

Thomas J. Main (2016)

***Homelessness in New York City: Policymaking from Koch to de Blasio***

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As the largest city in the United States, New York City has an outsize impact on many aspects of American life ranging from the economy to popular culture. Such is also the case with respect to the problem of homelessness. Indeed, the most recent estimates from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development indicate that 1 out of every 8 persons experiencing homelessness on a given night in the United States does so in one of the five boroughs of New York City, despite the fact that New Yorkers account for only about 1 in every 50 Americans. In short, while homelessness is a problem that exists throughout the United States, it is uniquely acute in New York City.

It is therefore fitting that Thomas J. Main has dedicated an entire book to examining homelessness in New York City. Or more accurately, he has dedicated an entire book to examining the policy response to homelessness in New York City. As he makes clear in the introductory chapter, Main's book intentionally sidesteps grappling with why people become homeless and what types of assistance are most effective in helping them exit homelessness, two questions that have long been at the heart of empirical research on the problem. Instead, the focus here is on recounting the history of homeless policy in New York and examining what this history tells us about the policymaking process in a highly fragmented political system like New York City in which there is intense competition between branches of government, city agencies and individual policy actors. The conventional thinking on urban politics is that such a context tends towards stasis or (at best) incremental change, and Main occupies himself with investigating whether this is the case with homelessness policy in New York or whether it has followed an altogether different trajectory.

Main answers this question by unravelling the history of homelessness policy in New York in a series of chronological chapters that focus on successive mayoral administrations stretching from the late 1970s and the tenure of Ed Koch to the present day and Bill DeBlasio. Appropriately, this history starts with the landmark *Callahan v. Carey* lawsuit that ultimately led to the creation of a legally enforceable right to emergency shelter for single adults in New York City that took effect in 1981 (a subsequent and

separate lawsuit extended this right to families). If there is a defining feature of the policy response to homelessness in New York City, it is found in this legally enforceable right to shelter and the large, publicly funded shelter system that it has engendered. Indeed, much of the history of New York's response to homelessness (and thus much of the space in the pages Main dedicates to recounting this history) is comprised of the ongoing legal battles between advocates and the City about what precisely this right obligates the City to provide. Thus, we hear much in these chapters about daunting logistical challenges (What is an adequate number of showers per person? How can enough sheets be laundered and delivered to shelters?) with which city officials must contend in order to implement this right to shelter in practice. In sum, Main does a solid job in explaining how the right to shelter has played a central role in defining the parameters of homelessness policy in New York City, but one wishes he had done a bit more to highlight how anomalous this right to shelter is and what it might mean that few other jurisdictions have followed suit in adopting the same approach.

The above noted critique notwithstanding, Main's account of key developments in homelessness policy in New York City is meticulously researched, highly detailed, and worthy of praise. The book makes extensive and effective use of interviews that the author conducted with a wide range of policy actors past and present. The excerpts from these interviews make for the most interesting reading in the book as they provide insight into what these individuals were thinking (and often what pressures they were facing) as they sought to influence or implement New York's response to homelessness. These interviews are also strikingly candid. For example, one city official who had been in charge of New York's infamous intake center for families entering shelter is blunt in her assessment of it, saying "It was just a really kind of dreary, terrible place" (p 152).

These first-person accounts and Main's detailed history are almost enough to make the book worth reading in their own right, but Main capably ties them together in service of a coherent answer to the central question of his book. Specifically, he argues that homelessness policy in NYC has proceeded through a series of "quantum jumps" that resulted in rapid, and significant changes in direction rather than in a slow, incremental fashion as prevailing theory on urban politics would suggest. Main associates these incremental jumps with three distinct phases of homelessness policy in New York City. In the first phase, which he labels as the "entitlement phase," the focus was on creating a right to shelter and implementing it in practice. This was followed first by the "paternalistic phase," in which, echoing contemporaneous conversations at the national level about welfare reform, access to shelter was made contingent on clients working or seeking treatment; and then the "post-paternalistic phase" in which the emphasis moved beyond simply providing shelter to trying to solve homelessness through Housing First and other approaches focused on permanent housing.

Fans of John Kingdon's streams model of the policy process will find much to like in Main's analysis. In particular, Main describes how the development of homelessness policy in New York City owes much to policy entrepreneurs ranging from the attorney Robert Hayes who was the driving force behind the *Callahan v Carey* lawsuit, to former Mayor Rudy Giuliani who is largely credited with ushering in the paternalistic era, to Sam Tsemberis, the architect of the Housing First model who is seen as a central figure in shifting the emphasis towards providing housing instead of shelter and treatment. Academic researchers are also seen as highly influential, particularly in later stages when their research helped build consensus that solving homelessness was a feasible policy objective. This is an interesting story in its own right, and Main has enough grist here for an entirely separate book about the role of research in the policymaking process.

What then, has ultimately been wrought by the non-incremental trajectory of homelessness policy in New York City? Main contends with this question in the concluding chapter where he suggests that the amount of resources (more than \$1 billion per year) that New York City dedicates towards a group with little political power who are (at best) marginal actors in the policy process represents a victory of sorts. However, this victory is not complete because, as Main points out, these funds have largely been dedicated towards creating a sprawling shelter system of variable quality and not towards the permanent housing that those experiencing homelessness really want.

It is in the decision to not continue this thread and offer thoughts on what should be done moving forward that my biggest critique with Main's book lies. Perhaps this critique is unfair as Main is explicit from the outset that he does not intend to offer any policy prescriptions and—to his credit—he remains true to his word. Nonetheless, I did find myself wondering what someone who has been a longtime observer of and occasional participant (a role about which he is admirably transparent) in the process of developing policy responses to homelessness in New York City thinks the next chapter of this story should look like. Surely someone in Main's position has some ideas about what could be done better and how it might be achieved? And surely those ideas would be of interest in the context of shelter counts in New York City that are at all-time highs and a mayor who has recently set a decidedly modest goal of reducing these counts? But that is arguably a topic that deserves its own book and even without prescriptions about what should be in the future, Main's work stands strongly on its own as a compelling history of what has been done to date and how we got where we are.

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