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Homelessness and mortality: an extraordinary or unextraordinary phenomenon?

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ABSTRACT

In this article we explore the vicissitudes of extraordinariness in relation to homelessness and mortality in Britain. Death and its threat are a constant presence in the lives of people experiencing homelessness, but despite the established fact that homeless populations have a far lower life expectancy than the general population, mortality is rarely considered as part of the homelessness plight, nor is it fully acknowledged or understood in official spheres. This article explores the ways in which homelessness and mortality are constructed as an unpreventable phenomenon, not deserving of any meaningful political intervention. Drawing on the conceptual framework of ‘organised abandonment’, we argue that the invisibility of homeless people in death can be linked to their invisibility in life. In so doing, we underline the minimalist policy frameworks and the expansion of anti-homeless campaigns, which, to different extents, result in the exclusion of homeless individuals and families. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, however, the risk of death affecting homeless groups was responded to as an extraordinary social and political problem, requiring maximum political intervention. While remaining cognisant of the limitations of the extraordinary homelessness and housing policy measures brought in during this time, we argue that there are key possibilities to be explored within those policy responses.

KEYWORDS

Homelessness; mortality; organised abandonment; extraordinary; unextraordinary; COVID

Introduction

When extraordinarily high mortality rates affect a marginalised social group, it is often dismissed as ‘unextraordinary’ and the structural causes are ignored, downplayed, or omitted from public discourse. As Kleinman et al. (1996, p. xiii) argue, ‘[m]uch of routinized misery is invisible’. For people experiencing homelessness, their mortality is often accepted as an unextraordinary outcome of poverty, not as an extraordinary failure of state provision. Their cause of death is often framed in ways that connect it to lifestyle choice or individual circumstance and is all too readily accepted as unpreventable, inevitable, self-inflicted and, moreover, not deserving of any meaningful political intervention. During the COVID-19 pandemic, however, the risk of death affecting homeless groups was elevated onto the political amphitheatre. The response to people who die whilst homeless shifted from that of an unpreventable and unextraordinary social

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phenomenon, to an extraordinary one that required maximum political intervention. Previously, governments were satisfied with minimum political intervention and fervently defended meagre housing provision and support on the premise that it is too costly to accommodate every homeless person. However, with the onset of COVID-19, governments were in an impossible bind: as housing became 'the frontline defence against the coronavirus' (Farha, 2020), governments had to accommodate the unhoused as an emergency response, to contain the spread of infection and prevent the death of individuals experiencing homelessness. In this article, we critically explore the vicissitudes of extraordinariness in relation to homelessness and mortality, both pre-pandemic and during the COVID-19 pandemic. In so doing, we contribute to the paltry discussions concerning homelessness and death and raise key questions about the political response to and administration of homeless populations during the COVID-19 pandemic.

We begin this article by setting out the concept of 'organised abandonment'. Described as a 'concept for our time' (Bhandar, 2018), this intellectual framework provides us with the necessary, critical scope for capturing the key structural shifts and economic transformations that result in the diminishing quality of life and premature death of disenfranchised groups. Organised abandonment also provides us with the intellectual scope to consider complex forms of action and inaction, which can include the omission to act as well as administrative action that effects no change at all – described elsewhere as obfuscation (Artero & Fontanari, 2021). Second, we situate the scale of death and dying that characterises the everyday plight of homeless groups by focusing on Britain and global contexts. Despite the urgency of the issue raised by public health experts from across the world, the exceptional high mortality rates affecting homeless persons are rarely understood as an extraordinary phenomenon. Prior to the onset of COVID-19, homelessness and mortality received minimum political intervention and nowhere in the official 'death system' was it possible to locate records or statistical data about those who die while homeless (McClenaghan, 2020). It is at this juncture where we adjust our focus to consider the range of political responses to and routine administration of homeless people, as we argue that the unextraordinary response to homelessness and mortality can best be understood by shining a light on the invisibility of homeless people in life. This precursory understanding concerning the range of political responses to homeless people is crucial, we argue, for considering how the ideological vagaries and minimalist policy interventions play out in life as they do in death.

The latter section of this article turns to the range of extraordinary measures and unprecedented political interventions organised and instituted at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Here, we outline what we see as the main policy responses implemented to reverse the established trend of high mortality rates amongst homeless populations. Finally, we conclude by considering what these range of extraordinary measures might mean in the future, as old and new policy norms are being established within the field of housing and homelessness.

