
Editorial

As this edition of the *European Journal of Homelessness* goes to press, restrictions on travel, hospitality and broader economic activity due to Covid-19 are gradually being eased across Europe as vaccination programmes are rolled out. However, uncertainty is evident in relation to the various variants of Covid-19 that are circulating, and if these variants, allied to greater social contacts, will result in further restrictions in the Autumn. Protecting people from Covid-19 has cast a cold light on the limitations of current policy and service responses to homelessness, and Ruth Owen and Miriam Matthiessen in their review of responses to homelessness in Europe arising from Covid-19 demonstrate just how inadequate and dangerous emergency accommodation, particularly communal shelters, are as a response to those who experience homelessness. The ability to protect oneself by staying at home simply adds to the large body of evidence that access to housing, with support as needed, is most effective response, not only to the residential instability that characterises that majority who experience a spell in temporary or emergency accommodation, but also how crucial a secure dwelling is across a range of other domains in providing protection, security and the capacity to develop ones capabilities.

They also demonstrate that given sufficient political will and resources, what are sometimes termed ‘intractable’ or ‘wicked’ social problems, such as responding to entrenched street homelessness, can be addressed in relatively short time frames through the provision of good quality safe accommodation, and those experiencing street homelessness are not ‘service resistant’ as is sometimes claimed, but may be reasonably resistant to poor quality, overcrowded communal facilities. Indeed, a key lesson from the pandemic to-date is the significant differences in the rate of infection amongst people experiencing homelessness in different settings, with shared airspaces and dormitories having worse outcomes than individual accommodation.

In her case study of Germany, Claudia Engelmann in her paper notes that tens of thousands of people experiencing homelessness currently live in such congregate accommodation. Originally intended as a short-term measure – for a few days or weeks – people increasingly stay there for a longer time, and that standards which suffice for short-term housing are in the main not adequate for longer-term accommodation. The paper also highlights the significant differences across German municipalities in such accommodation in relation accessibility, conditions inside, as well as the chances of moving on from shelter to regular housing. Local variability in responses to those experiencing homelessness is also a theme in the paper by Matti Wirehag, but despite these local variations, the paper argues that such services share

three overarching functions: gatekeeping, managing the homeless, and administering housing for the poor, with these functions serving to manage those experiencing homelessness rather than provide sustainable exits from homelessness.

The pandemic has also starkly highlighted the precarious housing situations of those in overcrowded shared accommodation, often referred to as the hidden homeless or sofa / couch surfers. Based on an innovative methodological approach, Henning Lohmann in his paper shows that in the case of Germany, that within a period of 12 months, about 3 per cent of households surveyed hosted a sofa / couch surfer for at least one night and provides an important template for other countries to collect data on hidden homelessness from respondents in population surveys. Deb Batterham in her paper also utilises an innovative methodology using household panel surveys to operationalise and test a definition of homelessness risk. Based on these household panel surveys, 7.9% of people aged 15 years and over, just under 1.5 million people, were at-risk of homelessness in Australia in 2015, and compared with the national population, were more likely to be women, to be Indigenous and to report fair or poor health.

Turning to practice, the pandemic has reemphasised the need for sustained efforts to assess the situation of homeless migrants, victims of domestic violence, and others whose vulnerabilities have not been adequately understood or addressed. In the case of migrants experiencing homelessness, Angeliki Paidakaki, in her paper, provides useful case studies from Vienna and Madrid on the role of NGOs in finding socially innovative housing solutions for asylum seekers and refugees through fostering strategic partnerships in contexts where affordable housing is limited.

Geoff Nelson and colleagues in their contribution to this edition aim to understand how social scientists can influence policy responses to those experiencing homelessness based on examples from Europe, Canada, and the United States. They argue that social scientists have shown that *ideas matter* by reframing effective responses to homelessness. Social scientists have also played an important role demonstrating that *evidence matters*. While problem framing and rigorous evaluation research have established a firm foundation for homelessness policy change, other strategies are needed to establish evidence-based approaches more fully into homelessness policy. In the follow up paper that will appear in the next edition of the EJH, the authors explore the considerable difficulties in ensuring that this evidence translate in policy and the crucial of politics in making the shift from ideas and evidence to policy.

This edition of the EJH also contains the first systematic review of homelessness in Switzerland, and the paper provides an important Swiss perspective to the European landscape of homelessness research and to highlight important future challenges. Finally, this edition contains two review symposia and a number of book reviews that we hope that the readers of the EJH find informative.