

# Nearly 80% of the money budgeted for Operation Rio Grande was used for policing, jail beds and court costs

*Some advocates believe the money would have been better spent on housing, treatment and services.*  
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Nearly \$8 of every \$10 allocated by state and local governments for Operation Rio Grande, a massive safety and social services campaign, were spent on court costs and policing and jailing the predominantly homeless population around Salt Lake City's Pioneer Park. Spending data, which The Salt Lake Tribune has compiled for the first time since the two-year operation ended, show far less money — about 18% of the \$55.3 million in new funding — went into housing, shelter and services like substance abuse and mental health treatment.



Operation Rio Grande's planners have long denied that the initiative centered on heavy-handed policing and maintained that their goal was to help people exit homelessness and addiction.

And while proponents argue that every dollar spent on the campaign was well invested, the American Civil Liberties Union of Utah says the money budgeted by Salt Lake City, Salt Lake County and the state is indicative of the operation's misguided priorities.

"You get what you pay for, which is that there was a misguided attempt to use the criminal legal system to provide treatment and housing options," said Jason Groth, a Smart Justice attorney at the ACLU. "The police and courts themselves are meant to enforce the laws. They're not necessarily meant to provide housing and health care, and it's no surprise that Operation Rio Grande missed the mark in those areas."

As part of the operation, law enforcement officials made 1,442 felony arrests and 3,323 misdemeanor arrests from August 2017 to July 2019, according to data from the campaign's first phase, which focused on restoring public safety.

Statistics for the campaign's second phase, aimed at supporting people with mental illness and addiction, show 275 treatment beds were added and 150 people pleaded into the drug court program during the same time frame.

Some 246 people were employed as part of the final phase of the operation, which focused on finding jobs for homeless clients, while 348 were placed into short-term housing and 661 were diverted from emergency shelter. There were also 962 individuals served in long-term housing during that time. Utah officials who helped lead the campaign now concede that the bulk of the new money went into criminal justice. But they say it's important to recognize that federal funding and other resources also flowed toward treatment and services. That outside support, which wasn't included in The Tribune's analysis, eased the demand for state and local dollars in these areas, according to Nate McDonald, spokesman for the Utah Department of Workforce Services.

"The things that we were able to reallocate funds for, we took full advantage of that," said McDonald, whose agency helped coordinate Operation Rio Grande. "That is harder to do with law enforcement because you have to have the right equipment, you have to have the appropriate staff and resources there for that operation. So that becomes more of a hard cost."

Overall, the state, city and county approved spending around \$9.9 million on housing, services and shelter — a number far eclipsed by the \$43.9 million spent on law enforcement and courts. The other \$1.5 million in new funding went to neighborhood cleanups and the creation of a fenced "safe space" near the now-demolished Road Home shelter in the Rio Grande neighborhood. Despite concerns all along about the operation's far-reaching impacts, comprehensive information about the millions of dollars that poured into it has, until now, been difficult to come by.

"Transparency in Operation Rio Grande is absolutely critical because without it, we can't know how effective those resources were," said Rep. Jennifer Dailey-Provost, a Salt Lake City Democrat who has asked for an accounting of the initiative's costs. "If we're ever going to solve this problem, we have to know how effective our investment is in getting to the root cause of those devastating problems."

The Tribune remains unable to nail down the amount of overall funding for the operation including in-kind and previously budgeted but re-diverted city, county, and state resources. State officials say they're unsure how many dollars came from those sources.

## Approved spending for Operation Rio Grande

Salt Lake City, Salt Lake County and the state of Utah spent around \$9.9 million on housing, services and shelter as part of Operation Rio Grande — a number far eclipsed by the \$43.9 million spent on law enforcement and courts.

### Law enforcement: 79.38%



### Services: 17.84%



### Cleanup: 2.79%



**TOTAL \$55,355,757**

Source: Salt Lake City, Salt Lake County, state of Utah  
GRAPHIC BY CHRISTOPHER CHERRINGTON | The Salt Lake Tribune

(Christopher Cherrington | The Salt Lake Tribune)

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### 'New charges'

Operation Rio Grande, a multi-jurisdictional response to lawlessness in the Rio Grande neighborhood, began after frustrations with the conditions around Pioneer Park reached a boiling point in the summer of 2017.

After several violent deaths in the area and an assault on a minor league baseball player made national news, then-House Speaker Greg Hughes said crime and disorder had so gripped the neighborhood that “you can have a discussion about [bringing in] the National Guard with a straight face.”

In a matter of weeks, state, county and city leaders banded together to plan an all-out attack on the open-air drug market that had taken root near the former Road Home emergency shelter and the crime that had spilled into the surrounding neighborhood. But they said the two-year campaign, initially estimated to cost \$67 million, would also focus on connecting homeless individuals with services, mental health and substance-use treatment and jobs.

