



BOOK REVIEW

Ella Howard, *Homeless: Poverty and Place in Urban America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

Focusing on the Bowery in Manhattan, once the nation's most infamous skid row, as well as the rest of New York City and select cities throughout the nation, *Homeless: Poverty and Place in Urban America* by Ella Howard walks readers through an aspect of American urban history that has been constantly neglected by politicians, popular media, and the general public—the homeless poor. From the late 19th century to the early years of the new millennium, the homeless poor, as the most impoverished people in this country, have been targeted by a number of different strategies shaped by powerful institutional forces with little input from the homeless themselves.

The chapters are organized in chronological order, featuring major eras in recent American history, from the late 19th century, through the times of the Great Depression, postwar prosperity, urban renewal, to the late 1970s and early 1980s, when skid rows were largely eradicated and the homeless became scattered across the urban landscape. For each time period, the issue of homelessness is analyzed from diverse perspectives, but with a focus on perceived causes and corresponding solutions. Take the late 19th century, for example, when homelessness was mainly understood as a moral issue. During this time the plight of homeless individuals was perceived to be caused by the absence of a sense of responsibility and the lack of a work ethic. Work relief programs were established with the hope of inculcating the absent moral values into these “flawed individuals.” Since that time, experts have linked homelessness with alcoholism, social disaffiliation, and mental illness, and have developed programs addressing these specific issues.

Following a cause–solution framework, Howard does a great job illustrating the evolution of knowledge about homelessness in the eyes of various professionals. In the legal community, for example, during the most recent period homeless individuals were no longer viewed as actual or potential criminals but rather as citizens with the right to decide their own lifestyle. “The liberalization of legal attitudes toward the homeless formed one lesser-known aspect of this legal trend: vagrancy and public intoxication ordinances, in particular, were seen as unjust persecution of the poor and sick” (p. 136). *Place* is another important concept highlighted in the book. Through the Bowery's transition from an entertainment district, to an infamous skid row, to its final eradication by the combined forces of urban renewal and gentrification, Howard highlights the pros and cons of the function of certain confined urban areas in serving some of the most impoverished Americans. The benefits and costs are presented from the perspectives of social workers, social scientists, religious leaders, urban planners, and government officials. Each profession's perspective is shaped by its own areas of expertise and its own self-interests.

As the victims of an unequal and unfair socioeconomic structure that systematically produces poverty in a modern society, the limited voices of skid row residents recorded by urban scholars convey a sense of helplessness and hopelessness. Howard writes, “When asked where they would be in a year, more than 25 percent of Bowery residents mentioned death” (p. 158). As a historian, Howard does a great job presenting various aspects of the environment in which the homeless live, including the impacts of powerful structural forces such as gentrification. Unfortunately, Howard does not explore the issue deeply enough to reveal how these institutional factors work to systematically place people on the pathway to homelessness. Given the limited space, and the book's comprehensive content, this minor flaw is understandable.

Written from a historical perspective, the overall tone of this book is descriptive rather than analytical. It contributes to the urban studies literature by providing a comprehensive picture of the historical background of urban homelessness, but it is not analytical enough to be used for policymaking. The book would serve well as the textbook for a graduate-level course focused on urban history, homelessness, or urban poverty. Its comprehensiveness also enables it to be used as supplementary reading for courses on public policy, mental health, and race or gender studies.

Chunhui Ren

The Institute of Urban Policy Research & Analysis,
The University of Texas at Austin
Ren.36@utexas.edu
