

Teresa Consoli and Antonella Meo (Eds) (2020)

Homelessness in Italia, Biografie, Territori, Politiche

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In Italy, the public and academic debate about homelessness is not wide-ranging. For many years, the periodical Reports of the Italian Commission on Poverty and Social Exclusion have placed the issue of homelessness at the forefront of the policy agenda as an extreme condition of poverty. Housing exclusion was identified as one dimension of an extreme poverty which can be tackled by institutions and charities primarily through income support policies and emergency food assistance and shelter programmes. However, much of the theoretical and empirical research has suffered from serious methodological flaws. In the major part, it focused on variations of poverty intensity – extreme poverty or the near-poor, absolute, or relative poverty – and its incidence among different typologies of households. The process of impoverishment was described as the progressive effect in a process of accumulation of negative events. Studies showed significant results in detecting the dimension of homelessness in many towns, but in many cases did not possess a solid framework that brings together a description of the observed phenomenon to the following generalisation of the research findings.

In the 1990s, theoretical and empirical research and the Reports of the Italian Commission on Poverty and Social Exclusion began to propose a more solid theoretical framework. The years that followed were extremely important both for the development of academic studies in this field and the introduction of new theoretical approaches, and for the definition of welfare responses to individuals living in severe housing deprivation.

Compared to previous studies, the interesting and timely publication edited by Teresa Consoli and Antonella Meo presents a useful conceptual map which allows for a more accurate reading of the processes and changes in the field of homelessness, eliciting the attention of politicians and scholars on the topic (p. 12). This edited collection includes contributions from 20 authors, mostly members of the scientific committee of fio.PSD, the Italian Federation of Organizations Working with Homeless People (Consoli et al., 2016). The book is divided into three sections, plus introductory and concluding chapters. Moving beyond the limits of much of the

previous research, the introductory chapter proposes a shift of attention from economic and social deprivation to the growing housing deprivation involving several social groups – not only the poor people- and to the inadequacy of housing policies adopted by many European governments (pp.8-9). People experiencing homelessness are a heterogeneous social group, characterised by very different life trajectories, divergent lengths of deprivation, as well as variations in routes into and out of poverty. People experiencing homelessness may remain in the same condition for many years or may leave it after a few months. The trigger events which lead to the beginning, or the end of poverty or periods of housing deprivation spells can be very different.

The first section, with four chapters, provides a detailed analysis of the organisation of services in four Italian cities, reconstructing the life trajectories of service users and the relationships they have established with social workers. The second section focuses on the conditions and processes that favour or hinder social integration. The authors use life history interviews for detecting the particular life events which increase the likelihood both of entering and exiting poverty. The third section presents the results of a survey on households receiving assistance from FEAD programmes (Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived). Two other chapters explore the differentiated territorial impacts of national and regional programmes and provide an evaluation of the Housing First and Housing Led models.

In the concluding chapter, it is noted that most services are organised in such a way as to deal with chronic housing deprivation, and thus do not provide intervention programmes for less severe forms of housing deprivation. In Italy, the Guideline for Tackling Severe Adult Marginality remains the primary reference for the definition of welfare responses to individuals living in severe housing deprivation. The chapter underlines the need to initiate the third national research on the homeless population.

It can be said that the book is underpinned by three primary theoretical premises that link all chapters in a sort of 'red thread'. Firstly, in all chapters, the different forms of poverty and housing deprivation are observed not as a state but as a dynamic process with significant variations in intensity across time. This can evolve not only into a deep social drift for an individual or household, but may also include frequent fluctuations and exits from poverty and housing exclusion. Such a dynamic approach is becoming more consistent in Italy (Alcock and Siza, 2003) as in many European countries (Nolan and Whelan, 2011) and in studies of people with a high need of housing support (Busch-Geertsema, 2010; O'Sullivan, 2020). In many cases, this approach adopts research methods and tools that should be able to understand the route of a life process, such as longitudinal research and administrative data that refers to many years. In others, it is applied through

qualitative cross-sectional interviews which grasp the development of the processes of impoverishment in a specific time, or the end of a crisis and thus the phenomenon's fluidity.

Secondly, much research shows that the boundaries between 'the poor' and 'the non-poor' are becoming more unstable and precarious. Those that have shared a condition of economic deprivation in certain periods of life may reach sufficiently good life conditions or slip into even more severe levels of poverty; a smaller number, which differs from one context to another, reaches an irreversible social drift or manages an emergence out of deprivation once and for all. The concept of poverty is extended and includes very different social groups, in terms of professional qualifications, possible inclusion in the labour market, resources in a network of informal relations, and the ability to manage critical situations. The growing food insecurity of some social groups which many charities face coexists with precarity and economic hardships that hit a large number of households.

Thirdly, strategies defined over the years as active welfare, new risk policies, and social investment welfare have spread in all European countries with the aim to increase autonomy, mobilise the individual's resources, and secure a better future for people facing conditions of severe poverty.

These three re-conceptualisations shift the terms of the debate on homelessness by placing emphasis on blurred social identities and unstable social positions and the widespread diffusion of fluid and mobile lives. In addition, they highlight the need for activation of personal resources to create opportunities for changing people's life trajectories and establish a recovery orientation in welfare services. These re-conceptualisations have a notable influence in defining the principal European documents on this issue and contribute to reframing the public discourse.

In the last decade, the economic and cultural context has been changing drastically, and certainly not in the direction hoped for by many social groups. Conditionality and harsher sanctions are changing the nature of welfare, the persistence of poverty and social divisions between 'the poor' and 'the non-poor' are increasing throughout towns and cities in Europe, and housing politics are progressively weaker. In many European countries, people experiencing homelessness, particularly those involved in antisocial 'street culture' activities such as street based sleeping, problematic substance use, public drinking, and begging, are a key group targeted by conditional welfare interventions and other social control measures (Watts and Fitzpatrick, 2018, p.73). Welfare conditionality requires people to behave in a certain way to access welfare goods, such as cash benefits, housing, or support services. These behavioural conditions tend to be enforced through penalties or 'sanctions' that reduce, suspend, or end access to these goods (Dwyer, 2019). In Italy, this scheme intends to respond to changes in attitudes and interests of a large part of the middle and

working class and many economic and political actors. These social groups think that being more selective, increasing the degree of conditionality in housing programmes, social assistance, and lowering the level of benefits for immigrants and traditionally undeserving groups are priority measures of a new welfare. This welfare configuration intends to reinforce public protection for 'deserving' Italian citizens and reduce competition with ethnic minorities and refugees on access to housing programmes, social assistance, and health services.

This publication is product of an extensive network of associations that has been able to build collaborative relationships with local and national institutions over time. I hope it can contribute to countering the aforementioned drift of European welfare systems.

► References

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