Lt. Gov. Spencer Cox, who served as the governor's liaison to the initiative, exhorted reporters not to call it a crackdown, saying the policing effort was surgical and targeted "the worst of the worst."

But advocates denounced the initiative, which they said focused more on arrests than on getting people experiencing homelessness into treatment and off the streets. And hardened criminals weren't the only ones swept up by the operation, with many homeless people cited and arrested for minor, nonviolent offenses.

Looking back on the effort, Scott Howell, a leader of the Pioneer Park Coalition that seeks to address issues related to crime and homelessness in Salt Lake City's Rio Grande neighborhood, said the money on the operation was well spent.

"You had to clean up the criminal element first," he said. "You had to get rid of the drug dealers down there that were using the homeless. You had to set a benchmark of it's time, if you're doing drugs, you're going to go to jail. We needed to enforce the law in order to clean it up."

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(Francisco Kjolseth | The Salt Lake Tribune) Homeless camp out in downtown Salt Lake City on Thursday, Dec. 3, 2020. A Salt Lake Tribune analysis of dollars spent on Operation Rio Grande from Salt Lake City, Salt Lake County and the state has found that the vast majority of new spending went to fund law enforcement, jail beds, court and policing, while far less money went to services, housing and shelter.

The larger amount spent on courts, cops and jail beds, he said, is indicative of "how bad the criminal activity was."

Many services were offered to people experiencing homelessness throughout and particularly toward the end of the operation, Howell added, but some didn't want to receive mental health or drug abuse treatment. And he argued that for some of them, spending a night or more in jail could have been the jolt they needed to turn their lives around.

"Going to jail sometimes for people is a good start to say, 'You know what, I need to have a better attitude or whatever it is about where my life is.' And sometimes that week in jail or two weeks or whatever it is, it's a sobering moment."

Mindy Vincent, a social worker and founder of the Utah Harm Reduction Coalition, views the operation differently, and sees the distribution of resources for the operation as a "horrifying" manifestation of the belief in coercing people into treatment.

When Operation Rio Grande began, Vincent said, she was working with the First Step House, which runs residential recovery programs for people with substance use disorders. The law enforcement crackdown brought an influx of people through First Step House's doors — but the program wasn't equipped to address the trauma that these clients had suffered while living in harsh and exposed conditions, she said.

Many people simply weren't ready to enter treatment and ran away, according to Vincent. Others, used to living on the brink, stole and hoarded supplies.

Operation Rio Grande did channel additional funding toward First Step House, said Vincent, and she doesn't think the nonprofit suffered from a lack of resources during the initiative. But not nearly enough money went toward housing, case management and outpatient services that could've helped people without plucking them off the streets, she said.

Overall, Vincent said, she's skeptical of the return on the tens of millions of dollars spent.

"A few people did get sober and did get new lives," she said. "Many people just got new charges out of it."

A reset or a revolving door?

Chief Brian Redd, who helped coordinate the Utah Highway Patrol's involvement in Operation Rio Grande, said outreach and connecting people to treatment were integral to his troopers' mission. But their mandate was also to curb the crime and chaos that had overtaken the area around The Road Home's emergency shelter and its surroundings.

State and local officials also didn't want that lawlessness to spill over into the three new resource centers that recently opened to replace the now-shuttered emergency shelter, he added.

"We were kind of setting the expectation that we're not going to have this kind of disorder, and we're not going to let criminals take over the new resource centers," he said. "There needed to be a reset of the situation."

Arrests did act as a catalyst for some people, leading them into treatment or to programs they might not have sought out otherwise, he said. But Redd acknowledged that this wasn't true for everyone — and that criminal charges in these cases created additional barriers.

The ACLU of Utah has previously called out Operation Rio Grande for placing a "long-term burden" on the state's homeless, many of whom were cited and arrested during the operation for low-level offenses like camping, jaywalking, and open-container violations.

Some of those who were targeted for such low-level offenses then became caught, the ACLU said, in the "revolving door" of the criminal justice system, exacerbating their challenges to exit homelessness.

But while Redd said troopers weren't setting out to make life on the street more difficult, he argued they couldn't ignore assaults, thefts and drug sales that were happening in front of them.

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(Rick Egan | The Salt Lake Tribune). A front-end loader scoops up tents, sleeping bags, blankets and bikes, as the health department sweeps the area, loading everything into dump trucks on Wednesday, Dec. 9, 2020.

"You hear all the time that mental illness, addiction, homelessness are not a crime and that's so true. They're not a crime," he said. "But many of those individuals are committing crime, and if they don't, many of them do attract a criminal element."

