

ETHOS: A Perspective from the United States of America.

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Introduction

The paper, ‘The ETHOS Definition and Classification of Homelessness: An Analysis’, by Kate Amore, Michael Baker and Philippa Howden-Chapman aims to analyze the ETHOS definition and typology of homelessness, and to remedy certain weaknesses that it finds in them. However, it is not clear that the remedies suggested strengthen a framework that has been widely supported and adopted.

Defining homelessness is a critically important task for a host of reasons that the authors point out. From the perspective of those primarily involved in homelessness policy, data and research are essential to size the problem and identify which solutions work best. The definition, therefore, is a bedrock matter. The definition of homelessness in the US has been an issue of fierce debate for the past decade. This debate has primarily focused upon the critical threshold between homelessness and housing exclusion, which is also a primary focus of the paper’s criticism. The authors’ contention that this issue has serious policy ramifications has been borne out by the close link in the US between the definition and the policy response. In the US, different federal programmes use different definitions, determined largely by what policy resources are available to address the problem. Nevertheless, the definition adopted by the largest federal funder (the US Department of Housing and Urban Development) has been the most commonly used, and has also been the basis of the two most comprehensive national efforts to enumerate the homeless population: the semi-annual point in time count and the homeless management information system. Using these data sources, a baseline was established, and the US set numerical goals for reducing homelessness over time. Federal investments have been linked to progress in achieving these goals, and this in turn has driven public and political will for continued funding, and even increased funding despite the decreased number of homeless people and sub-populations, such as chronically homeless people and veterans. Consistent data based upon a solid definition has been the lynchpin of these efforts.

The ETHOS Framework: Exploring the Critique

ETHOS has made a very important contribution to the international discussion on definitions. It points out that homelessness is something that occurs along a continuum of housing and it provides a way to understand various housing situations. It gives nations a way to ‘think’ about housing problems, therefore, in a more nuanced fashion, and to understand and measure housing adequacy in a relative way. It allows nations to assess how many homeless people there are while not violating their own national or cultural definitions. Within the ETHOS framework, nations can choose what category or categories of homelessness they wish to define and measure, and have this measurement be understandable, comparable and reliable internationally.

The authors of this paper point out what they consider to be weaknesses in the ETHOS framework. The first is that the conceptual model upon which it is based does not draw the line between homelessness and housing exclusion in the proper place – although they agree with the domains (physical, legal and social). The ETHOS framework determines that homelessness occurs when all three domains coincide, or where the social and the legal domains intersect. The authors identify this as a weakness, arguing that homelessness should be defined as either the intersection of all three domains, or the intersection of *any two* domains. However, although ‘reasonableness’ is cited, there is no clear conceptual rationale for this proposed change. It could as easily be argued that homelessness should only be the intersection of all three domains, or that the absence of any one, rather than two, of the domains would suffice.

Their second argument with the conceptualization of ETHOS is that it does not address the circumstances of those who are homeless, but only their housing status. The point here is essentially that there is a difference between someone who has choice and chooses a certain less than adequate housing type (say, living in a tent while camping) and someone who is forced to live in a less than adequate housing type (living in a tent because they have nowhere else to live). Addressing this could help eliminate the inclusion of people who are not homeless in enumerations of homelessness. However, in their suggested modification of ETHOS, the authors fail to suggest a remedy, beyond saying that “access to economic resources is a key indicator”.

The authors also identify three problems with the ETHOS typology. They find that both its construct validity and its exhaustiveness fall short, and that it does not give sufficient guidance to cover the range of possible housing situations fully in every national or cultural context. They suggest a modification of the model to solve these problems. They propose, as mentioned above, that homelessness be defined as the intersection of all three domains, or any two of the domains. Again, there is no

definitive rationale for this proposed change and it is not clear that it addresses what they see as the problem with ETHOS. Similarly, they present a partial typology based upon their concept, but no clear explanation of how this would address what they see as the shortcomings of ETHOS.

Finally, they point out what may be a more serious criticism with respect to ‘reference period consistency’. They suggest that a definition of homelessness should confine itself solely to identifying those who are currently homeless. While the question of who is at risk of becoming homeless and what happens to people who were recently homeless are of high policy importance, they argue that addressing these questions should not be conflated with defining homelessness itself. However, having raised this important criticism, they fail to suggest how it should be remedied within the ETHOS framework, recommending only that the definition have a ‘reference period’.

Conclusion

The importance of having a definition of homelessness is not primarily academic; a definition is needed to help solve the problem. To end homelessness, it is necessary to know how many homeless people there are and how this number changes over time. There is a practical dimension to the matter. A definition must contain data elements that can be collected in the real world. A definition must be consistent over time so that change can be measured. It would also be beneficial to have a definition that had some international comparability so that we could compare the efficacy of approaches in different nations.

ETHOS as constructed may not be perfect in every respect, but it can be expected to improve over time and with use. It has the clear advantage of having been widely vetted and approved by a broad spectrum of nations. It has the further advantage of increasing utilization, as it meets some of the practical tests. Further, as ETHOS is increasingly used it will have the advantage of consistency. In ETHOS there is hope that a workable definition will be coupled with a consistent definition.

It is agreed that a definition of homelessness should have a clear conceptual basis. As the authors point out, however, the definition should be created in pursuit of a series of goals around addressing a social problem. Academic requirements must be fused with workability and linked to policy and practice. The authors point this out, but do not suggest practical incremental adjustments that will improve the ETHOS model.