Homelessness as a Moving Target

Contrary to popular perceptions of homelessness as a static, enduring condition, we emphasize its dynamic nature. The updated macro-micro framework that we develop capitalizes on the increasing availability of over-time data, which makes it easier to examine changes in homelessness and the factors responsible for them. Our framework integrates structural forces—such as income inequality, an affordable housing shortage, social exclusion, and inadequate safety net programs—with the personal circumstances and challenges that shape individuals' homeless trajectories. The macro-micro perspective also helps us to evaluate the effectiveness of policies, and it highlights variation across contexts in how the dynamics of homelessness operate. In a separate section, we introduce the sixteen core articles of this volume against the macro-micro backdrop. Finally, we discuss two emergent macro "shocks" (the COVID-19 pandemic and climate-related hazards) that are largely absent from the volume but carry important implications for understanding and addressing homelessness in the future.

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In common parlance, references to "the homeless" convey a shared perception that individuals experiencing homelessness belong to a static, monolithic, and stigmatized population. Social scientific study of the homelessness problem contributed to this view, especially from the tramp through the skid row eras (1890s–1970s). For the better part of a century, scholars focused on distinguishing among basic types or categories of homeless people and

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describing the characteristics of each type. The supposedly static nature of homelessness was reinforced by traditional "snapshot" investigations (what social scientists call "cross-sectional" analyses) that tended to account for homeless persons who were in shelters or on the streets for long, unbroken stretches (Bahr 1970). Reliance upon cross-sectional data precluded a rigorous analysis of causes, rendering attempts to do something about homelessness ineffectual at best and moralistic or punitive at worst. The scattered homelessness articles published in *The ANNALS* before the late 1900s largely conform to these generalizations (e.g., Lewis 1912; Rice 1918; Rubington 1958).

The articles that we have assembled in the current volume take a very different perspective. Our desire is to illuminate the dynamic nature of the phenomenon, or the manner in which homelessness and its correlates vary in response to each other temporally and spatially. In particular, the growing use of over-time data, which come from experiments, censuses, panel studies, repeated surveys, administrative sources, and extended field observations, can help to identify factors associated with changes in homelessness. Such data allow us to think about homelessness as a "moving target" rather than a stable state both at the micro level, where individuals pass through homeless episodes with beginnings, middles, and endings; and at the macro level, where shifting structural conditions and social policies influence rates of homelessness and who is most likely to succumb. This understanding opens up new avenues for intervention, not just to manage homelessness but to end it.

The next section of this article justifies and unpacks the notion of homeless dynamics. We then position these dynamics within a macro-micro framework that integrates structural features conducive to homelessness with the personal circumstances and challenges that affect people's trajectories into, through, and out of a homeless spell. Special attention is given to various types of ameliorative efforts—policies, programs, and services—and their impacts. We also underscore the importance of contextualizing the dynamics of homelessness, noting that they can operate differently across subpopulations, community settings, and broad time periods. In a separate section, we briefly introduce the sixteen dynamics-oriented articles that form the core of the volume and link them to our broad thematic emphases. Finally, in keeping with the moving target metaphor, we discuss two emergent macro forces omitted from the volume but that have significant implications for homelessness in the future: the coronavirus pandemic

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and climate change–related natural hazard events. Both promise to increase the likelihood of becoming homeless for at least some Americans.

Dynamic versus Static

Several well-known monographs published during the second half of the twentieth century examine the experiences of "down and out" individuals mired in homelessness for extended periods (Bahr and Caplow 1974; Snow and Anderson 1993; Wallace 1965). These are also the people with high street visibility and thus a disproportionate influence on public perceptions of homelessness as a semipermanent condition. However, improvements in research design during the "new homeless" era (especially since 2000) have enabled social scientists to recognize and document a variety of possible patterns in homelessness, based on the number, duration, and timing of homeless spells that individuals experience (Culhane et al. 2007; Kuhn and Culhane 1998; McAllister, Lennon, and Kuang 2011). The chronic pattern—lacking access to a conventional dwelling unit of one's own more or less continuously—does indeed exist, reflecting significant entrenchment. But it is far less common than a single, brief spell of homelessness that occurs during an otherwise domiciled lifetime. Some people may transition between housed and unhoused status on multiple occasions, yet most of them eventually make a permanent return to housing as well.[1]

These different types of patterns are valuable for a couple of reasons. First, in the aggregate, they undermine the notion of a stable homeless population, pointing instead to a dynamic one constantly reshaped by high turnover. Second, they encourage a more refined, granular examination of individual-level engagement with homelessness. The concept of trajectory is central to such an examination. It consists of three sequential stages: a person becomes homeless, remains in that condition for a while, and then becomes housed again. We refer to these as the entry, pathway, and exit stages of a trajectory. Each varies along several dimensions, including timing (e.g., age at onset, length) and the proximal antecedents that initiate or end a stage. Another dimension of variation within and across stages is one's residential situation, which can range from secure housing to doubling up with family or friends to sleeping outdoors or in a shelter. Much still needs to be learned about the potential for path dependence; for instance, do events during the entry process condition later aspects of one's trajectory? Similarly, little is known about connections among multiple trajectories spread across an individual's life course.

