Activism and Research in Arctic Homelessness in Kalaallit Nunaat (Greenland)

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Abstract_ *One percent of a population of 56 500 people were counted as homeless in Kalaallit Nunaat (Greenland) in 2022. The social problem has been on the rise since the industrialisation period in the 1960s. It is caused by a housing crisis, inadequate social and political attention, and a lack of rights-based legislation in the area. After introducing the colonial historical context, which dates back centuries, the article discusses the current situation regarding the particularity and origin of homelessness in this part of the Arctic. For the past 10 years, researchers at Ilisimatusarfik Centre for Arctic Welfare have focused on homelessness by conducting fieldwork in a local soup kitchen, fieldwork with outreach teams, teaching shelter staff, and organising the nation's first PIT count. The research has an activist social justice focus, with public hearings and increased media attention around issues such as poverty, lack of social and housing support, and the general situation for people living with long-term homelessness. This engagement has resulted in a national strategy and a definition of homelessness, which are important first steps toward real change.*

Keywords_ *Greenland, Arctic, social policy, homelessness, activism*

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Introduction

Close to 1% of the population was counted as homeless in Kalaallit Nunaat (Greenland) in 2022. Homelessness has been growing since the 1960s. The focus of this article is to report on the last 10 years of social scientific research about homelessness in this part of the Arctic by discussing classic field studies (Arnfjord, 2021a; 2022b; Arnfjord and Perry, 2023; Perry, 2022), and quantitative studies (Arnfjord and Perry, 2022). We approach homelessness from an activist and social-political understanding, which means going beyond documentation and looking to change what we perceive as unjust conditions for a large minority compared to numbers in Europe. Kalaallit Nunaat had 1% homeless in 2022. In comparison, in the same year, Belgium had 0.004%, Sweden had 0.003%, and Denmark had 0.001% (FEANTSA, 2024).

Contextual background

Kalaallit Nunaat is the world's biggest island, with a population of 56 500 people, mainly consisting of indigenous Kalaallit (Inuit). The nation has been colonised by Denmark since 1721 and is still part of the Danish Realm. Few towns are connected by roads, and thus transport and travel depend on air travel, sea travel, and dog sleds when the season permits it. The self-rule government has autonomy over areas such as taxation, commerce, housing, health, education, and social affairs. Colonisation links the welfare system to a Danish welfare system with high levels of taxation and public spending. There are universal benefits such as free education, free health care, medicine, and dentistry. The social system has some protection from unemployment, though not as high as in Denmark, and a similar pension system. Social services are delegated to five large municipalities. Nuuk is the capital city, with a population of 20 000. It is also the country's administrative, educational, and health care centre. The population consists mainly of 88% born in Kalaallit Nunaat and 12% born outside the country. Most people live in towns with between 1 000 and 5 000 inhabitants. Around 12% of the population live in small settlements with fewer than 400 inhabitants. On a national level, the unemployment rate is low, around 3-5 percent (Statistics Greenland, 2024).

Understanding homelessness from an Arctic perspective in relation to European and North American homelessness

Homelessness in Kalaallit Nunaat differs from homelessness on the more interconnected and multicultural European continent and in North America. Because the infrastructure forces people in Kalaallit Nunaat to settle in their town of employment, homelessness does not resemble the traveling hobo researched by Anderson, Solenberger, and Harper. Their research focused on the individual migrant worker. Early on, hobos were stigmatised as drifters and examples of idleness and laziness

(Anderson, 1923; Harper, 1982; Solenberger, 1911). As a result of North American and European conservative ideologies many were sent to labour camps. Spradley (1988) criticises these disciplinary measures against public drinking because they only result in further marginalisation and continual jail sentences. For centuries, decision-makers in the West have targeted the poor and the homeless through legislation. Similar punitive measures were introduced when Kalaallit Nunaat saw its first formulated system for social help: a division of social services targeting a productive part of the population, which was deemed worthy of receiving help, and an unproductive part deemed not worthy of help. The 'non-productives' received poor benefits in the 1850s (Rinch, 1857). That thinking has since lingered and has come up in relation to laziness, drunkenness, and unemployment in the 1960s (Rasmussen, 1965; Redaktionen, 1965; Simonsen, 1958).