Homelessness and organised abandonment

The concept of organised abandonment provides the necessary critical framework for thinking about global capitalist interests that 'render particular groups of people vulnerable to precarity, injury and premature death across multiple scales...' (Bhandar, 2018).

Organised abandonment entails the political and economic abandonment of things, people, space and place to secure capitalist development and redistribution of wealth. Understood mainly as a structural outcome of neoliberal state policy, effected through deregulation programmes, dismantling of the welfare state and commodification of housing, organised abandonment primarily concerns the withdrawal of key structures and social protection that would normally act as a buffer against the injurious effects of capitalist development (Bhandar, 2018; Gilmore, 2007). In lieu of social protection, marginalised groups are exposed to the vagaries of uneven development where their quality of life is in perpetual decline and risk of premature death is amplified. As people experiencing homelessness face some of the most severe consequences of capitalism, organised abandonment serves as a useful concept for exploring the ways in which their deaths are made unextraordinary. This section will outline the origins of the concept of organised abandonment and critical sociological applications of it.

First coined by the management consultant Guru, Drucker (1993), the notion of organised abandonment was introduced as a tool for managing 'change'. Drucker argued that to successfully lead change, organisations must routinely plan for abandonment, which entails ongoing organisational planning of products, services or markets that must be discarded to make room for new innovations. Abandonment, he argues, 'is the right policy' because injecting resource into maintaining an established product or service, can stymie the growth of a new product or limit the potential of another market (Drucker, 1993). Some years later, David Harvey applied the concept to critically assess the political and mediated forces of uneven geographical development in the built environment, exercised through institutional apparatuses of the state. The circulation of capital in the built environment, Harvey argues, is 'a highly specialized system linking economic agents who perform each role separately or in limited combinations' (2018, p. 395). A highly specialised system necessitates 'special kinds of institutional arrangements' to support the speed at which financial investment can be turned over, but also to manage social problems that may stymie development (p. 397). It is at this juncture that we understand abandonment as the destructive force of capitalist development, in that it requires 'the abandonment of particular elements within the built environment' (p.397).

Continuing with this critical frame of thought, Gilmore (2007) introduces the concept of organised abandonment to highlight the ways in which capital investment and uneven geographical development have come to shape the global political economy of prison security, arguing that 'prisons are partial geographical solutions to political economic crises, organized by the state, which is itself in crisis'. (p. 38). For Gilmore, neoliberal economic transformation, and the redistribution of wealth from public to private spheres, has not only accelerated the uneven geographical development and destroyed communities along the way but has led to an explosion of capital investment in prisons and security, where both the prisoner and prison guard are organised as commodities. As Gilmore puts it: '[T]he rise in security work, therefore, is the natural outcome of the renovation and deepening of uneven development throughout the world' (Gilmore, 2011, pp. 251–2).

In relation to homelessness specifically, organised abandonment can be understood as a pervasive way of governing and organising homeless people in ways that lead to their exclusion, prolong their suffering and amplify the risk of premature death. On one level, it involves a whole suite of policies and stigma programmes that ideologically support their

segregation, but on another level, it involves direct policy intervention that claims to seek to address the issue of homelessness. However, these policy interventions rarely have sufficient resource or reach to address the structural problems affecting the people they are set up to support, because of the inherent paradoxes in neoliberal capitalist development. Here, we argue that understanding abandonment as an ‘organised’ event requires a conceptual shift in what we mean by ‘organised’. On the one hand, abandonment requires a significant level of political intervention and ‘special kinds of institutional arrangements’ (Harvey, 2018, p. 397) that guarantee a withdrawal of rights and dismantling of protection for marginalised communities. Examples of such direct state-sanctioned interventions include decisions to facilitate the sale of public and affordable housing that result in the eviction of scores of households or state-sanctioned budget cuts to homeless hostels that lead to a spike in rough sleeping. However, the injurious effects of abandonment can also arise through *inaction*, the omission to act or the organisation of administrative action that effects no change at all, which, drawing on the work of Artero and Fontanari (2021), we call ‘obfuscation’. The omission to act, or the obfuscated attempt to act, can have serious and injurious effects in the same way that direct action and decision-making can have. Thus, both action and inaction, we argue, play an important role in understanding the ways in which the concept of organised abandonment can be applied in critical analyses of homelessness and mortality.

