Grand Challenges for Social Work (2020)

Social Work's Grand Challenge to End Homelessness: Policy Proposals for the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election

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The paper presented is a collection of essays by 17 authors from NGOs and universities, interest groups and umbrella organisations in the fields of social policy, health care, politics, urban economics, and psychology. It is initiated by the 'Grand Challenge to End Homelessness' as part of the social work initiative 'Grand Challenges for Social Work'. Deborah Padgett and Benjamin F. Henwood, both co-chairs of the initiative, "believe the time has come to focus our efforts on what works and how to scale it up" to end homelessness in the USA (Padgett and Henwood, p.3). For this reason, the authors in this anthology briefly describe the problems from their special perspectives and then suggest solutions to solve them. They all emphasise "the need for political will" (ibid.).

In this review, I will start with the overall problem descriptions and proposals given in the essays. This is followed by a short overview of the 10 essays and will be finished by an assessment of the relevance of the collection in the European context of homelessness.

Problem Descriptions

In two essays, increased rents with parallel stagnating wages, i.e. a lack of financial security, are described as the reason for increasing homelessness in the USA. In another, gentrification is seen as a motor for homelessness. In one of the essays, the author on the one hand sees a lack of social capital among homeless clients and on the other hand criticises the system of assistance.

Almost every author identifies specific vulnerable groups in relation to homelessness, namely groups at risk and/or groups with special needs. Three essays focus on people of colour by referring to racial inequalities as a reason for homelessness. Two essays describe homeless veterans as vulnerable. Naming the rising costs of health care due to the aging adult homeless population and, on the other hand, the

increasing homelessness among older adults, put older homeless people at the centre of attention in two essays. In other papers, young homeless people, homeless families, people with mental illness, tribal homelessness and LGBTIQ* are described as vulnerable groups.

How to Solve the Problems

A "brief overview of their collective recommendations" (Padgett and Henwood, p.4) is given in the introduction:

1. Expand investment in affordable housing through existing and new revenue sources;

2. Shift funds from transitional emergency programmes to lasting solutions such as rental vouchers and permanent supportive housing for those with disabilities;

3. Prevent homelessness or ensure its brevity by supporting rapid re-housing and time-limited rental assistance. For the majority of homeless (or near-homeless) families this is all that is needed; and

4. Ensure that the guiding principles of housing first (low barriers to housing, harm reduction, client-centred services) form the cornerstone of homeless services for adults, families and youths.

In the individual essays there are further, repeatedly made suggestions for the solution to the described problems**:**

• A need for a national affordable housing strategy (e.g. Tsemberis, p.45) with a Housing First approach as the cornerstone of a centrepiece of homeless policy (ibid. p.47);

• Evaluation and research (Morton and Horwitz, p.30; Andere, p.34);

• Strengthening social networks (Kushel, p.24) and restoration of social capital (Mangano, p.54); and

• User participation in the sense of decision-making (Morton and Horwitz, p.28; Andere, p.35; Mangano, p.51).

Short Overview of the Essays

1. Progress and Poverty: Homelessness in Rich Cities (Dan O'Flaherty)

Problem: Expanding industries in richer cities lead to gentrification. The "filtering" does not work (anymore) because there are too few middle-class households.

Recommendations: E.g. deregulation for more flexibility in the use of existing housing, and land value taxes instead of levying water and property taxes on the poor.

2. Addressing Homelessness with Unconditional Income (Jack Tsai)

Problem: Lack of financial security in the sense of a regular, stable income.

Recommendations: Tsai proposes a countrywide system of unconditional income.

3. The Opportunity Cost of the Aging Adult Homeless Population (Dennis P. Culhane, Daniel Treglia, Kelly Doran)

Problem: The increase of health costs due to aging of the adult homeless population.

