

Book Review: Indigenous Homelessness

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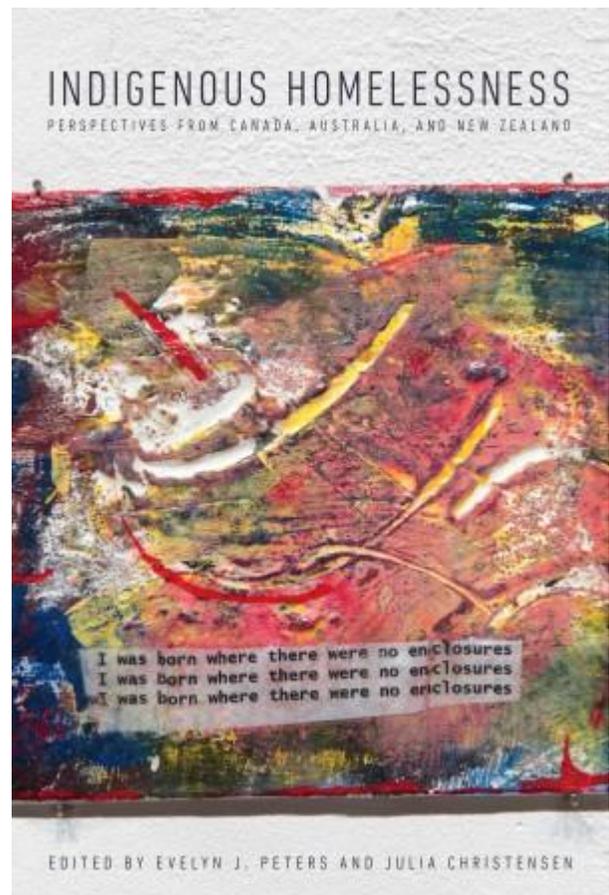
By Nick Falvo, PhD

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[Evelyn Peters](#) and [Julia Christensen](#) recently wrote an [edited book](#) on homelessness among Indigenous peoples in Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Excluding the Introduction and Conclusion, more than half of the chapters are either authored or co-authored by an Indigenous person. A useful contribution to researchers, students, consultants and policymakers in all three countries, it should be required reading for anyone wanting to learn more about homelessness experienced by Indigenous peoples.

Here are 10 things to know about this book.

1. **The book contains lots of useful information.** In Chapter 1, Christensen—citing [research done previously by Yale Belanger, Olu Awosoga and Gabrielle Weasel Head](#)—notes that on any given night in Canada, approximately 7% of Canada’s urban Indigenous population is homeless, compared to fewer than 1% for Canada’s total population. Chapter 8, authored by [Yale Belanger](#) and Gabrielle Lindstrom, includes a succinct, three-page section titled “Understanding Indigenous Homelessness” that provides a useful history of the Canadian context. And in Chapter 9—co-authored by [Rebecca Schiff, Alina Turner](#) and [Jeannette Waagemakers Schiff](#)—we learn that many Indigenous people in Canada migrate from urban to rural areas (as well as between rural areas). By contrast, it is commonly believed that Indigenous migration in Canada happens only from rural to urban areas.
2. **The book includes contributions from three countries with similar social welfare systems.** The book looks at Canada, Australia and New Zealand, allowing readers in each respective country to learn from other countries’ experiences and perspectives. What’s more, many researchers will appreciate the opportunity to compare the experiences of these particular countries because all three are considered “liberal welfare states.” That means their social welfare systems are considered stingier than those of many other OECD countries—they have relatively low rates of taxation, relatively low levels of public social spending (including spending on housing for low-income households) and



relatively high levels of income inequality (the United States, while not a focus of this book, is also considered a liberal welfare state). At the other extreme of the spectrum are social democratic welfare states (e.g. Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden); they're known for having relatively generous social welfare systems—relatively high tax rates, relatively high levels of public social spending (including spending on housing for low-income households) and relatively low levels of income inequality.^[1]