European research on homelessness between the 1960s and 1980s was dominated by health and mental health research. Few social studies focused on marginalisation and the causes of homelessness. There were some efforts to humanise the people behind the homeless label (Borg, 1976; Giggs and Whynes, 1988; Greve et al., 1971; Lindelius and Salum, 1976). For both Europe and Northern America, the '80s marked a turning point. Bahr and Caplow (1973) together with Barak (1991), discussed shifts resulting in hobos, tramps, and poverty related to cracks in the economy and a predominantly middle-aged male problem. After the 1980s, homelessness is also understood as a social problem affecting women and families, related to poverty, unemployment, and a housing crisis (Harman, 1989; Rousseau, 1981). In his well-known work *Down and Out in America*, Rossi (1989) talked about extreme poverty and the concept of homelessness as being a literal thing, as opposed to precarious homelessness – having a tenuous hold on housing of the poorest quality. Since its beginning, homelessness research has also focused on welfare and work migration. At the end of his anthology *Walking to Work*, Monkkonen (1984) writes: "Our ignorance of tramps is not that the sources don´t exist, but that tramps simply do not fit our visions of the past, even the most critical ones. They were poor, mostly single working men (and sometimes women)" (p.235). Back then, this was also activism in the form of giving a voice to societal groups that didn't fit the majority's version of society. In Kalaallit Nunaat, there is a general push effect from smaller towns into bigger towns, and eventually to Nuuk, due to job availability, better health care services, schools, and lower living costs. The same migrant pattern has been discussed on the European continent for 30 years (Borjas and Trejo, 1991). People are seeking out better healthcare services, social services, higher housing standards, and employment in the urbanised areas (Riva et al., 2021; Schiermacher, 2020; Watson, 2017). There is also a level of emigration from Kalaallit

Nunaat to Denmark, where Kalaallit can settle due to citizenship of the State. Denmark offers higher welfare services than are available in Kalaallit Nunaat. The level of emigration has yet to be analysed with more qualitative data.

Defining Homelessness in Kalaallit Nunaat

Kalaallit Nunaat has been without a homeless definition since the social problem started occurring in the 1980s, though definitions may pave the way for a general conceptualisation and recognition of a given phenomenon as a social problem. More importantly, it may lay the foundation for new rights-based legislation so that people in these circumstances can receive universal benefits similar to legislation around pensions and health care. We also need the municipalities to be precise about what social services are available in the form of shelters, health care, and necessities for survival. Some researchers deem homelessness almost indefinable. Bahr and Caplow (1973) discussed paradoxical cases of the missionary priest or the deployed soldier not being considered homeless, while the residents spending decades at the same homeless shelter are categorised as homeless. In a Kalaallit Nunaat context, we could add sailors and trawler workers who spend months at sea; however, they are not considered homeless. We also have reports of people living in the same shelters for a decade who are considered homeless (Nielsen, 2025). Much current European and North American research does focus on the home as a material frame when focusing on the ground breaking *Housing First* approach (Aubry et al., 2015; Tsemberis, 2013). When the Kalaallit public authorities first produced reports on homelessness, they adopted a material frame of understanding homelessness as either homeless, re-housed, or houseless (Hansen and Andersen, 2013). Homelessness was then defined as: "people that don't have a steady place to spend the night" (Hansen and Andersen, 2013, p.10). The definition didn't include geographical variations in understanding homelessness, such as rural homelessness, where a distinct culture of rurality is discussed and solutions to homelessness are sought in close-knit communities via benevolent landlords, extended families, and such (Cloke et al., 2001). There are, however, also limits to rural solutions, with risks of social isolation and abandonment (Carpenter-Song et al., 2016).