Homelessness and mortality

Globally, it is estimated that 100 million people are homeless (United Nations for Human Settlements, 1996). Death and its threat are a constant presence for people experiencing homelessness – not only through the ever-present heightened risk to oneself whilst homeless but also through the deaths of friends, loved ones and pets. According to recent statistics, the average age of death for homeless people in England and Wales, can be up to 19 years younger than the comparable general population (Office for National Statistics, 2020)¹. Between 2013 and 2019, more than 3,000 people were estimated to have died whilst homeless in England and Wales, with an estimated 778 registrations of deaths of homeless people in 2019 alone (Office for National Statistics, 2020). However, it is likely that these figures may be underestimated, as the Office for National Statistics states that ‘the method used provides a robust but conservative estimate, so the real numbers may still be higher’ (2020, p. 4). In Scotland, there were an estimated 216 registrations of deaths of homeless people in 2019 (National Records of Scotland, 2020).

While this article focuses on the British context, looking at English and Welsh jurisdictions in particular, it is important to note from the outset that the high rate of mortality amongst homeless populations is a global issue. Globally, homeless populations are three to four times more likely to die than the general population (O’Connell, 2005), and while the cause of death may play out differently across national and global contexts and across demographic trends, there is ‘a remarkable consistency that transcends borders, cultures and oceans’ (O’Connell, 2005, p. 13). Public health and epidemiological studies show that homeless adults and children are more likely to be afflicted with underlying health conditions than the general population (Romaszko et al., 2017). Associated health effects can include but are not limited to respiratory illnesses such as pneumonia, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, emphysema and bronchitis; cardiovascular diseases,

such as coronary heart disease and stroke; skin diseases, such as gangrene, frostbite and foot fungal infection; infectious diseases, such as hepatitis, tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS; and malnutrition and vitamin deficiency which can lead to prevalent health issues, such as anaemia, reduced muscle mass and brittle bones. Homeless individuals are also disproportionately likely to die due to violent, unintentional accidents, such as being run over by a motor vehicle or being crushed in a bin lorry (Fazel et al., 2014; Gladding et al., 2020).

Such is the magnitude of the health conditions and risk of fatal injury affecting homeless people that health researchers and practitioners argue that homelessness constitutes a public health crisis (Fransham & Dorling, 2018). Researchers in Canada, for example, stress that homelessness presents key public health challenges and furthermore points out that

the cumulative disease burden experienced by homeless persons, when combined with high levels of suicide, fatal injury and homicide, results in some of the highest all-cause mortality rates of any population in Canada. (Guirguis-Younger et al., 2014, p. 2)

Most researchers of public health and poverty-related studies will agree that statistical data plays a 'critical role in deciding whether something is a problem or not and what, if any, resources are required to tackle it' (Widdowfield, 1998, p. 25). Systems of counting and enumerating key populations in life and death bear some impact upon the social world as it helps to draw necessary public attention to emerging social problems like homelessness. Statistical data and politics interact in critical ways, whereby government definitions of homelessness can help to shed some light on the problem and its causes and lead to meaningful political intervention. However, narrowly defined meanings of homelessness can result in the exclusion of certain groups from receiving adequate support and can also result in the omission of those populations from official streams of knowledge, thus distorting the true size and scale of the problem. To put it differently, how social problems are defined can have a direct impact on the 'official view', and studies concerning homelessness and mortality should therefore take into consideration the definitional parameters by which key homeless groups are counted and which groups fall outside of those parameters.

At local levels, there is abundant knowledge and evidence about the relationship between homelessness and premature death, where the deaths of homeless people are often memorialised through vigils organised within the communities that supported them (McCarty et al., 2021). Yet, it remains the case that activists and researchers of homelessness will be hard pushed to find 'evidence' or 'data' in official government statistics that show a direct causal link between homelessness and premature death. Even though it is well understood within intersectional fields of study, such as public health, poverty and housing studies, that people without a fixed abode will disproportionately die prematurely from underlying health conditions and fatal accidents compared to their housed counterparts, there remains a critical lack of recorded data on homelessness in death records. This lack of understanding can lead to the distorted knowledge concerning the different causes of death. The highly acclaimed journalist, Maeve McClenaghan, exposed the spectacular failure of the 'death system'² and collection of data about deaths of homeless persons. Beginning her investigation with multiple Freedom of Information Requests regarding the number of people who die while homeless, McClenaghan (2020) claims that she was met with the same reply: 'The data is not

held' (p. 50). Vital public services held no data whatsoever. The Coroner's office informed McClenaghan that 'there was no requirement to record someone's homelessness status on the death certification' (p. 50), and when her enquiries were directed higher up at national government level, she was told that 'it's a council-level thing' (p.50). It was this profound invisibility and lack of data that led McClenaghan to log 800 cases of homeless people who died in Britain, whilst conducting her 18-month investigation.

