Nowhere to Call Home: Grassroots Shelter and Municipal Apathy in Qaqortoq, Greenland

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Abstract

In Qaqortoq, Southern Greenland, some individuals sleep rough or rely on other citizens' private dwellings for shelter. Ethnographic fieldwork in Qaqortoq finds that homelessness is a symptom of deeper structural deficiencies rather than an anomaly. Frequently, it is reported in the media that the municipal authorities face significant financial pressures. These pressures strain their resources, and this has a knock-on effect, resulting in gaps in essential social services for vulnerable citizens. The fieldwork from Qaqortoq reveals that while the municipal system is failing to assist vulnerable citizens, some ordinary individuals are stepping up and bridging some of the gaps through grassroots initiatives. These individual acts of benevolence in Qaqortoq illustrate both a sense of belonging (community spirit) and compassion towards fellow citizens who have fallen through gaps in the system. While these benevolent citizen-driven solutions undoubtedly provide immediate relief for some citizens, they are not sustainable. At the heart of these citizen-led efforts lies an uncomfortable truth: they expose deep cracks in the existing welfare safety net. Both the state and municipalities are failing to address fundamental social welfare needs in Greenlandic society, including the root causes of social vulnerability and the lack of effective measures to address them. They must urgently adopt long-term, sustainable solutions that address these failures. In Qaqortoq, the creation of a government-funded drop-in centre for homeless citizens, to be managed and operated by the municipality, constitutes a tentative step toward increased formal institutional involvement. Nevertheless, despite its promising intentions, the centre's fragile beginnings have been overshadowed by poor management and a rapid turnover of staff, issues that have led to inconsistent operations and frequent closures, leaving those who rely on its services in a state of uncertainty.

Introduction

Qaqortoq, a town on southern Greenland's jagged coast, mirrors a paradox like many postcolonial welfare states. It is a municipality in a country that defines itself through universal care and collective security, but visible exclusion of homeless citizens remains. Homelessness starkly highlights this contradiction where homeless citizens in Qaqortoq have fallen through the welfare safety net. It signals not only the limits of social policy but also the fragility of the state's structural guarantees (Arnfjord & Perry 2022; Christensen et al. 2024).

This article draws on ethnographic fieldwork to examine how homelessness is lived and understood in Qaqortoq. The analysis situates these experiences within the broader landscape of Greenlandic social policy, the enduring imprint of welfare colonialism, and the pressures of decentralised municipal governance (Christensen et al. 2024; Perry & Arnfjord 2019).

The research also highlights the crucial role of residents who step in when formal systems are inadequate. Strangers with little of their own to give feed, house and comfort people—occasionally in makeshift fashion. Such acts of solidarity support people in the direst of need, but they also beg larger questions. How much can informal care replace state welfare, and what are the implications of this dependence for responsibility- and culpability-regimes in present-day Greenland?

The study begins—not with an individual biography or a single case—but with the system that makes those lives legible. Homelessness in Greenland is treated here as a structural condition, not a string of isolated events (Christensen et al. 2024; Arnfjord & Perry 2022). That starting point matters because it shapes the method: choices were reflexive and pragmatic, openly negotiated with the field, and attentive to the dilemmas of researching a small community where anonymity is fragile and access is relational. In other words, the approach follows the problem rather than forcing the problem to fit the approach.

History arrives early and refuses to leave. Danish colonial policies and the spatial restructuring of settlements—consolidations, relocations, and the categorisation of some places as central and others as peripheral—continue to have reverberations (Gad 2017). These are not mere backdrop notes. They set path-dependencies: who lives close to services, who is rendered mobile or

stuck, who falls within the imagined constituency of welfare and who drifts to its edges. Inequalities produced then echo now; they pattern contemporary exclusion, including homelessness.

When formal support becomes limited—and this happens regularly—the gap is filled not by institutions, but by neighbours who help through practical actions rather than words. Much of it happens quietly at the edges, some of it in plain view. One woman traces a daily circuit, distributing hot meals and small hygiene packs; to her, the gesture feels ordinary, almost routine. For those who meet her at the doorway, it can be the difference between coping and not. Another resident goes further: each night, he turns a private dwelling into a temporary hostel, opening the door again to people who would otherwise sleep outside. These responses are improvised, contingent, intensely human held together by trust, by fatigue, by stubborn care. Moreover, they mark a fault line. When care migrates from public systems to private shoulders, what remains is a fragile patch: necessary, admirable, and, at the same time, a sign of structural retreat. How far can informal care stretch before it strains the carers themselves? Can citizen compassion—however steady—stand in for structured intervention over weeks, months, winters?

When examining this situation from an outside perspective, the ethical and political stakes are clearly hard to ignore. In the cases outlined in this paper, one can be concerned about the reliance on unpaid, unsupported volunteer residents, which risks normalising a quiet transfer of responsibility from the state to private citizens (Christensen et al. 2024; Perry & Arnfjord 2019). Undoubtedly, the presence of some citizens in Qaqortoq in the short term is keeping people alive—an outcome that matters—yet it raises further questions about justice, accountability, and the moral hazard of treating exceptional generosity as a durable welfare solution. In short: the practices described here are admirable, necessary, and insufficient, all at once.

