

## *Reviews/Comptes rendus*

**Malign Neglect: Homelessness in an American City.** Jennifer Wolch and Michael Dear. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1993, xxviii and 378 pages.

*Malign Neglect* is a call to arms by two dedicated researchers intent on changing public discourse about homelessness in the United States. The purpose of the book is breathtaking in its scope. According to the authors "this book tells important truths about homelessness" (p. xv). The ultimate aim is to establish that homelessness is a predictable and tractable public policy problem. They argue that our current understanding of homelessness is sufficient to develop effective policy responses, only the political will and resources to address the issue are lacking.

The book is built around, arguably, the most comprehensive examination of homelessness in contemporary North America. The authors integrate numerous reports, theses, and publications released by the Los Angeles Homelessness Project into a readable, general discussion of homelessness and its causes. Drawing on a wealth of empirical material, they document the causes of homelessness at several spatial scales ranging from the national to the local levels. The argument emphasizes that homelessness is a process situated in particular places.

The argument is organized into three parts. First, the causes of homelessness are outlined. The effects of economic restructuring and the changing international and national division of labour, state and local public policies and the decisions of people susceptible to homelessness are all discussed at length. Section two concentrates on policy responses to homelessness, underscoring the shifting goals of public policies. Wolch and Dear argue that many policies were designed to discourage the homeless from receiving benefits, while those intended to address the causes of homelessness have unexpected and sometimes, pernicious effects. Finally, the authors describe poignantly the experience of homelessness. Extensive quotes from personal interviews bring to life the tribulations faced by the homeless underscoring the good fortune of those who are homed.

The explanation of homelessness in section one is extremely useful. It summarizes succinctly arguments presented in numerous articles and books. However, some material is out of date. For example, the discussion of struc-

turing concentrates on changes in Los Angeles in the early 1980s, overlooking the recession in California at the end of the decade. We are left to speculate how recent economic trends such as job losses in some service sectors and among professional and managerial occupations may influence homelessness.

The evaluation of local policy responses emphasizes the spatial concentration of services for the homeless, community hostility towards the homeless and the apartheid that has resulted. The authors demonstrate how some policymakers have deliberately manipulated the spatial distribution of services for the homeless to heighten their vulnerability and to reduce their quality of life. Even more alarming, community hostility to the homeless has reinforced a form of apartheid that leaves the homeless abandoned in marginal spaces. The analysis is compelling, although Canadian readers may wonder how much is relevant here where control over social programs is divided differently, albeit often equally uncomfortably, among federal, provincial, and local jurisdictions. In their attempts to situate the Los Angeles research, the authors have also tried to incorporate relevant research findings from other places, but with limited success. For example, the links between community attitudes towards the homeless in Los Angeles and surveys of the acceptability of various types of facilities in an Ohio county are not always clear.

The most effective section is the last where any preconceptions about the homeless are destroyed by their own words. In Los Angeles, the homeless come from all walks of life. Although they do suffer higher than average rates of psychiatric disorders, the individual stories confirm what we have all feared and suspected. The homeless are people just like the homed. The individual stories narrated in three chapters devoted to becoming homeless, life without a home, and the lives of homeless women on Skid Row, a downtown neighbourhood of Los Angeles, restore the dignity of homeless people.

Although the authors address at length the extent to which their understanding of homelessness in Los Angeles can be generalized, this is the most important potential drawback of the book. While stating forthrightly that Los Angeles is distinct, the authors never deviate from their goal of developing policy recommendations that have general applicability. Given the depth and breadth of their research, this reviewer concluded that Wolch and Dear have provided a framework that identifies the factors contributing to homelessness in any American city, an essential first step for developing and implementing successful policy. The specific details of homelessness in Los Angeles may not be relevant elsewhere, however, the research reported here has demonstrated how the disparate actions of individuals, social service providers and politicians shape homelessness.

Consistent with their goals, Wolch and Dear have written an extremely readable account of homelessness in the 1980s in one of the United States's largest cities. There is little new in this book, but ground breaking theories and novel empirical observations are not the purpose. For any reader whether researcher, graduate or undergraduate student, social service worker, politi-

cian, journalist, policymaker or policy analyst, this is a comprehensive and lucid exposition of homelessness that forthrightly proposes feasible policy responses. The book is needed more now than ever as we continue to dismantle the welfare state that has already served the homeless of Los Angeles so poorly. If the compelling explanation of homelessness presented here has any truth, then there will be many more homeless on the streets of Canadian and American cities in the months to come.

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