As part of this project, McClenaghan, the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, and homelessness activist groups such as Streets Kitchen and the Museum of Homelessness in London campaigned for greater official recognition of these deaths, using the social media tag '#makethemcount' (McClenaghan, 2019). The political response to this campaign led to the establishment of official national data sets, with the Office for National Statistics (ONS) in England and Wales and National Records for Scotland now collating key data and compiling annual reports concerning the deaths of homeless populations. Whilst these data sets provide the most accurate official data available on homelessness and death within these nations, caution should be maintained when engaging with these statistics because they are 'experimental' statistics, meaning that 'they are in the testing phase and not yet fully developed' (Office for National Statistics, 2018, p. 4).

The absence of homeless groups from official data on death and dying is not a new problem and to a large degree, their absence merely adds to the story of their more general invisibility from public and political discourse. Systematic tools of measurement and assessment of who is statutorily 'homeless'³ are routinely administered through gate-keeping processes (G. Robertson, 2012), which leads to the exclusion and disqualification of thousands of adults and children from official definitions of and statistics on homelessness. Additionally, rough sleeping is estimated using less than robust methods, which, according to Cloke et al. (2001), 'has clear distorting consequences for the identification and understanding of to what extent, where, and among whom homelessness represents a pressing social issue' (p. 259)⁴. The reluctance of government administrations to adequately measure the scale of homelessness is, again, not unique to Britain, but is apparent on a global scale. According to the Institute of Global Homelessness (n.d.), 'the lack of commitment on the part of some governments to acknowledge and dedicate resources to analyzing the issue of homelessness within their countries obfuscates the true scale of the problem'.

To explore the vicissitudes of 'extraordinariness' and processes of structural adjustment that so painfully lead to surges in homelessness and amplify the risk of premature death, it is vital to reveal the processes and structures that depoliticise the causes of homelessness and normalise suffering in life *and* death. When extraordinarily high mortality rates affect a particular marginalised group, it is often dismissed as routine and unextraordinary, with the structural causes ignored and omitted from public discourse. For homeless groups, their mortality is often accepted as an unextraordinary outcome of poverty, not as an extraordinary problem, and the cause of death is often constructed in ways that connect it to lifestyle choice or individual circumstance, not circumstances precipitated by structural inequality, or caused by lack of choice. Framed in this way, the death of homeless people is all too frequently accepted as an unpreventable, inevitable and not deserving of any meaningful political intervention or attention. As Kleinman et al. (1996) put it, '[M]uch of routinized misery is invisible' (p. xiii).

In the following section, we focus on the ways in which the issue of homelessness has been depoliticised. Here we argue that the social, political and legal constructions of homelessness are defined in ways that help to advance dominant understandings about the causes of homelessness. As Cronley (2010) argues, 'societal understanding of homelessness stems from a process of social construction in which, over time, differing groups have framed the definition and debate' (p. 319). As we will explore, dominant understandings and definitions of homelessness also lead to particular policy approaches and systems of administration that reflect the main social, political and legal construction of the issue.

Depoliticising homelessness through minimalist responses

Using a wide range of discursive practices, binary oppositions of 'deserving' and 'undeserving' are central underlying features used to frame homeless people as either deserving, vulnerable and 'in need', or undeserving, intimidating and disingenuous (for more on the historical construction of these distinctions, see Beier & Ocobock, 2008). In the seminal article, *Neutralizing Homelessness*, Marcuse (1988) challenges the dominant political narratives surrounding homelessness of the 1980s, which ideologically frame homelessness as an individual failure, notably by underlining their unique set of circumstances related to, for example, addiction, criminality, mental health and/or relationship breakdown. For Marcuse, this ideological construction helps to depoliticise the scale of structural and economic factors inherently connected to the rise in homelessness and, moreover, helps to divert blame onto the homeless themselves. He argues that the socio-economic ramifications of past and present housing booms, such as gentrification, unaffordable rent and eviction, are defended as signifiers of economic growth and improvement, and talked out of dominant political narratives concerning deprivation and marginalisation.

