

The top factors mentioned by LEOs as contributing to long-term nonrecreational camping were drug or alcohol use and mental health issues, followed by job loss and lack of affordable housing. In some cases, nonresidential campers were intentionally living outdoors as a preference or in hiding, with some involved in illegal activities. “According to some of the officers we talked to, the forest may be viewed by nonrecreational campers as a place to get away from the rules and confines of society and experience a sense of freedom or escape.” Cerveny explains.

In terms of selecting a place to camp, nonrecreational campers were most attracted to dispersed areas and no-host campsites where privacy is possible, with few gravitating toward developed campgrounds. Sites close to roads and water sources were commonly sought by nonrecreational campers.

And, all regions were grappling with nonrecreational camping, with the Southwestern and Rocky Mountain Regions having the most encounters and Alaska and the Eastern Regions reporting the fewest. Forty-eight percent of LEOs reported that encounters had increased in the past five years. However, to put this observation in context, the survey was conducted in 2015. “At that time, homelessness hadn’t reached the crescendo it’s reached in the last four to five years,” cautions Cerveny.

### **A Science-Management Partnership**

While most research is peer reviewed and published before made available to managers, given the importance of this topic, Cerveny and Baur published a research highlights in November 2015, and in 2016, they presented their initial findings for the Law Enforcement and Investigations staff, with invitations extended to all agency LEOs.

In early 2019, Cerveny received a call from Dave Halemeier, the district ranger for the Detroit Ranger District on the Willamette National Forest, asking if she would join their strategy group to address the nonrecreational camping, which he described as a “huge problem.”

“We found that the forest was spending quite a bit of money reacting to the effects of homelessness on public lands, such as towing of vehicles and removing of hazardous waste,” explains Chiara Cipriano, then the public affairs specialist on the Willamette National Forest,



Trash at a nonrecreational camping site in the Willamette National Forest, Oregon.

now with the Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest. “We wanted to do something proactive.”

The Willamette National Forest spends an estimated \$250,000 a year reacting to non-recreational camping, and “we have implicit direction from the Endangered Species Act, the Clean Water Act, and the Northwest Forest Plan on how we need to minimize adverse effects to public lands,” Cipriano says.

Without hesitation, Cervený said yes to Halemeier’s request. “I love doing research, but ultimately, we want solutions,” she explains. “If I can participate in a way that can lead them down a path to reach a solution that is helpful, that’s something that I think is part of my role and really important.”

The meeting with leadership from the Willamette National Forest yielded rich discussion. “There was an initial concern of mission creep by taking on what was perceived to be a social service field issue,” Cipriano explains. “Lee’s research helped us understand the complex reasons why folks may become houseless. It’s very easy to assume that everyone would benefit if there was more room in the shelter or if we provide the same solution to everyone. Lee’s research made it clear there’s not going to be a one-size-fits-all solution.”

On November 14, 2019, a listening session with public land managers and social services providers from the Eugene area met to discuss the situation. Trauma Healing Project, a non-profit based in Eugene, served as the facilitator, because “we didn’t want to be leading the conversation,” Cipriano says. “We wanted land management staff in listening mode.”

Subsequently, the social service agency, White Bird, was contracted to teach de-escalation techniques for recreation and frontline staff. White Bird also created a resource list that district offices and LEOs could hand out to non-recreational campers they encountered. Another

suggestion that came from the listening session was having social workers ride along with LEOs when visiting homeless encampments.

The COVID-19 pandemic and devastating Labor Day fires halted this work, and key people have since retired or transferred to other positions. However, Cervený is optimistic the work will continue: “We’re waiting to pick up the conversation again.”

## Nature, Health, Homeless Project

Farther north in Washington State, the conversation is continuing in spite of COVID-19. Cervený, along with Monika Derrien, a research social scientist with the PNW Research Station, and Gregory Bratman, an assistant professor at the University of Washington, launched the Nature, Health and Homelessness Project.

“We are doing a qualitative study of people who live outdoors on different types of public lands (in King and Snohomish Counties), starting from the city environment to the suburbs and all the way out to the rural areas and wildlands,” Cervený says, “We are especially focused on health implications of outdoor living and the factors that draw people to these outdoor settings.”

