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# "Doing What We Can with What We Have": Examining the role of local government in poverty management during the COVID-19 pandemic

Fiona Long [a,*], Joshua Evans [b]

[a] Cardiff School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University, United Kingdom
[b] Department of Earth & Atmospheric Sciences, University of Alberta, Canada

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ABSTRACT

With the dawn of the COVID-19 pandemic and concern regarding the subsequent vulnerabilities of houseless populations, countries have sought to adapt and enhance emergency housing policies with a view of better protecting this population. Drawing on the poverty management perspective, this article focuses on local government and its role in managing houselessness during the COVID-19 pandemic. It achieves this by treating local council meetings as sites of problematization, in which the management of houselessness is rationalized and solutions negotiated. We transcribed local council meetings in Bristol, England and Edmonton, Canada, for an 18-month period from March 2020. Our analysis found that a common set of 'problem spaces' - systems, strategic opportunism and power - were evoked by municipal officials in both cities. Under the umbrella of 'doing what we can', local councils: conceptualized houselessness as complex and systemic; identified what does and does not work; discussed jurisdictional limitations and their impact; and defended new forms of accommodation. Significantly, despite the discursive desire to 'build back better', and a slightly rebalanced poverty management landscape in terms of care and control, local governments alone were unable to end houselessness within the post-COVID city.

## 1. Introduction

Urban poverty management is a critical concept developed by geographers to describe the socio-spatial regulation of visible poverty through policing and the organization of social services that combine to contain the visibly poor and render poverty less visible in the city (Evans and Deverteuil, 2018). This article critically examines the role of local government in urban poverty management; more specifically, we leverage insights from two case studies to examine the extent to which local government bodies can transform poverty management regimes in ways that reduce urban marginalization. The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a rapid reappraisal of urban poverty management landscapes across North America and Europe. Recent scholarship has endeavoured to understand these reappraisals and evaluate whether they have given rise to meaningful change in the lives of houseless populations. While some positive change has been documented, thus far the prognosis has been bleak: backtracking by central governments (Fitzpatrick et al., 2020), re-assertion of punitive welfare principles (Evans et al., 2021), and reluctance to initiate structural housing reform (Parsell et al., 2020) has rendered many houseless urban dwellers as vulnerable as before.

Whilst these analyses have drawn attention to the logics operating behind pandemic interventions (see Parsell et al., 2020), the way in which local government officials themselves rationalize their responses has received less attention. As others have recently argued, paying attention to local government is critical for understanding formations of urban governance, which is itself a complex, multi-scalar process (Cirolia and Harber, 2021; Lauermann, 2018; McGuirk et al., 2021). This scholarship shows that local governments are not simple 'creatures' of higher orders of government, nor are their decisions shaped solely in relation to the demand for growth. Local governmental practices encompass a variety of toolkits that are used to address diverse agendas (Lauremann, 2018) and in some contexts this 'municipal statecraft' can be inventive, experimental, and progressive (McGuirk et al., 2021). Moreover, some argue that the municipalist tradition has been re-politicized - even radicalized - by counterhegemonic grassroots movements giving way to a 'new municipalism' for which the local state is a strategic entry point (Thompson, 2021).

Working with this understanding of local government in mind, this article uses a comparative case study to consider the problematization of

* Corresponding author.
*E-mail addresses:* Longf5@cardiff.ac.uk (F. Long), jdevans@ualberta.ca (J. Evans).

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houselessness in two cities - Bristol, England and Edmonton, Canada. To zero in on this site of problematization, we examine the discourse of elected city councillors, their subcommittees, and administrations, as it relates to houselessness during the pandemic. This discourse is analysed as a constellation of 'problem spaces' that together rendered houselessness into a domain of local action during the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. In examining these problem spaces, we endeavour to shed light on local governments and their role in the management of urban poverty, and in the governance of urban marginality more generally (Wacquant, 2008). Unsurprisingly, we find important divergences across these two sites; however, a number of key convergences were also found that are revealing when it comes to the post-COVID city. Namely, a common set of problem spaces emerged across both cities which were reflective of a critical attitude towards urban poverty management. However, this critical attitude was accompanied by a sense of resignation which heralded a return to poverty management approaches. We conclude the article by evaluating this register of urban politics and its significance for the lives of marginalized urban dwellers.