Dominant political narratives of homelessness allow governments to maintain power over how the social issue in question is defined, giving governments space to shape understandings and design policy responses in ways that reflect those dominant understandings. Schiff (2003) argues that critically assessing definitions of homelessness can reveal 'who holds power, how that power is used, how the parameters of the broader arena are shaped, how the activities of that arena are organized and determined, and finally, what the underlying conceptions of that arena are' (p. 491). The dominant understandings that shape and influence definitions of homelessness, argue Jacobs et al. (1999), are reflected in the policy constructions and responses to homeless individuals seeking support. For Jacobs et al. (1999), definitions of homelessness broadly vary between 'maximalist' and 'minimalist' policy frameworks.

'Maximalist' understandings consider the causes of homelessness within wider structural issues, such as labour market and housing market conditions. Policy responses and practices that adhere to the maximalist definitions of homelessness may intervene in ways that maintain the necessary structural conditions and welfare infrastructure that prevents homelessness from occurring or maintains low levels of homelessness. Interventions under the maximalist policy response may include, by way of example, building genuinely affordable housing or through legislation, such as legal protection from eviction. Given the emphasis here on structural causes and factors, there is barely any distinction between supposed deserving and undeserving homeless groups.

By contrast, homelessness is more narrowly defined with the 'minimalist' framework, where governments and policy programmes focus mainly upon individual behavioural issues, such as substance abuse, alcoholism, relationship breakdown and/or mental health issues. Under this framework, routine administrative practices are designed to distinguish between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' homeless individuals, with the view to exclude so-called undeserving applicants from receiving meaningful housing provision. In Britain, from the 1980s onwards, the most prevalent definition of homelessness has been associated with the individual, individual circumstances and individual need. While the Housing Act 1977 was a 'major step forward in the legal protection of homeless people' (Fitzpatrick & Davies, 2021, p. 109), the economic transformations and commodification of housing from the 1980s onwards led to a rapid decline in availability of quality housing stock. To manage the sharp rise in homeless applications at a time when key structural shifts in housing composition were taking place, the Housing Act 1977 established criteria for determining 'eligibility', that distinguished between those who were entitled to a legal duty of support, and those who were not. This technocratic procedure involves the assessment of 'priority need' and administrative investigations as to whether a person is 'intentionally' or 'unintentionally' homeless.⁵ For example, homeless applicants must prove that they are 'unintentionally' homeless by showing that they are not at all responsible for their homelessness and must furthermore show that they have pursued every possible avenue to try and prevent themselves from becoming homeless. However, and paradoxically, applicants must also prove some level of vulnerability and should not therefore be seen to be 'too resourceful' or 'too proactive', in the likelihood that they will be assessed as 'not vulnerable enough' and excluded therefore from receiving statutory support. Applicants must satisfy local authority assessment teams that they are more vulnerable than the 'ordinary person if made homeless' (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2018), which, given the legal comparator, is not an easy status to prove as it is based entirely on a hypothetical ordinary person. Given these legal thresholds of eligibility, housing and homelessness legislation is essentially regarded as a 'vehicle for marginalisation' as it excludes several homeless people on the basis that they are 'non-priority' (Cowan & Gilroy, 1999), and therefore acts as a rationing process, or a form of gatekeeping (Evans, 1999; Fitzpatrick & Clapham, 1999; Somerville, 1999).

Following Jacobs et al. (1999), these constructions matter for understanding policy approaches to homelessness and housing, whereby the 'struggle by different vested interests to impose a particular definition of homelessness on the policy agenda is critical to the way in which homelessness is treated as a social problem'. (p. 11) In England, the state pursues a minimalist policy approach which aims to administer change at the level of the individual, as opposed to the macro, structural level. In doing so, state agencies adopt policy frameworks that echo some form of organised abandonment. Given the inherent paradoxes in neoliberal economic transformation, homelessness policy programmes barely have sufficient resource or reach to address the colossal structural problems affecting the very people those programmes are set up to support. Instead, the modus operandi has been to design minimalist policy frameworks premised upon a contradictory political logic that 'neither admits nor denies homelessness, that neither provides homes nor leaves the homeless on the streets' (Marcuse, 1988, p. 85). By focusing on individual behaviours and accountability, administrative regimes are equipped with

the organisational capacity to withdraw legal duty of care, and in so doing, organise homeless groups out of the legal thresholds of housing support. The exclusionary impact of minimalist policy frameworks, as discussed above, raises critical questions about the extent to which these policy frameworks prolong the suffering and amplify the risk of premature death affecting homeless populations.

