

Charley E. Willison (2021)

Ungoverned and Out of Sight: Public Health and the Political Crisis of Homelessness in the United States

Oxford University Press

In the midst of reading Charley Willison's book *Ungoverned and Out of Sight: Public Health and the Political Crisis of Homelessness in the United States*, I took a trip to visit a dear friend and his family in San Francisco, which happens to be the focus of one of Willison's case studies in her book examining the politics of municipal-level responses to homelessness. As with the handful of previous trips I've made to San Francisco, I was struck by how unique of a city it is. Turning left out of the front door of my friend's apartment building led me directly to the expanses of Golden Gate Park. Turning right led me to a park situated on one of San Francisco's many famous hilltops that offered panoramic views of the city and the Pacific Ocean. Of course, San Francisco is also unique in that it has come to be perceived as an outlier among American cities with respect to both its astronomically high housing costs and its large homeless population. The relationship between these two things (housing costs and homelessness) has been the subject of a line of research in which I've been engaged, and thus it unavoidably frames my thinking about policy responses to homelessness. This nexus of housing affordability and homelessness is thus the lens through which I read Willison's book. Being physically present in San Francisco and reading Willison's case study of it while there helped crystallise the main challenge I had with her work. But, I'll hold off on diving into that challenge for a moment, as there is still a lot to like about what Willison does in her book.

The starting point for Willison's book is that prior research has not paid much attention at all to the political processes that govern municipal-level responses to homelessness in the United States. From my perspective, this lack of attention is surprising for at least two reasons. First, homelessness in the United States is heavily concentrated in urban areas. Indeed, roughly 25% of the population of people experiencing homelessness on a given night in the United States in 2020 were in New York City or Los Angeles, despite the fact that these cities account for less than 4% of the overall United States population. Second, in some cases there

are substantial municipal resources dedicated specifically toward homelessness. The budget for New York City's Department of Homeless Services, for example, is north of \$2 billion per year. Thus, Willison's focus on city-level policy responses to homelessness is a welcome contribution to the literature, and her focus on the politics that drive variation in these responses is natural given her background as a political scientist.

Willison seeks to empirically examine these city-level responses using a mixed methods approach that entailed a considerable and laudable amount of original data collection on her part. She first constructs a dataset of roughly 250 municipalities in the United States and uses municipal-level adoption of an explicitly articulated supportive housing policy as a proxy measure for whether a city has implemented an evidence-based policy approach to homelessness. Willison then uses an array of city-level variables (e.g., percentage of population identifying as black, degree of city's political conservatism, concentration of nonprofit health providers) to identify typologies of cities that have (and have not) implemented supportive housing policies. It is a creative and interesting idea, and I have no doubt that Willison's execution of it is technically sound. However, readers like myself who are unfamiliar with the fuzzy set qualitative comparative analysis that Willison uses to conduct this analysis may find this section of the book difficult to follow at times. Indeed, Willison's book is likely, at times, to be less than accessible to a broader audience. For example, on too many occasions the book slipped into language that felt a little too much like political science/policy wonk jargon (I had to read the sentence "This section focuses on the dynamics of political participation in San Francisco's political economy of homeless politics—or debates over the policies affecting people experiencing chronic homelessness" several times to make sure I understood it).

However, Willison does do a great job of communicating the overall end goal of her quantitative work. This goal is essentially to identify candidate cities that are representative of the different types of cities that do and do not have municipal-level supportive housing policies for the qualitative case study component of her work. It is in conducting these case studies that Willison dives deeply into the heterogeneous municipal policy responses to homelessness.