Recent publications discussing challenges with defining homelessness indicate that there are issues with the overall definitions used in homeless counts, such as shelter counts, where data sets have an overrepresentation of men (Bretherton and Mayock, 2024; Bretherton and Pleace, 2024; Treglia and Culhane, 2023). Arguments are also made for the need for separate definitions around youth homelessness. An important point in the debate around definitions is to use a housing continuum between a narrow definition, like the physical domain (being shelters), and the social domain, which involves having access to a space for social relations. There

are several important and relevant frameworks, categorisations, and typologies to consider (Busch-Geertsema et al., 2024). During one of our many field studies, we had a conversation with a local shelter manager. This was before a public definition of homelessness. During the conversation, we asked if he would participate in the homeless count, and he replied, "Yes, but it shouldn't include the people here in my shelter – because they have a home." By this, he indicated that rooms with 2-3 bunk beds housing up to six people were equivalent to a home. Eventually, we managed to convince him that we would be very grateful if he would let us include his shelter users in the count.

Ahead of the first count in Kalaallit Nunaat, we looked carefully at FEANTSA's ETHOS definition of home as:

> Having an adequate dwelling (or space) over which a person and his/her family can exercise exclusive possession (physical domain); being able to maintain privacy and enjoy relations (social domain) and having a legal title to occupation (legal domain). (FEANTSA, 2005, p.1)

We chose to go for a definition that would better fit the culture, context, and data gathered so far. The definition that finally became official was: "People in this social situation do not have the current resources to choose their own safe and secure accommodation where they can legally stay indefinitely" (Departementet for Sociale Anliggender, Arbejdsmarked og Indenrigsanliggender, 2023, p.12). Safety and security became additional explicit key elements when talking about homelessness in Kalaallit Nunaat.

The Historical Context

When tracking homelessness in Kalaallit Nunaat, it is not until the mid-1960s that we begin to see news stories about the extreme consequences of centralisation and a housing shortage, with a reported housing shortage of 2 495 in Nuuk in the 1970s, with a then population of around 8 000 (Christensen, 1964; Redaktionen, 1974). Homelessness is concentrated mainly around the capital, Nuuk, but there are severe housing and social issues in places like Tasiilaq on the east coast, Ilulissat in the north, and Qaqortoq in the south as well. The Kalaallit became home-owners and renters just after World War II.

Nuuk opened its first shelter in 1977 (Atuagagdliutit, 1977; Jensen, 1982) and there have been several variants of sheltering the homeless with varying degrees of success – there is currently a plan to have a more comprehensive approach to people experiencing homelessness in the capital. There are currently three emergency shelters in Nuuk, with a total of 88 sleeping spaces. All shelters are

emergency shelters, meaning that the facilities open at 3 p.m. and close at 9 a.m. This continues in February with a mean temperature of -8 degrees Celsius. There have been attempts to set up transitional housing in former container homes and in local housing blocks. The housing containers are placed in a secluded and marginalised area of Nuuk. The housing blocks were, however, quickly struck by NIMBY issues due to neighbours' complaints and a lack of preparation by local authorities. There is no affordable housing plan in Kalaallit Nunaat. The country's housing stock consists of 71% publicly owned housing. The waiting list for public housing in Nuuk is 10-12 years for individuals. People can be listed on the waiting list after turning 15 years of age.

Following this introduction, I will touch upon industrialisation and the housing crisis, social policies, and individualisation as effects of colonisation. I will sum up by describing the overall approach and activist research and discuss how, by going beyond data gathering in the field, we might succeed in changing political and public perceptions of homelessness from a victim-blaming tendency to an understanding of how we demolish structural barriers.

Particularities in homelessness in Kalaallit Nunaat

In Kalaallit Nunaat, homelessness is monocultural. This means we hardly encounter Danes who are experiencing homelessness. If adult Danes are not working or retired, they migrate to Denmark. The same goes for people on a work visa, who will migrate out of the country. There are no veterans with PTSD or refugees. There are no hard drugs in the homeless community, only cannabis and alcohol (Arnfjord, 2019), and no comorbidity in the form of tuberculosis or HIV/AIDS. The demographic/migration pattern is movements from smaller settlements to towns, and finally to Nuuk or Denmark (Rasmussen, 2010). Once a person in a housing crisis settles in Nuuk, there are hardly any affordable living options or possibilities for commuting in and out, as is the case in Anchorage, Alaska, where people can set up camps in the forest, live in trailer homes, or stay in their cars (Boots, 2023).