Beyond processes of obfuscation and inaction, we argue, it is important to also consider the broader approaches and discourses about homelessness that may not always be clearly linked to formal homelessness and housing policy interventions, but nevertheless play a pivotal role in the ideological construction of a political narrative that is, quintessentially, 'anti-homeless' in character. Integral to the minimalist construction of homeless policy frameworks is the ideological construction of anti-homeless narratives and practices, which broadly stem from urban governance strategies and the neoliberal urban agenda to exclude marginalised groups from designated urban spaces.

Killing with your kindness: anti-homelessness as a form of organised abandonment

Outside of formal homeless policy programmes, homeless groups are routinely subject to state-led initiatives and campaigns that frame their pursuit for survival as a pathological and deviant problem. Using a combination of public and private methods of regulation that draw upon statutory and non-statutory frameworks for maintaining public order, one of the most prevalent characteristics of neoliberal urban governance has been the ongoing exclusion of homeless people from prime public spaces (Tosi, 2007). Mired in power relationships, these methods seek to sanitise and gentrify urban spaces (Mitchell, 1997; Smith, 2005). This is achieved through the use of 'hostile architecture' (Petty, 2016; Rosenberger, 2017) where homeless groups are designed out of prime city spaces, but also through the organisation of state-led appeals that attempt to shape hostile public attitudes concerning homelessness. Where it is not enough to target and physically prevent individual homeless people from sleeping or sitting in designated spaces, considerable efforts are also levied at the public, in ways that mystify the issues surrounding homelessness and harden public attitudes. In recent decades, we have seen a rise in local authorities making public appeals not to give money to street homeless people, claiming that giving money can inflict 'more harm' and contribute to the death of a homeless person (A. Robertson & Lander, 2015). With unambiguous messages advertised in public spaces, such as 'your kindness can kill', local authorities aim to subvert the moral order around almsgiving and munificence by reframing kindness as harmful and abandonment as kindness. The exact origins of the 'killing with your kindness' campaign is unknown, but cursory evidence points to Thames Reach Charity, which, in 2003, launched a campaign to persuade the public not to give to the homeless, with the message 'your kindness can kill'. Local authorities were quick to follow suit and began making similar appeals, with different versions of the same message (The Pavement Perspective, 2003). These anti-homeless appeals have not gone unchallenged however, and in recent years there have been a number of complaints, arguing that the advertisements make spurious and false claims about homeless people. In 2016, Nottingham Council was forced to remove their anti-homeless public advertisements because, according to the Advertising Standards Agency, they caused 'serious, or widespread offence' (Sweney, 2016).

In Britain, anti-homeless public appeals appear to be a relatively new phenomenon, understood as the culmination of neoliberal economic transformations. While this is not entirely wrong, these public appeals have a much longer history that can be better understood by looking at the construction of vagrancy legislation. Throughout history, almsgiving features prominently as part of the historical construction of vagrancy laws and labour statutes. However, since the 1300s, and as part of the ongoing crusade against vagrants, the state opposed the ecclesiastical ritual of almsgiving and provision of temporary shelter to 'healthy beggars' because it was entirely incongruous with the needs and desire of the state to mobilise cheap labour. Consequently, the state sanctioned institutions and individuals that provided alms and shelter to people deemed fit to work, as well as punishing individual beggars. This growing intolerance towards almsgiving was compounded by the protracted period of the Reformation, which amongst many other things, involved the dissolution of Monasteries and Abbeys, introduced under the 1539 Supremacy Act. This Act resulted in the complete abandonment and thus heightened visibility of the poor, which only seemed to intensify the state's crusade against the swelling number of vagrants and resort to punish them. Today, the production of anti-homeless campaigns serves a similar, albeit different ideological function as it shapes public perceptions about disenfranchised groups in ways that broadly conform to the ideological repertoires of the 'anti-welfare state' (Hall, 2011), which depict the abject poor as 'undeserving' and as a so-called problem for urban governance (Tosi, 2007).

In these ways, the logic of anti-homelessness has come to shape normative discourses surrounding homelessness and its causes. In doing so, the state is effectively pursuing an approach that is akin to some form of organised abandonment, whereby its restrictive and minimalist policy framework and response is justified, and lack of any meaningful intervention to prevent homelessness from occurring is validated. These moral framings of homelessness are pertinent for understanding political responses to high rates of mortality affecting homeless populations. Our central argument is that the invisibility of people experiencing homelessness in death can be linked to their invisibility in life and diminishing quality of life, achieved by an organised lack of support and ongoing exclusion. In exploring minimalist constructions of homelessness, as well as anti-homeless advertising campaigns, the death of homeless people is too often treated as a routine and unextraordinary aspect of homelessness, and cause of death is framed in ways that connect it to lifestyle choice or individual circumstance. These are presented as unpreventable and inevitable and, moreover, not deserving of any meaningful political intervention. We argue that unextraordinary responses to homelessness and death are inextricably linked to policy responses of homeless populations in life.