The good news is that a greater number of data sources for investigating homeless trajectories are available now than in the past. Researchers can take advantage of homeless management information systems (identified by the acronym HMIS), which link administrative records generated at intake, discharge, or reentry and thus allow the tracking of individuals through shelters and other service environments. In addition to HMIS evidence, trajectories may be discerned from large-scale randomized trials such as the Family Options Study

(FOS), sponsored by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD); or the Canadian At Home/Chez Soi (AH/CS) project (Aubry, Nelson, and Tsemberis 2015; Gubits et al. 2018). Both of these investigations enrolled more than two thousand families (FOS) or individuals (AH/CS) from several communities, randomly assigned them to services as usual (control group) and to specific combinations of housing and service assistance (treatment groups), and conducted periodic follow-up interviews over three to four years to evaluate the effects of the experimental treatments on participants, including their domiciled/homeless status.

Longitudinal data from another major HUD effort are helpful for monitoring the population-level dynamics of homelessness. Since 2007, communities that receive federal funding for homeless assistance have been required to employ HMIS technology to determine, among other things, how many different people stay in local emergency shelters or transitional housing units over time. At least every other year, the communities must also conduct single-day counts in January, which, following technical guidelines from HUD, strive to include unsheltered as well as sheltered persons. Aggregating the HMIS and count data separately produces period prevalence and point-in-time (PIT) estimates for the nation as a whole, states, and continuum of care (CoC) areas.[2]

Although both types of estimates surely err on the low side, they offer some intriguing insights about broad trends in homelessness, the foremost being that the phenomenon is not immutable but susceptible to policy interventions and structural forces. For example, the number of persons spending a night or more in shelters throughout the United States over the course of a year (i.e., annual period prevalence) declined from nearly 1.6 million in 2007 to roughly 1.4 million in 2017, with modest increases in the representation of older and female clients and a dramatic decrease in military veterans (HUD 2018). The trend for veterans aligns temporally with the billions of dollars in federal funds spent by the Veterans Administration and HUD on housing vouchers, supportive housing, and other services designed to end veteran homelessness, along with concerted local efforts. PIT estimates headed gradually downward for nine years to about 550,000 people homeless on a given day in January 2016. During that period, the supply of permanent supportive housing for chronically homeless individuals grew substantially. But the estimates then reversed course and climbed to 568,000 in 2019, driven primarily by increases in the number of people experiencing unsheltered homelessness in the western states (HUD 2020).

A Macro-Micro Perspective

The changes just described in the magnitude and composition of homelessness indicate that the phenomenon can be considered dynamic in a macro or structural sense.[3] Indeed, economists and sociologists have long examined its temporal and spatial covariation with the affordable housing supply and the extent of poverty and income inequality: homelessness rates tend to go up in a community

when housing costs exceed the reach of poor people and price them out (Byrne et al. 2012; Hanratty 2017; Lee, Price-Spratlen, and Kanan 2003). Social exclusion, manifested in widespread negative attitudes and discriminatory practices toward particular groups, dramatically limits group members' opportunities and thus qualifies as another type of structural force conducive to homelessness. Such exclusionary treatment helps to account for the overrepresentation of African Americans, Native Americans, and persons with disabilities in the U.S. homeless population (Burt, Aron, and Lee 2001; Fusaro, Levy, and Shaefer 2018; Hopper and Milburn 1996).

Public policies can also exert an important influence on homelessness at the macro level. This happens most directly through the generosity or stinginess of social welfare programs that provide cash assistance, tax credits, housing and food subsidies, and other forms of aid to poor households (Shinn and Khadduri 2020). However, major shifts in specific policy domains—such as the deinstitutionalization movement in mental health and criminal sentencing changes leading to mass incarceration—have been thought to indirectly (and unintentionally) boost homelessness rates at certain times, typically in lagged fashion (Dear and Wolch 1987; Jencks 1994; Metraux, Roman, and Cho 2007). A series of large-scale "shocks" converging during the post-2000 period have likewise impacted homelessness rates. These include the mortgage foreclosure and eviction crises, ongoing gentrification, natural hazards, a surge in opioid abuse, and the COVID-19 pandemic, all of which further undermine economic security among disadvantaged groups and fuel residential displacement (e.g., Benfer et al. 2020; Elliott 2015; Faber 2019; Lee and Evans 2020).

