Mind the gap! How social policy failures cause homelessness

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Why do people become (and stay) homeless?

Why relevant?
  ➤ Housing & energy crisis –> homelessness most precarious form of poverty, marginalization, and social exclusion.
  ➤ Gap in the (German sociological) literature

Where does the study take place?
  ➤ Three German cities as case studies (Göttingen as "anchor case")

How is the study conducted?
  ➤ Narrative, semi-structured expert interviews
  ➤ Narrative, biographic interviews with (formerly) homeless persons
  ➤ Systematic content analysis using MAXQDA
  ➤ Triangulation of interview data (observations, official documents, media)

What do we know about the causes of homelessness?

- German language research:
  - Strong focus on "objective" data -> surveys, descriptive statistics on individuals (socio-demographics) and infrastructure (organizations and client count)
  - Insights from social work and education -> "insights from practitioners"

- English language research:
  - Decades-long debate on "who is at fault?" -> individuals or structure?
  - Since 1990s consensus on a "**new orthodoxy**" -> focuses on the *interaction* of individual agency and structure (Somerville 2013; Pleace 2016)

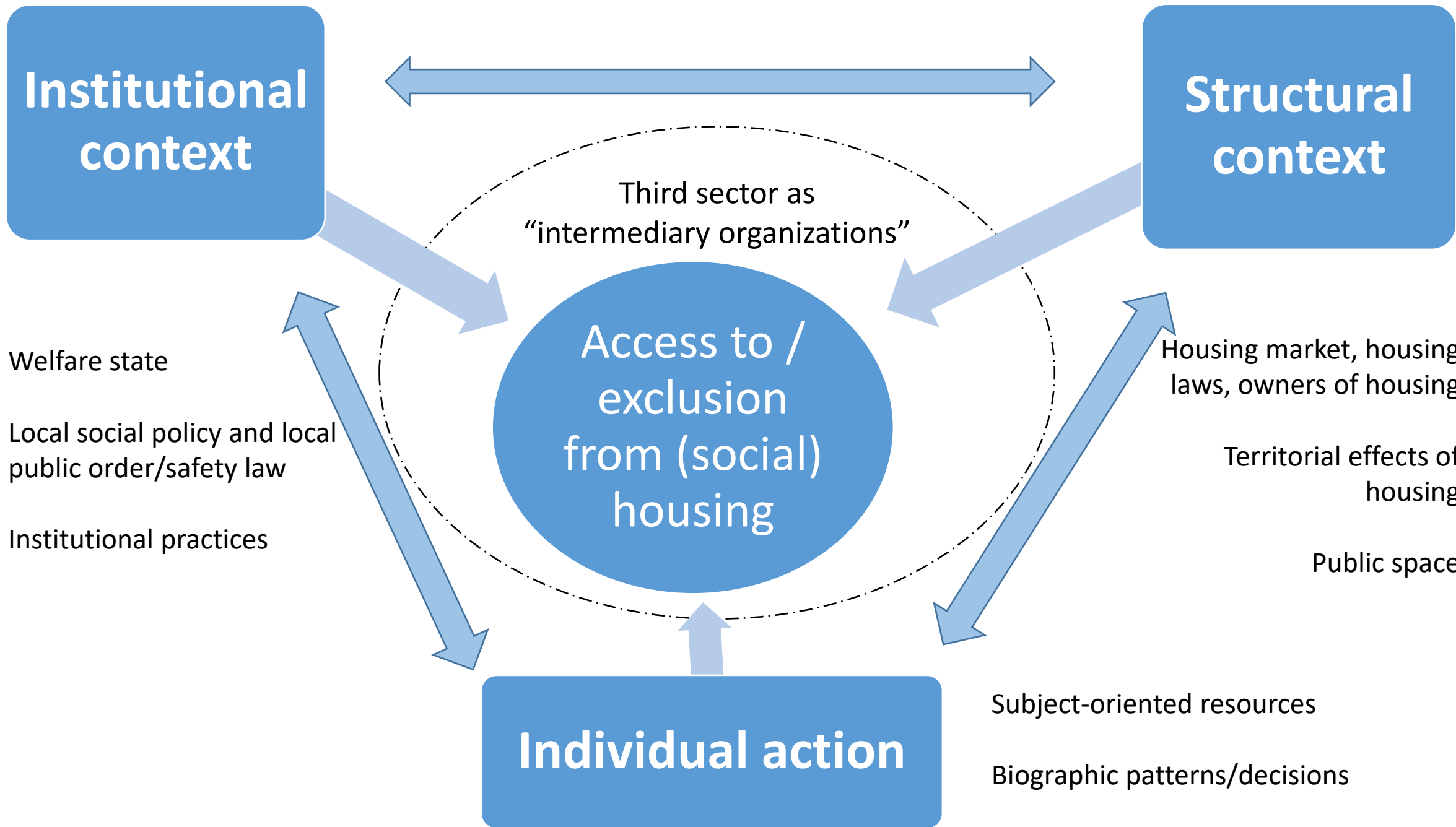# New orthodoxy in a nutshell – plus our adaptations