From unextraordinary to extraordinary

At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the response to homeless people dying shifted from that of an unpreventable and unextraordinary issue, to an extraordinary one, requiring urgent and targeted intervention. As COVID-19 infection rates peaked in 2020, governments were in an impossible bind: as housing became 'the frontline defence against the coronavirus' (Farha, 2020), governments had to accommodate the unhoused as an emergency response, to contain the spread of infection and prevent the death of individuals experiencing homelessness. In March 2020, a state of emergency was actioned

in Britain with the Coronavirus Act 2020, resulting in the closure of all non-essential public services and businesses. As excess deaths in the general population became a politically contested topic, the high mortality rate of homeless populations was also put under the political spotlight. According to Nancy Scheper Hughes, a state of emergency is only ever applied when risks of health and/or violence affect an entire population, not just aspects of it:

A state of emergency occurs when the violence that is normally contained to that social space suddenly explodes into open violence against the 'less dangerous' social classes. What makes the outbreaks 'extraordinary', then, is only that the violent tactics are turned against 'respectable' citizens. . . (Scheper-Hughes, 1993, p. 220)

The risk that unhoused people presented during the period of COVID-19 must be understood in the context of the 'home' and the role it played in defending housed populations against COVID infections. As governments across the world drafted an emergency legal order of 'lockdown', the general housed population was legally required to stay at home. The home was therefore established as the main site that, to some extent, alleviated the pressures of health crisis that COVID-19 brought and, what is more, homeworking for adults and home-schooling for children was instituted as the 'new normal', to minimise the risk of infection. Globally, it was more or less accepted as a *fait accompli* that the home could protect people from COVID-19, and it is no surprise therefore that the term 'lockdown' became synonymous with the 'home'.

Once the parameters of lockdown were established and a state of emergency was administered, policymakers turned their gaze to vast groups of people in society who were, in one form or another, unhoused. In March 2020, the Westminster government announced the introduction of the *Everybody In* scheme, which aimed to get people sleeping rough into some form of accommodation, to prevent the spread of infection amongst homeless populations (Cromarty, 2020). With an emergency budget of £455 million, an estimated 37,000 people sleeping rough or at risk of sleeping rough were accommodated in hotels and other forms of emergency accommodation (Cromarty, 2020). Up until this point, and as we highlighted earlier in this paper, it was relatively routine for homeless persons to be excluded from prime urban spaces, however this was no longer the case during the pandemic. Instead, governments rolled out significant interventions to secure accommodation for the homeless, with much of it located in prime urban spaces. Similar policy programmes and responses were applied in Scotland (Homeless Network Scotland, 2021) and Wales (Welsh Government, 2020). In terms of the actual impact of these emergency policy initiatives, one study estimated that 21,092 infections amongst homeless people were prevented, and 266 deaths were avoided (Lewer et al., 2020).

As well as making emergency accommodation available to homeless persons, the government introduced a moratorium on evictions, which resulted in a 6-month temporary suspension on evictions. This suspension on evictions meant that landlords and mortgage lenders were prohibited from proceeding with legal arrangements to evict households for a 6-month period during the pandemic. While this went some way towards preventing an eviction crisis, especially given that an estimated 500,000 people were already in rent arrears at the point in which the moratorium came into effect (Heath, 2021a), the eviction moratorium was only a temporary buffer. Once the eviction

suspension was lifted, the number of eviction applications submitted to court increased by a staggering 207% (Heath, 2021a). Similar issues have come to light in the area of homelessness and provision of emergency accommodation. For example, in 2021, and at a time when lockdown rules that prohibited social gathering were still very much in place, local authorities were rejecting some homeless applicants for emergency accommodation on the basis that applicants did not meet aspects of the restrictive assessment criteria applied under pre-pandemic minimalist policy frameworks (Heath, 2021b). In July 2021, the *Everyone In* scheme was officially withdrawn in England, and most local authorities have returned to pre-pandemic rules and systems for assessing homeless applications.