## 2. Neoliberal Poverty Governance, Urban Poverty Management, and Local Government

An important paradigm in the analysis of urban poverty in the neoliberal age is the perspective of poverty governance (Baker et al., 2020). Poverty governance refers to the constellation of public, quasi-public and private practices that discipline the working poor and unemployed (Soss et al., 2011). The association with discipline speaks to the fact that poverty governance is "less concerned with eradicating poverty and more concerned with maintaining the poor by processing them into docile and industrious subjects" (Seim, 2017, 451). The poverty governance perspective can be traced back to the work of Piven and Cloward (1993) who argued that 'poor relief,' or welfare assistance in today's language, has long served a regulatory function: in times of high unemployment cash assistance is expanded to mute threats to civil order whereas in times of economic growth cash assistance contracts to reinforce work norms. Poverty governance, therefore, references the regulatory role of the welfare state and penal institutions in capitalist societies (Wacquant, 2009).

In examining poverty governance, geographers have oscillated between a focus on 'high altitude' poverty governance - such as welfare policy at national and state/provincial levels - and 'low altitude' modalities at the local and, more particularly, urban scale (DeVerteuil and Lowe, 2020). In the case of 'low altitude' modalities, geographers have focused attention on a general tendency towards "urban poverty management" (Wolch and DeVerteuil, 2001, 150), that is "organized responses by elites and/or the state, directed generally at maintaining the social order and more particularly at controlling poor people." Urban poverty management landscapes are often ambivalent (DeVerteuil, 2006): they express a coexistence of practices that appear on the surface as contradictory - control and care, for example - but are functionally interdependent. These practices manifest 'hubs' of spatially proximate but distinct organizational sites and settings, such as overnight shelters, hospital emergency rooms, detox centres, and recovery programs, each with their own programmatic goals. In working towards these goals, these sites function in tandem to manage the spillover effects of low-income, unhoused populations. Forming a series of laterally interacting institutions, these sites and settings produce a managerial effect in the city through their horizontal integration (Seim, 2017).

Recent scholarship on urban poverty management has highlighted a number of key political functions achieved through this horizontal integration, such as containment, correction, and incorporation that, in conjunction, transform the houseless poor into a spatially invisible, pathologized, and politically demobilized surplus population. Containment is perhaps the function most commonly associated with poverty management landscapes. This function is achieved through land use bylaws (i.e., anti-panhandling ordinances, camping bans, alcohol control areas) and general police dispersal powers; unhoused populations are consequently displaced and dispersed from prime public spaces and corralled within social service 'hubs', where a greater degree of tolerance exists (Langegger and Koester, 2017). Simultaneously, policing within these zones works to 'shepherd' houseless individuals into rehabilitative programs (Stuart, 2014) effectively concealing houseless populations within a labyrinth of helping agencies (Fast and Cunningham, 2018). This spatial concentration of institutional and semi-institutional sites and settings produce what Langegger and Koester (2017) characterize as a "spatiotemporal camp", centred upon the coercive power of service provision, orientated around individual pathologization, correction, and resocialization.

As far back as the late 1980s, geographers had anticipated the political expediencies achieved through this 'time–space of hegemonic control' (Langegger and Koester, 2017), introducing concepts such as the 'service ghetto' (Dear and Wolch, 1987) and the 'shadow state' (Wolch, 1989) to describe the ways in which these poverty management regimes isolated populations and shielded the state from accountability (DeVerteuil et al., 2020). More contemporarily, Greene (2014) has traced how poverty management strategies, such as containment, reach beyond houeless bodies to neutralize political dissent itself. As Greene (2014, 318) writes, "by targeting visible signs of homelessness, poverty management practices seek to preserve the ordinary rhythms of public life; in doing so, they may also contain the public unease and outrage that can make contentious collective action viable." Moreover, Greene (2014) describes how poverty management regimes channel contention and resistance through formal mechanisms of power (i.e., public engagement, planning) thereby co-opting collective dissent.

Yet, we caution that this portrayal of urban poverty management might give this modality too much credit. First, at the local level, poverty management is always characterized by a degree of messiness and incompleteness (DeVerteuil, 2006). In actuality, existing regimes of urban poverty management have been shown to be unbalanced, tenuous, and makeshift (Fairbanks, 2009). As such, regimes call out for some degree of tinkering, steering or coordination, a role often thrust upon local governments, which are seen to be 'closest' to the problem. Whether this local steering or coordination perpetuates the co-optation of collective dissent is an open question. Second, while management may be a pervasive logic characterizing local responses, this is not to say that countervailing logics are absent. Humanitarian impulses and concerns for human rights have long been a feature of street-level interventions and these ethics of care cannot be dismissed (Cloke et al., 2010). DeVerteuil et al. (2022) have recently argued that landscapes of urban poverty management, as a type of 'managed urban commons,' can possess countervailing functions that have the potential to be more accommodating than punitive and as such can act as a ballast against neoliberalizing forces in the city (see also DeVerteuil, 2015).