The case studies of these communities, which in addition to San Francisco also includes one other city (Atlanta, Georgia) that has adopted a supportive housing policy and one that has not (Shreveport, Louisiana), form the bulk of the book. Willison uses these case studies to develop the central argument of her book; homelessness is a fragmented policy space where policy outcomes are driven by four distinct policy entities: state government, local government, local economic elites, and Continuums of Care (CoCs), which are the local entities who are the

conduit for federal homeless assistance funds and have responsibility for using these funds to coordinate local efforts to address homelessness. Willison suggests that the degree of conflict between these entities dictates how successful a municipality is likely to be in implementing effective solutions to homelessness. In each city, the nature of this conflict is different, but the end result is essentially the same: the fragmentation between these actors results in less than optimal municipal responses to homelessness. In San Francisco, the CoC is integrated into city government, but state policy is not aligned with the city's supportive housing policy and local economic elites exert their political power in away that is detrimental to the supportive housing policy. In Atlanta, the story is somewhat similar: the CoC is part of the municipal government, but there is little state support for efforts address homelessness, and the preferences of economic elites exacerbate racial inequalities and advance efforts to move people experiencing homelessness out of desirable areas of the city rather than housing them. Things are different in Shreveport, but not necessarily in a good way. Responsibility for addressing homelessness is devolved almost entirely to the CoC, which is completely separate from city government. Naturally, this means the CoC has little political power and their policy goals are often at odds with the city's.

To deal with this fragmented policy space, Willison concludes her book with a set of proposals, many of which make a lot of sense and in theory would not be too difficult to implement. For example, she argues that closer alignment between CoCs and municipal governments should be pursued in all cities and would reduce policy conflict between these two actors as it apparently has in San Francisco and Atlanta. She likewise argues for greater inclusion of persons experiencing homelessness in the homeless policy process to counteract the political power she believes economic elites exercise. This too makes a lot of sense, and there is indeed growing recognition in the United States of the importance of involving people with lived experience of homelessness in the design and implementation of policies and programs that affect them. Whether these changes would ultimately result in better policy outcomes remains an open question, but they certainly couldn't hurt.

Thus, Willison has written an interesting book that offers some sensible paths forward to remedy the political challenges that impede local responses to homelessness. As I said, there is indeed much to like. What then did I find challenging? As I mentioned, I have a growing predisposition toward seeing homelessness (and policy responses to it) through the lens of the broader housing market. Given the growing housing affordability challenges in the United States, I think it is increasingly hard to separate politics of policy responses to homelessness from the context of the housing markets in which they unfold. To be fair, Willison makes this connection to an extent. In her case study of San Francisco, she talks about how influx of highly paid tech workers has driven up the city's housing costs and how

these wealthy new arrivals have wielded political power to block development of affordable housing. And she also talks briefly about how city officials tasked with implementing the supportive housing policy feel squeezed by the city's lack of affordable housing. Likewise, part of her analysis of Atlanta examines how corporate economic elites have similarly hindered efforts to build more housing.

But ultimately, the issue of how local housing market conditions constrain municipal level policy responses to homelessness feels like it is more in the background than it ought to have been. This is particularly true when making comparisons across the three case study cities. The median rent for a two-bedroom apartment in 2021 was \$2,925 in San Francisco, \$1,505 in Atlanta, and \$839 in Shreveport. Thus, these cities appear to have quite different housing markets. Yet, how the differences in housing costs across these cities has impacted differences in their policy response to homelessness is not fully addressed in the book. Indeed, Willison curiously does not include housing market factors in her quantitative work that is ostensibly meant to identify characteristically similar cities with and without supportive housing policies. In short, while Willison does not ignore it entirely, it would have been interesting to hear more in her book about how the interplay between the broader context of housing affordability in a city and the fragmented nature of policy responses to homelessness.

Ultimately, my challenge with the book is not a major one and I don't think it detracts much at all from the really interesting and comprehensive work Willison has done. But, if my tech worker friend in San Francisco is feeling squeezed by the city's housing costs (which he told me he was), it made me want to know more about the constraints housing costs place on city officials and other policy actors tasked with addressing homelessness in San Francisco and other cities. Of course, this topic could probably be a separate book in its own right, and Willison's work is a highly useful contribution to our understanding about why American cities continue to face challenges in addressing homelessness.

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