In contrast to macro explanations of homelessness, many social scientists (especially psychologists) have been concerned with the micro-level dynamics that shape the trajectories of individuals and families. People's experiences with the entry, pathway, and exit stages of homelessness are in part a function of personal vulnerabilities such as physical and mental health challenges, substance use, and adverse events in childhood (e.g., neglect, family conflict) and adulthood (domestic violence, loss of a job or spouse) (for reviews, see Lee, Tyler, and Wright 2010; Shelton et al. 2009; Shinn and Khadduri 2020; Susser, Moore, and Link 1993). For families, life course transitions are important, with pregnancy and childbirth major precipitating factors (Weitzman 1989). Social networks have a potentially significant impact as well (Shinn, Knickman, and Weitzman 1991; Snow and Anderson 1993). Depending upon the types of support they offer, the ties composing one's network could delay the onset of a homeless spell or shorten its length. Alternatively, they might facilitate passage into chronic homelessness. Both personal vulnerabilities and deficient ties can also affect homeless trajectories indirectly, by increasing the odds of placement in an institutional setting or program. Prospective studies show that homelessness is disproportionately likely after discharge from foster care, treatment facilities, and prisons or jails (Dworsky, Napolitano, and Courtney 2013; Metraux, Byrne, and Culhane 2010; Metraux, Roman, and Cho 2007).

Fortunately, past debates over structural versus individual antecedents of homelessness have given way to a consensus about the importance of both. This

consensus is reflected in the venerable macro-micro conceptual model that anchors the current volume (Lee, Tyler, and Wright 2010; Koegel, Burnam, and Baumohl 1996; Shinn and Khadduri 2020). The population at risk of becoming homeless occupies a linchpin position in the model. At the macro scale of analysis, housing affordability, poverty, social exclusion, public policies, and large-scale shocks influence the number of people living in disadvantage: the larger that number, the higher the homelessness rate. Yet the majority of members of this disadvantaged population do not experience literal homelessness at any given time. What is different about those who do? We argue that they are more likely to be impacted by sudden, unexpected events (see the next paragraph), have one or more personal vulnerabilities, lack adequate social support, or be alumni of an institutional setting. In short, micro-level circumstances define a selection process through which the most precarious at-risk households have higher odds of winding up homeless.

A key insight from our conceptual framework is that the occurrence of homelessness cannot be explained solely by either macro or micro forces or, for that matter, by any single factor. Instead, our framework accounts for most homeless spells as the product of several intertwined antecedents. In some instances, macro conditions affect individual risk directly. As an illustration, consider one form of social exclusion, structural racism, which puts African Americans in greater jeopardy of becoming homeless. Macro conditions also function as more distal causes, contributing to or exacerbating personal vulnerabilities that in turn increase the likelihood of homelessness. During economic recessions, for example, unemployment (or the threat of it) may be sufficiently stressful to provoke domestic disputes or substance use within a family. Personal problems sometimes compound each other as well, such as when the death of a loved one initiates a downward spiral into depression and social withdrawal. These scenarios alert us to the "trigger" effect that sudden life events can have, prompting a homeless spell.[4] Eviction, fire, job loss, work-related injury, or debilitating illness are among the events that mark the tipping point between being domiciled and being without a roof overhead, especially when resources have been exhausted or are hard to come by in the local community (Curtis et al. 2013). Summarizing the complex dynamics suggested by the macro-micro model, it seems apt to describe homelessness as the outcome of what O'Flaherty (2004, 1) calls "a conjunction of unfortunate circumstances" occurring in the absence of effective, preventive social insurance.

Addressing Homelessness

Framing homelessness as a product of both macro and micro forces points to a variety of strategies to address it. However, national policy currents have not always been informed by the macro-micro perspective. During the 1980s at the beginning of the "new homelessness" period, the federal government considered homelessness a crisis requiring an emergency response. Passage of the Stuart B. McKinney Act (subsequently renamed the McKinney-Vento Act) provided funding for food,

shelter, health care, and addiction treatment, which were delivered by a patchwork of local government agencies, faith-based organizations, and other nonprofits (National Coalition for the Homeless 2006). While this approach satisfied the basic needs of some people experiencing homelessness, the mix of services was not robust enough to meet the demand. Moreover, it tended to be accommodative in nature. Because little attention was paid to deficits in employment, income, or housing, the root causes of the homelessness problem went largely untouched.

In the mid-1990s, HUD established the CoC planning process, which remains in modified form today as the principal administrative channel for the distribution of federal homelessness assistance to the local level (Mitchell 2020). CoC procedures stress community accountability, placing the responsibility for dealing with homelessness in the hands of a consortium of agencies and providers that operate in the same geographic area, typically a city or a collection of nearby counties. Consortium members are expected to minimize overlap and to maximize (and assess) impact in their delivery of services. They also determine which service model best suits their clients' needs. Early on, some CoCs opted for a "staircase" strategy, guided by the assumption that homeless individuals and families must complete a series of service steps—intended to improve literacy, life skills, and job readiness as well as remedy personal vulnerabilities and problems—before they are prepared to live in their own place. That place could range from transitional to supportive to independent housing, contingent on how high clients climb.

