MIGRANT HOMELESSNESS AND THE CRIMMIGRATION CONTROL SYSTEM

REGINA SERPA

EXPLORATIONS IN HOUSING STUDIES
Migrant Homelessness and the Crimmigration Control System

*Migrant Homelessness and the Crimmigration Control System* offers new insights into the drivers of homelessness following migration by unpacking the housing consequences of ‘crimmigration’ control systems in the US and the UK. The book advances ‘housing sacrifice’ as a concept to understand journeys in and out of homelessness and the coping strategies migrants employ. Undergirded by persuasive empirical research, it offers a compelling case for a ‘social citizenship’ right to housing guaranteed across social, political and civil realms of society. The book is structured around the 30 life stories of people who have migrated to the capital cities of Boston and Edinburgh from Central America and Eastern Europe. The narratives are complemented by interviews with a range of stakeholders (including frontline caseworkers, activists and policymakers). Guided by the tenets of critical realist theory, this book offers a biographical inquiry into the intersections of race, class and gender and provides insight into the everyday precarity homeless migrants face, by listening to them directly. It will be of interest to students, scholars, and policymakers across a range of fields including housing, immigration, criminology, sociology, and human geography.

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Regina Serpa
For Michael Stone, whose commitment to advancing a right to housing and ending shelter poverty inspired this work.
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1 Introduction

This study marks a culmination of many years of housing activism, experience providing front-line homelessness services and detailed research work. In the U.S. and UK, I have worked with homeless migrant groups in different capacities and contexts (as an inner-city community organiser, an anti-eviction campaigner and housing rights advocate), and my knowledge, experience and understanding of the conditions experienced by these groups ultimately inspired this two-country study involving case studies in Massachusetts and Scotland—two localities which take a comparatively progressive approach to homelessness relative to their respective neoliberal, national contexts. As a practitioner and researcher, I witnessed the severe disadvantage experienced by homeless migrants, representing their marginalised position in American and British society. As Egoz and De Nardi (2017) assert, in most western countries, migrants generally occupy the most underprivileged position in society and are frequently confronted with a landscape permeated with prejudice and hostility. In spite of these constraints, I can also attest to individual and family resourcefulness in the face of adversity—a central focus of this book.

By the nature of their experiences, homeless migrants tend to be seen as invisible and silenced. People who experience homelessness following migration are rarely encountered directly in policy and practice debates. When the issue arises as a conversation topic, debates are seldom informed by the actual experiences of those who have crossed borders and who lack a permanent or stable home. Guided by the tenets of critical realist theory, this book offers a biographical inquiry into the intersections of race, class and gender and provides insight into the circumstances facing homeless migrants, by listening to them directly. At its core, the book demonstrates the nature of social citizenship in western democracies through biographical accounts of immigration and homelessness, offering a compelling case for an unconditional right to decent, affordable housing (Bratt, 2006).

This book contains oral histories of the immigration experience—and the process of deep social exclusion, as revealed in the first-person accounts of individuals confronted by varying degrees of criminalisation on two fronts: their status as a ‘migrant’ and their social standing as a person.

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experiencing homelessness. The punitive consequences of poverty and status are explored through the life stories of 30 people from Boston, Massachusetts and Edinburgh, Scotland; all of whom have paradoxically lost a home whilst attempting to make a new home elsewhere. Having crossed borders in search of a new life, the respondents outline their struggles and their ambitions—as Victoria, a mother of two from Belize explains: ‘I want to take all the opportunity, to make a little money, to have a future for my children. That is my dream’. The collection of voices in this book—of migrants themselves, the frontline service providers who support them, and of policymakers who legislate the regulatory terrain they negotiate—bear witness to the surprising degree of agency individuals can assert under extreme circumstances and the array of strategies used to cope with homelessness, or as Jakub describes of his experience migrating from Poland, to ‘start from square one again and to make it to square one hundred and one’.