“This was new and not very well explored in the literature,” adds Derrien. “A lot of what’s been studied is on the scale of one particular city park and how homelessness has manifested there. This is a more system-based approach that considers broadly how natural, social, and managerial environments are influencing people’s behaviors.”

For example, one reason for a system-based approach is because nonrecreational campers will often set up camp in a neighboring jurisdiction following an eviction elsewhere. “A cat-and-mouse dynamic” is how Derrien describes it.

“Forest officials find themselves encountering the same groups in different sites. They may cross into state or county lands, only to return to the national forest a few weeks later,” Cervený adds.

In 2020 and 2021, the team conducted phone and video interviews with land managers, social service providers, LEOs, environmental stewardship groups, and public health officials. Derrien expects to present their preliminary results by summer 2021. “Everyone whom I interview for this project is just so eager for help and in need of best practices,” she says. “Managers are working on their own to figure out what to do, and they are having so many similar issues. There’s so much opportunity for coordination and peer-to-peer learning.”



Forest Service staff Chiara Cipriano and Chloe Goldade-Holbrook clean up a homeless campsite in the Willamette National Forest. Photo by Brian Bull/KLCC.

## Reimagining How to Serve People

With research around nonrecreational campers still in early phases, many lines of inquiry beckon further study. While there are no one-size solutions currently available for land managers, strategies are being discussed and explored, including having a social worker ride-along with LEOs, developing clear signage about camping rules, and developing a professional network of land managers and social and health providers to share information locally, like in the Willamette National Forest. What this topic has prompted is a reimagining of what it means to serve the people at a time when much of the social contract between government and people is being debated.

“Caring for the land and serving the people is at the core of what the agency does, but understanding how we care for the land and serve the people, that’s going to change through time,” explains Nikki Cox, an inclusivity social scientist in the Rocky Mountain Regional Office. “The public we serve now is not the same public that Gifford Pinchot was talking about. It’s not the same public we were serving in the ’50s and the ’60s. We have to understand that our toolset needs to adjust to the public that we’re serving and the needs they have now.”

Resource managers may need to rethink their job responsibilities because they are now

## LAND MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

- Homeless and nonrecreational campers are socially and economically vulnerable people with few available resources and potentially needing social services and health care. Frontline forest staff may lack training on how to identify and approach nonrecreational campers safely. Solutions focused on removing homeless campers do not resolve underlying concerns.
- Long-term residential camping is associated with biophysical impacts that cause damage to soils and vegetation, and related pollution can alter the chemistry of freshwater lakes and streams. Costs associated with moving campers and cleaning camp sites can be significant. In 2018, the Willamette National Forest estimated spending nearly \$250,000 on activities related to nonrecreational camping including trash removal, site remediation, and law enforcement.
- Long-term homeless encampments or nonrecreational camping present safety concerns for other forest visitors, forest staff, and concessionaires. LEOs indicated that drug and alcohol use, production, and distribution were associated with many sites. Extended site use by residential campers also inhibits access to other forest visitors.
- The need for new tools and training programs was widely identified as an important step in working with homeless campers. Many LEOs stated the importance of raising awareness among U.S. Forest Service leadership and creating a sense of ownership of the challenges associated with nonrecreational camping.

managing both resources and people. It’s not the first time a rethinking of what it means to be a resource manager has occurred, Cerveny says. “In the last 10 to 15 years, the universities have been requiring social science classes because they’ve realized most of the problems are not resources problems but people and politics. Do we need to add social work to that curriculum?”

By all indications, homelessness won’t abate in the near future, which means the agency, its leadership, and staff are faced with the choice of being reactive or proactive and which one will best serve the people and the land.

*“And homeless near a thousand homes / stood, And near a thousand tables pined and wanted food.”*

—William Wordsworth, American poet

## For Further Reading

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Brian Bull/KLCC



Volunteers and Forest Service staff load an abandoned shopping cart into a truck as part of a cleanup effort on the Willamette National Forest.

## Writer’s Profile

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### **Scientist Profile**



LEE CERVENY is a research social scientist with the Pacific Northwest Research Station. Her research focuses on homelessness and nonrecreational camping on national forests and grasslands, residential location at the urban-wildland interface, and forest collaboratives as a form of resource governance. She also studies how sociospatial tools can be developed to collect information about human values, land uses, and forest benefits for use in forest planning.

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