

Preface

At the time, I had no idea that a bright Saturday morning in October 1993 in Los Angeles would forever change the course of my life. A Fulbright student from Germany studying at the University of Southern California (USC), I was taking a course on “Los Angeles and the American Dream,” taught by Professor Jennifer Wolch of USC’s geography department. On this delightful day, twenty-five undergraduate students embarked on a class field trip to downtown L.A., where Professor Wolch showed us the area’s impressive international business center, some amazing architecture, the charming yet kitschy historic pueblo, and then, to everyone’s utter disbelief, Skid Row. I can still feel the anguish and utter shock I experienced when we entered the outskirts of this infamous district, to this day home to an estimated eleven thousand homeless people who live contained within a seven-by-five-block area just a few streets east of Los Angeles’s thriving commercial downtown. Makeshift cardboard-box homes lined many of the sidewalks, and primarily older black males were roaming the streets. A sense of despair and hopelessness filled the air, and I remember vividly how out of place, helpless, and overwhelmed I felt at that moment. That same day, I went to a bookstore and picked up Professor Wolch’s most recent book, *Malign Neglect: Homelessness in an American City*, which she had co-written with her colleague and husband, Michael Dear (Wolch and Dear 1993). I read the book—which I still consider one of the best studies on homelessness ever conducted—in one sitting and, from that moment on, was hooked on the topic and determined to help find a way to aid people in overcoming this disempowering social condition.

Little did I know at the time that this field trip and my subsequent conversations with my professors and peers were the beginning of a working relationship with Professors Wolch and Dear, who recruited me to be their principal assistant in a research project on an innovative grassroots organization in Los Angeles (Dear and von Mahs 1997). I eventually entered USC’s master’s program

in geography and became involved in a research project examining the controversial siting of homeless service facilities and the frequently ensuing “not in my backyard” (NIMBY) battles that prevent equitable service distributions and reinforce the containment of homeless people in Skid Row areas and service-dependent ghettos (Dear and von Mahs 1995). I had the opportunity to learn about the subject matter and benefited from a slew of critical studies on homelessness in North America that were published during this time. I remember reading, with great interest, Neil Smith’s *The New Urban Frontier* (1996), Talmadge Wright’s *Out of Place* (1997), and Don Mitchell’s “The Annihilation of Space by Law” (1997), studies that provided me with clear-eyed assessments of the deliberate exclusion of homeless people in U.S. cities. During this time, I also studied with great fascination qualitative studies employing ethnographic approaches, such as David Snow and Leon Anderson’s *Down on Their Luck* (1993); Sue Ruddick’s *Young and Homeless in Hollywood* (1996), focusing on homeless youth; and Stacy Rowe and Jennifer Wolch’s (1990) ethnographic study of homeless women in Skid Row, all of which I found to be particularly helpful in understanding the nuances that ultimately explain why and how some people overcome homelessness while others do not. These studies, alongside the relatively few international comparative studies at the time (G. Daly 1996; Heilman and Dear 1988; Huth and Wright 1997), provided me with the theoretical, epistemological, and methodological backing to undertake and legitimize further research on homelessness and homeless policy from an international comparative perspective.

Being German, I immediately thought about undertaking a transatlantic urban comparison of public policy’s impact on homeless people, something that had not been done before. I felt emboldened to make such a comparison upon reading Margit Mayer’s (1995, 1997) poignant articles on what postunification Berlin could learn from the recent, postmodern development of Los Angeles, alongside discussions about the potential “Americanization” of cities in Germany more generally (Albrecht 1994; Häußermann 1998). Such theoretical backup seemed necessary, simply because Los Angeles, in many ways, is quite different from most U.S. cities, let alone European or German cities. Knowing that the economic restructuring processes underlying povertization and homelessness were similar, with relatively similar outcomes in both places, was important to legitimize a comparison of cities that differ tremendously in terms of size, governance, population, and economic activity. At the same time, I also knew from a variety of comparative social-policy studies that the German welfare system is much more developed and comprehensive than that of the United States, including its provisions for poor and homeless people (Esping-Andersen 1990, 1996; van Kersbergen 1995). This comparison, I thought, would make for a good case to advocate for more and better welfare and social-service provision in the United States.

Equipped with my new understanding of homelessness in Los Angeles and a rationale for a comparative analysis, I returned to Germany to start my Ph.D. studies in geography on the previously unexplored impact of public policy from

the comparative international perspective. My intentions, at the time, were two-fold: Using the example of homelessness, I wanted to show a German audience that any flirtation with U.S.-style neoliberal policy—hotly debated at the time—was counterproductive and damaging. At the same time, I wanted to show a U.S. audience that an alternative—better provision of welfare, as in Germany—was possible and desirable. Yet when I started doing secondary research on homelessness in Germany in the mid-1990s, I came across a finding that truly surprised me. As I discuss in more detail in Chapter 1, despite Germany's more extensive and better integrated set of homeless policies, the numbers and characteristics of homeless people were similar in the two countries, and the average durations of homelessness were longer in Germany during the mid-1990s. Understanding this contradiction—different welfare systems yielding similar outcomes—subsequently became my main objective in writing this book.