

Developing Sustainable Solutions to End Homelessness

Short Paper

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Abstract

Homelessness has been, and continues to be, a complex issue around the world. Urban planners, policy makers, and non-profit organizations have a strong interest in improving the ways in which they help the homeless. The impacts of politics, religious beliefs, budget constraints, and the status quo on their efforts to develop and implement sustainable solutions to homelessness have already been extensively studied. To the extent that research guides their actions, this paper makes the case for incorporating the place dimension of sustainability, Geographic Information Systems (GIS), and spatial analysis into solutions to homelessness for long-lasting results. An analysis of 30 relevant peer-reviewed papers reveals the staggering absence of the place dimension of sustainability, GIS, and spatial analysis from solutions to homelessness that are being considered sustainable. These findings have implications for future research and the development of truly sustainable solutions to homelessness.

Keywords: Homelessness, Sustainability, Place, Spatial, GIS, Geographic Information Systems

Introduction

Homelessness has been, and continues to be, a complex issue around the world. Urban planners, policy makers, and non-profit organizations have a strong interest in improving the ways in which they help the homeless. The impacts of politics, religious beliefs, budget constraints, and the status quo on their efforts to develop and implement sustainable solutions to homelessness have already been extensively studied. To the extent that research guides their actions, this paper makes the case for incorporating the place dimension of sustainability, Geographic Information Systems (GIS), and spatial analysis into solutions to homelessness for long-lasting results.

Background

Before sustainable solutions to homelessness can be explored, it is important to first understand how homelessness is defined, identify the resources that can help the homeless, and determine how to understand sustainability itself.

Defining Homelessness

Homelessness is defined in a number of different ways by different scholars and organizations. According to Tipple and Speak, there is no single definition of homelessness that can be applied globally. They argue that definitions of homelessness do and should vary to offer different perspectives on homelessness based on criteria such as “lifestyle, location, permanence of occupation, welfare entitlement and housing quality.” They provide definitions of homelessness by these criteria in different developing countries (Tipple and Speak 2005).

In Bangladesh, people who have a mobile and vagrant lifestyle and/or are living in public spaces such as train stations are homeless. In China, people living outside their district of registration are considered homeless. In Egypt, people living in marginal and unsuitable housing are considered homeless. In Ghana, anyone lacking a roof and/or anyone to care for that person is considered homeless. In India, anyone not living in a place with a roof or living in a slum is considered homeless. In Indonesia, anyone without a permanent place to stay is homeless. In Peru, people living on the streets, people without the deed to their land and/or those registered on the “Family Plots Programme” are considered homeless. In South Africa, people living in squatter settlements and backrooms in townships, etc. are considered homeless. In Zimbabwe, people living in informal residential areas and/or those who do not own a publicly provided dwelling and are eligible to register on the Official Housing Wait List are considered homeless. In New Zealand, homelessness is defined as “sleeping rough or improvised shelters, household crowding, being on the state house waiting list, or experiencing some form of serious housing need.”(Leggatt-Cook 2007)

The European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA) defines homelessness using the European Typology on Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS). ETHOS categorizes the homeless as people who are experiencing “rooflessness”, “houselessness”, “living in insecure housing”, and “living in inadequate housing.”(Amore, Baker, and Howden-Chapman 2011) An earlier definition corresponding to FEANTSA’s ETHOS definitional categories of homelessness proposed that the word “homelessness” be changed to “houselessness” categorized by “risk of houselessness, concealed houselessness and substandard housing situations.” (Springer 2000)

In the United States, the largest entity addressing homelessness is the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), a federal agency. HUD has several definitions of homelessness to indicate different categories, the most notable of which is “Chronically Homeless”. According to HUD: ‘A “chronically homeless” individual is defined to mean a homeless individual with a disability who lives either in a place not meant for human habitation, a safe haven, or in an emergency shelter, or in an institutional care facility if the individual has been living in the facility for fewer than 90 days and had been living in a place not meant for human habitation, a safe haven, or in an emergency shelter immediately before entering the institutional care facility. In order to meet the “chronically homeless” definition, the individual also must have been living as described above continuously for at least 12 months, or on at least four separate occasions in the last 3 years, where the combined occasions total a length of time of at least 12 months. Each period separating the occasions must include at least 7 nights of living in a situation other than a place not meant for human habitation, in an emergency shelter, or in a safe haven. Chronically homeless families are families with adult heads of household who meet the definition of a chronically homeless individual. If there is no adult in the family, the family would still be considered chronically homeless if a minor head of household meets all the criteria of a chronically homeless individual. A chronically homeless family includes those whose composition has fluctuated while the head of household has been homeless.’ (Defining-Chronically-Homeless-Final-Rule.pdf, n.d.)

Many researchers contest this definition of homelessness (Casino and Jocoy 2008). Some researchers have gone as far as to discount the notion of chronic homelessness altogether (Willse 2010).

Those who are subjected to the different definitions of homelessness do not agree on those definitions either. According to a study conducted in Delaware in the early 1990’s, many people who are considered homeless by society at large do not perceive themselves as such, offering alternative definitions of home (Veness 1993). There is a whole body of research developing just around the meaning of home (Somerville 1992).