3. **The book's account suggests that the history of Indigenous peoples in all three countries is similar.** As Dr. Peters notes in the book's Conclusion: "All of the [book's] authors situate their analysis within the ongoing legacy of Western colonialisms that dispossessed people of their lands, waters and resources, attempted to destroy Indigenous cultures, and resulted in intergenerational individual and collective trauma...Indigenous homelessness cannot be understood without recognition of this legacy" (p. 390).
4. **One of the book's chapters which I found very empirically-grounded was Chapter 4 which makes the case that police often relocate Indigenous peoples from affluent areas of Edmonton to poor areas of the city.** Chapter 4, written by [Joshua Freistadt](#), is a condensed version of the author's PhD thesis, which can be [downloaded here](#)^[2] and which is now available in [book format here](#). (I suspect that people involved with the [Homeless Charter of Rights](#) project in Calgary will find this chapter especially interesting.)
5. **Chapter 13, by Kelly Greenop and Paul Memmott, calls for the need to rethink the concept of crowding for Indigenous peoples.** Indeed, the authors suggest that, rather than think of crowding in simple mathematical terms (e.g., number of rooms per person, square footage per person), we should consider asking Indigenous people to personally define how crowded they actually feel. To make this point, the authors draw on [previous research done by Robert Gifford](#). The authors also note that, for some Indigenous people, [too few people in a house can be a problem](#). (This information is useful to the Calgary Homeless Foundation as we continue to plan and design culturally appropriate housing with and for Indigenous peoples. In 2016, for example, we began surveying tenants about their own perception of the quality of their housing unit.)
6. **I find the book pays insufficient attention to each country's social welfare system—including the macroeconomic factors that shape it.** In fact, even though all three countries are classified as being in the same family of social welfare systems (as discussed in point #1 above) the editors make no explicit mention of this. Do the editors not believe the amount of public social spending (as a percent of GDP) in each country can have a major impact on Indigenous homelessness? What about social housing stock in each country (as a percentage of total stock)? How about the amount of money each country provides to people—both Indigenous and non-Indigenous—receiving social assistance?
7. **The book could have benefited from a discussion of advocacy approaches in each country.** Canada has gone through an interesting evolution of advocacy approaches to homelessness; [I've previously discussed them here](#). What have advocacy campaigns looked like in Australia and New Zealand? Do advocates in those countries seek to "[end homelessness](#)?" To what extent have Indigenous and non-Indigenous advocates worked collaboratively in each country to end homelessness?^[3] I would have liked to have seen these questions addressed.

8. **The book could have benefited from some quantitative analysis.** My colleague and friend, [Michael Shapcott](#), once said: “Qualitative research engages the heart. Quantitative research engages the mind.” With that said, I would have liked to have seen a bit more quantitative research in this book. For example, in 2014, Jalene Tayler Anderson and [Damian Collins](#) authored [this journal article](#); it looks at the prevalence and causes of urban homelessness among Indigenous peoples in all three countries considered in this book. A modified version of that article would have therefore made for an excellent contribution.^[4]
9. **Chapter 1, which focuses on the Canadian context, ought to have made at least passing reference to the [Truth and Reconciliation Commission \(TRC\)](#).** Indeed, Canada’s federal government has committed to “[fully](#)” implementing all 94 of the [final report’s Calls to Action](#). These “calls to action” include calls pertaining to child welfare, health, and missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls (all of which have important ramifications for homelessness experienced by Indigenous peoples).
10. **The book lacks content from the United States (likely because very little has been written about homelessness among Native Americans).** The book includes nine chapters of Canadian content, five of Australian content, three from New Zealand and *none* from the United States. Trouble is, there does seem to be a shortage of research on homelessness among Indigenous peoples in the United States (one of the only recent exceptions I’m aware of [is this report](#)). The editors could have taken this issue head on by discussing this important research gap in the book’s preface (especially since the United States is also one of the so-called liberal welfare states discussed above).

In Sum. The publication of this book is a remarkable accomplishment. I consider it a ‘must read’ for anybody interested in understanding what contributes to, and what can end, homelessness among Indigenous peoples. You can [order a copy of the book here](#).

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[1] Building on the work of [Richard Titmuss](#), the early work on categorizing OECD countries into different categories like this was done by [Gøsta Esping-Andersen](#). Interestingly, Esping-Andersen’s work has been criticized for providing insufficient attention to Indigenous peoples (see [chapter 3 in this book](#)).

[2] More recently, [it has come to light that](#) Indigenous people in Edmonton are six times more likely than white people to be ‘street checked’ by police.

[3] For more on the importance of weighting macroeconomic and social welfare factors into any consideration of housing and homelessness, see [this recent blog post](#).

[4] To be fair, Christensen does reference this article in the book’s Introduction.