



Book review: **Housing, Homelessness, and Social Policy in the Urban North**

**Julia Christensen, Sally
Carragher, Travis Hedwig
and Steven Arnfjord (Eds), 2024**

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Abstract

Khushboo Jain is an academic, a social researcher and a human rights activist, engaged in agency-based political struggle. Through her ethnographic study of the home-making practices on the streets of Delhi, she critiques the normative ideas of home, family and the public-private divide. She teaches courses on feminist studies, Indian society and reimagining the home. **Contact:** khushboo.jain@fau.de

Christensen et al.'s edited volume, *Housing, Homelessness, and Social Policy in the Urban North* (University of Toronto Press, 2024), critically examines homelessness, challenging traditional approaches and advocating for context-specific solutions. Through case studies from the Canadian North, Alaska, and Greenland, the book explores how historical and structural factors perpetuate homelessness in the face of urbanization and social policy. Organized into three regional sections, it critiques interventions that focus mainly on larger urban centers, neglecting rural communities impacted by colonial policies. The authors argue against one-size-fits-all solutions, promoting culturally sensitive approaches tailored to specific contexts. Key themes include the regional geography of homelessness, definitional challenges of home, rural-urban mobility, welfare colonialism, and the adaptation of Housing First initiatives. Additionally, it emphasizes the importance of community-based support structures, often overshadowed by external solutions. This volume is essential for understanding homelessness through a nuanced lens that incorporates cultural and contextual factors.

Keywords

Regional geography of homelessness, indigenous people, social policy, cultural sensitivity

Christensen et al.'s edited book (University of Toronto Press, 2024) emerges as a critical intervention in the ongoing discourse surrounding homelessness, particularly within the context of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which ambitiously aim to end homelessness by 2030. The book underscores the inadequacy of such goals without a thorough examination of the historical and structural conditions that perpetuate homelessness. Although the case studies primarily focus on the Canadian North, Alaska, and Greenland, they offer critical insights into the intersections between homelessness, urbanization, and social policy. These regional perspectives shed light on broader global challenges, making the book's findings relevant to understanding and addressing homelessness worldwide.

The book poses the key question: What are the common challenges and responses to housing insecurity and homelessness across the northern regions of the Canadian North, Alaska, and Greenland? Organized into three sections, each dedicated to one of these regions, the book critically examines the shortcomings of interventions that focus mainly on larger urban centres. Such approaches, it argues, both negate and neglect the housing insecurities in small, rural communities, where colonial policies have historically undermined the development of sustainable local economies.

The first section, focusing on the Canadian North, highlights numerous examples of how the rural-urban continuum impacts homelessness and housing insecurity. It emphasizes how southern (Southern Canada and the USA)/and or more conventional urban context's definitions and discourses of homelessness render the issue invisible in rural communities, resulting in a lack of access to essential programs and services. The concentration of services in urban centres including health and social services, economic opportunities, emergency shelters, and criminal justice systems, and friendship and kinship networks shape the rural to urban migration of Northerners who experience homelessness. In Chapter 11, Christensen, Arnjord, and Aastrup explore how the concentration of essential support services frames the rural-to-urban mobility of Greenlanders at risk of homelessness as an issue of service dependency. This concentration of the non-profit sector in northern urban centres both contributes to and is a consequence of the persistence of homelessness as an urban problem.

The authors stress how Indigenous homelessness is aggravated by culturally inappropriate social policies, prompting them to question whether a single definition of 'homelessness' is practical or even desirable. This inquiry is central to the book's contribution, urging readers and practitioners to reconsider the complexities of homelessness and the necessity for context-specific and culturally informed responses, rather than one-size-fits-all solutions. In Chapter 5, Joshua Moses extends this discussion to academia raising critical questions about the role of anthropological knowledge, questioning whether the needs of academia can be reconciled with the needs of Indigenous communities. In Chapter 6, Frank Tester challenges conventional views on housing by re-examining the meaning of home, questioning whether overcrowding is inherently negative. He suggests that overcrowding can be a positive response, as families accommodate youth moving between urban jobs and those facing unemployment or personal challenges. Tester critiques how Inuit

perspectives on space and identity within that space are often overlooked in research and policy. He emphasizes the importance of involving Inuit in the culturally informed design, planning, and construction necessary for ‘making housing home’.

Expanding on the discussion of meaning-making, perceptions, and cultural differences, Dannenberg in Chapter 9 highlights how behaviours perceived as loitering by White community members may simply reflect a different way of being for Alaska Native groups. Dannenberg warns against treating homelessness as an ‘emergency’, arguing that this approach can lead to disengagement from the issue by stripping individuals of their agency and potential to make positive contributions.

