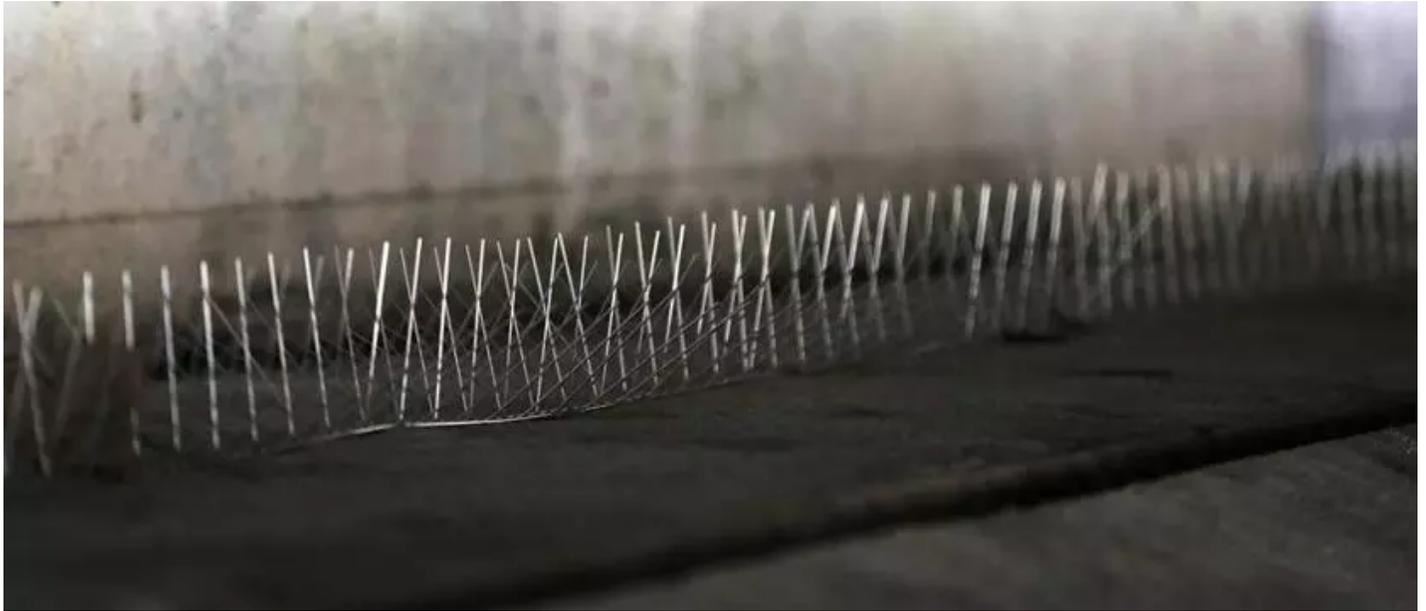


JOAN VENNOCHI

Spikes to keep out homeless people? That's outrageous



PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

Spikes under under the Route 2 bridge in Arlington.



By [Joan Vennoch](#)

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I could write about the college-era dance moves of newly sworn-in US Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, the coarse curse word uttered by US Representative Rashida Tlaib in reference to President Trump, or the analyses of Elizabeth Warren's likability and whether or not it's sexist.

But I write instead about a true outrage: [the spikes installed](#) in December by the state Department of Transportation underneath a Route 2 bridge in Arlington to keep homeless people from sleeping there. They were removed Monday, after a report by the Globe's John Hilliard and Aimee Ortiz. But someone, somewhere in government, initially thought they were a good idea. And that says more about the changing attitudes and appetites in this allegedly progressive corner of the world than the shuttering of Durgin Park.

The spikes, known as "hostile architecture," are designed to let people know that they, like pigeons, are not welcome. However, while birds can perch elsewhere, the homeless are not that lucky. A similar use of spikes [in London and Montreal](#) several years ago triggered protests and were removed. But they are part of [a growing trend](#) to keep the

homeless from invading our space, either through anti-vagrancy laws that criminalize their presence, or through architectural design, such as spikes and bumpy benches that discourage camping out.

In Arlington, town officials said they did not ask for the spikes and called for their removal. According to MassDOT spokesman Patrick Marvin, the spikes were designed to keep out “trespassers.” Their installation, he said, occurred after discussions with Arlington town officials about ways to discourage homeless people from sleeping under the bridge.

Marvin could not say who came up with the idea for spikes. He said they were removed “upon further discussions” with Arlington officials and have not been used elsewhere in the state. He said MassDOT will work on developing a plan to reduce trespassing in the area “while assisting vulnerable populations and ensuring public health and safety.”

That’s a real challenge in Massachusetts, which faces a growing problem of homelessness.

“It’s getting worse. The numbers show a dramatic increase,” said Kelly Turley, associate director of the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless. According to Turley, getting straight answers from the administration of Governor Charlie Baker about the actual number of families seeking emergency shelter has been difficult. To document the extent of the problem, Turley’s advocacy group has filed a Freedom of Information request with the Department of Housing and Community Development, seeking data back to 2011.

According to a recent report issued by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development, the [homeless population in Massachusetts grew nearly 33 percent](#) from 2007 to 2018. According to the HUD report, on just one night in January 2018, there were about 20,000 homeless people in Massachusetts.

Massachusetts is the only right-to-shelter state in the country. On paper, that means when [eligible families can show they are homeless](#) because of domestic violence, natural disaster, no-fault eviction, or substantial health and safety risks, the state is mandated to provide housing. That can mean a room in a shelter, or in a motel. During his first term in office, Baker focused on reducing the number of homeless families housed in motels, which are costly to the state and not conducive to a healthy environment for children. The downside to that policy is the lack of alternative shelter space and affordable housing. “The system is overwhelmed,” said Turley. “It’s not just that they can’t manage it. There’s not enough housing available.”

As gentrification across Massachusetts drives housing prices up, more people are at risk of losing a place to call home. While there are no easy answers to the homelessness problem, putting spikes on sidewalks or under bridges should be called out for what it is: more outrageous than a video of a dancing or cursing congresswoman, or a discussion of a politician’s likability.

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