Stephanie Southworth and Sara Brallier (2023)

## *Homelessness in the 21st Century: Living the Impossible American Dream*

New York: Routledge

Homelessness is a growing social and political problem in both the United States and Europe. The growing prevalence—particularly the visible prevalence—of homelessness in many cities has driven increased attention to this issue. This focus invites, and demands, a public response that, too often, remains inadequate and elusive. For the scholarly community, the challenge of homelessness invites researchers from many fields and disciplines to wrestle with numerous knotty questions about this phenomenon. There has been a proliferation of scholarship that considers causes and consequences of, and solutions to, homelessness. A stronger evidence base combined with increased public attention creates an environment in which meaningful progress is—at least in theory—more possible than it would be without these more favourable conditions.

In *Homelessness in the 21st Century*, Stephanie Southworth and Sara Brallier make a thought-provoking contribution to this body of literature as they tackle the issue from both a national (United States) and local perspective. The first half of the book provides an overview of homelessness in the United States and includes a brief history, the role of neoliberal ideology in producing the crisis of homelessness, the causes of homelessness, and how theory helps us understand homelessness. In the second half of the book, the authors summarise their research conducted in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. Over six chapters, the authors share the results of their qualitative research—which included many interviews with people experiencing homelessness—on topics related to heath, stigma, policing, and local interventions. Part II of the book also includes what I consider to be the most interesting and material contribution of the book: Chapter 6 entitled, "Work, Effort, and the American Dream." The authors highlight how the ethos of the American Dream—that hard work will produce life success—is highly prevalent even among their respondents who are experiencing homelessness. Intuition might suggest that faith in this core American ideology would fall for people who no longer have stable housing, but that is not what Southworth and Brallier found. Rather, the ideology persists even in the face of life circumstances that might understandably cause people to question the validity of the American Dream.

One challenge with homelessness is that it is highly regional. Existing research highlights that the prevalence and manifestation of homelessness varies widely throughout the United States. Therefore, a key question for research that is based on one location is whether such findings can be applied to other settings; in other words, is the research generalisable. There is a healthy scholarly debate about the challenges of generalisability in qualitative research. Some argue that generalisability is not the focus of qualitative research, but rather it is to provide deep meaning and understanding about a specific case or context. But generalisability is possible in qualitative research if broader applicability is one of the foundational goals of the study (Carminati, 2018). A question for readers of this book might be whether the empirical results of this study based in South Carolina can be applied to the experiences of the unhoused in large cities such as New York and Los Angeles. I would argue that even if the results are not generalisable, the meaning and understanding about homelessness in this particular context is a significant contribution that is worthy of our attention.

Currently, in the United States, there are hotly contested debates about homelessness that are falling along political lines. The subjects of these debates frequently involve the Housing First intervention and the non-profit service sector that provides housing and services to people experiencing homelessness. My one critique of this book is that on both of these important topics, the authors provide somewhat misleading or ambiguous impressions of Housing First and the non-profit sector. In their discussion of Housing First, the authors suggest that "because it [Housing First] is a profit-seeking strategy, there is little investment in finding structural solutions to homelessness" (p.26). Abundant research highlights that Housing First is an effective intervention for ending homelessness, especially among those experiencing long-term homelessness. A greater application of the Housing First model is a credible response to homelessness that should be expanded, not limited. The authors also have strong words for what they describe as the 'non-profit industrial complex'. A critique that is commonly voiced of the homeless response system is that non-profit organisations tasked with ending homelessness are not motivated to end homelessness because their funding streams are dependent on an ongoing flow of unhoused clients. A quick Google search produces numerous references to the 'Homeless Industrial Complex' from observers who critique the current response the crisis of homelessness. Clearly, our societal response to homelessness can, and should, be stronger and more efficient. Until our response is commensurate to the scale of the crisis, our systems will be open to such critiques. But, I am wary to level this claim in a blanket fashion toward the non-profit service providers that often work tenaciously to be strong advocates and accessible sources of support, many of whom commonly say that they would like to work themselves out of a job. Southworth and Brallier's argument that these funds

should instead be given directly to people experiencing homelessness is sound advice, and one that is supported by the success of recent basic income experiments. But even if we expand direct payments, a robust and compassionate response to a complex problem like homelessness will continue to require the important work of the people and organisations that currently constitute the crisis response system.

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> **References**

Carminati, L. (2018) Generalizability in Qualitative Research: A Tale of Two Traditions, *Qualitative Health Research* 28(13) pp.2094-2101.