A recurring theme throughout the volume is the interplay between homelessness, migration, and mobility, stressing the importance of considering the regional geography of homelessness. The book examines how Indigenous peoples’ connections to ancestral lands, the impacts of colonial disruptions, land claims, and recent histories of forced settlement, resettlement, and welfare colonialism have shaped patterns of mobility, migration, and homelessness in the Urban North. In Chapter 3, Alex Nelson employs an ecological framework to explore the geographies of homelessness in Whitehorse (capital of northwest Canada’s Yukon territory), arguing that for Indigenous people, homelessness is an experience of rootlessness that urban-settler conceptions and definitions of homelessness, as well as notions of ‘urban-ness’, fail to adequately account for. Similarly, Nick Falvo in Chapter 2, discussing homelessness in Yellowknife (capital city of Canada’s Northwest Territories), contends that without addressing structural factors such as unemployment, poverty, physical and sexual violence, and the housing market across the Northwest Territories, efforts to combat homelessness are like trying to push the ocean back with a spoon.

Housing First has been a flagship initiative for addressing homelessness in the developed countries. In Chapter 1, co-editor Julia Christensen, alongside Lisa Freeman, examines the implementation of Housing First in Yellowknife, highlighting how the absence of a comprehensive housing spectrum in the city adversely impacts low-income tenants and complicates the program’s effectiveness. On the one hand, the monopolies of private and public housing have neglected the need for multifamily dwellings and failed to consider the cultural and contextual needs of Indigenous communities in Yellowknife. On the other hand, Housing First’s emphasis on individual living arrangements often conflicts with the local cultural preference for communal and collective living. Chapter 8 by Hedwig explores Housing First Infidelity, discussing the challenges of implementing the program in different contexts and the need to adapt it to the specific cultural and contextual needs of the communities it serves. Dannenberg, in Chapter 9, critiques the implementation of global best practices for addressing homelessness in Alaska without adapting them to local contexts.

Public discourse, influenced by welfare colonialism, shapes debates about who belongs in urban centres and who does not. In Chapter 7, Carraher and Edwig, drawing from their work in Anchorage, focus on incorporating the voices and experiences of individuals in the conversation about homelessness and Housing First. Their analysis aims to evaluate what is effective, what is not, and what further actions might be necessary. Public feedback from their work reveals that challenging stereotypes about the homeless is possible when those

with lived experiences are given genuine opportunities to contribute and share their perspectives in public discussions with housed community members.

Programs for the homeless often rely on limited state funding and are precariously dependent on private entities, such as non-profits and industry. Christensen, Arnjford, and Marie-Loise Aastrup discuss in Chapter 11 how the absence of social policy on homelessness has led to a dependency on the non-profit sector for services and support, making these programs susceptible to funding changes and shifting priorities. Similar concerns are echoed by authors throughout the Urban North.

The gendered dimensions of homelessness are evident across all three regions covered in the book. In Chapter 10, Arnjford and Christensen delve into the issue of women's hidden homelessness in Greenland. They emphasize that social services often overlook gender-specific factors, such as the impact of trauma, violence, and post-traumatic stress disorder, which significantly shape women's experiences of homelessness.

In Chapter 4, Kauppi et al. examine migration from James Bay through five key questions that focus on the characteristics of migrant groups and the challenges they face, which often lead to homelessness. Their data reveal that despite experiencing homelessness and state exclusion, a significant portion of the migrants—three-quarters—reported improvements in their circumstances, and 83 percent planned to remain in their destination community. Although the authors recognize the importance of investigating survival strategies and subsistence patterns in urban settings, they do not provide a detailed analysis of the family and community support structures that help migrants. This oversight is also noted in other chapters, where discussions about community support are mentioned and encouraged, but not deeply explored. There is a clear gap in global homelessness research regarding the understanding and strengthening of community-based support systems, as the focus continues to be on external structures—state, non-profit, or private sector—rather than delving into how community support mechanisms can be further strengthened.

Overall, this book serves as a crucial resource for researchers, students, policymakers, and advocates addressing the complex issue of homelessness on a global scale, not just in northern regions. It challenges readers to rethink the concept of home, moving beyond mere physical security to explore its deeper connections to land, place, family, and culture. By emphasizing the significance of diverse cultural perceptions of home and place, the book enhances understanding of the varied experiences of homelessness. It advocates for culturally sensitive solutions tailored to specific contexts and stresses the necessity of incorporating the experiences and perspectives of those directly affected by homelessness in developing effective responses. Furthermore, it highlights the urgent need for additional research to raise awareness among government entities, non-profits, and community-based organizations about the lived experiences and viewpoints of individuals experiencing homelessness.