

Arctic Winter College 2021

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THE ARCTIC INSTITUTE
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Arctic Winter College 2021

Infrastructure

Foreword

Through a partnership with the National Science Foundation-funded Migration in Harmony Research Coordination Network and the Ecologic Institute, The Arctic Institute is publishing a series of briefs on Arctic migrations and mobilities written by Fellows of the 2021 Arctic Winter College. The Arctic Winter College brought together 60 emerging leaders and experts from across the world for 10 weeks in a free series of web-based seminars, the videos of which can be viewed on YouTube here. The program builds a lasting, policy-oriented network of Arctic professionals to strengthen communication between peoples and nations, scientific disciplines, policy areas, and across the science-policy interface to improve collaborations, research, and decision-making in the Arctic. Weekly webinars focused on the theme “Arctic on the Move.” Urbanization, globalization, and the impacts of climate change are activating the simultaneous migrations of species, ecosystems, settlements, and cultures across Arctic coastlines in new and unpredictable ways. Each of these intersecting mobilities challenge the quality of life, sustainable development, and environmental health of the circumpolar north. Participants engaged with Arctic researchers, traditional knowledge holders, and practitioners in a variety of fields related to movement to deepen their understanding of a rapidly changing region and its global connections.



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Arctic Winter College 2021

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HOUSELESSNESS IN ALASKA: MYTH VS. DATA

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This brief draws on an ongoing remote ethnographic studyⁱ examining how varying modes of housing insecurity are experienced by Alaskans. This includes:

- an introduction to the term “houselessness,” which describes shifting modes of housing insecurity caused by socio-economic changes and unanticipated life events, but also housing shortages, difficulties acquiring land and permission for building new housing, and (especially for some Indigenous groups) the foreign nature of home financing.
- reflections on the precarious living situations that Alaskans from rural communities’ experience across their lifetimes.
- the need for further qualitative research that interrogates how assumptions about houselessness are experienced by Alaskans in different contexts, not least because the term houselessness is a proactive attempt to delimit narrowly defined and demeaning terms such as homelessness.

Introduction

This brief describes how research on housing security issues needs to account for the transient situations in which Alaskans in rural communities may experience houselessness throughout their lifetimes. Developing insights into the shifting ways in which houselessness is experienced provides a critical framework for revisiting prevailing policies and developing new practices concerning housing security issues in Alaska and beyond.

Reflecting on Houselessness

In a recent article, Christensen et al. introduced the phrase “northern geography of homelessness” to accentuate the intersecting concerns that shape “the dynamics of rural-to-urban migration and urbanization in the Arctic.”ⁱⁱ The authors argue that there are likely “high rates of hidden homelessness (i.e., temporarily staying with friends,

relatives, or others because there is nowhere else to live and no immediate prospect of permanent housing), particularly in rural, remote, or settlement communities.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Building on this work, this brief draws on an ongoing remote ethnographic study focusing on how the notion of “houselessness” can provide critical insights into how migration between rural and urban contexts in northern Alaska produce shifting modes of houselessness.^{iv} These shifts in housing security provide insights into both context-specific factors in Alaska and implications for understanding the situated nature of housing insecurity in Arctic communities more generally. By generating thick descriptions of these issues, deeper insights about the various assumptions underlying public policies concerning housing security can emerge. To explicate this point further, this brief describes three modes of houselessness that were identified through interviews with experts who work on housing issues in remote and urban contexts in rural, hub, and urban contexts in Alaska. In the Alaskan context, most regions include numerous small, remote, and predominantly Indigenous communities that are commonly called villages or “outlying villages” and a larger regional “hub” community, which are also usually remote and predominantly Indigenous but with larger airstrips and more services. Utqiavik (formerly Barrow), for example, is the hub community for the North Slope region.^v

The first mode of houselessness concerns overcrowding in rural villages and its impacts on health and safety, a topic that was widely discussed in the research informing this brief.^{vi} Chantel,^{vii} a housing authority expert who has worked with rural Alaskan communities for over two decades, explained in an interview that many rural communities face severe housing shortages. As a result, there are high rates of overcrowding throughout northern Alaska’s rural communities. In these communities, people may end up living with extended family members and friends in a 1200-1300 square foot home. High occupancy rates in these homes can force occupants to sleep in shifts. Moreover, during winter when homes are sealed as much as possible to keep out the cold weather, the air quality can become very unhealthy.^{viii} Furthermore, many of these homes were not designed for arctic and sub-arctic environments, which can lead to moisture in wall cavities (usually through wind-drive precipitation or inadequate indoor venting, which produces mold and structural damage.^{ix}

A second mode of houselessness may be experienced when a resident moves from a rural community to a hub city, like Nome or Bethel, or an urban area, like Fairbanks or Anchorage. In both hub and urban contexts, the cost of living can create uncertain living situations. As Martin, who worked for several regional housing authorities, explained:

There's often a rat race where like people who [are working] entry level [jobs], work really, really hard and they just get exhausted, and they don't have a social safety net and they either give up and go back to their overcrowded home or they try to move on to Anchorage.

