

Miami Beach Crime Prevention & Awareness Group

Miami Beach, Florida

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Miami New Times

To the Editor:

We read with interest your stories covering our group, "Vigilantes Mount a Controversial Effort to Take Back South Beach," January 9, 2018, and "Miami Beach Honors Vigilante Group Criticized by ACLU," January 26, 2018. We found them newsworthy and readable. And we appreciate publicity for our efforts. After all, we seek as many friends and allies as we can gather to help make Miami Beach a better place. But we found much of the coverage so at odds with the truth and the false light you cast upon our group and its leaders so intense that we believed a response was necessary.

We do not believe that the *New Times's* policy and desire are that the citizens and visitors of South Beach become victims of harassment, theft, assault, robbery, rape, and murder, committed by lifetime criminals with lengthy rap sheets. However, if those were your aims, you could not have done a more effective job of pursuing them.

For, stopping these crimes from happening is a central focus of our group. That is where we have been volunteering our time. By attempting as you did to undermine the credibility of our group, to estrange your readers from our efforts, to make us out to be the actual villains plaguing South Beach, your paper is aiding those career criminals. You are giving them comfort, protection, and support for their criminal activities, thereby endangering the safety, the possessions, and in some cases even the lives, of the citizens and visitors of South Beach. We don't understand why you are doing this.

Our group began just a few months ago. By the spring of 2017 residents had formed a consensus that a criminal element had occupied Lummus Park and the Beach Walk, creating an atmosphere of prevailing lawlessness that was palpably threatening to citizens and visitors alike. We recognized it had not always been this way. And we saw it degrading the quality of life that made South Beach the place we wanted to live. Moreover, as a notable example, members with family in Italy were shown copies of Italian newspapers warning people to stay clear of South Beach because it was so dangerous. We became concerned that South Beach, the economic engine powering Miami Beach and Miami itself, was endangered by this hostile environment, which increasingly seemed designed to assure tourists never visit here again.

We thought your headlines calling us out as "vigilantes" and your cover photo likening our group to the "Make America Great Again" crowd were snarky and

designed to draw readers, but they gave a grossly inaccurate portrayal of our group. Just from the headline and photo alone, the false light began to shine before even reading the first word of the article. Although it would assuredly come as a surprise to anyone who read your articles, our group is broad-based and has no political ideology. The citizenry of Miami Beach as a whole skews left of center as does our group. This alone should communicate something critical about this situation: when a group of mostly self-avowed liberals takes up the cause of fighting crime, it means there's a real crime problem. And you need to pay attention.

At first we did what people tend to do: we complained to each other. But then we took an unusual step: we did something about it. Tired of being harassed on the Beach Walk, we began to look into publicly available criminal records and found, to our dismay, that many of these people had been arrested over and over, for a variety of crimes, and yet there they were, virtually untouched by the criminal justice system, boldly plying their criminal enterprises. We didn't know who these people were, but we decided to find out. And we decided we were going to help stop them. So, during the summer of 2017, we formed the group.

At about that time it became clear that the homelessness issue would figure prominently in the discussion. The *New Times* fired the opening salvo in its baffling, continuing war on Miami Beach with its article, "Miami Beach Homeless Say City's Outreach Office is Regularly Closed, Unhelpful," July 10, 2017, shedding a false light on the City's efforts to serve its homeless population. In response, the City Manager sent a memorandum to the City Commission describing in detail the state of affairs with the City's homeless population. From within his report one statistic stood out, way out: while in virtually every other similarly situated city in the United States (even Ft. Lauderdale) 25% of their homeless populations moved to that city after they were homeless, but here on Miami Beach, 95% of the homeless population moved here from elsewhere and were homeless before they arrived. That is nothing short of startling.

With the *New Times* article, understanding homelessness policy became an inescapable first step in plotting our course. It was actually helpful to us. It drove home from the outset the fact that our members had no intention whatever of joining a group whose aim was to vilify and victimize the homeless. It is an article of faith with our members that crime is our focus. We have not strayed from it. But that one statistic (25% vs. 95%) begged for further research. And research we did.