The primary motivation for this research originates from a strong commitment to combating social inequality; a purpose that has underpinned my academic and professional career. The methodology applied in this research—a biographical, critical realist inquiry—reflects my orientation towards social justice by giving expression to hitherto-silenced voices to challenge the dominant power structures that perpetuate inequality, injustice, and exclusion. Consequently, this research’s theoretical and methodological aims are: to advance an understanding of migrant homelessness through the lens of ‘crimmigration’ as a radical critique of the dominant ideology and to address common difficulties in data representation amongst marginalised communities by integrating critical realist analysis with biographical inquiry.

With regards to the first aim, ‘crimmigration’ refers to the various systems and processes in place that intentionally create a hostile environment for migrants which blurs the boundaries between border and crime control, creating hybrid forms of punishment and new disciplinary procedures of exclusion through administrative processes (Bowling & Westenra, 2018). As Stumpf (2006) argues, crimmigration systems witness a convergence between two domains of law resulting in a parallel system where immigration law has absorbed the theories, methods and perceptions of the criminal justice system (Legomsky, 2007; Di Molfetta & Brouwer, 2020, p. 303). Crucially, the result is a rejection of standard procedural and normative safeguards; hence ‘drawing of moral boundaries, a traditional concern of criminal law, is performed not only through the discourse of punishment, but also through practices of banishment and expulsion’ (Aas, 2007, p. 81). Wacquant (2008) has similarly observed a two-fold ostracisation of migrants and the ‘rightward tilting of the state’—based on internal ‘extirpation’ as well as external removal.

Crimmigration displaces responsibility for border control onto a range of third-party intermediaries (e.g., landlords, estate agents, bankers, airline
staff, medical and educational administrators, welfare rights officers and any number of service providers in local government or ‘street-level bureaucrats’; those subject to immigration control, in addition to a host of third-parties who have professional (or personal) dealings with them, are subjected to a ‘crimmigration control system’ which imposes civil and criminal penalties for so-called immigration ‘crimes’ (Canning, 2020). Importantly, the ‘social harm’ inflicted by a crimmigration control apparatus has two targets: non-citizens subject to immigration control and the variety of harm which follows from such a subjugated position in society, and the citizenry obliged to its enforcement. Welfare service providers with a social mission, for example, those involved in front-line casework, often experience ‘burn out’ following repeated efforts to fight ‘bureaucratic banality’ on a case-by-case basis. The case of Sue, the civil servant, in Chapter 4 illustrates: ‘I get why there needs to be restrictions, that’s my brain-side speaking. But my heart-side says, this is a mother of three, what do you mean she has to go sleep on the streets tonight?’. A crimmigration perspective critiques dominant power relationships and provides a detailed analysis of the socio-legal context which facilitates inequality, injustice and discrimination.

The second methodological aim of this study is to demonstrate the value of biographical, critical realist inquiry for overcoming common problems relating to data representation in the social sciences. This book provides an opportunity for research reflexivity, requiring an active consciousness of ‘power’ within housing studies (and other disciplines concerned with social inequality) and an understanding of the ways in which power features within research processes (study design, data collection, dissemination). This study’s methodological approach is specifically adopted to challenge dominant power dynamics in social research by creating a platform for seldom-heard voices. The book considers how power dynamics in research might reinforce a hegemony, which researchers might discredit and dismantle. Specifically, the ways in which poor people are represented in studies of poverty can do additional (albeit unintended) harm to marginalised communities, especially studies that assume a ‘pathological’ model of disadvantage, focussing on individual deficits (either of personal or structural origin) (Aldeia, 2013). This critique of research that fetishizes ‘vulnerability’ calls for a greater cognisance of power differentials between the researcher and study participants (or communities as investigation objects); methodological application and data presentation are particular points in the research process highlighted in this book which can offer a critical, reflexive approach to housing research.

Having conducted this study over a seven-year period (2014–2021), I argue that understanding migrant homelessness within the modalities of critical realism and biographical inquiry adds ontological depth to empirical analysis by anchoring a conceptualisation of social phenomena to a philosophical account of ‘being’ and ‘knowing’. Furthermore, biographical