Expanding on the precarity of this issue, Martin shared that for many people he has worked with, becoming houseless is a constant concern.

I think there's some pretty unexpectable situations that people run into. Kid gets sick. Someone doesn't have a babysitter; something happens and they're \$50 away from making rent.

These levels of uncertainty can elevate into anxiety that can lead to illness, and which is only increased when community ties are lacking.^x

While the previous examples focused on housing insecurity, a third important but less studied aspect of this phenomenon concerns how popular assumptions about houselessness become “urban legends.” Consider the

following reflections shared by Erica, a community organizer, who works with houseless and vulnerable communities in Bethel, Alaska.

There's an urban legend that folks who have no houses in Bethel somehow wish to return to the village that they're from. And if they had a way to get there, that's where they would prefer to be. So, we did some data collection about that. We asked people like, where do you want to be? And these folks... consider themselves members of our community here and have no desire or intention to return to villages.... So, it's interesting how, like these narratives get built up and the data really dispels kind of all of those things.

The idea that houselessness can be both pervasive in hub communities like Bethel yet also obscure and deeply misunderstood in those same communities and even among people who work with housing and homelessness is an important factor. Erica continued:

I don't know other hub communities; I only know this one. But I can tell you that if you walk through the grocery store and ask 20 people, "are there people who are unhoused here?" or "are there people living on the streets?" you know, probably 80% of them are going to tell you no. But when you interview folks [and ask them] where did you sleep last night, [it's] abandoned vehicles, shacks, in a tent somewhere along the river... [or] if you talk with police who actually know where people are, it's a very different story because folks are not as visible in that way as they are in urban centers.

This final example illustrates that houselessness cannot be easily collapsed into a singular definition. Rather it is a social phenomenon that is shaped and shapes socio-economic contexts in which people find themselves living. Furthermore, the idea that houselessness can become wrapped up in "urban legends" or myths that obscure shifting ways that houselessness is experienced in rural and remote areas of Alaska mirrors an observation made by Aaron, an interviewee from Quinhagak. He explained that it is often assumed that houselessness does not exist in rural villages, yet he has personally witnessed several fellow community members become houseless.

The term "houseless" is used in this brief because "homeless" does not capture the diversity of factors that influence housing insecurity in Alaska. In fact, the term "homeless" is strongly resisted by both housing advocates and people experiencing houselessness. For instance, advocacy organizations like *Do Good* argue for using the word "houseless" to replace homeless because it more accurately describes the spectrum of factors that shape people's experiences with housing insecurity. The following statement is included on their website page:

Houselessness is simply lacking a place to live. We use the term "houseless" because that is the term most of the population we serve chooses to use. We choose to listen to their preference and make the conscious effort to empower our participants in any way we can, which sometimes means adjusting our word choice.^{xi}

Similarly, in our research we spoke with Renee, a housing advocate and designer who recently worked on a collaborative project involving the unhoused, professional designers, and housing experts. Reflecting on this experience, she pointed to narrow meanings that are popularly associated with the concept of "homeless." The term, she explained, is an issue that the people she was working with who are experiencing houselessness see as a critical barrier for their wellbeing because it carries so many stereotypes and ignores the complexity of issues facing unhoused communities. As she shared:

The group of people experiencing houselessness said that they wanted to be de-stigmatized and decriminalized - that their experiences weren't based on...this immediate idea that they're bad people or people who are broken, or... whatever...

just like everyone else. They highly value human connection, acceptance, and positive recognition that there are lots of subpopulations. So, there needs to be a variety of solutions and not everyone defines home in the same way. And not everyone wants to be housed. And houselessness is a symptom of a systematic issue, not an issue associated with a person with regard to space needs....

The reality that housing insecurity in rural Alaska is part of an entangled network of factors stretching from housing shortages to overcrowding, and from a lack of access to land and funding resources for building homes, are all subjects that participants in our research project continually remind us necessitate alternative models and ways of approaching housing.^{xiii} These issues are tightly interwoven and must be addressed in collaboration with those who have real world experiences with houselessness. As one community advocate conveyed: “I think it's vitally important to include people who are experiencing [these issues] into the conversation.”

