From 1990 to 1993 I directed civil rights policy for the San Francisco Coalition on Homelessness, and during that time I witnessed the beginning of what would become a national backlash against homeless people. San Francisco Mayor Art Agnos had made extensive efforts to address what appeared at first to be a short-term problem made worse by the economic slowdown of the early 1980s and then exacerbated by the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, which damaged a significant amount of the city’s low-cost housing. Within a few years, however, the problem had become worse, with homeless people encamped throughout the city, undermining the usability of parks, sidewalks, and other public spaces. The mayor’s response was to begin to target homeless people in certain high-visibility areas of the city such as Golden Gate Park, the Civic Center, and Union Square. Through aggressive ticketing by police and outreach efforts by social workers, he attempted to restore order to those parts of the city. His efforts, however, were unsuccessful, as he lacked both the housing and services to move people off the streets and the willingness to fully engage the police in a program of harassment, intimidation, and arrests.

By 1992, public frustration with Agnos’s failure to “solve” homelessness through either progressive or regressive means resulted in his ouster. He was replaced by the city’s police chief, Frank Jordan, who campaigned on a platform of removing the homeless and restoring order through aggressive policing. In 1993 he initiated the “Matrix” program, which gave the police new authority and political backing for a concerted crackdown on public homelessness. Encampments were removed from public parks and plazas; thousands of tickets were issued for minor legal violations; and hundreds of homeless people were sent to jail.

Despite these aggressive efforts to restore order, the number of people without a place to live continued to increase and public order remained
impaired, with the problem often being shifted from the central city to outlying neighborhoods. Although Jordan’s backlash brought limited relief to a handful of targeted areas, it also engendered misery, anger, and hopelessness in thousands of homeless people.