More recently, homelessness policy has moved in a "housing first" or "housing led" direction, bucking staircase wisdom about the necessity of fixing "broken" homeless people with a combination of services prior to rehousing them. The housing first approach, which originated as the Pathways to Housing Program (Tsemberis 2010), is now favored by many CoC organizations. It aims to settle clients in permanent housing as soon as possible, given the many benefits that accrue from such housing (minimizing harm associated with a lengthy homeless spell, stabilizing a chaotic personal situation, increasing autonomy, and so on; Padgett, Henwood, and Tsemberis 2016). Wrap-around services are still made available, but their use is not required. Instead, proponents of housing first contend, and evidence suggests, that services are more effective when freely chosen.

These policy orientations can be viewed in relation to the trajectory concept introduced earlier. In essence, the entry, pathway, and exit stages of a trajectory represent pressure points where programmatic interventions can be applied and evaluated. Most interventions to date have focused on the latter two stages, attempting to end or shorten homelessness for people already experiencing it. Evaluation research utilizing strong methods shows that long-term rental subsidies for homeless families with children tend to be effective, consistent with housing first logic. In particular, the FOS experiment offers support for the basic subsidy effect on homelessness but demonstrates that subsidized housing contributes to other positive outcomes as well (Gubits et al. 2018). The AH/CS study also confirms the value of subsidies and the housing first approach for individuals with serious mental health or substance use issues, as do other studies for high-needs families (Aubry, Nelson, and Tsemberis 2015; Rog et al. 2017). In these

target groups, supplementing rental subsidies with supportive services seems helpful.

Motivated in part by promising evaluation results, the federal government, policy organizations, and numerous cities have launched or participated in well-publicized initiatives to reduce homelessness. These include the aforementioned collaborative effort between HUD and the Veterans Administration, Community Solutions' 100,000 Homes Campaign (Leopold and Ho 2015), and 10-year plans to end homelessness, either in general or among specific subpopulations such as veterans, families, and youth (National Alliance to End Homelessness 2000). The idea of eradicating chronic homelessness has been especially popular from a fiscal standpoint, in light of the high cost of services consumed by people in the chronic category (Poulin et al. 2010). At the same time, funding deficits are prompting many communities to make the administration of their homeless service systems more efficient. One innovation, coordinated entry, ideally provides clients with a single gateway to the full range of services available and strives to create support packages tailored to their needs (HUD, n.d.). It does little, however, to expand the resource base; hence, waiting lists for housing programs remain long, and people often have to exit homelessness without programmatic assistance. In many places on the West Coast, even the supply of emergency beds is well below demand. Confronted with this resource challenge, most plans to end homelessness have fallen far short of the mark, whether local or national in scope. Current aspirations at the federal level are telling: the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (2018) now emphasizes making homelessness a "rare, brief, and one-time" occurrence rather than eliminating it completely (cited in Shinn and Khadduri 2020, 107).

The other pressure point for intervention in a homeless trajectory is during the early portion of the entry stage, when precariously housed people are in imminent danger of slipping into homelessness. Their situation may be due to a housing emergency, such as eviction or disaster loss (from fire or storm damage); a life change, such as having a baby or experiencing domestic violence; or discharge from foster care, psychiatric hospitalization, substance use treatment, prison, or a similar institutional setting. Preventing homelessness in these instances depends on researchers' and policy-makers' ability to accurately predict who is most likely to become homeless (Shinn et al. 2013). It also requires measures that keep individuals and families away from shelters while matching them with community-based forms of housing and service assistance appropriate to their needs (Burt, Pearson, and Montgomery 2007; Culhane, Metraux, and Byrne 2011; Evans, Sullivan, and Wallskog 2016). Possible options include flexible cash grants, housing counseling and advocacy, legal representation in eviction court, relocation aid, and transitional residential programming, all of which are intended to help persons on the verge of homelessness retain their current residence or find a suitable replacement. Such measures are attractive because of their cost savings over what is available in the traditional, shelter-oriented homeless service system (Culhane and Metraux 2008).

Some evidence hints that the types of housing subsidies and permanent supportive housing programs that help certain groups (e.g., extremely poor families,

people with mental illnesses or disabilities) leave homelessness can also help them avoid it in the first place (Shinn and Khadduri 2020). So far, however, researchers have conducted few rigorous evaluations to establish the effectiveness of prevention efforts. Even if their promise is confirmed, these efforts fail to address the macro or structural forces that influence the size of the population at risk of homelessness. Hence, an alternative strategy may be to fundamentally reorient prevention priorities toward growing the number of affordable housing units, viable employment opportunities, and basic minimum income insurance for the poorest among us (Shinn, Baumohl, and Hopper 2001).