The note of caution outlined above resonates with the longstanding argument that urbanism is itself a unique register of politics linked to self-organizing networks of authority that generate local capacities but always with a certain degree of disorderliness, unpredictability, and multiplicity (Magnusson, 2011). Historically, such networks have yielded entrepreneurial growth machines coupled tightly to urban poverty management regimes; however, urban politics always carries the potential to transcend conventional politics through diversification, experimentation, and diplomacy (Lauermann, 2018) and can also spawn counter-hegemonic practices for contesting capitalist urban crises (Thompson, 2021). In these instances of 'new municipalism,' the local government can be seen as a strategic entry point for either pragmatic adaptation or transformative change (Thompson, 2021). In the context of urban poverty management, we suggest that local government is a key 'bricoleur' in this capacity that can, at the very least, shape the character of poverty management in one way (i.e., punitive) or another (i.e., compassionate), or possibly transform it altogether.

Yet the role of local government in poverty management and in the

governance of urban marginality more generally is less often acknowledged than the influence of "street level bureaucrats" (Lipsky, 2010) – such as the police, emergency responders, and social service operators – or the influence of welfare state reforms (Wolch and Dear, 1993). This oversight is surprising given that responsibility for the management of the houseless poor has long been the purview of local governments (Katz, 1996). Today, local governments, be they councils or municipalities, occupy an *interstitial space* connecting "low altitude" programs (i.e., street-level services delivered by non-profits) and "high altitude" poverty governance (i.e., state, provincial, federal, or central government policy and programs) (DeVerteuil and Lowe, 2020) via different forms of 'institutional bricolage' (Lowndes and McCaughie, 2013). They thus occupy a key position amidst the "horizontal relations" and "vertical relations" (Seim, 2017) which structure urban poverty management landscapes.

## 3. Researching Problem Spaces: A Comparative Approach

Our aim in this article is to critically examine the role of local government in urban poverty management during the COVID-19 pandemic. To examine this 'governmentality,' we utilize the analytic concept of 'problematization.' Often attributed to Foucault (1990), a problematization is a process by which a set of difficulties encountered in everyday life come to be interpreted as a problem for which a solution can be proposed (Koopman, 2013). Such processes are constituted by numerous 'problem spaces': forms of discourse (i.e., concepts, analogies, statistics) that contain, so-to-speak, the problem (see Lury, 2021). These discursive forms operate as grids of intelligibility that render difficulties visible, speakable, and on this basis, actionable.

The term 'problem space' directs analytical attention towards the discursive formations that make particular ways of speaking about and seeing houselessness, and other forms of visible poverty, possible (for an analysis of the problem space of social housing provision, see Clarke et al., 2022). To examine actually-existing problem spaces, Bristol and Edmonton (the authors' respective places of residence) were selected as part of a convenience sample. In each city, we focus on local government and its governing bodies as key discursive sites for the problematization of houselessness. Problematization within this institutional context is important because local governments in both Bristol (a unitary authority) and Edmonton (a municipality) played a role in the spatial management of unhoused populations: both fund programs and coordinate services accessed by unhoused populations and received additional COVID-19-specific funds from central governments for pandemic responses.

Our focus in this article is on city council meetings in both Bristol and Edmonton that featured discussion of houselessness from the onset of the pandemic in March 2020 until the end of September 2021. Audio recordings from the meetings were transcribed verbatim and coded in NVivo. Coding focused first on key events and municipal decisions and then on emergent problem spaces i.e., particular ways of speaking about and seeing the challenge of houselessness during the pandemic. It is within and through deliberative processes, such as local council meetings, that key problem spaces emerged, giving shape - *in situ* - to local responses. Hence, in line with the governmentality approach (Barnett and Bridge, 2017), discursive spaces provide the grounds, through problematization, for remaking (or not) geographic spaces. This article seeks to ascertain the linkages between council meetings as a discursive site, the problem spaces they engendered, and the actual spaces of poverty management that materialized on the ground during the first 18-months of the pandemic. We set out these material spaces in the next section. This is followed by an examination of the discursive problem spaces in the subsequent section.

## 4. Managing Houselessness in the Post-COVID City

On 11th March 2020, following a rapid spread between individuals and across borders, the COVID-19 outbreak was declared a global pandemic (WHO, 2020). In the weeks that followed, countries instructed people to 'stay at home' whilst advancing efforts to protect vulnerable populations. Whilst in many cases vulnerability was defined medically, in others it was defined socially, and was rooted in the marginalized status of certain groups (Kantamneni, 2020). The houseless population were one particularly visible example of such a group, their vulnerability explicated in socio-spatial terms, attributed, amongst other things, to: the environments in which they live; a chronicity of mental and physical health conditions; heightened rates of substance use; limited access to healthcare; and a transience which makes tracking and preventing the spread difficult (Tsai and Wilson, 2020). As such, there were increased calls for the rapid spatial management of this population (Perri et al., 2020).