These definitions of homelessness vary in scope and specific details but what most of them do agree on is the notion that place is a part of the definition of homelessness. The references to place in these definitions include words like location, public spaces, train stations, outside, housing, slum, streets, squatter settlements and backrooms, informal residential areas, improvised shelters, safe haven, emergency shelter, institutional care facility, home, and place itself. Most of these references to place allude to a physical place that can be spatially categorized and analyzed. Some definitions of homelessness allude to both physical and non-physical attributes of place.

Identifying Resources for the Homeless

There are different types of resources available for homeless people in different geographic locations, irrespective of country or region, often provided by government and nonprofit entities. Some of the resources considered beneficial to helping assist and support the homeless population include food banks, free clinics, homeless shelters, etc. Related research also suggests that if certain parameters are satisfied, chronic homelessness can be prevented altogether by providing the recently homeless entitlement income and subsidized housing (Zlotnick, Robertson, and Lahiff 1999). Shelter, group homes, education, and job training were also found to be resources that help segments of the homeless population better cope with their homelessness issues. Additional resources that can help the homeless include food pantries, soup kitchens, drop-in centers, hospitals, residential treatment programs, outpatient clinics, and substance abuse programs (Drake et al. 2001). Other than housing resources, social resources such as social interactions with family and friends are also very helpful in alleviating the stress experienced by those who are homeless, and possibly helping them exit homelessness (Wong and Piliavin 2001). Ontological security (the sense of security from experiencing a consistent social and physical environment) is also extremely important in helping the homeless, particularly those with serious mental illnesses (Padgett 2007). Yet another important resource for successfully exiting homelessness is the relationship of the individual homeless person with the service provider (Thompson, Pollio, Eyrich, Bradbury, and North 2004).

Collectively these studies demonstrate that the type of resources that can help a particular homeless person depend upon various characteristics of the person experiencing homelessness and their pathways into homelessness. What they all have in common is that they all have to exist in and/or are provided at physical geographic locations which are readily accessible to those homeless people, which highlights the importance of place.

Defining Home as a Resource for the Homeless

In addition to defining homelessness, and identifying the resources that can help improve the life chances of the homeless, the concept of home as a resource was also reviewed for this paper. While there is a vast body of work on the meaning of home, the literature selected for inclusion in this review corresponds to the overall aim of this paper.

Earlier research by a psychologist on the meaning of home found that subjects defined home in 20 different ways based on their personal, social, and physical experiences of their environment which they identified as home (Sixsmith 1986). A few years after that research, a rigorous literature review on the meaning of home took two distinct approaches to defining home. The first approach uses a conceptual model which defines home as security and control, as a reflection of one's ideas and values, as acting upon and modifying one's dwelling, as permanence and continuity, as relationships with family and friends, as a center of activities, as a refuge from the outside world, as an indicator of personal status, as a material structure, and as a place to own. Whereas the second approach uses interpretive models which define home based on territory, psychological wellness, socio-psychological wellness, and phenomenological and developmental experiences (Després 1991). A more recent literature review investigates the meaning of home as a place, a space, a feeling, a practice, and/or active state of being in the world (Mallett 2004).

Again, place has emerged as a recurring theme common to definitions of home as a resource for the homeless, just as it did with the definitions of homelessness and the resources identified that may help the homeless.

Understanding Sustainability

While there is no universal agreement on the definition of sustainability, it has been described as an optimal state along economical, societal, and environmental dimensions (Morus 1517). Since then, numerous researchers have attempted to consider and emphasize the need to integrate other dimensions into the definition of sustainability for it to be more comprehensive.

A cursory literature review reveals that only one researcher, Seghezzeo, incorporates place as an independent dimension of sustainability. He further breaks down place into three-dimensional space. Overall, he proposes that sustainability has five over-arching dimensions including permanence, persons, and the aforementioned three dimensions of place. He describes permanence as a temporal dimension of sustainability in which long-term planning and the impact of present-day actions and inactions should be

considered. He describes the persons dimension of sustainability by making the case for valuing individuals and their inner lives. Seghezzeo describes the place dimension as a three-dimensional space. As a dimension of sustainability, he argues that place is more than geography itself, that as a social construct, it plays a significant role in shaping identities, culture, behaviors, and local ways of life (Seghezzeo 2009).

To that end, not only local conditions, problems, and opportunities in a given place must be incorporated into sustainable solutions, but also the aforementioned persons and permanence dimensions.

Methodology

Multiple sources are used as part of the search strategy in order to conduct a comprehensive literature review. Google Scholar, Geobase, Scopus, Web of Knowledge, ABI/INFORM Global, EconLit, and Business Source Complete are used to search for peer-reviewed scholarly articles using keywords related to this study, specifically ‘sustainable solutions for homeless*’ to include both sustainable solutions for the homeless and for homelessness. No books, dissertations, theses, white papers, government, non-profit, or industry reports are included in the sample for this study.

