Suzanne Fitzpatrick, Deborah Quilgars
and Nicholas Pleace (eds.) (2009)

## *Homelessness in the UK. Problems and Solutions*

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UK policies and programmes against homelessness have in many ways been exemplars for other European countries. This situation is reinforced by the fact that they shape a discourse that has a distinct impact on thinking and reflection on homelessness policies elsewhere in Europe. Most of the European homelessness research is produced in Britain, often in the form of reviews and evaluations of local, regional or national policies and programmes. The Rough Sleepers Initiative from the early 1990s as well as recent legislation and policy development, especially in Scotland, have caught worldwide attention. *Homelessness in the UK. Problems and Solutions* is therefore a welcome introduction, overview and update.

The book's editors and authors, who are established and experienced researchers, provide accounts of recent policy development and research, as well as reflections on current and future trends and risks. Several chapters present summarised results of studies that the authors themselves had designed and led. The editors have clearly kept a firm grasp on the various contributions, which are of similar length, style and structure, and repetition is avoided through cross-references to other chapters. The political, legal and research contexts are presented in a comprehensive introduction. There is even a glossary and a list of acronyms, signalling that the book addresses not only British readers, but also homelessness researchers and policy makers in other countries.

This book might be characterised as something in between a government report and a research volume. It gives accessible information on current legislation, policies and action plans and their background and motivation, and sometimes suggestions for future policy revision. The chapters are based on empirical research with some space for critical reflection. However, the conclusions are in general more policy-confirming and hopeful than would usually be the case in research literature, which may be due to the fact that available data and recent policy debates confirm an encouraging development towards both reduced homelessness and empowered homeless individuals.

The introduction by the editors and Mark Stephens is a valuable summary of the development of homelessness as a problem, field of research, subject of debate and target of shifting policies. Already in 1977 a right to housing for ('unintentional') homeless persons in 'priority need' was established in Britain. The duty of local authorities was delimited in 1996 to cover only temporary accommodation for two years, but in 2002 it changed again to imply temporary accommodation until permanent housing (mostly social rented housing) could be arranged. Since then all local authorities must also develop strategies to combat homelessness. Recent policies in England (and elsewhere in the UK) include putting an end to the use of bed and breakfast accommodation for homeless people, but focus primarily on prevention and advice on 'housing options' and support to enable homeless people to access housing in the private sector, as well as floating support. Since devolution, however, the policies have been diverging in the four UK jurisdictions.

Besides the introduction and the conclusion, the book is in two parts. The first part includes four chapters on homelessness among three groups – families, youth and minority ethnic groups – and one chapter on street homelessness. The second part reviews the development of homelessness policies in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and ends with a chapter comparing the UK policy (or policies) with those of eleven other countries. Some of the content and the conclusions of the individual chapters are presented very briefly below. This is followed by a discussion of a few points inspired by the book, namely data, policy and discourse and their interrelations.

In Chapter 2, Suzanne Fitzpatrick and Nicholas Pleace present the results of a survey of a representative sample of homeless families in England with a special focus on their support needs, experiences of interventions and the claimed causes of their homelessness. Most respondents regarded even temporary accommodation as an improvement in their living situation, despite increased financial problems, while a general conclusion is that the great majority of these families, even though they were poor, were not very vulnerable in terms of substance misuse, mental illness or as victims of violence. The authors suggest that support resources should rather target the most vulnerable families only, since many of the statutorily homeless families 'are likely to require only access to housing and some minimal, short-term practical assistance' (p.34).

Youth homelessness is the topic of a chapter by Sarah Johnsen and Deborah Quilgars. Following legislative change in 2002 'priority need' was revised to include 16 and 17 year olds, and a substantial share of young people in the UK are now accepted as statutory homeless: in 2006/7, 15 per cent of all youths (aged 16 to 24) in Scotland, while the share varied between 5 and 8 per cent in the other parts of the UK (p.54). This chapter differs from the rest of the book in that it is based upon

not only statistics, but also young people's accounts of their homelessness, as well as their experiences of being homeless and of temporary accommodation and support. The authors have an optimistic view of the new emphasis on homeless-ness prevention and on alternatives to the social rented sector for permanent housing, which they describe as a 'significant cultural shift' (p.62).

A chapter by Carol McNaughton Nicholls and Deborah Quilgars on homelessness among migrants and minorities reviews the situation for ethnic minorities who have been settled in the UK for a very long time, new job-seeking EU migrants from the 'accession countries', refugees, asylum seekers and undocumented migrants. While some of these people have full citizen rights and asylum seekers and Eastern European citizens have limited rights, undocumented immigrants have no rights whatsoever. Nevertheless, all the studied groups appear to be overrepresented among registered homeless people and/or the 'concealed homeless'. The general conclusion of the chapter is that both marginalisation and discrimination, and to some extent special vulnerability, may explain the homelessness of minorities and the addressed kinds of migrants. The policy recommendations are limited to changes in the immigration system and improved funding to organisations that care for refugees and migrants.