The Utah Highway Patrol received enough state funding to hire 46 new troopers and an analyst to staff the initiative. The new troopers were redeployed after Operation Rio Grande, with 24 going into patrolling highways and 22 heading to the State Bureau of Investigation.

Operation Rio Grande funding also paid for the Salt Lake County Sheriff's Office to open a new pod in its jail and set aside 300 beds for people arrested as part of the initiative. Some were diverted into treatment, while others faced prosecution, according to Sheriff Rosie Rivera, who took office a few months after Operation Rio Grande began.

Rivera said more than 4,000 individuals were booked into jail through the campaign — with the average person booked six times over the course of the initiative and most brought in on misdemeanor charges.

State and local funding wasn't wasted on the jail beds, she argues, but it's what happens after an arrest that's critical to ending the cycle.

"There has to be that commitment to that treatment and to offer those beds," she said, "or those individuals will go right back to what they are doing. And I think when you see they are being rebooked, that's what's occurring."

'Putting off the long-term problems'

Officials behind Operation Rio Grande note that the new funding numbers don't paint the full picture of spending on the public safety campaign and that a Medicaid waiver granted in 2017 freed up significant additional resources for services.

Utah applied for the waiver long before the operation's inception, but its approval meant that thousands of chronically homeless and poor adults became eligible for health coverage and mental health and substance use treatment.

The shift unleashed so much additional federal funding — nearly \$72 million went into Salt Lake County alone from November 2017 to August 2019 — that providers long strapped for cash were no longer constrained by finances, said Tim Whalen, Salt Lake County's director of behavioral health services.

"We actually had more treatment payer resources than we did social workers and nurses and prescribers to deliver the services," he said. "That became the biggest barrier to having more access to treatment."

Before the Medicaid waiver, Salt Lake County had 170 treatment beds and didn't have enough space to accommodate everyone who wanted help, Whalen said. Because of the federal funding, he said, that total has jumped to more than 500 today.

Odyssey House alone increased its residential capacity by 108% in 2017, thanks to Operation Rio Grande funding and new Medicaid dollars. And despite the fact that vastly more money went into jails and policing, the treatment providers didn't believe officials were shortchanging them during the initiative, said Christina Zidow, the chief operating officer for Odyssey House.

"We really didn't feel like we were in a pinch, honestly, because of our partnership with Salt Lake County Division of Behavioral Health Services," she said. "We were able to leverage those resources to support the housing and treatment."

(Leah Hogsten | The Salt Lake Tribune) A Salt Lake City Police officer holds up police tape for two men leaving the Rio Grande area with their belongings, Dec. 10, 2020.

Installments of public funding in the early days of the pandemic supported the residential treatment program as it set up a 40-bed site totally dedicated to people who were coming in through Operation Rio Grande, she said. These new clients had a bed and warm shower waiting for them and could contact long-lost relatives and begin receiving substance abuse and mental health care treatment, she said.

Though Zidow doesn't agree with a punitive approach to substance use, she said the criminal justice system can give people the push they need to seek help.

"Helping people have an incentive to avoid jail time and those types of things," she said, "oftentimes does increase engagement right at the beginning of treatment."

Bill Tibbitts, associate director of the Crossroads Urban Center, said he recognizes there was a role for law enforcement in the operation. But he believes public safety could have been restored to the Pioneer Park area for far less money.

"If you're going to do a large investment in addressing homelessness and you put most of the money into law enforcement," he explained, "what you're saying is you're going to deal with a short-term problem in a specific neighborhood and you're putting off the long-term problems to another day."

Tibbitts argues that if government leaders had shifted money from law enforcement to housing and services, they would be "further along in terms of addressing the current needs" of the state's homeless population, which has been steadily growing during the coronavirus pandemic.

"If the ratio had been the opposite, if we'd increased police engagement with 15% of the money and put 80% into housing, there would be less people homeless right now," he said. "And there would hopefully be less people camping outside right now."

Salt Lake City Mayor Erin Mendenhall, who was a member of the City Council when the law enforcement campaign began, said the "most important outcome" of Operation Rio Grande is that it has showed "a singular and truncated approach to homelessness doesn't work over the long term."

"We have to take a comprehensive approach with ongoing programming to continually address the multitude of issues," she said. "And the approach of an operation which has a beginning point and an end point, is a very clear definition and approach that isn't going to net long-term gains for anyone."

The city's new focus on addressing encampments through the Community Commitment Program, she noted, has a strong focus on providing services and outreach to people experiencing homelessness more so than any law enforcement component.

"I think we knew, service providers and the partners knew, that a holistic and multifaceted approach to helping people connect with services they need could not be achieved solely through a law enforcement approach," she said. "I don't believe that people didn't know that before Operation Rio Grande but the experiment of Operation Rio Grande gave us tangible, local evidence that that is very much the case."