Industrialisation and the housing crisis

Historically, the Kalaallit were nomadic, moving with the land and sea mammals. They had winter settlements and summer settlements. Between 1700 and 1800, when the Danes set up a trading post, the Kalaallit began to settle in permanent settlements and towns. They settled because of a growing capitalisation through trade activities with the Danes. The need for housing emerged from this settling and was promoted by colonising politics in the 1950s and 1960s. The tents (tupec) and the stone huts (illuut) were turned into houses (illu is still a house but is now referred to as a wooden house or apartment building and not a stone hut). The colonising of living conditions went hand in hand with better sanitation, as well as ownership and

rental agreements. All land in Greenland is public land. There is no such thing as private land ownership. Nobody inherits land or anything similar. House owners enter into an agreement of land allocation with the public authorities.

Homelessness in Kalaallit Nunaat is, like in many places, about housing and poverty. Before 1930, almost everything revolved around the hunt. Hunters needed access to kayaks, hunting equipment, and, most importantly, good-quality skin clothes. Everything relied on a collective culture that was dependent on everyone's participation and shared focus. It wasn't a 'from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs' kind of society. It was closer to the society described in Durkheim's theory of mechanical solidarity: one with collective values, beliefs, and, we can add, common goals about furthering that society through hunting (Durkheim, 2000). Kalaallit culture is complex and vibrant, but with a unified focus on nature and hunting as a central food source (Lynge, 1992; Petersen and Lynge, 2004).

By 1910, fishing surpassed hunting in terms of economic measurements. Early biological expeditions by the Danish State concluded that the waters around Greenland contained many cod, which were needed to feed a growing population. The Danish colonial power decided to switch the Kalaallit's focus to fishing. After the 1950s, the Danish State pushed colonial politics of industrialisation and especially capitalisation by forcing a transformation from independent homeowners and hunters into fishermen and renters, creating a working class. People had the option of buying what was called a do-it-yourself/pre-fabricated house for which they paid a mortgage, or they could rent from the municipalities (Redaktionen, 1961).

When Danish planners persuaded many to move to Nuuk and fish all year round, they didn't consider the part of the population that also followed but didn't fish, and the ramifications of an exponentially growing workforce. Would everyone be working? Would everyone just transition willingly from an independent hunting lifestyle to being part of an industrial workforce with a dependent lifestyle and a 9-to-5 mindset? The planners counted on a steady pay-cheque being the sole motivating factor, with improved living standards in addition. No apparent social planning went into the process in the 1950s and 1960s; it was what Weber named instrumental rationalism or purpose rationality (in German: *zweckrational*) (Weber and Roth, 1968) or what could be called engineerism. The gaze was locked on the working and middle class, which had appeared here, like everywhere else, with industrialisation. In the 1950s, there was little administrative focus on social problems. So, the minority of the population that had social problems were not paid attention to. In the 1960s, concerns started to grow about alcohol consumption and unemployment (Udvalget For Samfundsforskning I Grønland, 1961). There were

worrying news reports about idleness and a loss of purpose among the young generation (Janus, 1964). Similar social problems are recognisable in many industrialisation histories. In Kalaallit Nunaat, this coincides with colonisation as well.

A Looming Housing Crisis

Housing as a political topic is constantly a part of the current news cycle (Christensen and Arnfjord, 2020). Between 1920 and 1960, housing construction relied on wood, but then followed a period when concrete apartment buildings took place; an efficient but not culturally appropriate way to offer housing (Christensen et al., 2024; Grønlands Tekniske Organisation, 1968; GTO, 1968; 1973). Housing blocks designed in Denmark suited a northern European way of life, but didn't fit a culture where seal hunting, carving, and skin drying were significant parts of life (Chemnitz et al., 1975). In the 1980s, a slow but steady liberalisation of the former public housing market appeared. Currently, it is only in a few cities (Aasiaat, Ilulissat, Nuuk, Qaqortoq, and Sisimiut) that a prospective house owner can get a real estate loan.