Whilst the COVID-19 pandemic arguably marked an extraordinary response to homelessness, health and death, it also allowed governments across the globe to sweep in a range of social control measures, claiming them to be necessary to manage a 'state of emergency'. On the one hand, the political interventions during the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the possibility for abolishing traditional policy constructions of 'deserving' and 'undeserving', and the eviction moratorium is worth further consideration in terms of the provision of legal protection for low-income households, especially during periods of housing crises that result in unprecedented high rates of eviction and repossession (Cooper & Paton, 2021). However, and on the other hand, the wider social control measures brought in during COVID-19 reinforce the reproduction of stereotypes and perceptions of 'riskiness', where expectations were put upon people to manage their own conduct within very strict parameters of cleanliness, space and the wearing of masks.

While remaining cognisant of the limitations of the homelessness and housing policy measures brought in during the pandemic, as well as the paradox between supportive housing initiatives and the implementation of draconian 'lockdown' measures, we argue that it is still worth considering the realm of possibility within the extraordinary measures brought in to accommodate the homeless and prevent the eviction of low-income households. Although the policy implementations were imperfect in their truest form, such measures challenge the legitimacy of minimalist policy frameworks and anti-homeless campaigns that occur in tandem with the neoliberal urban governance strategies. On this point, we argue that it is important to consider the realm of possibility presented: for decades prior to the pandemic, governments fervently argued that accommodating every homeless person would be far too costly and defended minimalist policy frameworks and provision of support on the basis that it was sufficient and more could not be achieved. However, the extraordinary policy responses to homelessness and mortality rolled out during the COVID-19 pandemic, reveal that new norms can be drawn, and higher standards of support can in fact be achieved. Policy measures implemented by Conservative governments arguably stem from progressive movements and critical alternatives that grew out of social and political crises preceding the pandemic. Where Conservative political assemblies are usually quick to downplay and ignore critical alternative policies as 'idealistic', Conservative governments drew on those ideals, to some degree, as they rolled out extraordinary, albeit short-term initiatives to prevent the death of homeless populations during the COVID-19 pandemic. As old and new policy norms are being established in relation to homelessness and housing, the extraordinary COVID-19 measures clearly underline the range of interesting possibilities emerging within alternative arenas.

Conclusion

This article has explored the vicissitudes of extraordinariness in relation to homelessness and death, by considering political responses both pre-pandemic and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Globally, premature death and high mortality rates have come to characterise the everyday plight of homelessness. And yet, the extraordinarily high rate of mortality affecting people who are homeless is depoliticised in official spheres and dismissed as an unpreventable and unextraordinary phenomenon.

Our key argument and ultimate point in this article, is that the unextraordinary response to homelessness and mortality can be better understood by exploring the invisibility of homeless people in life and diminishing quality of life, organised at the level of the state. Using the conceptual lens of organised abandonment, we showed how policy programmes which ideologically support the segregation of homeless groups, whilst claiming to address the issues experienced by homeless groups, can amplify the risk of premature death. Described as a 'concept for our time' (Bhandar, 2018), organised abandonment entails the removal of key structures and social protection measures that would normally act as a buffer against the injurious effects of capitalist development. Played out through complex processes of action and inaction, the removal of key structures exposes disenfranchised groups to the material and injurious effects of this form of development. Through a routine administrative order and punitive action, we showed how the state engages in processes of organised abandonment, achieved administratively through minimalist policy frameworks, and ideologically, through anti-homeless campaigns.

It was not until the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic that the political significance of homelessness and death shifted, this time framed as an extraordinary and preventable phenomenon that therefore required maximum political intervention. According to one study, policy interventions introduced during the pandemic helped to prevent 21,092 infections and 266 deaths amongst homeless people (Lewer et al., 2020). While remaining cognisant of the limitations of the extraordinary homelessness and housing policy measures brought in during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is still worth considering the realm of possibility within those exceptional policy responses. We argue that there are clear possibilities within the critical, alternative spheres from which these extraordinary responses arguably emerge, and that are worth further exploration as old and new policy norms are being established in the field of homelessness and housing.

Notes

1. In England and Wales, the mean age of death for people experiencing homelessness is 45.9 years for men, 15.6 years less than the comparable general population, and 43.4 years for women, which is 19.0 years less than the comparable general population (Office for National Statistics, 2020).
2. According to the Lancet Commission on the Value of Death, death systems are 'the means by which death and dying are understood, regulated, and managed' (Sallnow et al., 2022, p. 10).
3. Statutory homelessness refers to those people who are owed a duty of care and assistance by their local authority.
4. Though the methods of estimating rough sleeping have changed since 2001, the quality of statistical data still very much remains an issue.
5. The priority need test was abolished in Scotland in 2012.

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