Since the Rough Sleepers Initiative in the early 1990s, street homelessness is a thoroughly researched issue in the UK. The chapter by Anwen Jones and Sarah Johnsen captures the changes in policy and discourse over the past two decades. In the beginning the purpose was to 'make it unnecessary for people to sleep on the streets of London' (p.39), a goal which in 1999 was supplemented with 'reject[ing] those which sustain a street lifestyle' (p.41), partly through anti-social behaviour orders (ASBOs). The initial opposition towards such harsh measures against street sleepers has since toned down among service providers, while the government approach has softened somewhat. The authors conclude that the policy focus on rough sleeping has been successful in reducing the number of people in such a situation.

Part 2 of the book presents the development of homelessness and policies to combat it in the four countries that make up the UK. Scotland is undeniably leading the development towards a stronger and wider right to (permanent) housing, with its ambition to soften the moralised category of 'intentional homeless' and to broaden the concept of 'priority need' to the extent that this qualification will expire by 2012. Isobel Anderson's chapter on Scotland also analyses the difficulties in implementing an enforceable right to permanent accommodation in local contexts, despite general external support of the vision, and concludes that it is still an open question whether the vision will be realised.

Especially in England, the new agenda for reducing homelessness stresses preven-
tion and a 'housing option approach'. The aim is to avoid routinely putting homeless
households on the waiting lists for social rented housing and instead to enable them
to access private rented housing through advice and support (e.g. rent deposit
guarantee schemes). 'Promoting "gatekeeping" or effective prevention?' is the
subtitle of Hal Pawson's chapter. The dilemma with the new approach is that those
who do find a home in the private rented sector lose their chance of being accepted
as statutory homeless and eventually being assigned social housing, which may
further explain the declining numbers of registered homeless people. Pawson
suggests that the current policy reflects a consumerist trend that may undermine
the discourse of right to housing.

The chapters on Wales (by David Clapham, Peter Mackie and John Pritchard) and
Northern Ireland (by Paddy Gray and Grainia Long) have less official data to work
with and fewer accomplishments to explore with regard to homelessness. The
reviews of both countries' policies and trends relate extensively to England and
Scotland, the policies of which are implicitly presented as moderate and progres-
sive alternatives respectively. Wales seems to have chosen a more constrained
definition of, and policy against, homelessness than England, although it has a
comprehensive 'supporting people' programme, where one-third of the budget is
spent on homelessness services. Northern Ireland differs from the rest of the UK
in that its homelessness legislation is more recent and it is confronted by the special
problem of religiously segregated social housing.

Part 2 concludes with a chapter comparing homelessness and policies to combat
it in the UK with the situations in eleven other countries: the United States, Australia,
Canada and eight European countries. Although differences in the quality, scope
and availability of data on homelessness actually make the twelve countries incom-
parable, Suzanne Fitzpatrick identifies some shared characteristics (e.g. minorities
and immigrants are mostly overrepresented). An interesting observation is that
although the UK is the only country with an enforceable right to housing (for some
homeless people), it lacks a right to temporary accommodation for households who
are not in 'priority need', which is found in some of the other countries. This chapter
also includes very brief introductions to the US systems of 'continuum of care' and
'housing first', 'reintegrative schemes' in Western Europe, emergency arrange-
ments in Eastern and Central Europe and effective preventive policies in Germany.

In the book's concluding chapter, the editors claim that reduced levels of rough
sleeping and 'statutory homelessness acceptances' and the more support-oriented
schemes for young homeless people are areas of 'significant progress', while
temporary accommodation of bad quality and that it is used for too long (especially
in London's private rented sector) and the consistent overrepresentation of ethnic

minorities and migrants remain problematic. The risk that prevention strategies may hinder young people from moving out of destructive parental homes – or make them move into insecure private rental housing – is highlighted, as are concerns about the current, possibly exclusionary, policy of making hostels and shelters 'places of change' and about the differences in tenure security between the social rented sector and the private one.

This is a very British book with the specific British vocabulary of homelessness, and all researchers in the field, regardless of their country's conceptual framework, must learn and be able to translate their findings into this language. Exotic expressions such as 'intentional homeless', 'non-statutory homelessness' and 'priority need', and their internal relationships, have, over time, become objectified properties of the situation, with the result that they now appear to be self-evident in legislation, policy and research in the UK. The chapters are all written with a minimum of theoretical concepts and the discourse chosen seems to be close, if not identical, to that of policy makers, politicians and street-level bureaucrats. This will probably enhance its impact on policy makers, but the level of abstraction may be too limited for theoretical advancement and for the development of alternative perspectives and deeper international comparisons.

The book contains recurring reflections on possible solutions to the homelessness problem, as well as on its plausible explanations, while acknowledging shifting strands of understanding over time. Fitzpatrick et al. write in the introduction (p.6):

> … while the sophistication of the theories that seek to explain causation have improved over time, the available data is often still insufficient to prove or disprove any particular hypotheses. The structural versus individual dichotomy is a helpful starting point in thinking about causation, but the reality is far more complex.