Recommendations: E.g. shifting spending from health and shelter systems to housing solutions, a re-envisioning of the SSI/SSDI Outreach, Access, and Recovery (SOAR) programme, 'Rapid Re-housing' and 'Critical Time Intervention' if prevention is not possible anymore.

4. Homelessness Among Older Adults: An Emerging Crisis (Margot Kushel)

Problem: The heterogeneity among older homeless adults: significant disabling behavioural conditions in people who become homeless before the age of 50 and dramatic life courses when people become homeless after the age of 50.

Recommendation: Different solutions due to different causes/target groups (Permanent Supportive Housing or Housing First versus affordable housing).

5. Ending Youth Homelessness (Matthew H Morton, Beth Horwitz)

Problem: Hidden and fluid youth homelessness due to structural inequality (e.g. race, LGBTIQ*) and family adversity. Various programmes set up and funded by the government, but in which far too little money has been invested.

Recommendations: Youth-centred, coordinated response systems, addressing inequalities related to race and LGBTIQ* identity, research and evaluation.

6. Ending Homelessness by Addressing Racial Inequities (Amanda Andere)

Problem: Homelessness is a symptom of failing systems and people of colour are most affected due to structural racism.

Recommendations: Racial equity has to be centred in policies and practices to end homelessness; data about homelessness have to be disaggregated to make visible features like race.

7. Homelessness is a Housing Problem (Marybeth Shinn, Jill Khadduri)

Problem: Lack of housing, but also discrimination in income and employment, wealth, imprisonment and housing on the basis of race or mental illness.

Recommendation: Anti-discrimination legislation in the areas of housing and employment (e.g. in the context of race and disability), promoting fair housing conditions by increasing income and reducing housing costs.

8. Three Housing Strategies to End Homelessness: Is There Political Leadership to Get There? (Nan Roman, Diane Yentel)

Problem: A lack of affordable housing due to increased rents and stagnating wages, but also the lack of political will.

Recommendations: E.g. the provision of state rent subsidies, the expansion of the supply of affordable housing, the creation of a "National Housing Stabilisation Fund" to prevent the imminent loss of housing for people in short-term housing crises.

9. We Can End Homelessness, If We Choose To: Policy Recommendations For 2020 (Sam Tsemberis)

Problem: No national affordable housing strategy.

Recommendations: E.g. more investment in affordable housing by a millionaires' tax or a real estate tax; use of existing approaches like Permanent Supportive Housing, Housing First, and HUD-VASH for homeless veterans.

10. Replenishing Social Capital in the Lives of Homeless People: Overcoming Stigma through Housing and Employment (Philip F. Mangano)

Problem: The lack of a home and a job in connection with a lack social capital leaves homeless people isolated. Helping programmes are focused on sustaining the programme and don't consider enough the interests of the clients.

Recommendations: A consumer-centric approach, a restoration of social capital, approaches like Housing First and HUD-VASH (for homeless veterans), but also employment initiatives addressed specifically to homeless people.

Conclusion and Evaluation

All of the essays focus on the connection between structural and individual problems as causes of homelessness. The recommendations therefore point in both directions. First: Homelessness is ended by the provision of housing! If this is not available or accessible and affordable for all, the state must provide access to housing through housing construction and individual financial support for homeless people. In addition, the multiple discrimination of many homeless people (race/class/gender) is evident, which must be overcome by appropriate anti-discrimination laws. But also, the system of assistance is often criticised because it does not take sufficient account of the needs of those affected. Morton and Horwitz (p.35) therefore described very aptly what they consider to be the right approach: "Those who are closest to the problem are the ones who are closest to the solution". In this respect, the collection of essays can also be used in Europe, as a call to examine the transferability of causes and solution strategies described in the essays. Because of the many programmes mentioned, some of which are specific to the USA, the essays are somewhat useless in themselves – individual research is needed to find out what is hidden behind the many abbreviations of the programmes (not everything is so familiar like the Housing First approach). But this seems to be a worthwhile endeavour.

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