This article intervenes in broader debates on what the future of welfare might look like in societies that are at once remote, postcolonial, and structurally vulnerable. The questions are not abstract: they touch directly on how responsibility is shared, or shifted, between the state and the citizen. At the heart lies a tension. On one side, the quiet labour of grassroots compassion—those daily, unrecorded and unacknowledged benevolent gestures that sustain life in the absence of formal provision. On the other hand, the enduring expec-

tation that the government should guarantee welfare, even when its capacity falters. To rethink that balance is not merely to assign duties differently, but to ask what kind of society is imagined when reliance falls on one rather than the other (Christensen et al. 2024; Perry & Arnfjord 2019).

The discussion here also insists on something easily overlooked: the dignity and agency of those experiencing homelessness. Primarily, many homeless citizens are not passive recipients of care, nor simply objects of policy failure. They survive in extreme weather conditions where temperatures often reach minus degrees. Moreover, they navigate, resist, improvise, survive and endure in ways that complicate the simple binaries of dependence and autonomy.

If there were a will to tackle these dynamics of homelessness seriously, the Greenlandic government and its municipalities would put in place a legislative binding framework and, at the same time, allocate the resources and push welfare beyond its familiar frame of technical distribution. The welfare safety net is not simply about how much to allocate and who to assist; it also concerns changing relations between people, institutions and the shared histories that bind them together.

These relationships can be complex, uncertain, and sometimes contradictory, and they are often negotiated in ways that are not typically reflected in policy documents. However, they matter precisely because they reveal how welfare is both imagined and enacted on the ground.

In tracing these arguments, this article positions itself as at once grounded and reflexive (Perry & Rasmussen 2023). Grounded—because the analysis emerges from sustained ethnographic encounters in Qaqortoq, from conversations in kitchens, from observations of improvised shelters, from the mundane practices of survival and care that unfold in the shadow of absent institutions. Reflexive—because no account can escape the positionality of the researcher, who listens, records, and writes while remaining implicated in the very structures being studied. The voice carried here is therefore tentative, aware of its own limitations, even as it seeks to interpret.

The purpose is not to claim finality, nor to impose a totalising explanation. Instead, the aim is to contribute to a broader ethnographic conversation about marginalisation in the Arctic, a conversation that is itself fractured, unfinished, and evolving.

At the intersection of systemic ruptures within the welfare state and the fragile forms of solidarity produced in their wake, this article explores how resilience and exclusion coexist uneasily within the social landscape (Christensen & Arnfjord 2020).

Data Collection in Qaqortoq

The point of departure for this article is fieldwork undertaken in Qaqortoq over a four-month period from October 2024 to January 2025. The primary research methods used were shadowing my key gatekeeper during her voluntary outreach work, participant observation, and ethnographic interviews. During fieldwork, I recorded notes in my pocket notebook or on my mobile phone (depending on the context)—sometimes I had to wait for an appropriate break in the action to do so. Throughout my notetaking and reporting, I chose not to name or describe anyone in detail because research ethics are crucial, especially in small communities where everyone knows each other. However, in small communities like Qaqortoq, most citizens will clearly understand who the gatekeeper at the centre of this article is if they read it. In Qaqortoq, a tight-knit environment, obtaining informed consent was an ongoing process, rather than a single task. Throughout the fieldwork, I focused on ensuring participants' dignity and confidentiality while keeping their voices and lived experiences at the forefront.

Alongside documenting the lives of those without stable housing, the fieldwork revealed something just as significant—the quiet, everyday efforts of residents who refused to stand by doing nothing. I observed fellow citizens taking responsibility and stepping in to help and support marginalised citizens in the neighbourhood, while the municipality did not, perhaps through a lack of resources and legislation requiring them to act.

The citizens' gestures were small but steady: a delivery of food, a blanket, a warm coat, a mattress on a shared floor, or a space on a shared sofa bed. These acts spoke of benevolence and a resilience rooted in community and belonging rather than public policy, and they exposed, by contrast, how fragile the official welfare response had become.

Shadowing and participant observation

Most of what I write here grew out of shadowing and participant observation. These were not technical exercises so much as a way of being present—of walking alongside people and watching how help, fatigue, and kindness moved through their days. The word *shadowing* can sound suspicious, but in practice it was simple enough: I followed my gatekeeper as she went about her voluntary work, staying close but not intruding, learning by keeping pace with her rather than by asking too many questions. My engagement began as shadowing, in the sense proposed by McDonald (2005), but often drifted into participant observation as described by Emerson et al. (1995) and Prus (1996). Over time, the boundary between observer and participant became increasingly blurred as I helped carry bags of food, clothing, and supplies, joined conversations in the street, and accompanied the woman on visits to those living precariously on the social margins.

My take on shadowing fits nicely with McDonald's (2005) description, which states that it involves the researcher following another person as they undertake their daily activities, observing them and asking clarification questions, while taking detailed notes on interactions, moods, gestures and context. While shadowing my gatekeeper in Qaqortoq, I spent many hours accompanying her as she wandered between shops, rubbish disposal containers, places frequented by people, apartments, and municipal offices. Her voluntary work was informal and often spontaneous; there were no official schedules, and the lines between public and private life were blurred. This made shadowing an ideal method, as it allowed me to capture the rhythms of everyday welfare work as they happened.