Housing prices in Nuuk have skyrocketed over the past 30 years. In 2007, the Municipal Government planned seven housing towers in downtown. This was hailed as cheap accommodation. However, from the time block 1 was finished to the time block 7 was built, construction costs had increased by 7.2% (Netredaktionen, 2008). There is currently a universal challenge with building cheaply enough. In Kalaallit Nunaat, there is no political programme oriented toward affordable housing, and no current plan to subsidise the existing housing stock. For a working-class family in the mean monthly income group (€3 250 per person), over half of the monthly pay cheque is spent on rent in a newly developed area called Qinngorput, compared to the older and more dated housing where the rent is close to a quarter of the monthly pay. The housing crisis does not seem to stop. The municipality is continually building housing, but it is in a price range for the middle to upper middle class. Consequently, everybody else is pushed out of the housing market. In the following, we focus on the correlation between social policies and homelessness.

Social policy and homelessness

Kalaallit Nunaat has had full authority over social policies since the Home Rule Act of 1979.[1] Different social policy areas, such as the well-being of children, early retirement, and the elderly, take priority over matters such as homelessness and poverty. Recently, we saw an adjustment to the social legislation that now emphasises workfare in contrast to the social help orientation in the prior legislation. Help is still a core concept of social legislation where needs-based assessment and

[1] I have argued elsewhere that it may go further back (Arnfjord, 2022a).

punitive measures ensure that recipients of public benefits live up to their obligations. The law literally translates into The Inatsisartut Law about Help from the Public (Inatsisartutlov Om Offentlig Hjælp, 2022). If they fail, they run the risk of benefits being halved or completely removed. When it comes to children or people with disabilities, there are legal measures that ensure the rights of the citizen, but a general law that ensures the legal certainty of the citizen does not exist. Homelessness, in a social justice sense, is still an area with few legislative rights. There is no mention of homelessness in any legislation.

The results are few formulated rights for shelter users, people sleeping in encampments, stairwells, etc. In Nuuk, there are three NGOs operating within the homeless environment. There are two full-time services. One is Kofoeds Skole, which was originally a Danish initiative. It is a day programme that aims to integrate people into the labour market (Meldgaard, 2005). It recently started a youth division. Kofoeds Skole is funded by the municipality and is currently run by the former mayor of Nuuk, but is an independent (non-profit) organisation. The second outfit is the Salvation Army, which started operating in Nuuk in 2012 (Arnfjord, 2021b; Pressemeddelelse, 2014). It also runs a day programme that functions as a day shelter, operating from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. on weekdays. The only after-hours initiative is the soup kitchen run by NoINI, a small NGO that relies on funds from the Kalaallit Nunaat Rødekorsiat (Red Cross) and other small donations. NoINI only operates on Wednesdays and provides food by borrowing facilities from The Salvation Army.

Collectively, the NGOs are working to push for more rights-based legislation. Small successes have been accomplished, but we have yet to see focused legislative work, such as affordable housing acts, inclusion programmes in the labour market and educational system, and social welfare cards. The politicians and the media sometimes have a singular focus when it comes to big political agendas. In the spring of 2024, almost every news story was about a new fishing act, which is core legislation relating to the nation's economy. It dominated the news coverage for weeks on end. There was very little political focus on homelessness in the National Assembly in the spring of 2024. What happens with homelessness when there is little political attention is possibly a repeat of history: the social problem will grow. Schiermacher has, through research in Denmark, pointed out that the longer one is homeless, the more severe the social problems become (Schiermacher, 2018; Schiermacher and Arnfjord, 2021). This is confirmed in the classical homeless research (Anderson, 1923; Harper, 1982).

Colonial Welfare Fosters Individualisation

Individualisation is one of the main alienating factors of industrialisation and colonisation (Harvey, 2010; Seeman, 1959). The reification of work and the exchange in the form of a monetary economy resulted in a reduction of traditional Inuit understanding of collectivism. Collectivism still prevails, but it is located in family circles; although some are wide and expansive, there are also family circles that are small and porous. Kalaallit Nunaat's welfare system can easily be viewed as two distinct systems. The public system, in the form of legislation and a rights-based approach, offers services the citizen can expect to receive if seeking them out. Then there is a civil societal welfare system. The welfare system is, in general, social democratic and has inherited individualising aspects. This occurs when a person, and not their social group or family, gets a case file number assigned to their individual social security number. If the person seeks therapeutic help, a psychotherapist is available, and the person then receives individual therapy. The person is led to believe that the smallest entity is them: the individual and not the group. The group is shielded through acts of anonymity and confidentiality clauses, which forbid the sharing of the individual's case with anybody not 'assigned' to their case. It also begins in the early classes of schooling, where the teaching mantra now is that the child shares responsibility *for their own learning* (Grønlands Selvstyre, 2023).