However, cities with a large houseless population faced a unique challenge, as guidelines to 'stay at home' were incongruous with being houseless. Nevertheless, the conditions of houselessness and COVID-19 each had the potential to exacerbate one another (Tsai and Wilson, 2020). Although the same virus was experienced globally, strategies seeking to manage the houseless population varied greatly, from country to country, and city to city. The following section sets out a timeline of spatial management strategies taken by local councils in Bristol and Edmonton.

### 4.1. Bristol, England

On 17th March 2020, 6 days before England's first lockdown, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) announced £3.2 million in funding for local councils to get 'everyone in' and enable rough sleepers to isolate. Local authorities were tasked with coordinating a local response, getting houseless individuals inside, preventing the use of congregate facilities, and providing individuals with social care basics. Extraordinarily, during this initial period, local councils were permitted to assist those with No Recourse to Public Funds based on their immigration status (NRPF). Bristol put out urgent appeal to hoteliers and B&B owners for self-contained accommodation, closed night shelters, temporarily housed those with NRPF status, and worked with local organisations to provide wraparound support and services. In consequence, Bristol accommodated up to 441 houseless individuals in this newly sourced accommodation at any one time. Simultaneously, a range of government measures prevented additional houselessness, including a job retention scheme (furlough), moratorium on evictions, pause on benefits sanctions, and £20 increase in Universal Credit benefit payments (Fitzpatrick et al, 2020).

By 28th May 2020, the government's focus shifted from getting everyone in to moving everyone on, a change in direction and tone disapproved of by many. One Bristol MP criticized the government for demonstrating a woeful lack of understanding regarding the complexities underlying houselessness, whilst Bristol's Mayor condemned the resumed ineligibility of support for those with NRPF status, instead calling for the status to be scrapped altogether. To facilitate the transition out of hotels and into longer-term options, £105 million in 'Next Steps' funding was announced. Councils were able to access proportions of this fund incrementally, over several rounds of 'bidding'.

Bristol's initial bids sought to prolong the use of hotels and commercial hostels beyond the anticipated 'cliff edge' on 4th July 2020, when they were able to reopen to the public, as despite moving 311 people into longer-term options, 300 remained. At the same time, central government directed night shelters to remain closed. Nonetheless, by the end of October 2020, three of Bristol's hotels had closed their doors to those experiencing houselessness. Bristol City Council worked alongside other organizations to rehouse the hotels' residents in one of the following ways: within the city's existing supported or social accommodation, via the private rented sector, or into the recently opened Imperial Apartments.

Subsequent rounds of bidding aimed to create longer lasting change,

either through partnership-enhancing projects, or through the procurement of capital funding to secure new units. Bristol's response meant that there were no COVID-related deaths amongst the houseless population, though despite this success, there was a 330% increase in single homelessness by May 2021, with no real solutions for those with NRPF status.

### 4.2. Edmonton, Canada

In Edmonton, a local state of emergency was declared on 20th March 2020. In contrast to Bristol, Edmonton's emergency shelters, operated by provincially-funded non-profit organizations, remained open throughout the pandemic, with over 700 individuals continuing to rely on these bed spaces in April 2020 (Government of Alberta, 2020). Nonetheless, efforts were made to ensure that social distancing was possible within these spaces. Initially backed by $25 million in funding from the Government of Alberta, Edmonton opened up the Kinsmen Center, a municipally-owned recreation centre, closed due to the pandemic, as an additional night shelter for 180 people, for use between 8pm and 7am. Further, on 28th April 2020, the Expo Center, another municipally-owned facility, was opened as a day centre and isolation space, in collaboration with local health and homelessness services.

Meanwhile, services continued to house individuals, finding longer-term solutions for 199 individuals between 1st March 2020 and 30th April 2020. As in Bristol, a range of measures were put in place by higher orders of the Canadian government to prevent houselessness, including a temporary ban on evictions, changes in benefits, mortgage and utility payment deferral programs, and the provision of financial support services. Edmonton City Council also temporarily paused evictions of unhoused populations camping on public lands.

By the end of July 2020, the Kinsmen and Expo Centres were closed to those experiencing houselessness, with no alternatives in place, owing to a lack of provincial and federal funding. In response, encampments began to crop up across the city, many of which were supported by mutual aid groups, claiming that they could support the city's houseless population in ways that the local council could not. Some individuals felt safer in encampments, following a recent outbreak at a large-scale emergency shelter, whilst others considered them more culturally appropriate for Indigenous Peoples, who are overrepresented within Edmonton's houseless community.

