



Access to Safe, Sustainable, & Healthy Housing in Cambridge Bay, Nunavut

Research Finding Highlights (2025)

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What this project is about

A research project about the housing crisis in Cambridge Bay, Nunavut, through:

- interviews with community members & service providers
- reviews of laws, policies, guidelines, manuals, forms, and other texts



Emergency
shelters &
transitional
housing

Public
Housing

Staff
housing

Private
Rentals

Home
ownership

Experiences of people looking for a home



*“There was times where I had to
bite my tongue, just to have a place to stay.”*
–Community member

Stories of homeless Inuit women

- Inuit women talked about being kicked out by their partners & going from house to house, looking for a place to stay for the night. They were often worried about their health, safety, and their children’s well-being.



A person can apply for an emergency protection order under the *Family Abuse Intervention Act*, which can include ordering an abuser to leave the house for some time.

But it can be difficult to make an abuser to follow the order, especially in a small community like Cambridge Bay.

- Some women have to find their own ways to deal with their situation, without the law to help them. This can involve couchsurfing with friends or family, staying at a shelter when possible, or returning to their partner.

Experiences of people looking for a home

Housing for people going through the criminal justice system

The housing shortage affects people going through the criminal justice system for crimes such as domestic assault.

- When a person is charged with a crime, sometimes there is an option to live in the community on bail while they wait for their trial.
 - But if the only place they can live is with the victim that they have been accused of assaulting, the court will probably not release them on bail. Instead, they will have to wait for their trial in jail.
- This also happens for people who have been convicted of a crime: the law sometimes allows them to serve their sentence in the community, rather than in jail.
 - But if the only place they can live is with the victim, the court will probably not grant a conditional sentence.
- This means that people must stay in jail, even though they don't have to be in jail, all because of the housing shortage in the community.





Experiences of people looking for a home

The bigger picture:
The need for emergency shelters & transitional housing

- There are very few emergency shelters and almost no transitional/supportive housing like halfway houses in Nunavut.
- As a result, homelessness often appears in the form of couchsurfing and overcrowded homes.
- Cambridge Bay has homeless shelters, but they are often full. Other communities in Nunavut do not have shelters, so people come from all over the territory to stay in Cambridge Bay's shelters.
- **Having enough long-term support for shelters and transitional housing across the territory will help address these problems. These programs should be Inuit-specific and Inuit-led, to make sure Inuit needs are met.**

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Public Housing



“The narrative in Nunavut right now is that children are told, wait and when you turn eighteen, go put your name on the housing list.”
–Service provider

Different ideas about the role of public housing

There is a difference between how the territorial government and community members see public housing.

Government of Nunavut view of public housing	Community member's view of public housing
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Only for the lowest income population – not the main form of housing• People should eventually move to other forms of housing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• It is the main form of housing that people are expected to remain living in 

Community members' views of the role of public housing should be understood in the context of the story of Cambridge Bay:

Inuit in the Kitikmeot region had their own lifestyle living on the land before colonialism where the Canadian government persuaded them to move permanently to the settlement of Cambridge Bay by promising to provide them with housing.

Inuit live under laws, policies, and programs that reflect the government's view of public housing. It does not reflect their view of public housing, based Inuit's memories of the promises the government made to them under colonialism.



Public Housing: The waiting list

- There was confusion about how the waiting list for public housing works
- Service providers play an important role helping people to understand the process for applying for public housing.
- Public housing is given out using a system that rates each application with a number of points.
- It can be challenging to translate people's housing needs into number-based points, especially if people's situations are complicated.
- This point-rating system for public housing is meant to be fair by treating everyone in the same way, but some community members still do not feel that the system is fair, because they do not understand why other people get housing and while others do not.

Housing system view of fairness	Community members' view of fairness
The process: Are people treated equally and in the same way? 	The results: do people who need housing get it? 



The law is limited in its ability to help people who are unsatisfied with how public housing is given out, unless there has been a specific mistake in how the rules have been applied.

The root issue is the housing shortage: some people will get public housing while others will not, so everyone on the waiting list must compete with each other for a home.

Recently announced increased funding support for public housing programs, for Inuit and led by Inuit, may start to address these root issues.

"It's a bit of a zero-sum game in a crumbling pie." – Service provider

Public housing: Repair needs

What the <i>Residential Tenancies Act</i> says	The reality
Landlords must make repairs within 10 days of being told about the problem	Repairs takes much longer in reality – sometimes years
The Act offers ways to order the landlord to make the repairs 	Community members were not aware of this option to use the law, nor were some service providers. 