In relation to this and quoting Durkheim, Habermas (1984) writes: "… increasing individuation and growing autonomy of the individual are characteristic of a new form of solidarity that is no longer secured by prior value consensus but has to be cooperatively achieved by virtue of individual efforts" (p.84). Colonisation of a lifeworld or the 'introduction' of Western bureaucratic systems has a damaging effect on a society's former cohesive principles. What could have, and would have, been dealt with in a family setting was a housing crisis—similar to the above-mentioned culture of rural homelessness. Yet, in an effort to create transparency and treat everyone the same, there is an equal risk of lowering the service level to a point that people in real need will become very ill and 'clientised' (Mik-Meyer, 2013) When they encounter the public system, the richer middle class has the buying power to seek therapeutic help and privatised alcohol treatment, and to read up on couples therapy techniques. When their kids grow up, they are equipped with educational resources to get jobs through the job-housing programme, or long-term savings ensures a down payment on an apartment, thus creating more division. The systemic colonisation of the collective lifeworld has become an area of independent individualism for a prospering middle class and a dependent clientisation for the lesser-educated class.

When homeless researchers shine a light on this social problem, it closely resembles activism toward a more egalitarian society. It is through constant attention and eventually political attention that changes start to happen. It is furthering Freire's idea of breaking down a culture of silence. (Freire, 2005). A core motivation for our activist and involved approach in Kalaallit Nunaat was to engage with the field and alert politicians to respond more quickly to social problems, new social clients, and to create awareness around housing needs and poverty. Similar situations might be found among Arctic, European, and island communities, with limited professional capacity and limited political attention (Christensen et al., 2024).

An Activistic Approach to Homeless Research

Our approach to homelessness has a Marxian-Feuerbach angle. Among activist researchers, there is a famous Marx quote, which is also found on the stairs of the Freie Universität in Berlin: 'Die Philosophen haben die Welt nur verschieden interpretiert; es kömmt darauf an, sie zu verändern.'[2] By itself, the quote is rather dogmatic. Change it, how? It is entirely open. We have fused this with modern Marxist class analysis, focusing not particularly on class itself, but on the apparent inequality between classes that is still growing in Kalaallit Nunaat, where, for lack of a better tool, the GINI coefficient has averaged 35 for the past 10 years (Greenland Statistics, 2024); whereas for EU it has been 30 (Eurostat, 2024). We have maintained a focus that resembles Wright's reflections below:

> Different ways of analysing class can all potentially contribute to a fuller understanding by identifying different causal processes at work in shaping the micro- and macro-aspects of inequality in capitalist societies. (Wright, 2009, p.101)

To some degree, we continue to conduct class analysis to look for ways to counter class division. We work with a myriad of problems whose particularities can't be reduced to the consequences of colonialism or capitalism. This is a complex approach to class and society in an attempt to avoid mono-causal explanations for social problems.

This resembles Bradshaw's (2012) discussions about the difficulty for social policy researchers to remain neutral toward injustice. We engage with all levels of decision-makers and the community of people experiencing homelessness. The latter demands constant awareness around whether we, as researchers, still have a mandate to speak on behalf of people experiencing homelessness. We keep getting assurances that we are recognised by them to speak about the issues in this environment. The moment we don't, when people from the homeless community start

2. "Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it." (Marx, 1845, p.3)

voicing concern about our approach or our analysis, then we need to rethink our approach. Part of the activism is through engagement with Kofoeds Skole and The Salvation Army, where we conduct homeless fora. In the fora we discuss topics such as general service levels, the situations in the shelters, winter living, and so on. Through the forum, the participants are given space to voice their opinions and are listened to by people who take them seriously.