1. *Individual factors*:
   - "**pathologies**" or "**individual failures**" -> disrupted biographies and poor individual choices (traumatic life-events -> lack of resilience -> social deviance)
   - family, friends, informal networks („**failure of social ties**")
   - (Failure of) access to "**resources**" -> *body* (physical health, appearance), *mind* (mental health, language skills, "system knowledge"), *money* (smartphone, documents, day-to-day survival)

2. *Structural factors:*
   - "**state failure**" -> privatization of state-owned properties, lack of social housing, shift from funding "objects" to "subjects"
   - "**market failure**" -> marketization and financialization -> profit-driven private/professional investments almost only in mid to higher rental price properties

3. **What's missing? The welfare state!**

Institutional context

Welfare state

Local social policy and local public order/safety law

Institutional practices

Structural context

Housing market, housing laws, owners of housing

Territorial effects of housing

Public space

Access to / exclusion from (social) housing

Third sector as "intermediary organizations"

Individual action

Subject-oriented resources

Biographic patterns/decisions

The three-pronged "inclusivity promise" of the (German) welfare state

1. **Prevention**
   - Early interventions (e.g. to prevent eviction)
   - Social services (e.g. to prevent escalation of abuse)

2. **Protection**
   - Social insurance / social assistance
   - Homeless shelters
   - Women's shelters

3. **Reintegration**
   - Clinical rehabilitation
   - Counseling and guidance
   - Housing benefits / access to social housing

Policy failure 1: statutory rental price limits

➢Social Code II: *"Costs for rent and heat will be reimbursed, if appropriate"*
- Policy-makers set unrealistically low threshold
- No access to housing at that price-> need to sue -> takes time -> apartment gone
- Willing to pay difference to keep home -> accrue debt -> eviction

➢People end up on the streets or in "ghetto like" building complexes

Policy failure 2: women's needs not addressed

➤ Social Code XII: assist people to overcome "difficult life circumstances and social difficulties"

- "triple-service gap" for women:
  - Shelter for battered women (*Frauenhaus*) most mentioned sanctuary, but rarely an option
  - No women-specific shelter for homeless women
  - No women-specific homeless services or service hours (soup kitchen, food bank, social work)

➤ Women end up on the street or – more often – in relationships "with conditions"

Policy failure 3: transitions to nowhere

Prison -> release -> no home
- Difficult to find home from prison; discrimination; lack of affordable homes
- Quick ways back in to prison -> petty crimes -> no money to pay fee -> prison

Therapy / rehab -> release -> no home (and hence no cure)
- Financialization and marketization of health care
- Return to "unhealthy" home / access to only precarious housing
- No medial care/support after release (who gets medical report, who provides medication)
- No perspectives no hopes! Why go through it?

Youth homes -> release at age 18 -> no home
- Various social codes -> unclear bureaucratic responsibilities -> late or no help
- Under 25 rarely qualify for housing benefits

Conclusions & reflections

Social policies and interventions "fail" to prevent, protect or reintegrate and thus cause (or prolong) homelessness:

- ✓ **Not (only) poor design, but intentional!**
  - Hurdles to and limits in service provision
  - Why? Fear of becoming "welfare magnet"

- ✓ **Tolerating "bad business models"**
  - Housing firms specialized in renting property to marginalized groups
  - Why? People are "off the streets"

- ✓ **Privatization, marketization & "permanent austerity"**
  - Clinics with profit orientation
  - Cutting health care costs
  - Limiting costs for "additional" social services

- ✓ **Unclear inter-institutional responsibilities and lack of ownership**
  - Why? Someone needs to pay.