In October 2020, Edmonton's Mayor announced that the municipally-owned Convention Centre would be converted into a new shelter space, using one-time COVID-19 funds provided by federal and provincial governments. This new site, known as Tipinawâw, enabled the relocation of those living in large encampments over the winter months, and was open to its users 24/7, unlike previous spaces. At the same time, the mayor aspired to increase both bridge housing and permanent supportive housing, recognizing that both options lead to longer term housing solutions. Faced with a continued lack of provincial funding, Edmonton City Council decided to 'go it alone', using a proportion of the federal government's $17.3 million 'Rapid Housing Initiative' to fund longer-term projects, whilst continuing to fund more immediate temporary shelter options and longer-term supportive housing.

## 5. Problematizing Houselessness in the Post-COVID City

The chronology presented above suggests a certain linearity in the spatial management strategies adopted by local councils. However, the discourse of council meetings themselves tell a different tale, as they encompass a level of complexity, messiness, and multiplicity in how houselessness was rendered visible and talked about. By taking council meetings as our point of entry, and treating them as an epistemic space within which problems come to be framed, it becomes possible to search for points of convergence, thereby shedding light on a common process of problematizations across sites. Focusing on problematizations involves unpacking the constitution of those problems i.e., how they are discursively constructed as being certain kinds of problems, or *problem spaces* (Bacchi, 2016). In the analysis which follows, privilege is given to recurrent and pervasive points of convergence in problematization between Bristol and Edmonton, whilst appreciating certain nuances between the two contexts. In this regard, three interlocking problem spaces emerged: systems, strategic opportunism, and power.

### 5.1. Systems

Houselessness was problematized as a complex social issue by councils in both cities. Fundamentally, it was stressed that houselessness is about more than a mere lack of shelter, sentiments expressed by Bristol City Councillor Helen Godwin and echoed by those at Edmonton City Council:

> We've known for a long time that what we need to do is not just provide beds or not just provide a roof, but we need to be looking at wraparound support (Bristol, 3/11/20).

Both councils made clear that the houseless population were facing multiple, intersecting problems, beyond the need to secure shelter. For example, Edmonton Councillor Aaron Paquette described houselessness as several coinciding crises:

> We've got a mental health crisis, we've got a housing crisis, we've got a poverty crisis, we've got an addictions crisis all happening simultaneously on our streets (Edmonton, 6/4/21).

In Edmonton, a further dimension was also considered, owing to the disproportionate number of houseless Indigenous Peoples within the city:

> A lot of folks end up on the street because of historical or familiar trauma… There's lots of people who are still impacted by residential school trauma. (Edmonton, 5/10/20).

Whilst each city faced unique challenges based on specific historical, geographical, and socio-economic factors, there was consensus in both that houselessness is complex, both in terms of its causes and solutions. To grasp this complexity, the 'systems' problem space was routinely evoked in local council meetings. In this regard, local councils identified deficiencies in multiple systems - including housing, criminal justice, income benefits, and health care - as being partly to blame for houselessness.

Whilst these systems impact upon the houseless population in significant ways, they operated in isolation and were steered at 'higher-altitudes' by central and provincial branches of government. Moreover, at the street-level, services were rationed by screening applicants and means-testing eligibility (Lipsky, 2010). In this regard, councillors in Bristol recognized how houseless individuals were often denied access to certain support services:

> the system is essentially stacked against people, especially those people who won't engage with the system often… the eligibility criteria for some services are quite strict, or once you've failed to engage, then you're dropped again. (Bristol, 15/10/20).

In Edmonton, Seim's (2017) concept of 'burden shuffling' was implicitly invoked to explain 'revolving door' houselessness. The concept describes the movement of houseless populations between different systems, all of which provide short-term shelter options, such as night shelters, hospitals, and prisons:

> And they know very well that if they're discharged into homelessness, they're coming back to hospital soon enough… they know that as they release people from, probably, fairly minor charges but charges nonetheless who are suffering mental health and addiction issues, if they release them into homelessness, they're coming back. It's a revolving door. (Edmonton 8/6/20).

This line of thinking prompted local councils to take a step back and consider shelters, hostels, and other forms of temporary accommodation as symptomatic of failures in a much wider ecosystem of services. From this perspective, the negative outcomes attributed to shelters and hostels were not necessarily their 'fault' (Edmonton, 30/8/21), rather these issues were reflective of broader, more systematic tendencies relating to poverty governance. The problematization of houselessness in terms of system fragmentation called for holistic solutions, solutions which would involve 'lots of different agencies and sources of finance, and in fact sources of clients' (Bristol, 15/10/20). Nonetheless, both councils faced an urgent situation and had to respond immediately.

