

Canadian Planning and Policy Aménagement et politique au Canada



Housing, Homelessness, and Social Policy in the Urban North

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Volume 2025, Number 1, 2025

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1117591ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24908/cpp-apc.v2025i1.19256>

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Publisher(s)

Association of Canadian University Planning Programs
Canadian Institute of Planners

ISSN

2816-6256 (print)

2562-122X (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Walker, R. (2025). Review of [Housing, Homelessness, and Social Policy in the Urban North]. *Canadian Planning and Policy / Aménagement et politique au Canada*, 2025(1), 1–3. <https://doi.org/10.24908/cpp-apc.v2025i1.19256>

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Book Review

*Canadian Planning and Policy /
Aménagement et politique au Canada*
Volume 2025
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ISSN 2562-122X

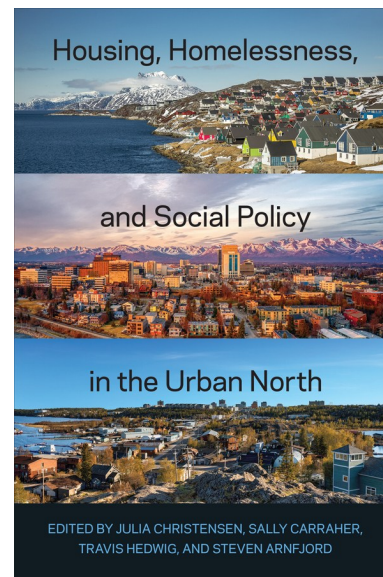
Julia Christensen, Sally Carraher, Travis Hedwig, Steven Arnfjord, editors

Housing, Homelessness, and Social Policy in the Urban North. Available at [University of Toronto Press](https://www.universityoftoronto.ca/press/books/housing-homelessness-and-social-policy-in-the-urban-north), 2024; 330 pp., paperback and online; \$39.95 (paperback). ISBN 9781487552893.

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Julia Christensen and her team of co-editors and -authors have written an eye-opening book. It is a rare opportunity to learn about communities in the Canadian and circumpolar North from some of the best-qualified community-driven scholars in the field. Momentum generated at the “Housing and Homelessness in the Urban North” workshop with government officials, Indigenous and non-Indigenous community leaders, service providers, and researchers, held in Yellowknife in 2018 led to the creation of this book. In between the introductory and concluding chapters, the book divides into three regional sections – The Canadian North; Alaska; and Greenland. Each section has a regional introduction that punctuates the transitions through our northern journey, providing some initiation to the setting and a sense of what is to come. The book skillfully handles its primary subject matter of housing, homelessness, and social policy as one would expect from the title of the book. It offers unexpected rewards as well. For those of us with limited knowledge of northern communities, settlement histories and hierarchies, Indigenous-settler relations, peoples, and industries, the chapters vividly acquaint the reader with the Canadian North, Greenland, and Alaska as places.

Six chapters make up the section on the Canadian North, where construction costs are higher, housing deteriorates faster, and operating costs are greater than in most of the rest of Canada. Concepts like “spiritual homelessness” and “rootlessness” are discussed among the impacts of forced relocation, welfare colonialism, and social policy. The first chapter examines challenges presented by having only one public and one private housing provider in



Yellowknife, and the ways in which a ‘Housing First’ model for addressing homelessness and associated supports functions in the absence of much of a housing spectrum or market.

The second chapter, also about Yellowknife, highlights the importance of voluntary sector organizations (e.g., YWCA, Salvation Army, Yellowknife Women’s

Society) and of ‘pathfinders’ in the territorial government’s integrated case management program, connecting housing with supports. Most of what occurs to address housing and homelessness, in a social policy sense, occurs in the largest urban centres, making relocation over large distances a defining feature of place and placelessness for many who end up in cities and towns. The need for new Indigenous-led approaches is raised at the end of the second chapter. Most of the homeless population are Indigenous and culturally appropriate interventions would be most effective. This brings to my mind the expertise of Indigenous organizations in southern Canadian cities (e.g., Lu’ma in Vancouver; Namerind and Camponi in Regina and Saskatoon) at serving the housing and support needs of Indigenous households.