However, despite the heavy emphasis on specific UK legislation and comprehensive programmes for reducing (or even ending) rough sleeping, use of bed and breakfast accommodation, youth homelessness etc., and for reforming the categories of 'priority need' and 'intentional homelessness', the institutional factors explaining homelessness may be forgotten. In Fitzpatrick's comparison of the UK with other countries (Ch.10), differences tend to be explained simply by whether the welfare state is 'strong' or 'weak' overall. Still, institutional arrangements – in terms of legislation, policy models, tenure security, owners' rights, rules of eligibility and allocation systems, to name a few – are given explanatory weight in most of the book as regards development (i.e. comparisons over time). Fitzpatrick does highlight 'the statutory framework on allocations' as a guarantee against exclusion of the most vulnerable families and individuals from the housing market, but such reflections seem more random than part of a theoretical whole.

Let me give three examples of the importance of the institutional design of markets, services and rights in a country for what it is to be homeless (and what it means *not* to be homeless) and what is 'thinkable' as a solution. The traditional division between 'deserving' and 'non-deserving' poor is clearly an institution that has survived in the categorisation of 'intentionally homeless', and which may be born again in the 'places of change' policy. The specific legislation for citizens from the more recent EU member states appears to contribute to their homelessness, but is not highlighted as a cause, and hence not targeted by homelessness policies. The social rented sector seems to be the only one providing security of tenure in the UK, as tenants' rights in the private sector are constrained by the practice of short-term contracts. Although this issue is included in a discussion of future risks, it is not seen as a possible cause, nor is it seen as a policy – nor is its revision seen as a possible solution to homelessness in the UK. Put differently, policies are not only effective or not effective, they also have side effects and they tend to reproduce cultural institutions (or may themselves be institutionalised).

The UK has stronger legislation and more and different data on homelessness than other countries. Policies and data are interrelated. The legislation has a profound influence over research, not only because the government funds evaluations of legislative changes and reviews of their implementation, but also to the extent that research is based on data collected and produced by the authorities for their own purposes, using their categories and definitions and based on their decisions and priorities. In addition, new policies, action programmes and legislation are usually preceded by investigations intended to serve as a basis for planned change.

UK policies obviously provide lots of data on the scope and characteristics of the 'presented' homeless individuals, and especially the 'accepted' ones. When compared with most other countries (as Fitzpatrick rightly remarks in her international comparison) this gives researchers in the UK special access to information on homeless families. However, this is at odds with her suggestion that individual expla-nations are stressed especially in Sweden and the Netherlands due to those countries' more developed welfare states. An alternative account for the same difference would be to consider the different kind of data that these countries provide and, conse-quently, what strata of homeless people are being investigated.

Registers of individuals and families defined as 'statutorily homeless' and in 'priority need' make up a population of identifiable people who provide a basis from which homeless people may be sampled for in-depth interviews. However, this research population may be biased as it is formed and delimited by authority assessments of individual 'intentionality' and 'priority needs'. If having a child is sufficient to be accepted as in 'priority need' it is not unexpected that 'homeless families' need little support, while those who are accepted due to illness or youth

will probably need more support. Another bias (which is sometimes taken into account in this book) is that the group 'presenting as homeless' may be distorted by the fact that some people may not apply for homelessness status because they anticipate that they will be rejected.

In their final chapter, the editors welcome the tendency in UK homelessness research to adopt more 'robust' quantitative research methods and data. However, as some of the authors discuss, even such data may be misleading. In her chapter on Scotland, Anderson deals with what is sometimes called the 'service-statistics paradox', namely that wider criteria and a greater service supply will result in higher numbers of accepted homeless people (and hence be less rewarding in a short-term evaluation). Conversely, Pawson displays a sceptical stance towards official data on reduced homelessness – in terms of decisions as well as acceptances – since 2003 and cites suspicions that prevention strategies have come to function as gatekeepers against applications from homeless individuals.

Similarly, preventive measures are suspected of concealing homelessness by making people remain in destructive environments, for instance when youths are persuaded to return to their parental homes, a situation that Johnsen and Quilgars warn against. The number of statutorily homeless could probably also be reduced by making social housing and temporary accommodation less attractive. Finally, the difficulties in assessing the scope of the homelessness problem through statistics on the relative number of 'presentations' and 'acceptances' as homeless alone will probably increase in a situation where local authorities are urged to prove that their strategies work through reduced numbers of homeless people.

This said, *Homelessness in the UK. Problems and Solutions* deserves many readers, both within and outside the UK. As the title suggests, it provides an up-to-date overview of various aspects of homelessness and the policy dilemmas associated with this problem. It is a tightly structured book offering plenty of information on various features of the homelessness problem and its solutions in the UK.

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