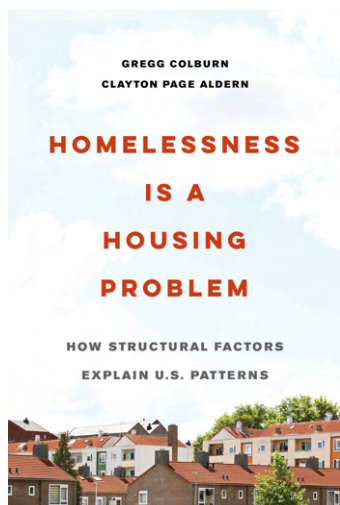# Book Reviews

Gregg Colburn and Clayton P. Aldern 2022: Homelessness is a Housing Problem: How Structural Factors Explain US Patterns. Oakland, CA: University of California Press

Homelessness is a highly complex phenomenon. When compared to other contemporary socioeconomic issues such as the economic fallout during and after the COVID-19 crisis, various types of entrenched inequalities, and climate change, the current pool results in the United States show that public interest in homelessness is increasing dramatically, suggesting the phenomenon should be a top priority for policymakers.

The present study provides a comprehensive analysis of many of the empirical puzzles surrounding this phenomenon and asks: Why do urban homelessness rates vary significantly between cities in the United States, even though local indicators such as federal support remain constant? Why does federal investment fail to reduce the number of homeless people and at times actually increase the number of homeless people in sheltered accommodation? Why are urban homelessness rates so low in cities where levels of poverty and unemployment are highest? Why might the issue of race explain who becomes homeless in a given city but not why one city has a higher per capita rate of homelessness than another? Why can some cities build affordable housing in response to population growth while others do not? Why is homelessness lowest where low-income migration is greatest?

In light of these puzzles, the study critically questions the relationship between probable causes and rates of urban homelessness using the inter-community 'one-night count of people experiencing homelessness in the US' data between 2007 and 2019. Based on this analysis, the authors draw attention to the broader picture of the phenomenon and offer an action plan for policymakers.

The most important finding—and thus the central argument of the book—is that housing market conditions have more explanatory power for understanding fluctuations in homelessness rates than individual factors, landscape features, or the local political culture. Contrary to public prejudice in the United States, the authors provide statistical evidence that individual factors such as unemployment, poverty, mental health, drug use and catastrophic events do not appear as major causes of

homelessness; rather, they act as moderator variables influencing the magnitude of the relationship between housing market conditions and fluctuations in homelessness rates in cities. However, this moderator effect could have been analysed and visualized more systematically using advanced statistical methods (such as analysis of variance or linear regression), which the book lacks.

Drawing attention to the fact that sheltering the homeless does not end homelessness anywhere, the authors posit that elucidating the real causes of homelessness would help minimize obfuscation by policy initiatives which do not solve the phenomenon but only re-characterize it. Therefore, the very first step towards producing a sustainable policy response to homelessness must be to re-frame public perceptions. To motivate far greater resource input at all levels of government, homelessness should be understood beyond the individual factors mentioned above and viewed instead as a problem caused by structural components in the housing market.

Taking a closer look at the book's main argument, four components of the housing market—rent burden, absolute rent level, rental market vacancy rates and housing supply elasticity—are presented and analysed as decisive factors for the observed variations in urban homelessness rates. In a nutshell, the authors emphasize the importance of making affordable housing that meets basic quality and safety standards more accessible, and developing solutions for cities to achieve a balance between housing prices and unit supply (i.e. the price elasticity of the housing supply). At the end of their study, considering all the variables at work in the complex phenomenon of homelessness, the authors offer a sustainable policy model and a systemic approach for overcoming the homelessness crisis incrementally and moving people out of homelessness into stable housing.

For their systemic approach, the authors conceptualize homelessness as a circular process composed of three phases—home loss, homelessness, and securing new affordable housing—in which housing market conditions play a determining role in each phase. They argue that this approach would allow the public and policymakers to take action on homelessness beyond shelters and Safe Havens, where most public investment is made. They posit that this increased awareness of homelessness would help develop a more effective prevention strategy to include emergency assistance, housing benefits and other services in order to limit the inflow into homelessness. If the inflow is consistently less than the outflow, so the goal of 'functional zero' for homelessness can be achieved.

From a methodological point of view, there are other possibilities to support the authors' policy recommendations in a data-driven way. Having argued that homelessness is not an individual but a structural problem, recognizing the homeless as an active part of the solution and not as an 'invisible population' (p. 45) would go a long way towards addressing this problem. A multidisciplinary approach and a mixed methodology which included homeless people in interviews to understand their motivations and expectations could likewise increase the impact of policy interventions. Ultimately, the outflow from homelessness depends on the motivation of homeless people themselves.

Overall, the book captures the main components of the complex phenomenon of homelessness and their dynamic interrelation. Furthermore, the results of statistical analyses throughout the book systematically disprove public misconceptions in relation to this phenomenon. These efforts create an entirely new perspective on the subject. It would definitely be worth testing the authors' findings and arguments further in different countries outside the United States to understand to what extent the decisive impact of housing market factors on homelessness can be generalized.

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