However, as Emerson et al. (1995) and Goffman (1974) remind us, ethnographic fieldwork is never a passive exercise. The act of being present—what Emerson calls a consequential presence—inevitably shapes what happens in the field. Just the presence of an outsider affects the action and interaction—those present want to know who the outsider is and why they are there.

In Qaqortoq, I adopted an overt participant-observer role, making clear to everyone (my gatekeeper conveyed the same message) that I was a researcher from the University of Greenland (Ilisimatusarfik). Nevertheless, while 'shadowing', it was impossible to remain merely a bystander and often, shadowing blurred directly into participant observation. For example, I assisted in car-

rying heavy bags or 'dumpster diving' (retrieving food thrown into rubbish containers outside of supermarkets), and I stood beside her during emotionally charged encounters, becoming integral to understanding the embodied and relational nature of her outreach practice.

At times, I acted as an unobtrusive observer, quietly taking notes during meetings where participants often spoke Danish to facilitate my understanding of the conversations. As a native English speaker fluent in Danish but not in Kalaallisut, I found that language was a significant methodological consideration throughout my fieldwork. Many Greenlanders speak Danish as a second language, a result of the historical legacy of Danish colonisation and the enduring role of Danish in the education system and public administration. However, the use of Danish in meetings and interactions may have shaped what participants chose to express, how they communicated sensitive experiences, and whose perspectives were most fully represented in the research process. At other times, I was actively engaged, assisting with the delivery of food parcels or listening to the life stories of those seeking support. My fieldwork experience in Qaqortoq, where shadowing frequently merged with participant observation, supports Prus's (1996) assertion that participant observation encompasses more than observation alone; it enables empathic engagement with others lived experiences and fosters a deeper level of understanding.

Fieldnotes and thick description

Throughout fieldwork in Qaqortoq, I kept detailed field notes and a research diary, drawing on Geertz's (1973) concept of thick description. Geertz explains that analysis separates observation from interpretative methods, while thick description introduces a more analytical dimension to ethnographic inquiry, contrasting with earlier approaches that relied primarily on observation. For Geertz, analysis serves to distinguish mere observation from interpretative methodology.

Through analysis, researchers identify the underlying structures and established codes that give meaning to social action. This process begins by recognising and distinguishing the individuals involved, before moving towards an integrative synthesis that accounts for the totality of actions observed. The strength of thick description lies in its capacity to convey the richness and complexity of a situation—a mélange of descriptors that supports a deeper

understanding of the findings. As Lincoln and Guba (1985) point out, however, findings do not emerge directly from thick description itself, but rather from the subsequent analysis of the materials, concepts, or persons that have been "thickly described." The purpose of the analysis is to identify critical structures and established codes within the observations.

What is more, thick description involves recording notes so that the reader of any publication can imagine, or at least get a sense of, what it is like to be in the setting in focus. Thick description involves detailing the setting, including smells, sounds, and tastes—everything. Usually, I recorded notes immediately after significant encounters—sometimes scribbling on my phone to blend into the scene, expanding upon them later in a cafe, and at other times rewriting the following morning while reflections were still fresh. The act of writing was not merely documentary; it was interpretive, a way of making sense of fleeting gestures, silences, and the moral labour that unfolded in front of me.

As Geertz (1973) reminds us, ethnography is not a simple act of observing others but a layered process of interpretation—what he so memorably describes as a "second- and third order" construction. The ethnographer's task is to make sense of experience, continuously reshaping fragments of observation, dialogue, and reflection into something resembling meaning. In this light, my fieldwork diary became more than a repository of notes; it evolved into a living space of interpretation—a place where confusion, emotion, and ethical unease could be acknowledged and worked through rather than pushed aside. Writing became a way of thinking, a means of confronting the ambiguities of the field rather than smoothing them out.

Ethnographic interviewing

During the fieldwork, ethnographic conversations or interviews occurred continuously and developed naturally through the ups and downs of daily life (Whyte 1997). As in other types of qualitative data collection, rather than being separate or formally organised, these interactions unfolded in the rhythm of everyday encounters. They occurred during shared walks, errands, and relaxed discussions, gradually deepening as familiarity and trust grew.

I spoke both informally and in more deliberate, in-depth ways with my gatekeeper—my key interlocutor—as well as with citizens, municipal employees, and volunteers connected through her network. As Prus (1996) and Sprad-

ley (1979) remind us, ethnographic interviewing depends on rapport: on the slow cultivation of trust built through shared moments and mutual presence. Many conversations began in passing — during walks through town, errands, or quiet pauses over coffee—and only later turned towards more intentional explorations of people's life stories, local welfare practices, and the moral frictions surrounding homelessness. These exchanges were dialogical rather than extractive, shaped by curiosity on both sides and a sense of relational responsibility and trust, which guided the tone and rhythm of our interactions.

Reflexivity – the "curious stranger"

Reflexivity lay at the heart of this ethnographic endeavour and was a daily focus point while writing up my electronic journal (Perry & Rasmussen 2023). Moreover, reflexivity is a paramount concept for all field researchers to remember and incorporate into their analysis. With that in mind, it is imperative to remember that while undertaking fieldwork, we (researchers) are not distant figures who are observing from the sidelines, but rather, we become part of the very social world that we seek to understand (Mead 1934; Atkinson & Hammersley 1994).