### 5.2. Strategic Opportunism

Faced with an immediate need to bring the houseless population inside, and provided with vast sums of money by higher orders of government, councils in Bristol and Edmonton conceived of this pandemic as a strategic opportunity, one which could enable them to 'build back better' (White and Cretney, 2022). In Bristol, this sentiment was captured by David Ingerslev, Regional Head homelessness charity St Mungo's:

> I think it's a great time to take a step forward while there are some advantages to be gained from disruption to the normal ways of working to make some long-lasting changes that will benefit people who are homeless. (Bristol, 14/5/20).

Yet, councils were uncertain as to how they should proceed. This uncertainty yielded a problem space which exhibited a strong tendency towards lesson-drawing, as members of council meetings: reflected on the efficacy of past strategies; considered what was being done differently in the COVID-19 context; and proposed solutions rooted in learning, with a view of addressing houselessness more effectively going forward.

This lesson-drawing often centred on 'what works or doesn't work,' regarding shelter options for the houseless population. In considering what doesn't work, both councils found similar flaws, albeit on different scales. Both Edmonton and Bristol recognized that their immediate, knee jerk response to the pandemic – this urgent drive to get everyone in – was emblematic of wider responses to houselessness in recent times. This response, referred to as a 'sticky plaster' or 'band aid' approach, involves the use of short-term accommodation options, which are considered less-than-ideal for multiple reasons. Bristol Committee Member, Penny Germon, framed this argument in terms of sustainability:

> I think as well as asking about looking at dorm-style accommodation, we do need to help people to find a more sustainable housing solution rather than relying on something that's actually a short-term answer (Bristol, 27/5/21).

Similarly, in his critique of the 'warehouse configuration' of many shelters, Edmonton Mayor Don Iveson, advocated the need for longer-term housing solutions, whilst articulating the problem in financial terms:

> It may get short-term value for money in terms of dollars per head but it's not going to generate the housing outcomes (Edmonton, 15/3/21).

Beyond housing and financial implications, local councillors also acknowledged the humans behind the figures, as both councils concurred that congregate forms of accommodation, such as dormitory-style shelters, were particularly harmful to individuals. Edmonton City Councillor Scott McKeen described night shelters – the epitome of short-term, poor-quality shelter – as 'demeaning', 'dehumanizing', and capable of retraumatisation:

> I would argue has actually perpetuated homelessness because of retraumatisation of those people and also night after night after night of poor sleep (Edmonton, 15/3/21).

Against this backdrop, both councils reviewed their own practices, as well as those of other councils, to try and pinpoint what does work and why. Here, the trajectories in Bristol and Edmonton differ slightly. In Bristol, two key points of learning emerged from the city's own response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Firstly, that 'prevention and early intervention is so much better than having to deal with homelessness' (Bristol, 27/5/21). With several 'cliff edges' anticipated over the 18-month period – hotels reopening, evictions resuming, and the furlough scheme ending – the council placed a huge focus on preventing additional households from becoming houseless, with great success. Secondly, Bristol saw the benefits of providing wraparound support, as support services visited houseless individuals temporarily residing in hotels and hostels:

> What we did learn was that for some people, having been in one place, having services come into that one place, was able to make a real difference into their lives (Bristol, 3/11/20).

In Edmonton, the local council looked to permanent supportive housing, 'where these individuals can live and get the supports that they need to thrive' (Edmonton, 6/4/21) - as an example of accommodation that works. In one meeting, statistics were provided by Housing and Homelessness Project Development Manager, Colten Kirsop, to quantify its success:

> Overall emergency-department visits decreased by 61%. Overall rate of inpatient-hospital days for these individuals decreased by 65%. Overall rate of EMS events decreased by 38%, and the overall rate of inpatient costs decreased 39%. So, on a per-percent basis they went from $28,000 in health care costs per year to 17,000 per resident, per year (Edmonton, 8/6/20).

Whilst councillors recognized the need for more permanent supportive housing, they were also aware of a huge reliance on the existing shelter system. As the immediate cessation of emergency shelters would not be viable, Edmonton looked to make realistic changes within the existing system. These changes revolved around the proposal of shelter standards, together with a shift towards 'housing-focused shelter':

> I think that housing-focused shelter approach is a critical theme that we need to emphasize. And they've made this transition in Calgary. Their major drop-in centre downtown operates this way and it's made a huge difference culturally and in terms of outcomes for vulnerable people and alignment with the housing ecosystem (Edmonton, 15/3/21).

