BOOK REVIEW


The homeless do not organize themselves as an interest group like a union or a neighborhood group; they lack resources, existing in unstable, stressful situations. *Homelessness in New York City; Policymaking from Koch to DeBlasio*, by Thomas J. Main, explores how this vulnerable subpopulation, facing every possible disadvantage, has managed to secure such a sizable chunk of New York City’s budget, about $1.5 billion on homeless services each year. Though the homeless did not organize themselves, the plight of the homeless in NYC succeeded in attracting the attention of a homeless policy network that effected change through the system of the courts. Activist lawyers, pushing for the “right to shelter” through *Callahan v. Carey* and *McCain v. Koch*, set the stage for five mayoral administrations to respond to homelessness. The consent decree of 1981 pushed the city into becoming one of few local governments with a court-enforced policy providing shelter to anyone who asks for it.

Under Ed Koch, the phenomenon of homelessness began taking on visibility and attracting media attention. There was no systematic method of counting the homeless, but they no longer confined themselves to the Bowery and could be found sleeping in the transportation facilities, streets, and parks and virtually anywhere in the city. At that time, the shelter system consisted of a very dismal Men’s Shelter where folks were put in the “Big Room” to sleep on a cot until they might be referred to a Bowery hotel, an abandoned mental institution, or Camp LaGuardia, a shelter 60 miles away from the city. Robert Hayes, the activist lawyer who filed the *Callahan* litigation, joined forces with advocacy researchers to form the Coalition for the Homeless, which forced the city to live up to its obligations under the consent decree. From 1980 to 1983 the shelter population doubled to 5,061, as the Department of Homeless Services labored to increase the number of beds in the face of the five borough presidents who did not want homeless shelters in their backyards. Though Koch never succeeded in raising the level of quality in the shelters and in the notorious Emergency Assistance Unit, Koch gets considerable credit for his Ten-Year Plan, which created 150,000 units of affordable housing by 1997 and represents what Main calls the entitlement stage, where the real dilemmas of implementing the shelter system began to manifest themselves.

The paternalistic stage of NYC housing policy began under David Dinkins, responding to the findings of the Cuomo Commission. Although many homeless were able to find units created under the Ten-Year Plan, the Housing Authority began to resist automatic placement of homeless families, because it was running out of room to serve any other constituencies, such as the working poor. The numbers of homeless entering the Emergency Assistance Unit were increasing, giving rise to the notion that a “perverse incentive” was motivating families to become homeless in order to gain access to housing subsidies. The Cuomo report articulated the “underlying problem” (New York City Commission on the Homeless, 1992, p. 9) approach to homelessness; that is, that people who were homeless had something wrong with them and needed one or more programs to fix their problems. Meanwhile, new evidence began to suggest that an alternative model, known as Housing First, was needed. Under it, the homeless were moved into permanent housing without regard to compliance with mental health, substance abuse treatment, or any other social services. According to Main, Housing First proved to be very effective.

This paternalistic moment crystallized under Rudolf (Rudy) Giuliani, who along with others demanded that homeless clients take responsibility for their situation and “give something back” (p. 107). This same demand resulted in welfare reform in 1986 at the federal level. Helen Freedman, justice of the New York State Supreme Court in Manhattan and responsible for enforcement of the consent decrees under *Callahan* and *McCain*, ruled against the city’s efforts to eject residents for failure to live up to individual service plans. Though Giuliani gets credit for bringing vast improvements to physical conditions within the shelter system, the homeless problem showed no signs of abating and the shelter census grew to 36,329.
Michael Bloomberg’s administration marked the beginning of the postpaternalistic phase of NYC housing policy, with the city refocusing on “overcoming” homelessness, as opposed to managing it. Beginning on a promising note with a Five-Year Plan to end chronic homelessness, the administration’s most striking achievement might have been the Special Master Panels, which ended court supervision of the city. Unfortunately, by 2009 there was still no reduction in the number of shelter residents; the following year, the state of New York revoked the funding the city was using for rental subsidies. By the end of 2013, the population in the shelters ballooned to 53,270.

In 2013, Bill de Blasio leveraged the growth of homelessness, poverty, and inequality to win election as NYC’s first progressive mayor since Dinkins and restored not only the rent subsidies lost under Bloomberg but also relations with the Housing Authority, increasing access to permanent housing for shelter clients. As this is being written, De Blasio still in office, facing a still overwhelming problem of homelessness whose root cause is the lack of supply of housing units to move people into. One of the administration’s efforts, not yet successful, would fund creation of 12,000 units of Housing First units at a cost of $2 billion.

*Homeless Policy in New York City* is about the evolution of homeless policy into phases categorized as entitlement, paternalistic, and postpaternalistic. Although New York City has been dominated by conservatives, liberals, and progressives during the last 35 years or so, the city has developed a high-quality system of care for society’s most vulnerable people evolved. The book is a must-read for all of the detailed stories I have no room to go into here, like the time Justice Freedman sentenced the staff of Department of Human Services to spend the night in their own Emergency Assistance Unit. Main’s study suggests that “the possibility that fragmentation leads, not to stasis or gridlock, but to change” (p. 221). Perhaps that is a ray of hope as we consider the current political climate.

Stephanie Sweeney

*Stephanie Sweeney & Associates, LLC*  
[StephSweeney@aol.com](mailto:StephSweeney@aol.com)

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**Reference**