Understanding does not arise from detachment or from the pretence of objectivity; it takes shape through relationship, through the slow and sometimes uneasy process of involvement that is at once intellectual, emotional, and moral. Insights emerge not in isolation but during encounter—in shared laughter, awkward pauses, acts of kindness, or moments of misunderstanding. To engage ethnographically is therefore to inhabit a space of negotiation—shifting constantly between roles, sensitivities, and perspectives (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994).

In my own case, reflexivity meant remaining acutely aware of how my presence, assumptions, and positionality—as both an outsider and a social work academic—shaped what I could see, what was revealed to me, and what remained out of reach. My sense of foreignness extended beyond language or culture; it was also deeply institutional (Perry & Rasmussen 2023).

I arrived in Qaqortoq as an outsider in several respects: as an Englishman, as an academic, and as someone from Nuuk. These positionalities inevitably influenced both my interactions and interpretations during the fieldwork. Although academic tools and skills provide valuable methods and frameworks

for conducting research, it is necessary to reflect critically on their use, as they may also impose limitations and create blind spots for the researcher. At times, academic methods and theoretical frameworks offered clarity by enabling recognition of structure and pattern where I might otherwise have perceived only fragments. However, these approaches sometimes risked filtering lived experience through categories that did not always fully capture the realities people described and experienced. Recognising this dual position required constant attentiveness—to the power relations embedded in every conversation, to the subtle negotiations of trust and legitimacy, and to the emotional undercurrents that coloured interpretation. Reflexivity thus became less an abstract ideal and more a daily discipline, a way of thinking and feeling one's way through the field with humility and care.

In Arctic research, reflexivity also carries a distinct ethical weight. In communities where knowledge is intensely local and relational, researchers must recognise both their distance and their debt to those who open their worlds to inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln 2014). I have elsewhere described this orientation as adopting the stance of the curious stranger (Perry & Rasmussen 2023)—one who remains both near and distant, aware of being a guest as much as a learner.

Taking such a stance invites both humility and attentiveness. Rather than attempting to 'explain' the local world, the 'curious stranger' listens, invites and confirms input from people in the setting. The curious stranger also participates and reflects on the multiple, sometimes conflicting interpretations that circulate within it.

Understanding the Complexities of Homelessness

The forces that shape homelessness in welfare states like Greenland are layered—social, economic, and historical—and deeply intertwined. Homelessness in Qaqortoq is characterized by significant complexity. The municipality lacks formal strategies to address homelessness, does not employ specialized public outreach teams to systematically engage with homeless individuals, and offers only limited shelter and support services for vulnerable adults. A major structural issue in Greenland is the absence of specific legislation on homelessness, resulting in no legal obligation for municipalities to provide support, housing, or targeted services for homeless citizens. More broadly, Greenland lacks a

comprehensive social service law specifically addressing the needs of vulnerable and homeless adults, which contributes to fragmented and inconsistent support across municipalities. Political attention at both local and national levels is primarily focused on children, families, and other welfare areas considered more politically urgent. Consequently, individuals without stable housing become increasingly marginalized and encounter structural barriers at nearly every stage. The democratic welfare system, intended to promote public participation and inclusion, fails to do so when those affected are individuals without a fixed address (Arnfjord & Perry 2025).

On paper, the welfare model promises participation. In reality, there is little for anyone to participate in—no budget to draw from, no clear framework, no one who truly holds the reins. The local administration does what it can, but its resources are threadbare, its legal footing uncertain. In that thin space where policy fails to reach, something else begins to grow. Ordinary people step forward, filling the cracks with what they have: time, empathy, persistence. Their efforts are fragile, improvised, yet somehow essential—kept alive more by conscience than by funding. Every small step forward, like the opening of a new drop-in centre, carries hope for a while. However, without long-term vision or steady support, hope alone starts to feel like another patch over a widening gap.

The geography of Greenland introduces additional complexity to the issue. Vulnerability is spatially determined by factors such as distance, uneven development, and welfare colonialism. Welfare colonialism, in this context, denotes the persistent influence of historically centralised, externally imposed administrative systems, resulting in uneven distribution of welfare support and services across Greenland. Smaller towns and settlements remain structurally disadvantaged, with limited access to professional support services, fewer housing opportunities, and reduced availability of specialised social interventions compared to larger urban centres such as Nuuk. These inherited inequalities continue to determine who receives support, the timeliness of assistance, and who is at risk of being excluded from the welfare system. Consequently, the landscape of inequality complicates efforts to address homelessness, making it more than a matter of policy design. The same dynamic can be heard in the stories people tell. Those living without stable housing speak of deep inequities woven through the fabric of social life—inequities so ordinary

they barely register in official statistics. Staffing shortages, inconsistent funding, and precarious employment leave workers exhausted, and their capacity to offer consistent care is quietly eroded. Even among the better-resourced welfare states of Europe, similar pressures show through, but in Greenland, they are sharper, more exposed. A shortage of housing, insufficiently trained staff, and limited political attention have contributed to the marginalization of individuals, often compounded by racial prejudice in both housing and public services. The origins of these conditions extend back several decades. Comparable patterns have been documented in other northern and Indigenous regions, including Whitehorse and Yellowknife in northern Canada, where researchers have demonstrated that colonial settlement policies, displacement, and uneven welfare development have contributed to homelessness and persistent social exclusion (Christensen 2016, 2017). These parallels are significant for Greenland, as they illustrate that homelessness in Arctic and Indigenous contexts is frequently linked to broader historical and structural processes rather than solely to individual or economic factors.