Data, PIT, and Soup

We have conducted fieldwork through NoIni's soup kitchen (which I take part in operating). Research in the soup kitchen is first and foremost activism by providing comfort and a meal. We haven't conducted a single structured interview in the kitchen for 10 years. It's mainly participatory observation and informal talks about the guest's homeless situation. We have also followed the municipal street team in Nuuk, researched the social-political history of Nuuk's first shelter, and spoken at length with service providers and politicians. In 2022, we conducted the first homeless count (Arnfjord and Perry, 2022). It was conducted as a point-in-time (PIT) count. Some countries spend a particular week, but because of a small team and the geography of the world's biggest island, we chose all of April as a month of counting. We used a data sheet, visited every shelter in person, travelled to all larger towns, and were in contact with social workers assisting us with the few remaining smaller towns. We did not visit smaller settlements. In addition, we conducted night runs in Nuuk, Qaqortoq, and Sisimiut in order to count street-based sleeping. We covered invisible homelessness or what others refer to as hidden homelessness (Lohmann, 2021; Wilkins, 2018). This was done through our network of social worker and NGOs and their know-how of couch surfers, and in the cases where it was possible, we collaborated with local authorities who had lists of citizens without a fixed address. The PIT count was backed and funded by the Ministry of Social Affairs.

We had research teams all around Kalaallit Nunaat and were in contact with both Qaanaaq (Thule) in the northwest and Ittoqqortoormiit in the northeast; these are some of the most peripheral towns in the country, and we travelled far and wide to uncover homelessness on a quantifiable level. We were also able to document the longevity of some people's situations, their gender, and age. Around 1% of the population is homeless. The absolute number was 491 out of 56 000. That is 100 times the level in Denmark; 5 989 out of 5,8 million (Benjaminsen, 2024). The PIT count was mandated before there was a public definition of homelessness. In order to know what we were counting; we had to create a definition of the research object that was ultimately accepted by the Ministry of Social Affairs as a public definition of homelessness. This, to us, was a bigger accomplishment than the count itself because an official definition paves the way for further social and political work, such as legislation, help to prevent further homelessness, and protecting people already within the

perimeter of the definition by setting up services to get them out of a homeless situation, and creating transitional housing, exit programmes, and Housing First initiatives. The full definition of homelessness includes variations of homelessness like visible, hidden, at-risk, and functional homelessness (Departementet for and Sociale Anliggender, Arbejdsmarked og Indenrigsanliggender, 2023).

The complexity lies in breaking away from that habit and facilitating empowered ways of securing a holistic and humanistic understanding for people on the margins. My approach to criticism has been a neo-Marxist approach adopted from the late Erik Olin Wright, who talked about rupture and transformation (Wright, 2006). Instead of breaking down the system, following classical Marxism, critical theory, or a Foucauldian deconstructionist approach, which might leave arguments in the gutter, I try to set up cooperations with the system. This is found in the approaches of both Wright and Kurt Lewin, the organisational psychologist who focused on the effort to reflect, act, and reflect. He supposedly said, "If you want truly to understand something, try to change it." (Tolman et al., 1996, p.31). It's the fusion of classical Marxism, with Lewin and Wright's ideas, that together inform me of arguments around the legitimacy of change. This goes against Weber's rather conservative approach to what a social scientist could or should do and underlines a legitimacy.

Data is only relevant if it facilitates change

Nuuk and the society in general are small, so a large unfolding of criticism runs the risk of speaking to deaf ears. Said differently, sociological criticism needs a response because real criticism must engage in a dialogue to succeed in bringing about real change. Criticism is important to counter the culture of a bureaucratic rational instrumental system, which easily leads to conformity. The research has, in this instance, focused on documented transformation or change for the benefit of people who are homeless. The research project has documented significant qualitative findings about the differences between women's and men's strategies when they are homeless. Men focus on housing and employment, the two elements to which they need access in order to gain a new footing in life. The women primarily talk about safety and security as the main categories (Arnfjord and Christensen, 2024).