Subpopulations and Contexts

From the Second World War through the 1970s, homelessness in America was synonymous with older white men living alone on Skid Row (Bahr and Caplow 1974; Wallace 1965). That period continues to inform stereotypes about the kinds of people who are homeless today. Yet a distinctive feature of the new homeless population is its demographic diversity. Although single males remain the modal category, nontrivial proportions of women, children, young adults, people of color, and families now lack access to a conventional dwelling (HUD 2018, 2020). When we unpack the composition of homelessness in this manner, the difficulties inherent in explaining and addressing the phenomenon become apparent. At the macro level, for example, economic downturns are more likely to put Blacks than whites at risk of losing their housing. Similarly, the micro-level trajectories followed into and out of homelessness by families with children often differ from those exhibited by individuals on their own. In the policy arena, the appropriateness and impact of ameliorative efforts can be expected to vary according to the needs of specific groups. Simply put, one size does not fit all when trying to account for homelessness or reduce its occurrence.

  People who experience homelessness are distributed not only across demographic groups but across states, metropolitan areas, and small towns. Explicit in the macro-micro perspective is a spatial version of the moving target theme: that the magnitude and character of homelessness vary from one type of community context to another. Why? Because the structural forces that generate an at-risk population do not operate in a geographically uniform fashion. As noted, local homelessness rates increase when poverty is substantial and the supply of affordable housing units cannot keep pace with demand. Social welfare and housing policies, especially those set by states or municipalities, are attuned to the priorities of particular governmental jurisdictions and thus further contribute to the distinctiveness of subnational patterns and trends in homelessness.

  So do homeless-specific service environments. Despite some ambiguity in the causal direction of the relationship, communities with substantial service infrastructures tend to have larger homeless populations. But as Burt and her associates (2001) have shown, the picture changes when service levels are standardized to a suitable denominator. Their analysis documents great variability in the rate

of daily service contacts per ten thousand poor people within each of three types of contexts (large metropolitan areas, medium-sized metro areas, and rural counties). Regardless of a community's size, then, the ability of homeless people to fulfill housing, health, and sustenance needs likely depends on the capacity and accessibility of the local service environment, not just individual perseverance.

The contexts relevant to homelessness can be temporal as well as spatial. During certain periods, an assortment of structural forces, demographic changes, and shock events have converged in ways that complicate our understanding of homelessness and what to do about it. The beginning of the new homeless era nicely illustrates this point, with wide-ranging explanations proposed for the unanticipated resurgence of homelessness in the early 1980s (Blau 1992; Burt 1992; Jencks 1994; O'Flaherty 1996; Wright, Rubin, and Devine 1998). Many scholars acknowledge the roles played by rising income inequality, a shortage of affordable housing (due in part to the destruction of the single-room occupancy [SRO] housing stock), and the lagged effects of long-term policy trends, most notably deinstitutionalization and the shrinkage of the welfare safety net. At the same time, persons born during the second half of the Baby Boom came of age during the late 1970s and early 1980s, when the economy was in deep recession and young people faced a restructured labor market that had shed a large number of secure blue-collar jobs. All of these macro factors trickled down to the micro level, putting more poor people at risk of homelessness and shaping the trajectories of those who experienced it. Whether newly emergent events are pushing America toward a similar "perfect storm," fundamentally changing the nature of homelessness, is a question taken up in the final section of this article.

An Overview of This Volume

To more fully explore the dynamics of homelessness within a macro-micro framework, we solicited policy-relevant research during fall 2019 using targeted invitations and a widely distributed call for papers. The sixteen core articles compiled here, selected from a large pool of submissions, benefitted from feedback at a virtual authors conference in May 2020 and subsequent rounds of editorial review. The articles are diverse, employing quantitative and qualitative approaches and reflecting a range of disciplinary backgrounds. Their authors include both early career and senior social scientists who work in applied as well as academic settings. All of the contributions present substantive results that bear directly or indirectly on efforts to reduce homelessness.

We have organized the articles into four thematic sections, the first of which examines some of the structural forces that make homelessness more or less frequent. Thomas Byrne, Benjamin Henwood, and Anthony Orlando lead off, analyzing longitudinal HUD and Census Bureau data (2007–2018) for more than two hundred CoC areas to see if growing income inequality is associated with higher rates of homelessness and, if so, why. The authors find evidence of a positive relationship, which they attribute to inequality essentially crowding

out low-income households from the rental market. Hence, one side effect of mitigating inequality might be to lower homelessness at the local level. This possibility informs Zachary Parolin's study of whether income support policies influence student and family homelessness. Relying on 2013 to 2018 Department of Education data for most public school districts in the United States, he shows that greater access to cash aid from the TANF program (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families) reduces the extent of family homelessness, especially in majority-Black and Native American school districts. However, no consistent effects are detected for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), and the downward trend in TANF accessibility is worrisome.