In the North, even geography takes sides. Distance, weather, and uneven development all conspire to reproduce the same old disparities, and it is Indigenous Northerners who continue to feel their weight most sharply. You can see it by who gets housing first, and who waits the longest, and who gives up waiting altogether. To confront homelessness in any real sense, reforms will have to move carefully through this tangle of history, culture, and constraint—the parts of life that policy language so often leaves out. Structural change cannot stop at meeting immediate needs; it must reach deeper, prying open the institutional habits that keep exclusion alive.

The next step, then, is to bring ethnographic understanding directly into policymaking—to let the insights drawn from lived experience shape how welfare gets designed and delivered. As Christensen and Arnfjord (2020) argue, a culturally sensitive approach grounded in local knowledge offers the only real path toward policies that are both effective and humane.

The Paradox of Homelessness in Welfare States

Greenland presents striking—and at times unsettling—contradictions in its pursuit of universal welfare. The notion of the welfare state rests on a powerful moral vision—a belief that all citizens should be treated with fairness and

dignity, and that the state itself holds a collective responsibility to provide care and protection when life becomes difficult. In practice, however, this vision is far from complete. The persistent visibility of homelessness in welfare societies unsettles the very ideals on which those systems are built. During fieldwork, it is not difficult to notice how the presence of people without stable shelter disrupts the everyday image of social security that these societies wish to uphold. Their visibility exposes an uncomfortable paradox: a state that promises equality but struggles to extend that promise to everyone (Christensen 2017; Benjaminsen 2022).

When seen through the lens of ethnography, homelessness defies neat description, slipping through the language of administration and refusing to fit the orderly categories of welfare policy. It is tempting to call it a failure of governance, or simply a shortage of resources. However, that feels too easy. The problem runs deeper—into habits, histories, and the quiet routines that decide who receives care and who slips beyond it. Homelessness does not neatly fit into policy categories; instead, it sprawls, it seeps into everyday society. Sometimes it is visible, and sometimes not. Nonetheless, in small communities, residents know who people experiencing homelessness are and often stigmatise them as unworthy of help or support, "they should get a job," or "they are just scroungers." In small communities, so-called 'normal' people often look away or totally ignore marginalised individuals they encounter in the 'street.'

From what I have observed, these moments are often fleeting and awkward, passing unnoticed. However, if you linger long enough, you notice the awkwardness of the 'normal' encountering the marginalised citizen. I have also observed similar awkward encounters between marginalised citizens and public sector employees in municipal offices—the very places where welfare should be accessible. During fieldwork conducted for this study in both Nuuk and Qaqortoq, I consistently observed comparable interactions between vulnerable citizens and the municipal welfare system. These encounters generally consisted of brief exchanges at the municipal counter, after which individuals were instructed to call a telephone number or consult with an unidentified case manager. Frequently, citizens departed without receiving immediate assistance. These patterns illustrate broader structural characteristics of the welfare system, such as bureaucratic procedures, gatekeeping mechanisms, and the demands placed on limited welfare resources. Moreover, still, it is

there—in the tone of an encounter, in the silence that follows, in the uneasy compassion that no policy language can quite contain.

At first glance, homelessness may seem to belong to the private world of misfortune—the outcome of a broken relationship, a dismissal from work, or the slow erosion brought on by addiction. However, beneath such individual stories lie deeper, less visible and more powerful forces. It is impossible to speak of welfare in Greenland without acknowledging the weight of history. The legacies of colonial rule and the quiet endurance of hierarchy remain, though rarely named. They surface in policies and in the everyday routines of welfare work, shaping how help is imagined—and who is seen as worthy of it (Christensen et al. 2024; Benjaminsen 2022). Whether in a municipal office in Qaqortoq or during a home visit in Nuuk, traces of that older order still linger, not as overt authority but as quiet habit—woven into the moral fabric of care itself.

These hierarchies creep through daily routines and social expectations, often unnoticed, yet they leave traces—in who feels entitled to ask for help and who no longer bothers. You can sense it in the welfare offices of Qaqortoq, in the cautious tone of a conversation, or in the hesitation before a signature is made. Seen this way, homelessness becomes more than a symptom of poverty. It is a mirror—a way of reading the contradictions of the welfare state itself. The ideals of equality and shared responsibility meet the stubborn realities of bureaucracy and scarcity. Forms, budgets, and eligibility rules collide with fatigue, pride, and need. Moreover, somewhere between principle and practice—fragile, imperfect, and ongoing—the unfinished character of the welfare state reveals itself once more.

