



The Social Dynamics of Homelessness in Nuuk

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Homelessness is a growing concern in Arctic urban centres like Greenland's capital Nuuk, where visible signs of homelessness have emerged since the beginning of the 21st century. Homelessness and housing need across the circumpolar North is a testament to a host of social and structural challenges, many of which manifest themselves in distinct ways in northern regions. Meanwhile, devolution, resource development and climate change continue to boost the economic and political significance of Arctic towns and cities, and demographic change suggests that Arctic urbanization is gaining momentum ([Dybbroe et al. 2010](#); Hansen et al. 2013a; Pedersen 2008).

Nuuk (16.800 inhabitants) is the capital city of Greenland (56.500 inhabitants), and the city where visible signs of homelessness in the country are most apparent. In many ways, Nuuk demonstrates similar mechanics to those found in the rest of the world's urban centres, where the uneven concentration of social, economic, infrastructural and institutional resources acts as a draw for those who are in need or in search of opportunity. Those who often find themselves living under homelessness, however, generally do not have either a resourceful social network, nor lack the skills and/or qualifications that are in the demand by the current labour market. The demand for a skilled and modernized workforce is one challenge of Greenland's rapid modernization from former colony to a self-governing nation. These changes in combination with demographic shifts have put an untimely pressure on the government to supply people with affordable housing, all in a part of the world where transportation, infrastructure and labour costs are significant. Underlining or worsening the transitional challenges inherent to modernization and urbanization in the Greenlandic context are the many and complex structural, social and health factors that relate to homelessness.

Meanwhile, the social dynamics of homelessness in Nuuk are commonly understood through a western-oriented perspective rooted in the experiences of urban locales in Europe or North America. The principal aim of this research is to not only advance a place-based understanding of the social dynamics of homelessness in Nuuk, but also to propose practical solutions towards promoting context-relevant resources and programming to support the health and wellbeing of the men and women currently living under homelessness. This aim is mobilized through an action-oriented approach towards the production of meaningful research outcomes through research objectives that emphasize the health and social strength of Greenlandic people and communities ([Arn fjord and Andersen 2014](#)).

In this research project, we take a broad approach to homelessness in order to account for both the socio-structural processes of marginalization, processes that are part and parcel of urbanization, as well as the everyday life experiences of people living under the conditions of homelessness in Nuuk. An examination of the health and social factors contributing to homelessness in Nuuk, and their interactions with social welfare institutions in both the rural-urban relocation and reproduction of homelessness, forms the starting point for our study. In particular, we are interested in approaching the emergence of visible homelessness in Nuuk as a lens through which we can understand the dynamics of urbanization and social marginalization (i.e. class, colonial effects, social determinants of health) in a Greenlandic context. Yet at the same time, we seek to identify and understand the informal social and cultural resources that currently assist people living under homelessness to cope with, or help exit, homelessness. An exploration of local concepts of home and homemaking will significantly inform the development and implementation of effective housing, social and health supports.

We are currently engaged in a collaborative, community-based research approach with a range of qualitative methods over a period of two years (2016-2018). Men and women living homeless in Nuuk are interviewed using a biographical interview approach (May 2000) to identify the role of social factors and their management by social welfare institutions in rural-urban pathways. Their contributions provide expert insight into the everyday situations of homelessness in Nuuk. Policy makers and support providers are also interviewed following a semi-structured interview guide that places emphasis on participant observations and experiences with men and women experiencing homelessness in the community. The role of local NGOs in providing resources to people living under homelessness, like the Kofoed Skole, the Salvations Army and a small homeless support organisation NoINI, are also explored. Finally, a digital storytelling project employing participatory photography and research participant narratives serves as both a research method and output to create a space for research participants to present their experiences in their own voices and to illustrate the connections between life experiences, social institutions, and homeless pathways (Lambert 2013).

This project responds to research gaps identified across several critical studies in the field of northern homelessness and housing need ([Christensen 2012, 2013](#); [Hansen and Andersen 2013](#); [Tester 2006](#)) and engages with several key research reports on Arctic urbanization and housing (Hansen et al. 2013a; Hansen et al. 2013b) and Arctic migration and mobility (Nordregio 2010). It also directly informs policy and research reports released in recent years by the Government of Greenland (e.g. the Tax and Welfare Commission, the Homeless in Greenland survey, and the Addiction Treatment Needs report).

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