

Eoin O’Sullivan (2020)

Reimagining Homelessness for Policy and Practice.

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<https://policy.bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/reimagining-homelessness>

The central tenet of O’Sullivan’s book is uncontroversial, that understanding homelessness defines how you respond to it.

The growth in homelessness across Europe is evidence that the actions that are being taken to address homelessness are, in the main, not working. O’Sullivan argues that governments, policy makers, and service providers have been acting on homelessness, but impact has been blunted because they have been working within a construction of homelessness where ‘we *imagine* that homelessness is the consequence of individual failings and dysfunctions’ (p.16).

The answer is ‘... to rethink homelessness as a pattern of residential instability and economic precariousness regularly experienced by marginal households...’ (p.19).

In this slim volume, O’Sullivan primarily focuses on the Irish experience, but locates that in a European context. In five chapters and just over 100 pages he makes the case for a systemic and housing led response to homelessness. The case he makes is compelling drawing on a wide range of sources.

In the first chapter O’Sullivan sets out his early views of homelessness. It is based on his interaction with people experiencing homelessness and homeless services as a volunteer and then as an employee in a shelter in Galway as a young man. This is a writer’s conceit common in social texts, I am certain that I have been guilty of it, and it can often seem superfluous and self-indulgent. However, aided by an honest reflection of his own thinking at the time and a focus on the services available all juxtaposed with a wide range of informed sources that he is now aware of, O’Sullivan ensures that it is not the case here.

Rather it builds a picture of what services and homelessness ‘looks’ like, while drawing on the knowledge he has acquired in the intervening years to expose the misconceptions that flow from an inherited view of homelessness. These misconceptions stem from what we do not see, notably women, thus we have an absence of an appropriate gendered analysis of homelessness. The understandable focus

of time and energy on those most entrenched in homelessness who on any given night are the more numerous lead us to lose sight of the fact that the majority of people who are experiencing homelessness only do so for a short time.

In the second chapter O'Sullivan builds on this theme. He sets out a brief historical reflection on responses to homelessness. He might have edited down much of the first seven pages as the contemporary focus and the pace of piece are slightly dented by the time given to this broad historical perspective. Though that might leave the reader missing out on discovering the differences between a rogue and an incorrigible rogue.

It is when he starts to explore the growth of congregated shelters we return to the meat of the argument. Drawing on contemporary research he forcefully makes the case that '... there is no convincing evidence that...large congregated shelters.... achieves anything other than a temporary and generally unpleasant, respite from the elements...' (p.31).

The alternative and proven approach to entrenched homelessness as O'Sullivan sets out is 'Housing First', whereby the person is provided with a home and then given the support they require to maintain that home. Here he shows again that we have the answers if we have the will.

O'Sullivan continues to build on the theme of the contemporary view of homelessness and highlights that it is much the same as the old view. This is problematic because if we see homelessness as a consequence of a personal failing, mental health, or substance use problem, we see it as something to be responded to rather than something to be prevented. Warming to his theme, drawing on ground-breaking research, he discusses the varying experiences of homelessness and the prevalence of each. Here he highlights that entrenched homelessness in the Global North is far from being the majority experience, it '... accounts for roughly 10 per cent of those experiencing homelessness over time' (p.36).

These facts are not widely understood and O'Sullivan highlights the reasons for this. Namely that the bulk of research over the last 50 years has taken a cross sectional view of homelessness leading to an equating of homelessness with entrenched homelessness that ill serves everyone. The other significant actors are the service providers or NGOs whose fundraising leans heavily on the image of street based sleeping.

This distorted version of homelessness has led to policy and practice not meeting the needs of those experiencing or at risk of homelessness. We lose sight of the facts that '... the generosity and comprehensiveness of welfare systems shape the degree to which households will experience homelessness...' (p.29), 'alcohol, drugs and mental health issues are not in and of themselves causes of homelessness,

and to suggest that they are is to underrepresent the importance of the economic drivers' (p.40), and 'effective responses to homelessness require housing' (p.45). Further, 'outreach coupled with the provision of housing with support is an effective way of addressing rough sleeping. While providing short-term accommodation in congregated settings is not' (p.43).

It is in the third chapter that O'Sullivan takes a deep dive into the relatively comprehensive data on homelessness that is available in Ireland. Here he builds again on his theme that a comprehensive analysis of the flow and true experience of homelessness leads to real solutions. Again, he returns to the fact that housing is the answer to homelessness. Noting that 'it is the number of households who are unable to exit emergency accommodation that have swelled the point in time figure' (p.59).

The importance of the analysis comes to the fore in his artful deconstruction of the ambition in the Housing and Homeless strategy discussed in the fourth chapter and the number of services and policies that react to homelessness.

The housing crisis in Ireland over the period under review, 2016-2019, saw a 150 per cent increase of households in emergency accommodation. This in turn has seen a growth in the number of congregated services, particularly for families. This growth happened despite successful homeless prevention, diversion, and move-on supports that served more than 12 000 households.

In an insightful deconstruction of the Irish Government policy 'Rebuilding Ireland', O'Sullivan sets out that while the actions in the strategy on homelessness are useful in themselves, they do not disrupt the structural failings of the system' (p.76).

In the final chapter O'Sullivan sets out again the case for his thesis and outlines what a reimagined response to homelessness would entail. The actions taken have to be informed by 'understanding homelessness as a relatively predictable event in the lifecycle of those who experience entrenched housing instability and labour market precariousness' (p.101).

Flowing from that understanding and citing local and international research he argues,

Homelessness can be ended through the large scale provision of state-funded social housing tenancies provided by both local authorities and AHBs,... It will also require the restoration of social housing to a 'wider affordability role', rather than 'a safety net'.... (p.113)

That is the crux of it. Housing is the answer to homelessness, it is as simple and as difficult as that. This book, in particular because of its focus and accessibility, should be widely read and acted upon. Those at risk or experiencing homelessness will be well served if we do.

If, for the purposes of review, I had a quibble with this piece it is a sense of imbalance in the analysis. Here I have to be mindful of my prejudice, and the reader should be too. I have worked and represented three of the largest providers of homeless services in Ireland over the last 16 years. While O’Sullivan sees the construction of homelessness by NGOs as problematic, he does not take proper account of the advocacy by those same NGOs that has led to government action and public support for action on homelessness. There is also relatively scant recognition of the fact that homeless organisations in Ireland have been championing exactly the sort of change that he eloquently advocates for in the fifth chapter of this book.

If we are to address homelessness we need to provide a housing system, a social protection system, and a health system that meets the needs of the people. From where we stand today that will be a very expensive and long-term project. The scale of that challenge, how daunting it is for a political system that thinks in five year cycles, and how that might be overcome could have been explored. It does not go unaddressed. Former civil servant turned academic Eddie Lewis, who is well placed to understand these issues, is quoted noting that governments can be reluctant to meet the issues face on.

In this context, the omission of the positive social and political influence of homeless NGOs is important given that the ambition of the piece set out at the start is to influence how we think about and respond to homelessness. A more expanded examination on the drivers of the changes in thinking that have occurred, such as the roll out of Housing First in Ireland, as well as what stayed the same would have been a useful addition. This could also be extended beyond NGOs. As an example, the drivers of the decision of Dublin City Council to scale back on allocations to those in homelessness could have been given more in-depth attention (p.89). Having engaged closely with local authority representatives at the time, many, though not all, dismissed the idea of people ‘gaming the system’ but were torn and put under significant pressure from constituents due to the difficult decisions around the allocation of scarce resources.

Those quibbles aside, it stands repeating that O’Sullivan has produced an excellent and important contribution.

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