Yvonne Vissing, Christopher G. Hudson and Diane Nilan (2020)

Changing the Paradigm of Homelessness

New York: Routledge.

The central thesis of *Changing the Paradigm of Homelessness* is that ending homelessness requires a change in hearts and minds: "We need to start viewing and treating poverty and homelessness as what they are: human and civil rights issues" (p.182). The authors identify the basic problem as the current "dominant paradigm – that there is really something fundamentally flawed about people who become homeless" (p.3) and set out to replace this paradigm with one based on human dignity and human rights. *Changing the paradigm* is organised into two halves: Background, and Homeless Paradigms. In the first two chapters in the background section, the authors state their thesis and review definitions and numbers. Then they turn to a comprehensive survey of formal theories and how each might shed light on homelessness. These include stratification, social drift, functionalism, conflict theory, symbolic interaction/labelling, the "new orthodoxy", systems theories, chaos theory, and a social forecast approach. This focus on multiple theories, mostly repurposed from other fields, is unique in books about homelessness. The authors proceed to a history of homeless policy in the United States and, in the final chapter in the background section, describe inequality, social stratification, and economic distress in the United States today.

The second half of the book describes alternative paradigms for thinking about homelessness. An initial chapter describes and condemns the current paradigm as based on acceptance of social stratification, blame and stigmatisation of individuals for their homelessness, and readiness to curb rather than eliminate poverty and homelessness.

The next four chapters describe alternative paradigms in increasing order of utility, from the authors' perspective. The "let others fix it" paradigm focuses on criminalisation and philanthropy as inadequate approaches to homelessness. A chapter on the housing paradigm is dismissive of current housing efforts and criticises the "shelter-industrial complex" for profiting from keeping people homeless. The authors include as an appendix a business plan, obtained from the web, for starting a shelter to show how some seek to profit from others' suffering.

ISSN 2030-2762 / ISSN 2030-3106 online

The next paradigm is money, and the authors advocate for investing more in education, food, health care, jobs, childcare, transportation, cell phones and income. Their goal is to provide a firm foundation for children so that they do not become homeless adults. The authors suggest various strategies from raising the minimum wage to a universal basic income that would enable people to live with dignity.

The final chapter is devoted to the human dignity paradigm. It advocates a new "ethical, moral, and just" social contract (p.172) to "put people before profits" (p.171). One goal is the prevention of trauma, which may both cause homelessness and follow from it. The authors embrace a human rights approach, drawing on Franklin Roosevelt's 1944 proposal for a second Bill of Rights in the United States and multiple international covenants. They point out that the U.S., alone or almost alone among nations, has declined to sign these covenants.

I share the authors' values, but believe that policy makers need better guidance about how to instantiate them. Vissing *et al.* do not evaluate evidence about what programmes work. Rather they argue that "the programs that we have in place aren't working because their fundamental assumptions make it impossible for them to work.… Public programs have in the past and could today if we truly invested in them" (p.182). I think this choice is a strategic mistake. If people believe a problem is solvable, they are more likely to invest in solutions rather than turn away. Further, some of the research evidence the authors ignore, for example the success of housing vouchers for families and of a Housing First approach to supported housing for people with long histories of homelessness and mental illness, would bolster the authors' argument that the problem is lack of resources rather than fundamental flaws in the people who are denied them. (Full disclosure – I have co-authored a book with Jill Khadduri that marshals that evidence.)

In the absence of evidence, the authors make some curious choices. For example, in the housing chapter, they write off the Bipartisan Policy Center's recommendation to give permanent rental assistance to everyone whose income is below 30% of the median for their area as "unlikely" because budgets have been flat for years (p.117). Then they speak favourably of a far more expensive plan to build 10 million units of social housing at $150 000 to $220 000 per unit (p.131). The longest section of the money chapter is devoted to blockchain and cryptocurrencies as tools for helping people who experience homelessness to "get their lives back on track" (p.167).

At times the argument seems internally inconsistent. The authors criticise the Department of Housing and Urban Development [HUD's] narrow definition of homelessness: "One could say HUD, the NEAH [National Alliance to End Homelessness], and other HUD financially supported agencies have an intertwined, vested interest" in a definition "designed to undercount children and families" and "designed to keep people out, not let people in" (p.23). But then they criticise San Francisco for

spending two-thirds of its homeless assistance budget on rental subsidies and prevention for “people who aren’t homeless at all” (p.122) – although much of that money probably went to people who experienced the broader forms of housing insecurity the authors want to incorporate in the definition. (Full disclosure again – I serve on the research advisory council for NAEH).

It is not clear to whom the book is addressed. It is written in an accessible style, sprinkled with anecdotes (are these real people, composites, or constructed examples?). Over half of the references are to newspaper and magazine articles rather than scholarly or even advocacy reports. Thus, it seems largely focused on a popular audience – the citizenry whose understandings need to change. On the other hand, there is an occasional unexplained reference to autoregressive moving average (ARIMA) models or to vague “multivariate mathematical models” (p.56) that, along with a change of heart can put an end to homelessness. There is no doubt in my mind that the change of heart is needed, and to the extent that the authors can convince policy makers and the citizenry, I applaud them. Their condemnation of our current system is powerful. But I think that change is more likely if there is evidence that alternatives work. Researchers have provided that evidence, but their findings are not reflected here.

Marybeth Shinn
Vanderbilt University