Another way to decrease homelessness would be to address the ongoing eviction crisis. As Devin Rutan and Matthew Desmond argue, preventing eviction depends upon a detailed understanding of where it occurs. Their research, which utilizes more than 660,000 eviction records from seventeen midsized cities, describes the high and persistent geographic concentration of these evictions over a 10-year period, not only in particular neighborhoods but in a handful of buildings. The durability of such patterns hints at the promise of spatially targeted eviction-prevention strategies. Eviction and homelessness often go hand-in-hand with social exclusion, when pervasive prejudice and discrimination limit the opportunities available to a perceived out-group. A study of eight CoC communities by Jeff Olivet, Catriona Wilkey, Molly Richard, Marc Dones, and coauthors employs HMIS data, American Community Survey data, and nearly two hundred qualitative interviews to explore the implications of racism for homelessness. People of color, notably Blacks and Native Americans, are shown to be overrepresented in the homeless populations of each community, in part because of the barriers they face to housing and economic mobility. Discriminatory treatment by service providers further strengthens the link between racial inequity and homelessness, although race is an inconsistent predictor of exits from the homeless service system.

In the second thematic section, we shift from the macro to the micro level, featuring research that describes the trajectories of individuals and families into, through, and out of homelessness. Tim Aubry and his team of collaborators distinguish four types of trajectories among homeless and precariously housed people in a Canadian multicity study spanning four years (2009–2013). People who experience improving or continuously high levels of housing stability (and less homelessness) tend to be differentiated from those with lower stability by the presence of resources—including access to public housing—rather than by risk factors. A longitudinal investigation of patterns of public assistance receipt and shelter usage in Cleveland yields broadly similar results. Identifying three distinct trajectories for homeless persons with and without children, Francisca Richter, Claudia Coulton, Robert Fischer, and Nina Lalich report that increased participation in public assistance programs (TANF, SNAP, public housing) after initial shelter entry reduces subsequent shelter use among members of all three trajectory groups.

The remaining articles in the second section of the volume look at the trajectories and transitions of individuals engaged with two very different kinds of institutions: prisons and schools. Merging administrative data from multiple government agencies in Pennsylvania, Brianna Remster documents four patterns of homelessness exhibited by formerly incarcerated men during the eight years following their release. In addition to chronic and episodic patterns—both of which commence soon after release—some men first become homeless much later, either for a long or a short spell. Thus, vulnerability to homelessness can extend well beyond the immediate reentry period. Tasminda Dhaliwal, Soledad De Gregorio, Ann Owens, and Gary Painter also draw on multiple data sources to study the educational and residential contexts of homeless students in the Los Angeles Unified School District from the 2008–2009 through 2016–2017 school years. The researchers find that in the school years that students experience homelessness, they have high rates of school and neighborhood mobility; counterintuitively, they appear to move to somewhat better schools while homeless. In general, though, homeless students are concentrated in lower-achieving schools and disadvantaged neighborhoods.

Our third thematic section addresses policy, focusing on interventions designed to end, shorten, or prevent the occurrence of homelessness. Most of the articles in the section summarize evidence from rigorous program evaluations. James Lachaud and his colleagues examine the roles played by a housing first intervention (housing subsidy plus supportive services) and selected mental disorders in shaping the long-term housing trajectories of single homeless adults with a history of mental illness. Following participants in the Toronto randomized trial portion of the multisite At Home/Chez Soi (AH/CS) project from 2009 through 2017, the investigators find a strong association between the housing first treatment and a rapid and sustained stable housing trajectory. However, participants with severe psychosis-related and substance use disorders are more likely to follow an unstable trajectory over time. A second evaluation tests for disparities between Black and white families with priority access to housing vouchers in the Family Options Study (FOS), also a randomized trial. Claudia Solari, Douglas Walton, and Jill Khadduri find few significant Black-white differences in rates of voucher lease-up or exit from the voucher program. Moreover, vouchers reduce returns to homelessness, doubling up, and frequent residential mobility for both racial groups.

Restricting their attention to high-needs families (defined by a history of chronic homelessness and two or more significant vulnerabilities) living in Washington State, Debra Rog, Kathryn Henderson, Clara Wagner, and Emily Abbruzi compare the outcomes from receipt of subsidized housing combined with services versus receipt of subsidized housing alone. This study suggests that the first option—permanent supportive housing—may offer such families more opportunities to access services and benefits, but its consequences for housing stability, employment, and criminal justice system involvement are less clear. The last article of the section, by Ann Elizabeth Montgomery, reviews research utilizing longitudinal data from a universal screening instrument administered to more than six million veteran outpatients at VA health care facilities since 2012. The

instrument consists of questions asking veterans if they have lived in stable housing during the preceding two months and whether they worry that they may not have stable housing during the next two months. Responses to the screen have been used to shed light on veterans' transitions into housing instability and the individual characteristics and structural factors that shape these transitions. The screen was implemented as part of a multifaceted and well-funded strategy to prevent and end homelessness among veterans.

