

Heather Larkin, Amanda Aykanian and Calvin L. Streeter Eds. (2019)

Homelessness Prevention and Intervention in Social Work: Policies, Programs and Practices

Gewerbestrasse, Switzerland: Springer Nature Switzerland AG, 412 pp.

The provenance of this book begins in 2013 when the *American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare* set-up a working party to ascertain prevailing and future ‘Grand Challenges in Social Work’ – 12 were identified, the fifth was ‘End Homelessness’ (Uehara *et al.*, 2013; Uehara *et al.*, 2014; Henwood *et al.*, 2015). In support of this challenge the *National Centre for Excellence in Homelessness Services* launched the *National Homelessness Social Work Initiative* (NHSWI). Led by a national consortium of schools of social work, the overarching aim of the NHSWI was to develop and apply ‘innovative strategies’ to ‘service and policy design and social work education’. In the pursuit of this objective, the co-editors of the book under review were commissioned by the NHSWI to examine social work curricula in colleges and universities across the USA. They discovered – or more likely had their suspicions confirmed – that homelessness featured at best ‘sporadically and inconsistently’ and was often ‘left out altogether’ (Larkin *et al.*, 2016, *passim*). They saw this as both a challenge and opportunity to produce a textbook that would encourage the integration of homelessness in social work teaching: *Homelessness Prevention and Intervention in Social Work* is the outcome of this perceived opportunity.

In their Preface the editors claim that their book can be used either ‘as a foundational text for a full course on homelessness’ or as ‘a companion text for courses on poverty in the USA’. How well does *Homelessness Prevention and Intervention* meet these aims?

As a course text, its electronic format (strongly promoted by the publishers) and the accompanying e-learning material are salient. The latter includes chapter content summaries, keyword lists and suggestions for both essay questions and for group and/or class-based activities, plus the identification of key readings – all potentially enhance the pedagogic experience. From among the above, the class based/ group ‘activities’ stand out, addressing as they do the important question of ‘how-to-do’ social work with homeless people. The electronic version seems to

be widely available as part of a library bulk purchase agreement with the publishers, Springer. Even my own university, which has no social work, social policy or sociology department, has a copy accessible to all accredited library users.

A basic requirement of a course text is that it should be reasonably comprehensive in covering the basics of the topic under consideration and have a logical and coherent structure – in the parlance of some educationalists, it ‘should tell a story’ – and indeed, in that respect, the three-part division of this book promises an appropriate organisational arrangement. Part 1, focusing on the ‘characteristics and service needs of homeless people’, begins with an introductory chapter covering the history of homelessness in the USA, the rudiments of US homelessness legislation, definition and enumeration, and the identification of homeless subpopulations. The following three chapters respectively examine trauma, health disparities and the service needs of homeless people. Part 2 deals with ‘individual, community and systems responses’, examining a diverse range of issues including: affordable housing, homelessness discourses, community based strategies, criminalisation and the financing of innovation; it also includes a case study chapter on Los Angeles and New York. Part 3, the longest, considers ‘the delivery of homelessness services’. The eight chapters that make up this section of the book move from critical time intervention, through multisector collaborations, trauma informed care delivery, to street outreach. There then follow two chapters on aspects of youth homelessness and a related chapter on homeless students. Part 3 concludes with a reflection on ‘practice dilemmas, successes and challenges’ in the delivery of homeless services.

It is a moot point, however, as to whether this book so constructed constitutes an adequate ‘course text’. While many individual chapters glow with erudition, the book does not display the level of integration and coverage that might be expected of a ‘textbook’. The treatment of homelessness as a subject of study, *sui generis*, is patchy and there are many absences. The book’s target audience – trainee social workers – might condition choices as to content, yet it is difficult to comprehend why there are two chapters (2 & 13) on trauma and three (15, 16 & 17) on youth homelessness, yet no chapters on prevention, on gender or sexuality, or on ethnicity or race – despite these issues being highlighted in the introductory Chapter 1. Prevention is prominent in the book’s title, it receives 102 mentions, yet these are by and large “in-passing”; there is no chapter devoted to prevention and only one sub-section and that consisting solely of a five-line paragraph (p.10). Additionally, given its importance in the present era, Housing First though frequently mentioned (70 times), is surprisingly relatively neglected given that its success is closely linked with the provision of parallel, multi-agency assertive support systems (discussed in Chapter 12) in which social work would be expected to play a prominent role. These are puzzling lacunae.

There are further features that militate against this book's 'foundational text' status. For instance, there is a striking lack of integration between chapters; each chapter seems to have been written in isolation, the degree of cross-referencing is miniscule and their sequencing is unexplained. These are issues that the editors might have been expected to address; they serve to highlight the lack of participation by the editors in the writing of this book – their written contribution is confined to four multi-authored chapters and to a three and half page Preface. The book cries out for more overt editorial intervention and guidance.

The book fares better as a supporting text, for a course on poverty (as the editors suggest) certainly, but also importantly for a course on social work and homelessness and indeed as a 'reference text' for students of homelessness wishing to learn about the actual and potential contribution of social work. The main strength here lies in the substantive chapters and their attendant comprehensive reference lists (exceeding six pages in four chapters). As noted previously, there is much erudition in these chapters, the authors are after all experts in their fields: if you want to learn about trauma and homelessness, about young people and homelessness this text might well be your first port of call. Three chapters in particular registered with this reviewer; all three successfully meld 'concept' with 'practice', a binary that is frequently difficult to bridge. First, Chapter 6 by Baiocchi and Argüello examines 'street talk and the politics of service provision' persuasively arguing for the addition of 'social talk' to Teresa Gowan's celebrated typology of 'sin, sick and systems thought' (Gowan, 2010). The chapter goes on to explore the ways in which this conceptualisation might enhance social work practice. Second, Chapter 9 by Aykanian and Fogel on the 'criminalisation of homelessness' is notable for its concise history of and trenchant rebuttal of criminalisation policies, and for its proposals for alternative approaches, involving social workers, in ending anti-homelessness programmes. Third, the concluding Chapter 18 by Tiderington on 'practice dilemmas, successes and challenges' draws on a 2015 National Institute of Mental Health's study to examine the difficulties and predicaments faced by frontline workers in the implementation and delivery of homelessness services. While *Homelessness Prevention and Implementation for Social Work* may not realise exactly the role anticipated by its editors, it is nevertheless a valuable reference text, accessible and instructive for both homelessness researcher and practitioner.

Gowan, T. (2010) *Hobos, Hustlers and Backsliders: Homelessness in San Francisco* (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press)

Henwood, B.F. *et al.* (2015) The Grand Challenge of Ending Homelessness, American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare, Working Paper No. 9.

Larkin, H. *et al.* (2016) Responding to the Grand Challenge to End Homelessness: The National Homelessness Social Work Initiative, *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Social Services* 97(3) pp.153-159.

Uehara, E. *et al.* (2013) Grand Challenges in Social Work, *Journal of the Society for Social Work and Research* 4(3) pp.165-170.

Uehara, E. *et al.* (2014) Identifying and Tracking Grand Challenges for Social Work, American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare, Working Paper No. 9.

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