

Long title: 'Everyone wants to have a place': homelessness, housing insecurity, and housing challenges for single men in the Northwest Territories, Canada

Short title: Housing challenges among single men in the NWT

Julia Christensen
Department of Geography
McGill University
805 Sherbrooke Street West
Montreal, Quebec
H3A 2K6
Canada
julia.christensen@mail.mcgill.ca

Abstract

Objectives: This paper focuses on the primary housing challenges experienced by homeless men in the northern urban settlements of Inuvik and Yellowknife, Northwest Territories and how these challenges contribute to pathways to homelessness in these two communities. **Study design:** This community-based research project is rooted in a housing insecurity approach to exploring the geographies of northern homelessness. **Methods:** Biographical interviews were conducted with 45 men living in emergency shelters in the two study communities. **Results:** Primary housing challenges experienced by interview participants result largely from a heavy reliance on private rental housing. **Conclusions:** There are three main ways in which the current housing system serves to marginalize men at-risk of homelessness. First, rental housing monopolies in Inuvik and Yellowknife exacerbate housing inaffordability and inaccessibility. Secondly, government housing stock is simply not equipped for the diverse, northern, urban population. Thirdly, both the private and government housing stocks do not accommodate the particular needs or realities of those in the interview participant population.

Introduction

Countless material, economic, political, and structural changes to individual and community life in the Northwest Territories have shaped the context of northern housing insecurity, many of which are directly related to the growth of permanent settlements in the North [1]. Thus, housing insecurity in the NWT is not new; rather, it is a continually evolving process with roots in the complex history of northern colonization, government intervention, and the myriad resulting changes to individual and community life. Homelessness as we see it today is a contemporary symptom of this process.

While there are many factors that contribute to homelessness, housing insecurity is first and foremost among them (see [2] [3] [4] [5]). It is important to stress here that housing insecurity is not limited to housing, but rather includes everything that affects one's ability to access and maintain stable housing. This paper focuses on the primary housing challenges experienced by homeless men in the northern urban settlements of Inuvik and Yellowknife and how these challenges contribute to pathways to homelessness in these two communities.

As fieldwork for this research is still ongoing, this paper is based on preliminary findings.

Material and methods

This paper is based on doctoral thesis research in Yellowknife and Inuvik, Northwest Territories, ongoing since 2007. In particular, this paper draws from 45 biographical interviews conducted with men accessing services at emergency shelters in both study communities during 2008 and 2009. The men interviewed for this paper range in age from 18 to 70 years old, with the majority being between the ages of 25 and 45. 40 of the 45 men interviewed self-identified as Indigenous to the North.

Results

The key housing challenges experienced by interview participants result from a heavy reliance on private rental housing. While public housing is a primary source of low-cost housing in both communities, its accessibility is extremely limited for single adults, particularly men. The bulk of public housing units are family-sized, with the priority given to parents and their children. Thus, single men report waiting anywhere from one to three years to indefinitely for a unit.

I have tried to get into [public] housing but there are no real options for a single guy like me. You have to be on the list for a long time or they tell me they got nothing for me (Interview with Jim¹, Yellowknife, 7/04/09).

Similarly, in 2008, I interviewed James, a man in his early 20s who had been working steadily for a year and paying off loans. After an accident at work, he went on Worker's Compensation, however he did not receive the payments quickly enough and was evicted from his private rental unit. With no other affordable options, and no friends or family willing or able to take him in, he tried to apply for a public housing unit but was advised he would be on a waiting list for some time. He then had no choice but to seek emergency shelter, where he stayed for a few months before he found a room to rent in a private home.

The heavy reliance on private rental housing leaves men at-risk particularly vulnerable to the fluctuations and whims of the private rental market. A type of rental housing monopoly exists in both Yellowknife and Inuvik, where a few large companies dominate the market and share information with one another:

The problem is now that so many of the places here are owned by [the same private rental company]. And I had an issue with them and they won't rent to me anymore. And often other companies will check with [private rental company] before renting, so you can get yourself on the blacklist really easily (Interview with Leon, Yellowknife, 7/04/09).

Raymond was evicted from a private rental unit in Inuvik because he quit his job

¹ All names of interviews participants and other identifying details have been changed to protect confidentiality.

and was unable to pay rent. Since then, he has started to work again but has been unable to access housing because other companies have been warned not to rent to him. He admits that he is known in town as a drinker, but is quick to point out that he has never received a formal complaint and is always careful to repair and clean a unit before leaving. Despite these efforts, Raymond says, “it is very easy to burn your bridges here (Inuvik, 4/03/09).” There is enough competition for a limited supply of available units that companies can be highly selective in who they rent to.