Whilst the actual solutions proposed may differ in Bristol and Edmonton, there were more points of convergence than divergence driving the strategic opportunism problem space. In both cities, there was a shared desire to move away from dormitory-style shelters, as well as a recognition that for more sustainable forms of supportive accommodation to be successful, key stakeholders must work together. Importantly, this is where 'systems' and 'strategic opportunism' intersect. Local councils urged that they should not let this 'crisis go to waste' (Brodhead, 2010); however, as Edmonton Councillor Andrew Knack attested, the promise of ending houselessness was made by previous councils and higher orders of government, yet the actual solutions provided – the 'band aid' approach – were wholly inadequate when considering the problem from a systems perspective:

> This is not a partisan issue. This has existed across party lines longer than I've been on council, that's for sure, but I've had the opportunity to experience three different provincial governments, none of whom have ever done anything. Sure, they've funded one housing development here and one there and, oh, great, we did it, we built some units. But they actually haven't done anything on this and

that's what's just very frustrating. Because they could solve it (Edmonton, 6/4/21).

It was evident that when councils talked about 'solving' houselessness, they looked up the vertical axis of governmentality, towards provincial and federal government in Edmonton, and central government in England (Seim, 2017). As these higher orders of government are capable of changing systems and bringing them into alignment, 'solving' houselessness requires systemic coordination from above. As Bristol Councillor Tom Renhard explained:

> To some extent, as a local authority, we can commission services that can prevent or alleviate some of the personal circumstances. However, current government policy is not addressing the structural factors and it needs to do so. As without any change in government policy to address these structural causes, reducing or slowing the flow of people becoming homeless will be limited (Bristol, 22/6/21).

This belief that local councils can only do their best within their limits formed the focus of the next problem space, which we have labelled 'power.'

### 5.3. Power

As has already been alluded to, local councils are constrained by the jurisdictional limits, imposed on them by higher orders of government, as such we have conceptualized the final problem space as 'power'. The 'power' problem space was evoked to delineate jurisdictional boundaries, explore the implications of those boundaries, which are often expressed in terms of funding and policy limitations, and push back against these boundaries.

From the outset, local councils recognized that they would play a central role in addressing houselessness during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, Bristol Councillor Paul Smith remarked:

> It's important that we have correct leadership from national government, but they can't deliver locally. In fact, in some instances, they haven't been able to deliver nationally whereas it is local government across the country which is stepping up along with health, the local voluntary sector and businesses and others but local government really sits in the centre of that. (Bristol, 28/4/20)

Bristol attributed one of the key successes of the 'Everyone In' campaign to the 'additional powers and funding given to the local authority to take over accommodation that was left vacant' (Bristol, 27/5/21). Such powers represented a temporary shift in jurisdictional boundaries, a move which was hailed as a great success (Fitzpatrick et al, 2020). Though once the original jurisdictional boundaries were reinstated, and additional funding was taken away, Bristol began to face the series of potential 'cliff edges' detailed above.

In Edmonton, the picture was slightly different. Whilst additional funding had been provided by higher orders of government to expand the shelter system, the Province of Alberta purportedly refused to invest in longer-term housing options, despite this responsibility falling under its jurisdiction. Local councillors were therefore left to make a difficult decision, as set out by Edmonton Councillor Tony Caterina:

> It would be easier to say that housing is not in our jurisdiction and why do we spend what we spend on it? I think we're way past that point and this puts a period at the end of that sentence, that we would love the help of the feds or the province but if you're not prepared to step up, we'll do it regardless. With that, I'm going to support this. (Edmonton, 8/6/20)

At this meeting, councillors unanimously decided that the city would forge ahead with building its own housing for the houseless population, consequently overstepping this jurisdictional boundary. The discourse of humanity underlined this meeting, with the motion being described as one of 'responsibility, of spirituality, and just plain humanness' (Edmonton, 8/6/20).