Homelessness in Greenland is not just a problem waiting for a solution. It grows out of good intentions—policies made in hope, applied with care—that too often fail to see the longer shadows they cast. Efforts to ease suffering sometimes end up renewing it. A rule meant to help one group quietly excludes another; a reform designed to simplify life makes it more precarious for those already near the edge. This tension is particularly evident within Greenland's welfare system. In Nuuk, the municipality established a "container village" composed of converted shipping containers to provide temporary accommodation for homeless citizens who were either employed or enrolled in education. While this initiative was intended as a practical response to the

housing crisis, it also highlighted the limitations of short-term welfare interventions. Residents were required to pay rent and could be evicted if they failed to meet municipal requirements, which at times placed outreach workers in an ethically challenging position as enforcers within the welfare system. In contrast, Qaqortoq lacks any formal homelessness policy, leaving vulnerable citizens to create their own informal safety nets. These examples are not isolated incidents but rather reflect a broader structural misalignment, where goodwill confronts entrenched administrative practices and longstanding hierarchies that continue to define the practical meaning of "care."

The architecture of welfare in Greenland continues to reflect Danish designs. Welfare frameworks and administrative systems were largely transferred from Denmark during the colonial and post-colonial periods, often with minimal adaptation to Greenland's geographic, cultural, and social realities (Christensen & Arnfjord 2020). As a result, welfare institutions, legislation, and bureaucratic structures were established based on Danish assumptions regarding settlement patterns, infrastructure, language, and access to services. These assumptions persist despite Greenland's vast distances, smaller communities, housing shortages, and distinct Indigenous cultural context. The foundations established in a different era continue to create structural disadvantages for Indigenous citizens and the institutions intended to serve them. In Qaqortoq, this paradox is evident. While democratic principles promise participation and welfare protection, there is no municipal homelessness strategy, no specialised outreach system, and only limited support structures for vulnerable adults (Christensen 2016, 2017). Observations and discussions during fieldwork in Qaqortoq revealed that meetings on social welfare priorities consistently emphasized children and families, while homelessness among vulnerable adults received significantly less political and administrative attention. Previous research on welfare provision and homelessness in Greenland has identified similar patterns, indicating that this prioritization has become a broader national norm. Consequently, adults without stable housing frequently disappear from political and institutional consideration. These selective forms of care not only perpetuate inequality but also reveal a moral fault line within the welfare state, highlighting the disparity between publicly promoted welfare ideals and the forms of support prioritized in practice.

Such selective care does more than reproduce inequality; it exposes the moral fault line running through the welfare state—between what it proclaims and what it sustains.

In the absence of firm policy, help has taken other shapes. In Qaqortoq, it is neighbours who volunteer—not municipal offices, NGOs (or social workers)—who step forward. They share food, offer spare rooms, and check in on those sleeping rough. These gestures by Qaqortoq residents convey benevolence and kindness while also serving as a quiet protest against a system that fails to act and looks the other way. Watching these encounters unfold, it becomes clear that care here is not abstract. It is negotiated daily—through fatigue, humour, and the fragile dignity that comes from being seen.

The opening of the new drop-in centre in Qaqortoq was met with relief and optimism by residents, particularly homeless individuals and the volunteers who had previously supported them informally. This initiative arose in response to increased public awareness of homelessness in the town and mounting frustration regarding the municipality's limited response to vulnerable adults lacking stable housing. The municipality applied for and received funding from a government welfare fund, which enabled the establishment and operation of the drop-in centre, including staffing and operational expenses. The centre thus represented one of the first formalised welfare initiatives targeting homeless citizens in Qaqortoq. For some, it provided warmth, care, access to coffee on cold mornings, and facilities for washing clothes and showering. For others, it offered a safe and orderly environment, removed from the instability, social exclusion, and harsh conditions associated with homelessness. However, even if the drop-in-centre functions and becomes a success at some point, any small success will sit uneasily against the broader absence of a real homeless strategy not backed up by committed legislation (Christensen & Arnfjord 2020). Temporary warmth and comfort cannot stand in for long-term housing.

What unfolds in Greenland is part of a wider story, and across Europe and throughout OECD countries, homelessness is again on the rise. Sound research concerning homelessness in Europe makes it clear that there is a steady increase in homeless persons (FEANTSA 2023). Behind the statistics lie familiar struggles: governments still searching for sustainable strategies, municipalities

improvising under strain, and people trying to survive in the spaces where welfare systems falter (FEANTSA 2023).

Individuals working most closely with marginalised and homeless citizens, including outreach workers, shelter staff, volunteers, and social professionals, frequently bear the consequences of structural deficiencies within Greenland's welfare system. Fieldwork conducted in both Nuuk and Qaqortoq revealed increasing signs of emotional and institutional strain among frontline workers. Many employees and volunteers operated under challenging conditions, including limited resources, ambiguous organisational structures, housing shortages, addiction-related issues, and repeated exposure to trauma and social suffering. This strain manifested in subtle, everyday moments, such as silences between appointments, visible exhaustion, and the emotional effort required to consistently support vulnerable citizens. In this world, burnout is not a managerial cliché but a lived condition: an accumulation of frustration, sorrow, and the quiet hopelessness of trying to help within systems that rarely change (FEANTSA 2014).

In Canada's northern territories, the same colonial echoes linger—racism, displacement, the slow erosion of belonging (Christensen 2016, 2017). Everywhere, the pattern repeats: welfare ideals colliding with the limits of their own machinery. To move beyond it will take more than another reform. It will require a reckoning with history, with inequality, and with the belief that welfare can be engineered from above. A humane system must be built from the ground up, out of recognition, solidarity, and the fragile networks of care that people in places like Qaqortoq already practise every day.