For the purposes of this paper, the sample size of the articles collected and included for analysis in this study is limited to the first 30 articles which meet the criteria of being peer-reviewed journal articles. These papers are then analyzed using Seghezzeo’s framework to evaluate the solutions with respect to his five dimensions of sustainability, as well as for their incorporation of any use of GIS and/or spatial analysis. As identified in a recent study (Aasi 2020), most scholarly works fail to include an advanced spatial analytic component regarding homelessness.

- It is hypothesized that at least 75% of the articles sampled completely ignore the place dimension of sustainability in their solutions.
- It is also hypothesized that the remaining 25% of the articles sampled likely fail to explicitly acknowledge the place dimension of sustainability.

For the articles included in the study sample, data is specifically collected on: the author name(s), publication year, study location, the Seghezzeo sustainability dimension(s) included in their homelessness solutions, and the use of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and/or spatial analysis.

Data Collection, Analysis, and Results

Author(s). (Year)	Study Location	Sustainability Dimension(s)	GIS or Spatial Analysis
1. Anderson, I. 2007.	Scotland	Permanence	No
2. O’Sullivan, E. 2008	Ireland	Permanence	No
3. Fowler et al. 2019.	Multiple Countries	Permanence	No
4. Benjaminsen et al. 2009.	Europe	Permanence	No
5. O’Sullivan, E. 2016.	Ireland	Permanence	No
6. Casey, L., & Stazen, L. 2021.	World-wide	Permanence	No

7. Akinluyi, M. L., & Adedokun, A. 2014.	Ibadan, Nigeria	Permanence	No
8. Sanchez, D. 2010.	South Africa	Persons	No
9. Benjaminsen et al., 2010	Europe	Permanence	No
10. Lazenby, C., et al. 2009.	Australia	Permanence	No
11. Mangayi, C. 2014.	South Africa	Permanence & Persons	No
12. Granath Hansson, A. 2020.	Sweden	Place, Permanence, & Persons	No
13. Wall, J. 2013.	Sydney, Australia	Permanence & Persons	No
14. Cockman, C., & Cockman, S. 2020.	Greater Manchester, UK	Permanence	No
15. Nourazari, S. et al., 2021	United States	Permanence	No
16. Polakow, V., & Brooks, M. 2014.	World-wide	Permanence	No
17. Mitchell, N. 2008.	Melbourne, Australia	Permanence	No
18. Pawson, H., & Davidson, E. 2008.	Scotland and England	Permanence	No
19. Gibbons, A., 2020	Wales	Place & Permanence	No
20. Gaetz, S., et al. 2021.	Canada & Wales	Permanence	No
21. Parsell, C., & Jones, A. 2014	Australia	Permanence	No
22. Parsell, C., & Marston, G. 2012.	Australia	Permanence	No
23. Afolabi, A. O., et al. 2019	Nigeria	Permanence	No
24. Cairncross, A. 2016.	New Zealand	Permanence	No
25. Aitken, E. 2021.	Scotland	Permanence	No
26. Murnane, C. 2014.	Not specified	Permanence	No

27. Watts, B. 2014.	Scotland and Ireland	Permanence & Persons	No
28. Petit, J., 2019	Europe	Persons	No
29. Abdel-Samad, M., 2021	Southern California, USA	Permanence	No
30. Mackie, P., et al. 2019	Multiple countries	Permanence & Persons	No
Table 1. Sustainable Solutions to Homelessness			

Only two of the 30 articles reviewed, less than 7%, integrated the place dimension of sustainability in the solutions to homelessness they described. This is significantly less than the 25% of the literature which was hypothesized to include the place dimension of sustainability. Only seven of the 30 articles reviewed, less than 24%, integrated the persons dimension of sustainability in the solutions to homelessness they described. In contrast, 28 out of the 30 articles reviewed, more than 93%, integrated the permanence dimension of sustainability in the solutions to homelessness they described. Not a single paper in the sample included any use of GIS, nor spatial analysis.

Conclusion

The findings of this study clearly demonstrate the dearth of literature on sustainable solutions to homelessness which incorporate Seghezze's place dimension of sustainability since the sample data failed to reject the hypotheses that at least 75% of the articles sampled completely ignore the place dimension of sustainability in their solutions and that the remaining 25% of the articles sampled failed to explicitly acknowledge the place dimension of sustainability. It also exposes a significant pain point in the sustainable homelessness solution literature through its complete lack of GIS and spatial analysis. There is a strong need to build up the body of scholarly work on solutions to homelessness which integrate rather than ignore the spatial aspects of homelessness and the place dimension of sustainability. These findings have implications for future research and development of truly sustainable solutions to homelessness. In light of the findings of this study, researchers are strongly encouraged to make sure that any new research on homelessness and sustainable solutions to homelessness incorporate GIS, spatial analysis, and the place dimension of sustainability.

Since definitions of homelessness and home, as well as the resources involved in treating homelessness, revolve around place, one would expect solutions which incorporate Seghezze's five dimensions of sustainability are more likely to be sustainable than other solutions to homelessness. Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and spatial analysis should be used in conjunction when the place dimension of sustainability is incorporated into a homelessness solution, since the spatial aspects of homelessness are tremendously important to consider (Aasi 2020).

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