Can the law could actually be used to solve repair needs?

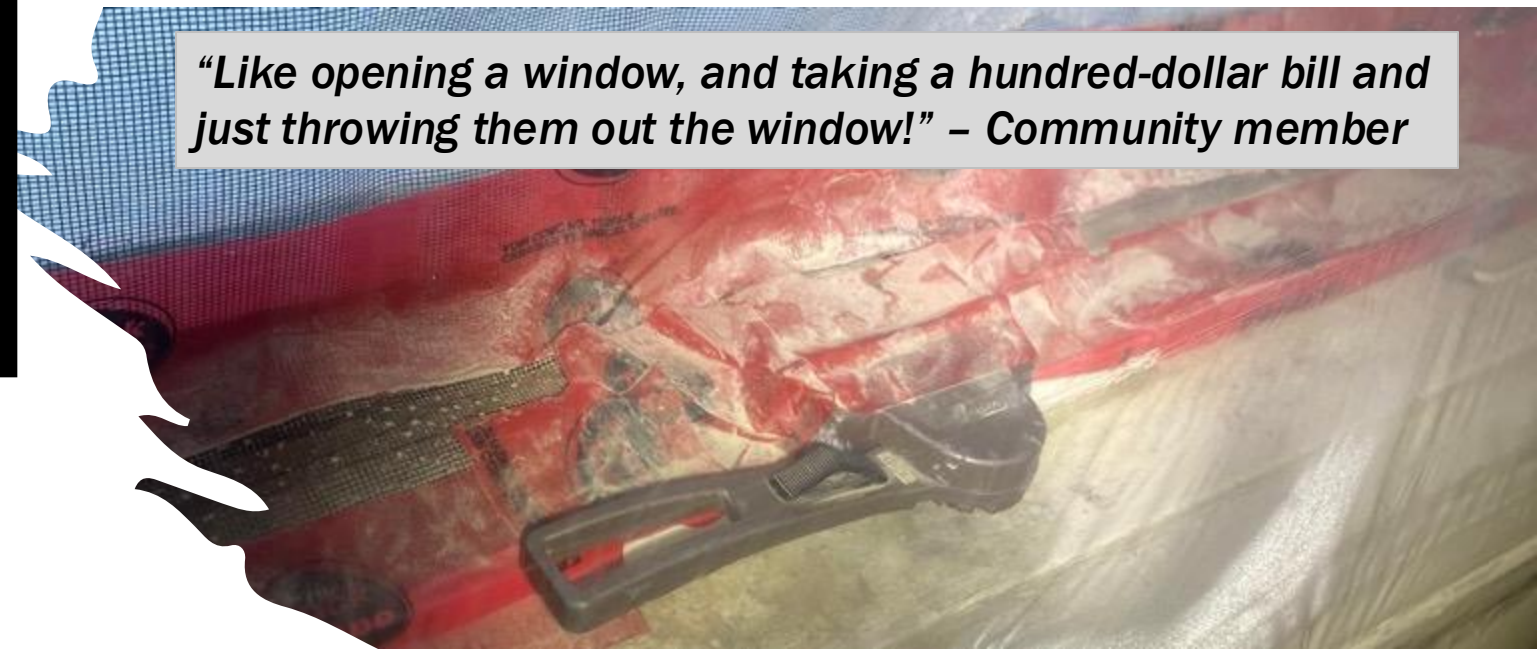
- Limited workers & supplies to make repairs (worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic).
- Older houses were not designed for the Arctic environment t& have more issues.

It takes more time & work to make repairs in the community:
The law alone will not necessarily solve these problems through an order.

- Addressing the underlying issue requires having enough resources, including workers and supplies.
- Otherwise, these disrepair issues in public housing will continue to negatively affect the well-being of Inuit in many ways.



“Like opening a window, and taking a hundred-dollar bill and just throwing them out the window!” – Community member



Public Housing: the story behind tenant damages, rental arrears & unacceptable tenants

What we should to think about when we hear and use labels like “unacceptable tenants”: There is always a story behind these labels, stories that aren’t always reflected in the system.

