

Introduction

Extreme poverty and housing deprivation are central issues on the policy agenda of many industrialized countries. “*Europe 2020*,” the ten-year socio-economic plan proposed by European Commission in 2010 to emerge from the economic crisis, has identified homelessness and housing deprivation as first-order priorities to be tackled by European Member States. Ten years later, in November 2020, the European Parliament adopted a set of recommendations to tackle homelessness and end housing exclusion in the EU. Indeed, the number of people living without adequate shelter is alarming in 2022, approximately 896,430 people in Europe and 582,462 people in the US experienced homelessness on any given night, and these figures have increased over the past decade (FEANTSA 2023, HUD, 2022). Recently, the Covid-19 outbreak seems to have exacerbated the problem. As a result, in June 2021, the European Commission launched the so-called European Platform on Combatting Homelessness, which aims to promote policies to strengthen cooperation and mutual learning among all actors involved in the fight against homelessness.

But what do we know about homeless people (i.e. who are they, why do they become homeless, etc.), and about homelessness prevalence rates across different European and non-European countries? Can policy interventions mitigate the phenomenon?

The goal of this book is to shed light on homelessness from various perspectives, by consolidating all available economic research on the topic and by compiling data on the number of homeless individuals and their characteristics, using a comparative approach across countries. Our objective is to offer a comprehensive view of the phenomenon from an international perspective. This book is intended not only for social scientists, but also for a broader audience of policy makers, NGO operators, service providers, advocacy, organizations, and readers interested in a data-driven and analytical examination of homelessness. Furthermore, the data reported in this volume are accessible to all researchers and policymakers seeking a deeper understanding of the homelessness phenomenon. We hope is that these data will be broadly used for economic research.

Interesting insights can be drawn from this volume. First of all, although the pattern of homelessness is not exactly the same in all countries, a common feature in many contexts is the lack of reliable, comparable and systematic data on the homeless population across and within countries. Comparable data are important to start rigorous empirical research on the topic. Indeed, despite the fact that homelessness is

one of the most extreme forms of poverty in the developed world, economic research on the phenomenon is extremely scarce. For these reasons, despite data limitations we try throughout the book to provide robust evidence based on available and comparable data. The second message of this volume is that policies and institutional features matter. In particular, welfare assistance schemes should be re-designed to encourage homeless people to leave the streets and to help the most vulnerable individuals to avoid becoming homeless. The third message is that policies must be updated to face new forms of homelessness. The Covid-19 pandemic, together with the austerity measures imposed by international standards, produced non-negligible effects in many countries, even in those that were adopting consolidated and integrated policies to reduce homelessness in the long run. The typical traditional homeless person (middle-aged single man) is still present in many countries, but we are seeing increasing numbers of women, young people and families with children living in inadequate housing. The changing profile of homelessness calls for changes in policies and interventions. Finally, the fourth message is that it is necessary to examine how individual risk factors interact with local structural and institutional factors in contributing to homelessness. Longitudinal data, when available, provide local and international researchers the opportunity to answer some of the fundamental questions that have interested and eluded homelessness researchers for many years. Both individual and structural factors can lead to homelessness. Depending on the prevailing cause, different interventions are needed. Individual factors call for specific *ad hoc* solutions, while structural factors call for long-term policies and structural changes.

The book is organized as follows. In **Chapter 1** we discuss the possible definitions of homelessness currently adopted by the European Union, highlighting the (unfortunate) lack of a unanimous and shared view of who is a homeless person across European countries. We also analyze the definition of homelessness used in the US and Australia. In **Chapter 2** we analyze advantages and disadvantages of all the methodologies used so far to count and survey homeless people. In **Chapter 3** we have undertaken a rigorous exercise to assemble all available data to provide a new cross-country and cross-city dataset on the homeless population. Through our data collection efforts, we were able to gather information on 36 OECD countries and 123 cities. **Chapter 4** analyzes the time trend in the number of homeless people in the European countries for which data are publicly available. Overall, we observe a general decrease of the phenomenon in Northern European countries (i.e. Finland, Norway) but an increasing trend in others (i.e. UK, Germany, Spain). We also observe a high variability in the evolution of homelessness within countries. In **Chapter 5** we have made the interesting exercise of correlating institutional factors, such as the *Gini Index* or the political orientation of a given country, with the prevalence of homelessness. **Chapter 6** uses available micro data we collected in three major Italian cities to describe the characteristics of a homeless person, the dynamics of the phenomenon and of the duration of a homeless spell. Finally, **Chapter 7** is devoted to the discussion of the policy approach to fight homelessness.