Matthew D. Marr (2015)

Better Must Come: Exiting Homelessness in Two Global Cities

Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, pp. 223, $24.95

Marr's book is described as a longitudinal, ethnographic study that focuses on understanding the determinants of sustainable exits from homelessness. Contrasting Tokyo and Los Angeles, Marr draws on highly detailed qualitative, longitudinal research to argue that exits from homelessness are determined by complex, nuanced and variable processes.

Marr seeks to explore how individual needs, characteristics and experiences, welfare regimes, homelessness service operations, housing and labour markets and cultural differences may interact to cause, extend and reduce homelessness. Maintaining a focus on exits from homelessness, Marr makes it clear that he wishes to move away from explanations of sustained homelessness that focus solely on individual pathology. He seeks to argue against those who equate homelessness with specific behavioural patterns and those who medicalize this social problem, viewing single homelessness largely in terms of comorbidity of severe mental illness and addiction.

The focus of the book is essentially around the interactions homeless people have with formal and informal sources of support and how contextual factors may influence their ability or inability to exit homelessness. Family relationships are looked at alongside the private rented market and the ways in which homelessness services operate.

The introductory chapter provides an outline of the book. The first part of the book, containing one chapter, looks at the political, structural and economic factors underlying the rise in homelessness in global cities. Part two of the book looks at what is described as state aid (the processes governing welfare systems) and the search for housing and work, each of which has a chapter devoted to it. Part three looks at what Marr defines as social ties, looking first at the how homeless people interact with homelessness services in one chapter and then devoting a second chapter to ties with family. The book concludes with a discussion, which emphasises the need to understand that a complex, variable interplay of multiple factors influences exits from homelessness.

Each part of the book begins with what Marr describes as 'exit stories', which are quite detailed discussions of the lives of individual people, some of whom have exited homelessness entirely and some of whom have experienced gains and losses in their attempt to exit homelessness. At various points, Marr draws on these interviews to explore specific issues and sometimes draws on other interview material as well. His original group included 26 participants in Tokyo and 31 in Los Angeles. Attrition was higher in Tokyo than LA, but Marr was able to sustain contact with a majority of participants and was able to stay in touch with some for years. Alongside the homeless people, staff working in homelessness services were also interviewed in both Tokyo and LA.

The book is accessible and concise. There is a serious attempt to try to look at the real complexities of homelessness and to engage with the interplay of context, systems, social support and individual characteristics. Any attempt to move beyond oversimplification is always welcome in a field of research that can still be characterised by what is effectively univariate analysis.

It is also worth noting that this is an often interesting book. The contrasts between Tokyo, where male responses to homelessness can include a total disconnect with family and a determination to be self-reliant, and LA, where help is often sought from both family and services, are interesting. Marr also avoids the easy trap of presenting a uniformly distinct Japanese culture as the single cause of differences in the experience of homelessness. Differences in housing and labour markets and the operation of homelessness and welfare systems in Japan receive equal attention, drawing out a finding that what might, superficially, be interpreted as 'cultural' difference, is actually the result of the complex interplay of multiple variables.

Other parallels and differences highlighted by Marr are also interesting. Japanese and Americans both receive what Marr views as harsh, unreasonable and, indeed, illogical responses from homelessness and welfare services that, in both cities, react to homelessness primarily by trying to push individuals into paid work. While the American services are portrayed as somewhat more flexible and understanding, they are also described as sometimes harder to access. In LA, homeless people are also described as facing greater barriers to labour and housing markets than is the case in Tokyo.

The book has some limitations. The basis for the comparison between Tokyo and LA seems to be somewhat coincidental. In addition, while Marr does draw out some interesting comparisons, he can be selective and he makes generalisations about the differences between the two cities.

Marr states that Tokyo has more accessible labour and housing markets than LA, a difference that Marr says is linked to 'greater immigration' in the US. Tokyo is, however, a global economic powerhouse, dwarfing LA in population terms and with one of the most pressurised housing markets on Earth. The idea that Tokyo's housing and labour markets face significantly less pressure than those of LA does seem rather unlikely. A more logical explanation may be that the Tokyo homeless population appears to be, relatively, quite a lot smaller than that in LA, while Tokyo itself is a much bigger city. So, relatively fewer homeless people are looking for opportunities in housing and labour markets that, in Tokyo, are several orders of magnitude greater in size than equivalent markets in LA.