“Ordinary wear & tear”	“Vandalism”	“Tenant damages”
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• From regular use• Tenant is not responsible for paying for repairs	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Caused by someone that is not the tenant, a household member or a guest• Tenant is not responsible for paying, if they file a police report	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Damage caused by tenant, household member or guest that is not ordinary wear & tear or vandalism• Tenant is responsible for paying for repairs

- Laws, policies & guidelines create labels about “unacceptable tenants” who owe money or are known to have damaged the home (“tenant damages”), etc.
- **How does damage happen?** Sometimes the tenant does not have much control, such as family violence incidents.
- The local housing organization requires tenants to get a police report to prove that damages were caused by vandalism & are not tenant damages. However, police cannot always prove who caused the damage, only that the damage happened.
- Serious consequences for tenant damages & rental arrears: Tenants may not get more housing support, including staff housing or down payment assistance to buy a house.





- Lawyers can help tenants who owe money, such as helping to arrange a payment plan or defending the tenant in legal proceedings.
- Lawyers can only help if tenants know to ask them for help: Community members were not aware that this was something they could ask lawyers for help with.
- Of course, lawyers also can only find solutions from within the law: they cannot solve underlying problems such as family violence, poverty, or colonialism.

Emergency shelters & transitional housing	Public Housing	Staff housing	Private Rentals	Home ownership
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Staff housing

Who gets staff housing?
Talking about fairness
in staff housing

Policies & practices for staff housing	Community members' observations of staff housing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Often tied to certain job positions Given out by allocation committee 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Good quality, often furnished Given to non-Inuit workers from out of town Some units are vacant 

- Policies & practices do not specifically say that staff housing is not for local Inuit workers.
- But in practice, community members see staff housing as mainly being for non-Inuit workers who are hired from out of town. This does not seem fair.



Even though the policies were meant to be fair and do not say to treat Inuit differently from non-Inuit, they have produced results that community members do not find to be fair.

Laws, policies and programs should be carefully designed to consider their effect on Inuit; it is not enough to focus only on the process.



Staff housing tenants are still at risk of homelessness.



- The *Residential Tenancies Act* says that a person who loses their job must move out of their staff housing unit within a week.
- This means that staff housing tenants are at risk of becoming homeless very quickly if they lose their job.

Government view of staff housing

A temporary arrangement until the worker can find a private rental or buy a house



People's experience of staff housing

Private rentals and homeownership is expensive, so staff housing is more permanent – unless they lose their job.



The government sees staff housing as being temporary, giving workers a place to live until they move into housing in the private market. But in reality, it is not easy to make this move out of staff housing.

Private rentals

The government would like to have more people eventually move on from public housing & staff housing into housing in the private market, like private rentals.

But this can be difficult because there are not a lot of opportunities to rent privately, and private rentals are expensive.

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- Many private rental units in Cambridge Bay are actually a type of staff housing, rented out to employers to rent out to their employees.
- Some community members talked about having to leave Cambridge Bay and/or not return to Cambridge Bay, because finding a place to rent is so expensive, even though they have a good job. Communities like Cambridge Bay may lose its skilled workers if those workers cannot find a place to live.
- Some of the challenges of building new homes and maintaining old ones is due to not having enough skilled workers. This is the vicious cycle of the housing crisis.
- The Government of Nunavut now offers a housing benefit to help people pay for private rentals, even though the government's goal is to have less people dependent on government funding for housing.

workers leave
because of lack
of housing

houses cannot be
built/ because of
lack of workers

Private Homeownership



Emergency shelters & transitional housing	Public Housing	Staff housing	Private Rentals	Home ownership
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- Homeownership is an important housing goal for the Government of Nunavut - it would like to have people less dependent on government funding for housing in Nunavut.
- Houses are expensive to buy in Cambridge Bay – too expensive for many community members.
- The government offers funding programs to make homeownership more affordable, such as the Nunavut Down Payment Assistance Program. Homeowners were clear that they could not have bought their home without this program, but some participants felt that the amount provided through this program is not high enough for the cost of houses.
- Homeowners also face difficulties in getting repairs and renovations done to their homes.
- One homeowner shared her story about struggling with the costs of maintaining her home, leaving her to wonder if it was a good decision to purchase her home in the first place.