I joined the group at its inception. The homelessness issue was important enough to me that I volunteered to undertake a fulsome exploration of those issues. On behalf of the group, I reached out to people who had been in the homelessness services profession for over 35 years, spent hours interviewing them, discussing what they have seen over the course of their entire careers, what is going on in homeless services around the country, and how that squares with what is going on here on South Beach. I specifically inquired about our crime problem. Through this inquiry, what we discovered surprised us: the homeless don't commit crimes. Criminals

commit crimes. This point is essential to understanding what is going on here and what this group is about.

We discovered that people who serve the homeless dislike the label “homeless.” It means so many different things and is used so many different ways that it is almost meaningless. It can be a condition, or an identity, or merely a label. It has different meanings in different contexts. Because it’s so difficult to avoid the word we employ it here. But we learned it’s important to be clear what you’re talking about. That is what we seek to do. Your paper did not. That is part of why we respond this way.

People who have been serving the homeless since the mid 1980s will tell you the same thing: the homeless do not commit crimes. They simply do not encounter a criminal element. Over and over you hear that. The homeless may have mental health problems and substance abuse problems, but they do not commit crimes. Out of our discussions, some things became apparent.

We discovered there are three distinct, separate groups of homeless people. First, the traditional homeless who began to hit the streets in large numbers during the ‘80s, people with mental health diagnoses like schizophrenia, severe bipolar disorder, and substance abuse, who are difficult to serve within our current mental health treatment system.

Second, is a growing population of people who live normal functional lives with intact families, stable jobs, and tidy homes, but due to the increasing pressures of our economy, live so close to the bone that two-wage-earner families barely scrape by. With one mishap such as a lengthy illness or a lost job, they cannot make ends meet and they eventually lose everything. Going to the street or to a shelter become their only options. People in homeless services encounter this group of people with an alarmingly increasing frequency.

In discussions with Maria Ruiz, Director of the Miami Beach Office of Housing and Community Services, the primary point of delivery of homeless outreach services in the City of Miami Beach, we learned that the City has abundant resources to provide services to any homeless person who accepts the service. The Miami Beach Police Department and the Office of Housing and Community Services are well equipped to serve and to house those in need. The City has arrangements for shelter space as well as for programs to support mental health and substance abuse treatment. We concluded these two groups of the City’s homeless population are well served.

So what to make of the people on South Beach, the street predators, who when arrested claim to be homeless and give no local address? As far as the police and the criminal justice system are concerned, and hence, in point of fact, they too are “homeless.” We had to conclude that they make up a third group of homeless people.

This third group, we concluded, are hardcore street predators who prey on the citizens of visitors of South Beach. They are nominally “homeless,” but they test the

meaning of that word. We don't know if they have a home or not or whether they consider the street their home. But they are distinct from the other two groups. The people in homeless services almost never encounter them. If they do, this population refuses all attempts at intervention. Instead, they spend their time committing crimes.

The homeless population of Miami Beach is still numerically quite small, about 133 people on an average day, according to the City's census. But between 40 and 60 of these people account for a disproportionate amount of crime on the Beach. Out of our discussions and through analyzing the data, a clear picture began to emerge of what is behind the statistical anomaly of Miami Beach with 95% of its homeless population having become homeless elsewhere and then moved here.

To an extent they come here for the same reasons anyone visits and moves here: a gracious climate, beautiful park spaces, abundant public amenities, and a wide array of food and beverage, all tightly packed into the urban-style street grid. But for the street predators it also provides an unprecedented bounty of opportunity: a continuing train of naïve foreign tourists with their guards down, seduced by the idyllic surroundings, relaxation, and alcohol. They are easy to prey upon: they often don't report their crimes, and they will never stick around to testify in a court proceeding. And if an arrest is made and evidence is available, waiting across the bridge is a criminal justice system that has become out of touch with the consequences of its actions here on the Beach. Our tourists are the perfect prey.

The group we are focusing on are about 26 individuals who are career criminals, with as many as 344 arrests under their belts, almost all of whom were arrested on South Beach 10 to 18 times in 2017 alone. And with each and every one of them, an arrest for whatever crime resulted in zero or minimal bail, with nominal deals struck or charges dismissed, and with them back on the Beach within 24 hours, to continue their criminal activity emboldened by the knowledge they are untouchable.