Grassroots Compassion in Qaqortoq

In the absence of a formalised shelter system, ordinary citizens in Qaqortoq have assumed a quasi-welfare role, responding with compassion and improvisation to the unmet needs of vulnerable residents. During fieldwork, the role of two individuals stood out. A local woman, retired from healthcare work, has turned her garage into an informal supply depot. Each week, she distributes sandwiches, soup, sanitary pads, socks, and donated clothes. She does not receive public recognition or financial aid for this work—her motivation stems from moral conviction and a deep concern about rising inequality in her town.

Another man has transformed his modest home into a nightly refuge. Up to twenty people sleep in his living room and hallway, their presence marked by sleeping bags, blankets, and quiet conversations. He provides hot drinks and a place to wash. Yet he is not a trained social worker or supported by any state programme. His house is crowded, his bills are high, and he has voiced concern over burnout.

These acts of compassion are not isolated. Other townspeople offer rides, deliver meals, or check in on vulnerable individuals. However, the sustainability of this model is in question. While such efforts reveal community solidarity, they also risk reinforcing the withdrawal of the state from its responsibilities. There is a fine line between citizen empowerment and the outsourcing of structural welfare duties. Without institutional backing, these helpers face growing strain—and the people they support remain in precarious conditions.

Moving past this will not happen through another reform paper or a neat policy slogan. What is needed is harder to measure—a reckoning with history, with the uneven ground that inequality has laid beneath us, and with the comforting idea that welfare can be designed from above. Real change grows from below, from people who still choose to recognise one another when the system forgets to. In towns like Qaqortoq, you can already see it: neighbours checking in, volunteers sharing food, quiet gestures that hold a community together. From such ordinary acts of care, fragile though they are, something more humane might begin to take shape.

In Qaqortoq, a small town pressed between mountains and sea, the contradictions of welfare are felt rather than theorised. Ideals meet limits here every day—in the cold air outside the municipal office, in the quiet exchanges of help between neighbours. Homelessness seldom looks dramatic. There are no tents or crowded shelters, only people moving from one couch to another, spending nights in entryways or storage sheds, carrying their belongings in plastic bags that tell more than any statistic could.

In the months of fieldwork, the realities of life in Qaqortoq never appeared in official reports or meeting minutes. They surfaced elsewhere—in fragments, in passing—a story told over weak coffee. A joke whispered in the supermarket queue. A silence that stretched a little too long before someone changed the subject.

What I kept noticing was how generosity seemed to hold the place together. It was the real currency of survival. A pensioner making quiet deliveries up icy steps; a man who left his door unlocked each night so others could sleep inside; volunteers walking the streets after dark, checking on whoever had not found a place to stay. It was not coordinated or perfect, but it kept the edges of the town from unravelling.

That same ethic of care carried exhaustion in its shadow. People spoke about promises that never came, forms that vanished somewhere inside the system, cases that were "no one's job." One municipal worker sighed and said, "We just do what we can." The new drop-in centre—launched with speeches, hope, and the smell of fresh paint—was often dark behind its windows a few months later. Staff were stretched thin; funding had begun to dry up. By February, the coffee machine stood cold more days than not.

Qaqortoq stopped being just a place in my notes. It became a mirror—one that reflected both the tenderness and the failure of the welfare state. In this town, care was constantly improvised, where ideals came undone and were stitched back together by people who refused to look away.

Field Observations: Everyday Ethics and Emotional Labour

Additional observations revealed how weather, visibility, and stigma shaped encounters with homelessness in Qaqortoq. In mid-November, the town square became a space of refuge and interaction; however, during heavy snowfall, those without shelter disappeared from public view. As one local woman put it, "They vanish like shadows when the snow hits." This invisibility not only shielded them from scrutiny but also made it harder for help to reach them.

One municipal worker shared that he often felt "powerless and ashamed" when confronted by citizens doing more than the local services. Another explained that the lack of specialised facilities meant they could offer little beyond emergency food vouchers. These institutional reflections illustrate the strain placed on frontline staff navigating policy voids and ethical ambiguity.

The man who opened his home explained that he began doing so after witnessing two young people sleeping near the container depot in freezing conditions. "I couldn't live with myself if someone froze to death out there," he said. He continued to talk about the rules in his home—no alcohol, quiet after

11 p.m.—and acknowledged that he sometimes must turn people away if all the space is taken: "It hurts, but my place does not have endless space" he added. His voice trembled when recounting a night in December when an elderly man collapsed at his doorway. He called the ambulance, which took over two hours to arrive.

The local woman who distributes food said she feels both pride and frustration. "They thank me, but I ask, where is the system? Where are the people who get paid for this?" Her voice carried a mix of anger and sadness. She described an incident where the municipality disposed of the donated winter clothing, she left at the town square because it was deemed "a public nuisance."

Community response to the planned drop-in centre has been ambivalent. While some welcomed it, others feared it would become "a place to hide the problem rather than solve it," as one young man who used to sleep at the harbour put it. A local police officer expressed cautious optimism but questioned the long-term planning: "Will it be staffed by people who understand addiction? Or will it just be a warm room with coffee?"

