Following the Money: Are the Cicero Institute's Backers Profiting from Anti-Homeless Laws?

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New research shows that the Cicero Institute's founder and stakeholders have deep financial connections to industries poised to profit from the very same anti-homeless policies peddled by the Cicero Institute's lobbyists. These connections include financial ties to the prison and surveillance industries driven by fear. Moreover, this research reveals Cicero Institute assets are used to lobby for military and defense spending.

We have long known who is the most harmed by these laws – our neighbors who can't afford rent and have no choice but to live outside. The research below, based on publicly available sources, sheds light on who might benefit from the surge in anti-homeless policies.

Background: What is the Cicero Institute?

The Cicero Institute is a right-wing think tank founded by Joe Lonsdale, a billionaire venture capitalist, Palantir co-founder, and prominent Trump supporter. The Cicero Institute is a main driver in the recent surge in anti-homeless laws. Specifically, the Cicero Institute has:

- Authored and lobbied for versions of template bills in ten states that make it a crime to sleep outside even if there are not enough shelter beds,
- Submitted a brief in the Supreme Court's case *Johnson v. Grants Pass* in favor of arresting and ticketing people for sleeping outside; and,
- Informed the Trump Administration's relentless attacks on real solutions to homelessness, like housing and support.

These ties are even more alarming following Trump Administration's release of new funding priorities that will make homelessness worse. The Cicero Institute is cited within the funding document, and its influence is seen not only in the rejection of proven solutions to homelessness but also in the focus on laws that make it a crime to sleep outside.

The Cicero Institute advocates for forced treatment, forced labor, and detention camps. These are the kinds of policies that have directly led to the harassment, jailing, and even death of homeless people.

Attacks on homeless people increasingly employ racist tropes that paint homeless people as dangerous and criminal, breeding a culture of fear that focuses on punishment over proven solutions. This culture of dehumanization of homeless people sets the stage for increased violence and political attacks. It is also in this climate that our nation has seen an increase in laws – including Cicero backed laws – that make it a crime to be homeless.

Ties to Prison Industry

Already, many people are in jail each night because they experience homelessness. New reporting shows that during one week in May, 53% of people in one New Mexico county jail were there because they were homeless. Cicero's policies that make it a crime to sleep outside are likely to push cities and states to funnel homeless people into jails and prisons, making this even worse. In the one year following the passage of a Cicero template law in Kentucky, a single county charged 178 people with unlawful camping charges.

Lonsdale and Cicero have close ties to an organization attempting to operate what it describes as a private "nonprofit" prison. This organization, now known as Social Purpose Corrections (SPC), was incorporated under the name Social *Profit* Corrections (emphasis added). SPC is also run by a former long-time warden at CoreCivic, one of the largest for-profit prison and immigrant detention camp operators in the U.S.

The connections between Cicero and SPC are extensive:

- Cicero is named as a "partner" on SPC's website.
- Lonsdale has praised SPC publicly on his blog.
- Multiple key staff members have worked at both organizations.
- A prominent Cicero staff member has written opinion pieces in support of private prisons without disclosing ties to SPC.

Investments in Surveillance, Tracking of Immigrants, and Vigilantism

8VC, Lonsdale's venture capital firm, is connected to and invested in companies that profit from surveillance, fear, policing, and are connected to the prison industry.

Lonsdale is connected to Gothams LLC, which has supported infrastructure for immigration detention facilities in Texas and Florida. The CEO of Gothams LLC, Matt Michelsen, sits on the 8VC advisory board and is a friend of Lonsdale's. Gothams LLC has also expressed interest in providing homeless services.

8VC investments include:

- Palantir, which sells data analytics software to governments for policing and surveillance and is a key cog in Trump's attacks on immigrants.
- Citizen, an app allowing everyday people to act as vigilantes and (often falsely) report crimes.
- Sauron, which provides high-tech home security systems for the uber-wealthy.

Defense Lobbying Raises Flags

Cicero Action, Cicero Institute's c4 entity, has engaged in lobbying related to military spending and defense contracts, topics that are entirely disconnected from the organization's publicly stated mission. Cicero Action operated under the name American Phalanx, Inc. and hired the lobbying form Arpinum Partners, which also does business as Anchor & Arrow Strategies. In both 2024 and 2025, Cicero Action paid Arpinum $80,000 to lobby on issues related to military contracts and defense spending.

Arpinum also lobbies for many of 8VCs portfolio companies around defense, including:

- Palantir, which also provides military intelligence for drone strikes and contracts heavily with the U.S. military and ICE. Because Lonsdale co-founded and continues to invest in Palantir, this lobbying directly benefits his stake.
- Saronic, which builds self-driving boats for the U.S. military. Cicero board member, 8VC advisor, and Lonsdale Enterprises advisor Blake Brickman is the Vice President of Government Affairs at Saronic.
- CX2, which focuses on "electronic warfare."
- Epirus, which develops anti-drone technology.
- Gallatin AI, an AI-powered military logistics platform.
- Overland AI , which creates "autonomous ground vehicles" for military combat.

The Cicero-Trump Connection

Lonsdale is deeply embedded in the Trump administration. and regularly meets with the White House and Pentagon. Cicero staff have informed the Trump administration's approach to homelessness, which has included attempts to cut funding for housing and services proven to solve homelessness.

These donations include:

- Hundreds of thousands of dollars to political candidates and organizations over the years, both as an individual and through Lonsdale Enterprises. Many of these candidates actively support the Cicero Institute's anti-homeless agenda.
- $1 million to Trump-affiliated political groups during the 2024 election, including as a backer of the Musk-founded America PAC.
- Hosting a $50,000 per person fundraiser for JD Vance.

Conclusion

Cicero laws have already – and will continue to – hurt our neighbors living outside and make homelessness worse. It is deeply troubling that the founder of the Cicero Institute and his billionaire friends are in a position to profit from these laws and the lives of the far too many people in America who have no choice but to sleep outside.

Lawmakers and community organizations have a clear choice before them. The Cicero Institute wants those in power to embrace policies propelled by a billionaire-backed network, the same polices from which they stand to profit and will force more people into homelessness, sickness, and jail. But we know that politicians who actually want to see fewer people living outside and create safer, healthier, and more just communities must not only reject Cicero's tactics, they must use their power to ensure that everybody has a safe place to live and the services and support they want and need.

This brief was prepared by the National Homelessness Law Center with publicly available information and research from the Public Accountability Initiative/LittleSis.