In the fourth and final thematic section, we turn to scholarship that introduces critical perspectives and/or innovative methodological approaches for understanding the dynamics of homelessness. Probing collaborative relations among service providers and agencies in CoC organizations, Jennifer Mosley asks whether CoCs have created the kind of holistic and coordinated response to homelessness at the local level that they were intended to. Her analysis of qualitative data from interviews with participants in eighteen CoCs throughout the country indicates that limited capacity not only constrains the effectiveness of these organizations but also inhibits innovation and creates equity issues. Such challenges can ultimately affect the trajectories of homeless people in an adverse manner.

Chris Herring focuses his critique on the policies and actions of municipal government, specifically the City of San Francisco. Through an ambitious ethnographic investigation spanning six years (2014–2020), Herring detects a relationship between the opening of new shelters and the accelerated criminalization of street homelessness in the neighborhoods where the shelters are located: the former is used as a tool for achieving the latter, although official justifications emphasize sanitation and public health concerns. According to Herring, shelters operate as complaint-oriented services, more responsive to the interests of domiciled residents, businesses, and politicians than the needs of people experiencing homelessness. Another Bay Area study tracks the growth and spread of tent encampments in Oakland, California, between 2008 and 2019. Building a novel dataset from Google Street View images, Ryan Finnigan documents rapid increases in the number and size of encampments after 2014. Greater spatial dispersion is evident as well, apparently an unintended consequence of the siting of new transitional housing by local government.

The last article, by Matthew Marr, broadens our consideration of the dynamics of homelessness in three respects. First, Marr looks at two service hubs (skid row areas) outside North America, one in Tokyo and the other in Osaka, along with the Overtown district of Miami and L.A.'s Skid Row. Second, his dependent variable is the ontological security—or sense of order and continuity—manifested by the sixty currently or formerly homeless men residing in these neighborhoods who participated in in-person interviews. And third, he employs fuzzy set qualitative comparative analysis (fs/QCA) to identify the "recipes" of factors that contribute to ontological security in each of the service hubs. Results show that organizational engagement, access to subsidized housing and income, and social ties combine and interact in different ways across the sites to promote an individual's sense of security. However, that security is undermined by negative experiences, such as encounters with crime and the police. Marr argues that steps should be taken to strengthen service hubs, which can provide their residents both with resources and a meaningful existence.

Our volume concludes with reflections by Katherine O'Regan, Ingrid Gould Ellen, and Sophie House on the policy lessons to be learned from the sixteen articles. Borrowing an upstream-downstream distinction from public health, the authors suggest ways in which the research presented here can inform policymakers about four types of responses: addressing the root causes of homelessness, preventing its occurrence, providing services, and promoting permanent exits from homelessness. They also discuss findings relevant to racial disparities in homelessness service system access and efficacy.

Two Omissions: COVID-19 and Climate Change

Proposals for contributions to this volume were due in fall 2019. That deadline meant none of the authors or editors could anticipate the pandemic crisis that unfolded in 2020; nor could we imagine how it would change the world. The spread of the coronavirus over the past year has taken a deadly toll, wreaking economic devastation while disrupting all aspects of social life. Its implications for homelessness were still coming into focus as we wrote this introduction last summer. But two points related to COVID-19 already seemed clear.

First, the high levels of unemployment and housing insecurity associated with the COVID-19 pandemic are increasing the size of the population at risk of becoming homeless. Because evictions constitute a proximal step toward homelessness, legislative measures have been enacted to protect renters, although the emergency nature of these measures makes them subject to expiration. Some states and localities have done better than others at temporarily slowing or halting evictions (Eviction Lab 2020). Nevertheless, one analysis using multiple data sources predicted that approximately thirty to forty million Americans would be vulnerable to eviction during the second half of 2020, absent new, more robust policy initiatives (Benfer et al. 2020). The impact of the pandemic on the magnitude of homelessness is exacerbated by the fact that the coronavirus has struck in the midst of an affordable housing crisis, leaving fewer options than normal for low-income households forced to move. Compared to its size, the composition of the homeless population appears less likely to change, with one possible exception. Poor people of color face double jeopardy, given their greater likelihood of both COVID-19 infection and housing eviction (Benfer et al. 2020; Hooper, Napoles, and Perez-Stable 2020). Hence, their current overrepresentation among the homeless ranks may grow. Rigorous descriptive work on the demographic dynamics of homelessness during the coronavirus era will help us to understand if and by how much that overrepresentation grew.

A second point concerns the health and well-being of persons who are weathering the pandemic while entrenched in homelessness. For such individuals, exposure to the coronavirus is especially difficult to mitigate. They do not have homes to go to, precluding compliance with stay-at-home orders. Moreover, social distancing can be a challenge in shelters where crowding facilitates transmission of the disease. The vulnerability of shelter clients further complicates the situation: many are older or have underlying health conditions that make them

more susceptible to COVID-19. Given these factors, the clustering of cases within shelters is hardly unexpected (National Health Care for the Homeless Council 2020). Some shelters and other service organizations have had to close or reduce their operations. Yet thanks to the CARES Act and similar stopgap efforts, most are adapting (National Low Income Housing Coalition 2020). For example, temporary accommodations such as vacant hotel and motel rooms have been mobilized for housing homeless clients who have tested positive themselves (quarantine), who have been exposed to people who have (isolation/observation), or who have comorbid risk factors associated with severe COVID outcomes (prevention). The big unknown, in our opinion, is how emergency responses to the coronavirus pandemic will influence the longer-term interventions, resources, and political commitments necessary to shorten or prevent homeless spells if the problem as a whole increases dramatically in scale.