Transport is an issue in LA for some homeless people, but this is not really discussed in relation to Tokyo. Perhaps another contextual difference is that the Japanese capital has a very highly developed and integrated public transport system, whereas LA does not. Equally, while socioeconomic racial segregation in LA is raised as a contextual difference, the ways in which Tokyo's much lower crime rate and greater income equality might influence housing outcomes – i.e., there may be greater choice of more affordable housing in generally safer neighbours in Tokyo – is also not discussed.

Looking at welfare systems and homelessness services, Marr highlights what he describes as considerable differences between LA and Tokyo. Yet these two systems arguably have rather more in common than Marr suggests. Both systems are described as both punitive and inaccessible, pushing poor populations away from welfare and support and into low paid work, with little concern beyond a single target to ensure they do not cost the state any money. While Marr portrays the LA systems as more reasonable and understanding, from a Northern European perspective both sets of responses appear, effectively, to be equally harsh and also likely to have limited effectiveness for basically the same reasons. It is also difficult to see the LA systems – where access appears often to require legal assistance, for which a proportion of any welfare benefits received is then charged – as necessarily more humanitarian. The idea that the US is really more humanitarian is also difficult to sustain when Marr points out that some basic safety nets in Japan, particularly access to health care, are significantly more accessible.

From a Northern European viewpoint, the book is looking at two harsh systems with more similarities than differences. At one point, Marr does briefly talk about how some European welfare systems may reduce levels of homelessness, but there is no comparative discussion about what European strategic responses to homelessness can achieve. Entire European countries, like Denmark, Finland and Ireland, have less homelessness than LA. Nor does Marr look north, at Canadian policy and the reductions in long-term homelessness among people with complex needs

achieved by the *At Home/Chez Soi* programme. Global cities are also rather lumped together in Marr's discussion. London is mentioned alongside LA and Tokyo, but London, through programmes like the *Rough Sleepers Initiative* and *No Second Night Out*, has not only contained, but very significantly reduced, its long-term homelessness.

There are some methodological issues. Qualitative research does not have to be large in scale. Indeed, it is impressive that Marr successfully maintained contact with a fairly sizeable group of people just working by himself. However, when using research to focus on the interactions of homeless people with homelessness and welfare systems, the absence of larger scale data is something of a limitation. For years, homelessness was misunderstood because there was a tendency to focus on individuals, albeit individuals from whom quantitative data were collected using cross sectional methods, without looking at patterns in service use data, particularly over time. Much of the perspective in the book is from the homeless people Marr interviewed. Whether homelessness service staff, welfare system staff, friends, partners or family members would view the same events in quite the same way is an interesting question.

Finally, there is the question about the extent to which Marr's book is telling us something new about homelessness. The idea that homelessness is the result of a complex interplay of structural, cultural and personal factors was around in the 1980s (Dant and Deacon, 1989). In terms of addressing misconceptions, while Marr is right to challenge the arguments about individual pathology centering on behavioural patterns, it is arguable that these have effectively been redundant for some time (Burt, 2001; O'Sullivan, 2008). In reality, it looks increasingly like it is those who argue that homelessness is bad luck, experiencing a trigger event while lacking both money and formal/informal support, rather than those who argue there are 'types' of homelessness, who are probably right (O'Flaherty, 2010). Marr's work is in line with more recent thinking about homelessness, but it is fair to say it is no more revolutionary than that.

This is a book that is a concise, clear, accessible and interesting read, exploring some interesting ideas about the causation and reduction of homelessness. The book is not ground-breaking in a theoretical sense and neither is it a textbook demonstration of methodological rigour. However, the comparisons and discussion are often interesting and it is always useful to have new work that reminds us that homelessness is not a simple social problem and that it cannot be reduced to simple relationships between a handful of variables.

❯ **References**

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