Similarly, Lewis was staying at an emergency shelter while he waited to get into a private rental unit in Yellowknife:

My cousin Jack and I went to [private rental company] a while ago to get our names on the list for a place. We’ve been waiting over six months and haven’t heard anything. I know Jack has gotten in trouble a lot there so I think because of his behaviour I am blacklisted from there now too (Interview with Lewis, Yellowknife, 4/04/09).

Although they are considered large relative to other NWT communities, Inuvik and Yellowknife are both small enough in population that it is difficult to go unnoticed. As is the case for many of the men in this study, second or third chances are tough to come by where housing is concerned.

The inaffordability of private rental options poses another major housing challenge. When public housing is not available to someone in need, he may qualify for a \$900/month private rental housing subsidy offered through territorial income support. However, to find an apartment for \$900 a month is almost impossible, especially if a negative reputation precedes you at the rental office. In fact, the average monthly rent of a one-bedroom apartment in Yellowknife and Inuvik in 2008 is \$1178/month [6] and \$1250/month [7] respectively.

For Tom, despite being on unemployment insurance and qualifying for a housing

subsidy, the lack of affordable options in Yellowknife led him to stay at an emergency shelter, where he had been for two months at the time of our interview.

I feel like I am a captive when it comes to housing options. You know, I am a really skilled guy. I'm on UI right now, but I am skilled and can work. I'm looking for work right now....I can't get into housing because the waiting list for single people is really long and I can't afford a private rental (Interview with Tom, Yellowknife, 09/04/09).

Similarly, the inappropriateness of housing options is also a factor for some. Jim was living at an emergency shelter in Yellowknife because the only housing he could afford with the subsidy was a shared room with roommates. Having recently finished a rehabilitation program for a drug addiction, to live in a private rental with roommates, with the possibility of being exposed to their drinking and drug habits, could jeopardize his recovery.

Discussion

There are three main ways in which the current housing system serves to marginalize men at-risk of homelessness. Importantly, as the majority of men at-risk are Indigenous, these processes of exclusion pose serious consequences in terms of who is included in our communities, and who is not. The fractures that this creates, and its impact on the health and wellbeing of those excluded, cannot be underestimated.

First, rental housing monopolies in Inuvik and Yellowknife exacerbate housing inaffordability and inaccessibility. Interview participants are highly dependent upon private rental housing, a sector of the housing stock that is heavily controlled by a small handful of rental companies. Monopolies create a highly discriminatory environment, effectively shutting out many among the research participant group. Moreover, beyond private rental housing, there are few—if any—other housing options for single men. Thus, single men unable to secure rental housing are forced to access the emergency shelter for housing,

something that the emergency shelter is not theoretically set-up for. Many of the men who participated in the interviews have stayed at the emergency shelter consistently for years.

Secondly, government housing stock is simply not equipped for the diverse, northern, urban population. While housing is available for families, there is a very limited housing stock available to single adults, particularly men. This leaves single men in need of low-cost housing vulnerable to the fluctuations and whims of a private housing market. Furthermore, it is a punitive housing market, where rental companies can be highly selective of tenants.

Thirdly, both the private and government housing stocks do not accommodate the particular needs or realities of those in the interview participant population. Each of the men interviewed faced additional obstacles to housing security beyond housing challenges. The housing system in Yellowknife and Inuvik does not accommodate the realities that men at-risk face. Furthermore, there is an illusion that a real private market exists and that this market can provide housing to all in need. However, low vacancy rates, high rents, and discriminatory rental practices all work to exclude at-risk men from accessing housing. For many in the interview group, this reality is what ultimately had to lead to them accessing emergency shelter.

Acknowledgements:

The author wishes to thank all the participants in this research project for their time and knowledge and Dr. George Wenzel for his guidance and support. This paper was made possible through support from the International Polar Year Canada, the Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, the Canadian Northern Studies Trust, the Northern Scientific Training Program, and a Health Canada Travel Grant awarded through the Canadian Society for Circumpolar Health.

References:

1. Collings P. Housing policy, aging, and life course construction in a Canadian Inuit community. *Arctic Anthropology*. 2005; 42(2): 50-65.
2. Bratt R G. Housing and Family Well-being. *Housing Studies*. 2002; 17: 13-26.
3. Bunting T, Walks R A, Fillion P. 2004. The uneven geography of housing affordability stress in Canadian Metropolitan Areas. *Housing Studies*. 2004; 19: 361-393.
4. Marsh A, Mullins D. The social exclusion perspective and housing studies: origins, applications and limitations. *Housing Studies*. 1998; 13(6): 749-759.
5. Stone M. Shelter poverty: new ideas on housing affordability. Philadelphia: Temple University Press; 1993.
6. Yellowknife Homelessness Coalition. Yellowknife Homelessness Report Card 2008. Yellowknife: Yellowknife Homelessness Coalition; 2008.
7. Yellowknife Appraisal Services and Consulting. Inuvik Monthly Average Apartment Rent 2008. Yellowknife: Yellowknife Appraisal Services and Consulting; 2008.