During our prolonged fieldwork, we have been establishing trust and are now viewed as persons of reference when engaging with decision-makers. We can give continual witness to the process from 2014 until now. In this period of change, all managerial positions in NGOs and the municipal setting have been rotated. We can testify to the changes within the environment and collectively facilitate a voice and give testament. From our point of view, research into homelessness is all about significant change. If there is no noticeable change, the data loses value. It only has value if it facilitates change. This may be a radical thought, but it has to do with the particularity of this data. It isn't just data; these are life experiences, as is most

qualitative data, but in a small environment like ours, data is sensitive. The story is sensitive, as its narrative, the telling and the retelling, run the risk of retraumatising people. If people eventually deem a researcher worthy of hearing their story, there is an expectation that this should be taken seriously.

With the homeless count, we wanted to supply the administrative bureaucrats with numbers, and we viewed the process as something that would be beneficial in the long run. It would help to speed the process along. It was, from a standpoint of activist research, more important than the quantifiable data. Data is not in itself research before the data yields transformative processes. All legislation is important if it helps and protects. It should ultimately empower people to live independent lives. For instance, legislation such as an act that prohibits peddling, panhandling, or begging, or the Danish act against illegal encampments, criminalises criminalising homelessness instead of preventing it from occurring.

Toward Change in Homeless Policies

In conversations with researchers within the homeless field, it's not unusual to encounter a sigh during reflective thought, and you hear the last half of an inner dialogue saying: "… well, we know what is needed, so why does the system not just provide the housing and the social and emotional support?" The complexity may be boiled down to an instrumental rational solution, but it is also a treatment of the symptoms and not a measure that prevents homelessness to begin with. I have yet to read a unified statement of one cause of homelessness, especially when considering the Arctic. Preventing youth homelessness could most surely advance with an effort to supply young people with housing when they reach adulthood, and further, enough of such housing. The homelessness that affects middle-aged men might be due to the death of a loved one, which causes a downward spiral because the individual holds the loss internally and doesn't reach out. It might also be due to the lack of an environment of support in civil society, with which a public system has little to do. It is hard to prevent unknown circumstances. It is the known unknown; the known being the young people in public care institutions, the young who are not seeking further education or employment; those we know of and those we can plan for.

If we listen to those in the homeless environment, they point to many sound solutions. These include creating housing for the elderly (who make up 17% of the group of people experiencing homelessness) and providing safe housing and support (which comprises nearly 25% of a young group). We run the risk of prioritising one group over another, but at the same time, we could create a better solution where public officials enhance their focus on the young, the elderly, and

the large middle group of typically sheltered men. These groups could then be worked with and differentiated further with the purpose of setting up safe spaces and processes that motivate and gently push individuals into independent housing situations or a care setting that is supportive.

Such differentiation would, in Kalaallit Nunaat, create new areas of unknowns; these are again known unknowns, including the motivation for members of individual groups. What if there are universal parameters for the young, the elderly, women, and men? Differentiating between ages is not necessarily a solution that would fit all, as there will always be cases that will teach us how we can increase the humanistic approach. So, we don't split up friends and intimate partners who support each other across gender and age groups.

In 2024, we set up free courses aimed at shelter employees and street-level social workers. This is based on the analysis that very few support staff have relevant professional training. Attendance was free, and the first full course was a success with positive feedback. The second instalment in 2025 is now fully booked. We will continue to be active when it comes to housing solutions and a more humane approach to citizens. It is important that the systems remain aware that these are citizens with political rights. It is not a crime to be poor and homeless. People should have the right to receive the appropriate level of support that enables them to live an independent life.

In conclusion, we have dared to stick our necks out and openly worked on homelessness research from a social justice angle. We might have been lucky to hit a vein of political willingness to improve social conditions. We are researching within a field with some political attention, and thus the research might have been received entirely differently with potential right-wing claims of politically oriented and normative research. However, the research, from an activist research perspective, has resulted in the first step of political action in the form of a public definition of homelessness and a strategy, that focus on protection, real professional help, and it mentions the Housing First approach (Departementet for and Sociale Anliggender, Arbejdsmarked og Indenrigsanliggender, 2023). We still have a long road ahead in securing real security for people experiencing homelessness and ensuring basic rights, such as access to dedicated social work, basic income, housing first that works, and the basic right to affordable housing.

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