

Laura Huey (2012)

***Invisible Victims:  
Homelessness and the Growing Security Gap***

Toronto, Ontario: University of Toronto Press, 174pp. €25 approximately.

Laura Huey's book, *Invisible Victims*, focuses on the inordinate amounts of violence and victimization that go along with being homeless. Anyone with experience in a homeless milieu is all too aware of how insecurity – threats to the physical safety and well-being of a person – is omnipresent here and how it impacts the day-to-day activities of a homeless person. Yet while the dangers that accompany homelessness are readily acknowledged, the full magnitude of insecurity is seldom grasped. This encapsulates Huey's mission in this monograph – to illustrate how insecurity permeates homelessness and to provide a framework that lays out the magnitude of the resulting 'security gap'.

Most of the book deals with the former aspect – the pervasiveness of insecurity in the context of homelessness. This is a largely uncharted domain, as the typical data used to document the extent of crime and victimization in more conventional settings are unavailable here. Instead, Huey uses data from her ethnographic research in San Francisco, Vancouver and Edinburgh to provide a systematic account of how homeless persons routinely get assaulted, robbed, exploited and otherwise victimized. Although at times she somewhat oversteps her data with lurid claims based largely upon hearsay, the point is clear. Putting destitute, powerless people – many with vulnerabilities such as disabilities, old age, substance abuse, and engagement in shadow work – out into the most unsafe urban areas is a recipe for victimization. It is difficult to imagine a reader left unconvinced by this.

If heightened risk is one side of the security gap, managing this risk represents the flip side. Here, the state security apparatus (not to mention the private security apparatus) has proven unable or unwilling to address this increased state of insecurity with even a normal degree of protection, let alone the increased protection that such a situation would warrant. Chapter 3 details the unresponsiveness of the police to the security needs that accompany homelessness, and the antagonism that has grown between those who are homeless and those who are putatively there to protect them. This leaves homeless persons to fend for their own security, an approach that, as Huey ironically

notes, renders them models of the neo-liberal 'responsible citizen'. Yet while homeless persons, out of necessity, have used a range of individual (chapter 4) and collective (chapter 5) strategies to maintain some degree of security, such measures are ultimately doomed by the inadequate material, social and political resources at their disposal and will, at best, temporarily stave off the constant threats to physical and psychological well-being that are an integral facet of homelessness.

Having documented this insecurity in the homeless milieu, Huey takes on the more challenging task of situating the chasm-like dimensions of this security gap in a more general context. Providing security is, Huey argues, one of the basic functions of a liberal democracy. Furthermore, a sense of security is one of the hallmarks of citizenship. This ideal, when contrasted with the reality of homelessness, prevents homeless persons from fully exercising their citizenship. Put another way, such extreme insecurity condemns homeless people to being second-rate citizens. Huey methodically lays this process out. However, in chapter 7, she makes it clear that one does not need political theory to understand such differential levels of citizenship. One only needs to read her accounts of how homeless individuals come to realize their limited ability to partake in the benefits of citizenship, and the toll this takes on their lives.

At this point, Huey is one step away from casting the security gap as a trauma, a framework that is increasingly being used to understand homelessness and deliver homeless services (Zlotnick *et al.*, 2007; Hopper *et al.*, 2010). With her focus on the damages that the many forms of homelessness-related insecurity have wreaked upon individual lives, and her emphasis on the need for secure environs, this book potentially lays theoretical foundations for a trauma-based approach to homelessness. However, Huey leaves it for someone else to make these connections explicit.

Instead, Huey sets her sights on broader issues. In casting this security gap as the difference between the real and the ideal, she challenges foundational precepts of citizenship. This brings the insecurity inherent in homelessness from exotic ethnographic locales to a more proximate place. The themes laid out here, of an unresponsive state and the necessity of developing alternative means of providing security, have also been shown in other contexts – Venkatesh's (2002) study of US housing projects, and countless monographs on prison life are the first examples that come to mind. When Huey applies these themes to the extreme contexts of homelessness, the contradictions of these expectations of self-sufficiency become clear, as homeless persons clearly lack the individual and community efficacy necessary to build their own secure space. Seen through the prism of citizenship, 'their' insecurity becomes connected with 'our' relative sense of security, which is prized when it is not taken for granted.

So what, finally, does one make of this security gap and what steps can be taken to redistribute security more equitably across all elements of a society? Huey's answer to this straddles the dilemma between the need for transformative social change and

the limited measures that are available in the absence of this. She draws upon Nancy Fraser (2008) to cast the security gap among the homeless population as the product of 'misrecognition', a process culminating in a tacit license to subordinate a particular group in society systematically. Huey turns away from calling for the transformative efforts that would be needed to address misrecognition and to bring on the 'deep redistribution' of security, however. Instead, she turns to more pragmatic measures and calls upon the state to take the lead in implementing these measures because, in short, it is the agent most capable of doing so. This includes measures found in other progressive platforms on homelessness and community development, such as more secure and affordable housing, capacity-building in poorer communities, and specific changes in policing and public safety.

This middle path of half measures is inherently unsatisfying, but it is difficult to find an alternative approach that would ultimately alleviate the security gap that Huey vividly illustrates here on a canvas of homelessness. Ultimately, her most promising solution to the security gap is simply to eradicate homelessness. But, as Huey points out at the end of this thought-provoking and very readable book, homelessness is certain to remain. Remaining also will be the rift between ideals and realities in a liberal democracy, illustrated by a homeless individual fending for his or herself in a hostile world.

### › References

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