

Mary Ellen Hombs (2011)

Modern Homelessness

California: ABC-CLIO 289 pp. \$55.00 (€39.84)

Modern Homelessness is a new book on homelessness from the United States. The author, Mary Ellen Hombs, comes to this work with rich experience in community settings and in government, both with the Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance, and much of the past decade with the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH). She has written a number of books (including several for this ABC-CLIO textbook series) on topics ranging from AIDS, to social welfare reform, to several on the subject of homelessness. In fact, she authored a previous title in this series, American Homelessness.

Her new book, part of a textbook series, is intended to provide an overview of homelessness in the United States. For students of homelessness both within and outside of the United States, the book presents a brief history of American homelessness, and key developments in the areas of policy and practice, focusing for the most part on developments over the past ten years. This descriptive overview of key events and factors that shaped policy development is useful in that the information is laid out in a clear, logical way that can guide the reader unfamiliar with the American context through the changes that have shaped the current response to homelessness. This review highlights the roles and actions of different Federal departments, as well as state and local government. The book outlines a range of issues necessary to take up in responding to homelessness, as well as the necessity of considering the needs of special sub-populations, including families, the chronically homeless and of particular importance in the United States context, war veterans.

One chapter focuses on 'Problems, Controversies and Solutions'. This is an interesting read, as it provides an overview of key issues in the US, including defining and measuring homelessness and the issue of poverty. In thinking about solutions, a key theme is the importance of partnerships, and of the need for strategic, coordinated and planned responses to homelessness. Here, she provides a critical overview of the Ten Year plan model, exploring the rhetoric behind its use, implementation challenges and whether or not such plans are producing results.

While the book is ostensibly about homelessness in the United States, she does not ignore international developments. In providing overviews of the responses to homelessness in Europe, Canada and Australia, she acknowledges that the unique social and policy contexts of different nation states makes comparisons very problematic and “speculative at best”. These descriptive overviews, though brief, do give the reader an introductory understanding into the history and organization of the response to homelessness in each of these international locations. While there is a short discussion of FEANTSA the European Observatory on Homelessness, and some member states of the EU, the most attention is focused on developments in the United Kingdom, perhaps not surprising given the linguistic and cultural affinity with the US. Given that there is really little comparative research on responses to homelessness at a time when researchers and policy-makers are now becoming more interested in engaging internationally (globally), the inclusion of this material is actually quite welcome. It is also important to consider that American audiences are likely very unaware of the developments in the area of homelessness in other countries.

What makes this book a bit unusual is that over half the book is made up of chapters that consist of lists. One chronicles key players in the United States, another is a Directory of Organizations, Associations and Agencies, and the final chapter is a grab-bag of ‘resources’, including databases, DVD lists and websites. It isn’t clear to this reviewer how intrinsically useful such information is, in the current context of wireless communication, handhelds and google. Most of these items – including biographical sketches of key players – are easily obtained through internet searches. Not only that, by placing such lists in a book format – no matter how comprehensive – the content is automatically stale-dated. For instance, the book references Philip Mangano, who was certainly a key player in the homelessness world as head of the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, but does not profile Barbara Poppe, the current director, who has not only made a big impact (orchestrating the development of the first US government sponsored 10 year plan to end homelessness), but has been in this role for almost three years.

Overall, this book has some key strengths, and some clear weaknesses. The first half of the book is most informative. What would have made this a particularly interesting read is if more space was devoted to discussing the historical development of USICH, which played a key role in shaping developments in the American response to homelessness during her period working for Philip Mangano, from 2003-2009. This was a period of intense change, and some biographical details of the workings of USICH, and the successes achieved under the Bush administration would have been particularly enlightening. Perhaps that is for a future volume.

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