Climate change–related hazard events, also known as natural hazards or disasters, are another macro factor omitted from the volume. Such events include but are not limited to hurricanes, tornados, flooding, wildfires, droughts, blizzards, and severe thunderstorms. Their absence here reflects both a luck of the draw (no proposals on the topic were submitted) and, more generally, the fact that these effects are understudied in the mainstream homelessness literature. We find this inattention surprising in light of the substantial and rising impact of hazard events. Even a quarter century ago, the average American household lived in a county that experienced more than thirty events and $60 million in associated property damage during a five-year span (Elliott 2015). A more recent modeling exercise restricted to sudden-onset events (e.g., hurricanes, flooding) forecasts the probable risk of housing loss due to disaster at 230,000 units annually in the United States, placing it among the top ten nations worldwide (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre 2017). Simply put, natural hazards are already a significant source of residential displacement, some portion of which is likely to culminate in at least short-term homelessness. Estimating that portion with reasonable accuracy constitutes an important task for future research.

The random nature of hazard events might mean that they play a leveling role, affecting all demographic groups equally and thus increasing the diversity of the homeless population. Available evidence, however, is not supportive: the same racial, socioeconomic, and other disparities associated with homelessness are apparent among disaster displacees (for reviews, see Fothergill, Maestas, and Darlington 1999; Fothergill and Peek 2004). Poor people and minorities tend to be concentrated in inadequate housing in high-risk locations, they have fewer resources to fall back on, and they encounter more difficulty obtaining postdisaster relief or permission to reoccupy a damaged unit than their advantaged counterparts do (Elliott 2015). As a result, they have a greater chance of spending time in emergency shelters or doubled up with family members, most for brief spells but some for longer ones. To the best of our knowledge, attempts to systematically examine the homeless trajectories exhibited by displaced disaster victims are rare.

Under certain circumstances, the connection between natural hazard events and homelessness is likely to be strengthened. Similar to the coronavirus scenario we noted, when a hurricane or other event strikes a community already saddled with an

affordable housing shortage, residents can become homeless not only because of damage to their unit but because of a steep rise in postdisaster rents (Dillon-Merrill, Ge, and Gete 2018). More immediately, resources needed during or right after the event could be scarce if shelters and other service venues fall within the event's footprint and are negatively affected by it. Any interruption of services would also influence the well-being of those individuals already experiencing homelessness at the time of the disaster. Their greater exposure to the elements is an obvious source of risk, and their stigmatized status may limit their eligibility—and their perceived worthiness—for event-specific aid (Gibson 2019; Sar 1996).

Disaster-related homelessness is further amplified by its temporal and spatial intersection with other macro-level forces. As we write, wildfires in California and hurricanes and tropical storms targeting Florida, Texas, and the Gulf Coast are occurring as rates of COVID-19 infection surge or remain high in these areas. The broader lesson is that the dynamics of homelessness become quite complex when multiple structural or macro antecedents operate simultaneously. Whether such instances of convergence are growing more common and the extent to which they complicate ameliorative efforts both remain open questions. Assuming affirmative answers, homelessness could be an even faster moving target in the future for researchers, policy-makers, and service providers.

Notes

1. The literal definition of homelessness popularized by Rossi (1989), among others, refers to lacking access to a conventional dwelling unit of one's own. But that definition is not the only one; the concept itself represents a moving target. Contemporary scholarship often considers people doubling up with relatives or friends to be homeless, and more expansive approaches incorporate extreme residential instability and housing precarity. By contrast, much homelessness research prior to 1980 emphasized disaffiliation from social networks and institutions as the critical criterion (Bahr 1970), which meant that isolated individuals could be defined as homeless even if they had a roof over their heads.

2. CoC areas, which vary in size from a city to multiple counties, are served by cooperating agencies and providers that administer federal homelessness assistance funds at the local level. More detail on CoCs is presented in the "Addressing Homelessness" section of this article.

3. We use the terms "macro" and "structural" interchangeably to refer to properties or processes observed at an aggregate level rather than for individuals or households. The geographic scale of macro units can range from a neighborhood or city to a state to the nation as a whole.

4. Such events, which have also been collectively termed "bad luck" (O'Flaherty 2010; Snow and Anderson 1993), appear to strike individuals at random although they exhibit a consistent frequency from year to year at the population level. We suspect that people on the verge of homelessness are especially susceptible to sudden life events in part because these events occur in the presence of other macro and micro forces which have already made personal circumstances tenuous.

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