Burnout among citizen helpers was palpable. Both the man and woman interviewed expressed emotional exhaustion. "I cry more often now," said the woman. The man described recurring headaches and sleep problems. "Sometimes I feel like I'm the only one standing in the cold," he said, his breath visible in the frosty night air. These reflections raise questions not only about sustainability, but also about the moral economy of care in remote communities.

Moving past this will not happen through another reform paper or a neat policy slogan. What is needed is harder to measure—a reckoning with history, with the uneven ground that inequality has laid beneath us, and with the comforting idea that welfare can be designed from above. Real change grows from below, from people who still choose to recognise one another when the system forgets to. In towns like Qaqortoq, you can already see it: neighbours checking in, volunteers sharing food, quiet gestures that hold a community together. From such ordinary acts of care, fragile though they are, something more humane might begin to take shape.

Recognition, Stigma, and the Fragility of Welfare Relations

When you spend enough time in Qaqortoq, specific patterns begin to take shape—not as data points, but as feelings that return in different forms. They can be understood through two overlapping frames: recognition and stigma, both quietly tracing the ways dignity is either protected or worn away in daily life.

Honneth (1995) writes that recognition is never just an idea. It happens, or fails to happen, between people—in a glance, in a gesture, in the simple act of being noticed. To be recognised is to feel seen, to have one's worth affirmed, however briefly. When that moment does not come, something subtle collapses inside; it leaves a mark that no report or welfare form can quite repair. When that acknowledgement is missing—when institutions turn away or neighbours grow silent—people feel it as invisibility, humiliation, or loss of self-respect.

In Qaqortoq, this absence was tangible. Those without a stable home spoke not only of cold nights and empty cupboards, but of being unseen—of living in the blind corners of the welfare system. However, amid neglect, moments of recognition surfaced too: a neighbour bringing food, a volunteer stopping by to talk. In such gestures, recognition became relational and embodied—what Honneth might call elementary acts of solidarity, brief but deeply human interruptions in the logic of exclusion. Goffman's (1963) notion of stigma helps to illuminate the other side of this struggle.

In Qaqortoq, anonymity is almost impossible. Everyone knows whose cousin you are, who you used to live with, what went wrong, and what you are trying to hide. In such a small place, homelessness carries a moral shadow. It is spoken about softly, if at all—seen not only as bad luck but sometimes as a kind of personal failing. The judgement is rarely direct; it sits in the pauses, in the glances that slide away, in the polite distance people keep. Stigma here does not shout. It creeps through daily life, settling as a muted shame, the kind that makes a person walk faster through town, hoping not to be seen.

Municipal workers and social professionals are not outside this dynamic. In interviews, many spoke about their own unease—the pull between compassion and compliance, between wanting to help and needing to record, assess, or deny. They live within what Lipsky (1980) called the street-level bureaucracy, where discretion and moral judgment constantly collide with institutional constraint.

When you look closely, Qaqortoq shows more than gaps in administration or missing policies. What it reveals is the moral architecture of the welfare state itself—a fragile framework of care, recognition, and quiet neglect that still manages to hold people in place. Recognition and stigma are not peripheral details here; they are the machinery that keeps the system moving, deciding who is seen, who is helped, and who drifts past unnoticed. The more profound contradiction sits in that motion: the very institutions created to care can, almost without intending it, turn need into paperwork and people into cases—a transformation so ordinary it rarely feels like cruelty, yet it leaves its mark all the same.

Conclusion: Between Structural Reform and Everyday Ethics

In the end, what Qaqortoq makes visible is that homelessness in Greenland cannot be grasped through policy language alone. It reveals a fracture—a gap between institutional frameworks and the moral worlds of those they claim to serve. The small acts of compassion that hold people together are vital, but they remain fragile stand-ins for the recognition that welfare institutions were meant to provide. However, even in that fragility, care persists. It reappears in everyday gestures—a shared meal, a door left open, a conversation that stretches longer than it needs to—signs that solidarity and moral responsibility are not extinguished by bureaucratic failure.

To confront homelessness in any meaningful way will require more than another technical reform. It will take an ethical reorientation of the welfare state itself: one that recognises the emotional and relational labour embedded in social work, one that confronts the historical legacies that still shape exclusion, and one that restores dignity to those who have too often been rendered invisible. Real change begins not with policy but with presence—with a renewed politics of recognition that takes human connection, rather than regulation, as the starting point for social repair.

This situation is particularly significant because grassroots initiatives have emerged as critical responses to institutional shortcomings. Local community initiatives in Qaqortoq aim to address deficiencies resulting from insufficient municipal support. Ethnographic methods have been especially effective in identifying structural and systemic gaps related to homelessness, such as the absence of formal strategies, limited outreach services, housing shortages, and

fragmented welfare provision. Rather than focusing primarily on individual narratives, this analysis investigates how homelessness and social marginalisation are shaped and perpetuated by institutional practices, political priorities, and welfare structures that often fail to address the diverse needs of vulnerable Greenlanders. The increasing reliance on voluntary and informal support mechanisms raises important ethical questions regarding the welfare state's obligations to its most vulnerable citizens. Although community solidarity is vital in supporting homeless individuals in daily life, the provision of essential needs such as shelter, warmth, food, and safety should not depend primarily on unpaid voluntary efforts.

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