We want these people to stop. That is our goal. This is why we are spending our time testifying in bond court to bring forth facts about the recent criminal records of these criminal defendants, so that the judges can make findings on the only issues to be determined in bond court: their danger to the community and likelihood of appearing for trial. This is why we advocate for plea agreements that provide for the greatest assurance the offenders won't be committing crimes in our midst again. This is why we have made a political issue of shutting down the atmosphere of prevailing criminality in the tourist zone. This is why we work to aid the Miami Beach Police Department. This is why our leaders have been honored by the City.

We take great umbrage at your paper's characterization of our group as anti-homeless. As we have explained, people who have served the homeless for an entire career have never encountered criminals. Meanwhile the people we are concerned about spend virtually all their time committing crimes. For all practical purposes

there is no overlap of these two groups. It is an inescapable fact that South Beach doesn't have a homeless problem, it has a criminal problem.

In a similar vein, your charges of racism are patently offensive and abjectly false. Your staff had become members of our group page. They had access to the names, records and mug shots of those we are trying to keep off our streets. Miami Beach is one of the most ethnically diverse cities in the country – and we like it that way. In fact, Anglos are a minority population in Miami Beach. A cursory review of information readily available to your staff on our page reveals that 60% of the 26 career criminals we are focusing on are Anglo and Hispanic. You could have reported that, but you chose to go with a newsworthy and disgusting falsehood, invoking the name of George Zimmerman instead.

We know why you went there. We know why you lodged the charge of racism. Anytime crime on South Beach is discussed, someone makes that accusation. They do it because they know it will shut down the conversation. They do it because it always works. Well, it's not going to work this time. Because you can't solve a problem if you don't talk about solving the problem. That's what we're trying to do. Maybe you don't want to help solve the problem. After all, it's easier to take shots at those who are.

You went to great lengths to denigrate the reputations of several of our leaders. You made them out to be the true villains in this story. You presented a few bits of fact and then went far afield, impugning their character and motivations. As a result, our leaders have been openly taunted and threatened on the street by the very same career criminals we are trying to keep off of it. We see no justification for what you have done.

One thing you highlighted in your articles we cannot quarrel with. You presented some examples of chat from our group page making derogatory comments about the homeless and talking about setting booby traps for thieves. Those comments were unacceptable and won't be tolerated. They have no place on our group page and, as difficult as it is to assure that every person who becomes a part of our varied and growing membership adheres to our common creed at all times, it is essential that we do so. At least in that way your articles served the constructive purpose of reminding us how important it is that we remain focused.

Although you ridicule the zeal of some of our members and leaders in pursuing our agenda, you totally lose sight of the fact that we are taking possession of the future of the city we love. There is a precedent for this you know. It wasn't all that long ago that another group of citizens took possession of the future of this city and changed it forever. Barbara Capitman and Leonard Horowitz, together with a dedicated group of citizens they organized, bore criticism, bad publicity, denigration, threats, and intimidation, all on their way to preserving the signature architecture of South Beach. Today the results of what they did are what defines us. And they are honored with streets named for them and a monument erected to celebrate their

contributions. We don't presume for a moment that our efforts even begin to rival theirs, but we find their examples an inspiration that if we try hard enough we can make a difference. That's what we're doing.

Perhaps the greatest indictment of your undertaking with these stories is the murder of Kamil Patel on January 25, the evening before your second article was published. Charged with first degree murder, the alleged murderer had 27 arrests over the past two decades. So far as we know, this was the most frightening sort of murder, a random one. Patel had only moved here a few weeks before and was walking with a friend between two popular night spots fairly early in the evening.

The defendant was not on our group's radar. But he was a career criminal, known to the Miami Beach Police Department, who had navigated his way clear of the criminal justice system again and again so that he was free to kill. We have no illusions that our group's activities can stop such things from happening, but we are certain that an atmosphere of prevailing lawlessness, which we are concerned is taking hold here, will embolden criminals to commit such heinous crimes again.

We're fighting to stop this. You're fighting us. That means you're helping them. And we don't get it.

On behalf of the Miami Beach Crime Prevention & Awareness Group
Charles A. Madison, Esq.
Miami Beach, FL