The third chapter focuses on Whitehorse and unpacks critically the concepts of ‘homelessness’ and

‘urban’, discussing the colonial basis of both, and how Indigenous worldviews, values and patterns call into question the way the settler state frames them. A definition of ‘Indigenous homelessness’ by Jesse Thistle is explained, and re-emerges several times throughout the book. The definition threads through the chapter’s look at the cultural shortcomings of southern approaches transplanted uncritically to the north. Some local initiatives are elevated for their progressive approaches to centring the voices of the homeless; building a government-to-government relationship with First Nations; and for reflecting the authentic place-based reality of Whitehorse. The fourth chapter focuses on the James Bay Region and digs into one of the integrative themes of the book, namely, homelessness as a function of being relocated from traditional territories, kinship, and lifestyles connected to the land, to larger centres characterized by western institutions and economies. In the process of relocation, people have endured a colonial life-course that has added trauma, inequality and structural causes of exclusion to the housing equation.

The colonial acts of Indigenous community relocation carry over into the fifth chapter on Northern Labrador, discussing the post-WWII consolidation of northern communities as a way to reinforce Canada’s sovereignty. The more recent character-shift of the settler state toward settling Indigenous land claims to enable mineral exploration is explored as a new way that some are evicted from their land, even while others benefit. The disproportionate impact on young people who, as a result of claim settlement and relocation, are disconnected from land and land-based practices at an important stage in life, ending up in urban areas instead, is laid out.

The last chapter in the section on the Canadian North examines Inuit housing and home in Nunavut. The Nunavut Housing Corporation houses most of the territory’s population. Most private sector housing is in the capital, Iqaluit. The author’s discussion of

how the standard western design of social housing units, and their management, creates a mismatch with the culture and needs in a home for Inuit is an important contribution. The chapter argues that the training of Inuit planners and designers is fundamental to getting the relationship between ‘housing’ and ‘home’ right.

Alaska is the regional focus of the second section and its three chapters address public voices and discourse on homelessness; continue the book’s critical examination of the Housing First model, in Anchorage this time; and, present the power of community ties in addressing homelessness. In one case example, a partnership with public libraries across Alaska allowed researchers to better understand the diverse experiences of homelessness and how to create welcoming spaces that draw the housed and homeless together to bridge social distance. As the author of Chapter Nine writes: “[C]ommunity uptake in the urban North does not rely on successful practices and programming per se; instead, successful practices and programming in the urban North rely on community partnership and shared stakes” (p. 243).

The third and final section of the book is special to me because prior to reading it I knew very little about the settlement history of Greenland, and its different stages of colonial relations with Denmark. The first of its two chapters addresses women’s experience of homelessness and housing insecurity in Nuuk. The pattern of women’s homelessness is similar between Northern Canada and Greenland, but a major difference is that in Greenland there is next to no policy focus on women’s housing security and homelessness. Yet the rate of reported violence against women in Greenland, according to the authors, is four times as high, and rape ten times higher, than in other parts of the Danish realm. The second chapter in this section engages critically with the concept of welfare colonialism and the way it, and the relocation of Indigenous peoples from small or

nomadic communities to larger urban centres, creates patterns of homelessness in Nuuk.

Together the authors of this book have made a significant contribution to decolonizing how we think about the relationships between home, homelessness, and housing in the urban north. The chapters combine rich theoretically informed primary research with discussions of existing social policies and programs, aimed at action, making it a valuable resource for teaching, research, and practice in housing and urban planning. I believe this edited volume will serve three audiences especially well. The first is northern planners and policymakers who will find the empirical research into specific policies, service users and stakeholders, and policy recommendations directly relevant to their work. Second, academic researchers focused on housing, home, homelessness and their intersections with colonialism, historically and presently, are going to find this volume deeply engaging for its theoretical strength and its research findings. Thirdly, students of northern studies, social policy, and planning will find this book a good primer. I can envision graduate students devouring it in its entirety, while undergraduate students guided by their instructors will nibble away at a few chapters for course teaching and learning purposes.