

# ACLU says Operation Rio Grande was “designed as a hammer,” and arrest figures show it



(Steve Griffin | Tribune file photo) Law enforcement officers from several agencies increase their presence in the Rio Grand homeless area in Salt Lake City Monday August 14, 2017.

[By Bethany Rodgers](#)

Salt Lake Tribune

October 16, 2018

Link: <https://www.sltrib.com/news/politics/2018/10/16/aclu-says-operation-rio/>

Civil liberties advocates are faulting Operation Rio Grande for an overemphasis on policing Salt Lake City's homeless population, reporting the initiative has so far yielded about 13 arrests for every new treatment program placement.

When Operation Rio Grande launched last August, its creators said they were seeking to reduce lawlessness around the city's homeless shelter through a two-year effort that would [target the “worst of the worst” for arrest](#) and expand treatment options and job training for others. But the American Civil Liberties Union of Utah says many minor offenders are also getting caught in the law enforcement net.

"Being homeless is not a crime, yet thousands of individuals living in or frequenting the Rio Grande neighborhood were detained, jailed, and released with no additional help and the added burden of warrants, fines, and a criminal record," the ACLU wrote in an eight-page report released Tuesday.

Since Operation Rio Grande's launch in August 2017, police have made [more than 5,000 arrests](#) as part of the initiative, more than three-quarters of them for misdemeanors or active warrants. That figure [dwarfs the number](#) of new beds added to local social service agencies (243) and the number of people who have pleaded into drug court (120) during the operation's first year, the report states.

Jason Stevenson, an ACLU spokesman, said the imbalance exists because Operation Rio Grande was "designed as a hammer" and has had a law-and-order emphasis since its inception. Granted, he said, it's easier to send squad cars to the Rio Grande neighborhood than to create new treatment beds. But it's not the most efficient tactic in the long term, he said.

"It's not necessarily cheaper to focus on law enforcement, but that machine is much easier to ramp up than the treatment side," he said.

Officials involved in Operation Rio Grande have pointed to sinking crime statistics as evidence of success. Crimes decreased [by 26 percent across the city](#) in the operation's first year, with the biggest drop documented in the Rio Grande neighborhood.

However, the ACLU report states that officials often improperly conflate issues of homelessness and crime, a symptom of the law enforcement-heavy approach that the group says has underpinned Operation Rio Grande.

Stevenson said his group's goal is to restart a conversation about Operation Rio Grande so its leaders can adjust the effort during its final eight months.

"We believe the data we've analyzed shows we're heading in the wrong direction, but there is still time to change course," he said.

*The Tribune will update this story.*