Accordingly, builders, designers, and housing specialists working in rural Alaska have impressed on us the importance of rejecting approaches that frame the building of homes as a ubiquitous solution. Home building as a solution in Alaska is instead variable by necessity, by culture, and is deeply tied to and shaped by place-specific factors.^{xiii} Structural factors often overlooked include colonial legacies, subsistence practices, weather patterns, changing environmental factors, and access to heavy equipment. Identity and community politics also need to be accounted for when building homes, along with the professional cultures of designers, engineers, and builders who employ expert language practices, specialized methods and tools, and conceptual orientations towards home building that are specific to their social worlds. The cultural and structural nature of these concerns, however, should not obscure the fact that homes are more than just shelters. They provide the means for “enriching the weaves that bind people and their environments.”^{xiv}

Consequently, as continuing research is conducted on these issues, these examples point to the notion of houselessness as a useful framework for developing more nuanced understandings of housing insecurity in northern Alaska communities.

Policy implications: This preliminary research highlights the need for developing context-specific policies and practices. Policy makers should consider developing resources for addressing houselessness that empower local communities to make their own culturally appropriate and informed housing decisions. Secondly, developing flexible funding streams to address houselessness is critical for increasing the capacity of communities to proactively respond to changing scenarios in times of crisis, like the current pandemic.^{xv} Finally, policy makers should support research collaborations that bring together social scientists, community stakeholders, and Alaskans with first-hand experiences of houselessness to co-produce further qualitative insights that can inform policy. This includes calls for research that probe assumptions about housing insecurity, including cultural conceptions of “home,”^{xvi} urban legends that may perpetuate misconceptions, and the anticipatory needs of rural communities as they adapt to climate change and related environmental concerns.^{xvii} In taking this approach, public policy makers need to think about housing security issues in Alaska as being made up of what the social anthropologist Arturo Escobar describes as multiple and generative social worlds.^{xviii} Put simply, home building approaches and policies need to prioritize adaptive practices that identify and respond to context-specific needs. Such practices entail collaborations with local communities to develop tailored responses in real time and require an understanding of houselessness that is deep enough to dispel myths.

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Chapter 2 – Houselessness in Alaska: Myth vs. Data

ⁱ This material is based upon work supported by the National Science Foundation under Grant No. 2103556. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation.

ⁱⁱ Christensen, Julia, Steven Arnfjord, Sally Carraher and Travis Hedwig. 2017. Homelessness across Alaska, the Canadian North and Greenland: A review of the Literature on a Developing Social Phenomenon in the Circumpolar North. *Arctic*, 70 (4): 349-364, p. 350.

ⁱⁱⁱ Christensen, et al. 2017, p. 350.

^{iv} Interviews with community organizers who work with the unhoused in Fairbanks, Bethel, Nome, and Anchorage, also cited interpersonal conflicts, substance abuse, and the desire for new experiences.

^v For further explanation of the rural-hub-urban concept see: <https://www.avcp.org/about-avcp/our-region/>

^{vi} There is also an extensive body of research on overcrowding and housing insecurity issues in Alaska rural communities (see Alaska Housing Finance Corporation (AHFC). (2014). *2014 Housing Assessment*. <https://www.ahfc.us/pros/energy/alaska-housing-assessment/housing-assessment>; Alaska Housing Finance Corporation (AHFC) (2018). *2018 Statewide Housing Assessment: Statewide Housing Summary*.

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vii Pseudonyms are used in place of interviewee's real names.

viii Singleton, R., Salkoski, A. J., Bulkow, L., Fish, C. Dobson, J., Albertson, L., Skarada, Kovesi, T., and McDonald, C., Hennessy, T.W., and Ritter, T. (2016). Housing characteristics and indoor air quality in households of Alaska Native children with chronic lung conditions. *Indoor Air*, 27(2): 478-486. See also: <https://anthc.org/what-we-do/community-environment-and-health/healthy-homes/>

ix See Rittgers, A. 2018. *A History of the Cold Climate Housing Research Center*. MA Thesis. University of Alaska, Fairbanks.

x The following citation focuses on pandemic induced stress, not housing insecurity, but we draw on it here to highlight the implications that changes in a person's external environment can have on health and well-being. See: Peters, Achim, McEwen, Bruce S., & Friston, Karl. (2017). Uncertainty and stress: Why it causes diseases and how it is mastered by the brain. *Progress in Neurobiology*, 156, 164-188.

xi Do Good website. Accessed 05/28/21: <https://dogoodmultnomah.org/blog/why-do-we-say-houseless>; see also Christensen et al. 2017's discussion of houseless and related terminology.

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xiii Interviewees also pointed out that people have relatives and friends/networks that are tight knit enough to ambiguate the term homelessness under certain circumstances.

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