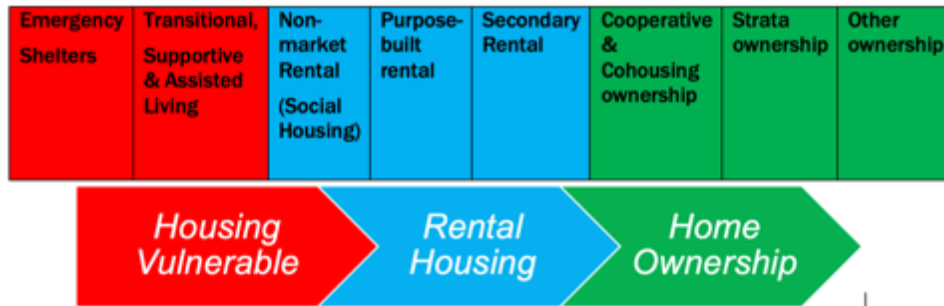
Homeowners can face difficulties in accessing lawyers for their law-related issues, because of the small numbers of available lawyers who can provide services to them in this area.

Thinking about policy solutions: Is it always about buying a house?



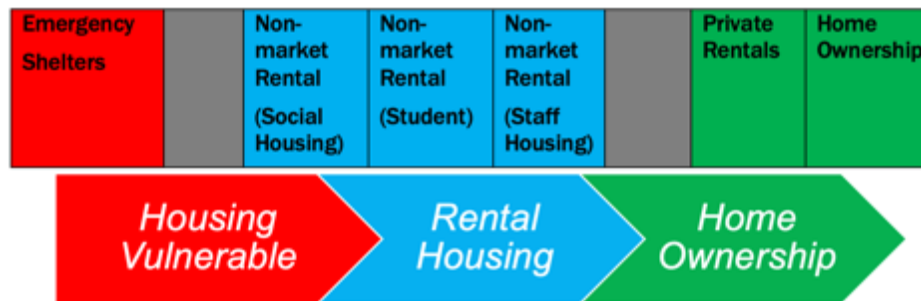
The government's view of the housing crisis

An Example of a Complete Housing Continuum



Source: City of North Vancouver

Housing Continuum in Nunavut



The housing crisis is more than simply a shortage of houses.

How can housing policies support goals of Inuit self-determination?

- Many of the same issues occur for people living in different types of housing, including overcrowding and repair issues.
- This is because the same factors influence them:
 - the Arctic environment
 - the impacts of colonialism
- The government's current view of housing is based on housing models from southern Canada, prioritizing individualist private housing markets & focusing on having a housing continuum that looks like those of southern Canadian models.
- Housing as a market commodity or a financial investment is only one way to look at housing. There are other ways to look at housing, like as a human right or in terms of relationships.
- It may be useful to imagine what an Inuit-specific housing model might look like, suiting Inuit values and needs, to support Inuit self-determination.

Thinking about justice and housing in Cambridge Bay

- In bureaucratic processes within the housing system and legal system, people's lived experiences are filtered & translated to fit with the requirements in ways that may not really reflect their experiences anymore. This can sometimes have a dehumanizing effect, especially in the context of colonialism.
- This gap between what these processes consider to be relevant & how people experience the world can affect whether people see these systems as being fair.
- Bureaucratic systems like housing and the law are often designed to be "fair" with a focus on the fairness of the process. But community members based their sense of fairness on the results, rather than simply the process.
- When we research access to justice, we need a holistic view that looks at how people experience the law, & their perceptions of justice, rather than simply studying laws in isolation.



What laws/policies say

The *Residential Tenancies Act* & Nunavut Housing Corporation policies set out processes & provide remedies...



What happens on the ground

...But community members may not be aware of them and may not benefit from them unless service providers act as intermediaries for them



Thinking about justice and housing in Cambridge Bay



- Why don't people make use of the law as a tool for their housing issues?
 - Some may not know that they can use the law because they don't see their housing issue as a law-related problem.
 - Sometimes there are limits to how the law can help, especially if there is no basis for a legal intervention or if actual enforcement is challenging.
 - Some community members may be reluctant to trust the ability of the legal system to help them, because of the impacts of colonialism – and in particular, the imposition of a different legal system on Inuit who already had their own practices of dispute resolution for centuries.



Solutions for access to justice issues need to involve more than simply public legal education, but a holistic, Inuit-specific, trauma-informed, cross-sectoral perspective to address the underlying issues of the housing crisis in Nunavut.



About me

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The statements in this document represent my own personal views as a scholar, and do not represent the views of any of my employers, past or current.

Thank you for logistical support: the Kitikmeot Friendship Society; the Law Society of Nunavut; Polar Knowledge Canada

Funding acknowledgments: Joseph-Armand Bombardier Graduate Scholarship - Doctoral Program (Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council); the Shirley Greenberg Scholarship; University of Ottawa Knowledge Mobilization Scholarship; Environment, Society and Policy Group, University of Ottawa