Funding from higher orders of government was problematized in both cities in many respects. The decision to self-fund housing projects in Edmonton, triggered by a lack of provincial funding, was met with some criticism by the local community, who subsequently blamed the council for failing to effectively address the problem of houselessness. Edmonton Councillor Aaron Paquette responded to this as follows:

> I give full and open kudos and accolades to the Administration who is trying to do with one dollar things that require $10 or $100 or $1,000… We have issues here that have been downloaded onto our shoulders as a city that are not our responsibility or within our tools or finances to take care of, yet we're being asked to take care of, and because we do not have these, we cannot deal with it in an effective manner, the way that it should be done (Edmonton 6/4/21)

In Bristol, funding options provided by higher orders of government have been criticized in two additional respects, both of which centre on the need to 'bid' for 'pots' of funding. The first was rooted in the fragmented nature of services, as discussed in the 'systems' problem space:

> There's a whole range of pots of money, none of which are linked up. And it makes it really difficult (Bristol, 15/10/20)

The second related to the ad hoc and short-term nature of these 'pots', which made it difficult for long-term planning within this sector:

> The commissioning team and the rough sleeping team spend a lot of their time applying in for pots of money from MHCLG and then waiting to see if they received the money, not knowing how much they're going to get, and it's obviously then really, really difficult to do the forward planning (Bristol, 25/2/21)

In addition to funding constraints, local governments were also restricted by the policies of higher orders of government. Whilst governance differs between England and Canada, the results are similar insofar as they hamper the ability of local councils to support the houseless population. In Edmonton, this was most evident when the local council attempted to implement 'minimum shelter standards', applicable to all of the city's night shelters. When this proposal was first brought to a council meeting, the Legal Services Branch said that they would need to, 'look a little bit closer at what type of controls would possibly be within our toolkit' (Edmonton, 15/3/21). It was later noted that human rights were a provincial responsibility, therefore beyond the scope of local government, and that the use of 'by-law powers' were the most likely route for enforceable shelter standards. In the end, Edmonton City Council were only able to produce a set of 'moral' standards, requiring 'voluntary compliance' which, despite their original aims, were unenforceable. The reasons for this were largely jurisdictional: the council required provincial participation in order to actually enforce shelter standards.

Bristol faced similar jurisdictional restrictions when it came to housing those with NRPF status, as this group once again became ineligible for support. This made it impossible for local councils to continue supporting those with NRPF status, resulting in a further and seemingly final 'cliff edge' of houselessness for this group (Bristol, 25/2/21). On the topic of immigration, Bristol Councillors were outraged by Home Office guidance which suggested that 'someone's right to remain in the UK can be cancelled if they become homeless' (Bristol, 6/7/21). Councillors distanced themselves from this 'unjustified, unnecessary and cruel' policy, for example, Councillor Tim Rippington stated:

> This guidance reflects an inward-looking, backward, hostile government. A government which has already wrongly detained, deported and denied the legal rights of hundreds of members of the Windrush generation. Bristol is renowned for being the opposite of this. For being inclusive, progressive, and welcoming. This motion commits us to not following guidance that is completely detached from Bristol's identity. (Bristol 6/7/21)

Bristol councillors rejected this guidance, a choice made jurisdictionally possible by the optional nature of the guidance, and instead affirmed Bristol's status as 'City of Sanctuary.'.

This section has detailed three interlocking problem spaces: systems, strategic opportunism, and power. Together, these problem spaces constitute a process of problematization that conveys a mixture of criticality and resignation. Despite knowing 'what works', the two cities continued to do what they could with what they had, resulting in the continued production and funding of temporary accommodation; although local councils resisted provincial and central governments where they could, even going so far as funding new housing, the 'band aid' shelter approach was perpetuated nonetheless. Both councils, perhaps to deal with the cognitive dissonance this created, defended those decisions in meetings. In Bristol, Imperial Apartments were of a questionable standard, and operated by an even more questionable company:

> I think we were aware, going into the deal, that Caridon, who are the owners of Imperial Apartments, had a less than savoury reputation in other parts of the country. We knew that. But I think we were not in a position, if we could make it work, to turn down that scale of accommodation. (Bristol, 15/10/20)

In Edmonton, the shelter standards recommended that shelters with a smaller number of units would be more appropriate, yet a new overnight shelter, the Herb Jamieson Centre, opened with 400 bed spaces:

> And so, notwithstanding that, we have a very, very mega shelter opening up, which is not what the city of Edmonton recommended. It's still worth working as hard as we can to make sure that that is a housing focused shelter too. (Edmonton, 30/8/21)

Constrained by the various factors outlined above, councillors in both cities resorted to 'doing what they can':

> We've got a lot of challenges that are coming forward in the coming months… so it's important that we're doing what we can to support people. (Bristol, 06/07/21)
> We're doing what we can… and the number of units in this report is what we can afford to do. (Edmonton, 08/06/20)

Knowing what worked and what should be implemented, but constrained from above, councils could only implement, and therefore perpetuate, a 'band aid' approach. It could be said that this is another crisis which went to waste, as both cities failed to 'build back better' (Brodhead, 2010), notwithstanding the efforts of both local governments.

## 6. Managing Houselessness in the Post-COVID City

This article has endeavoured to shed light on local governments and their role in the management of houselessness during the COVID-19 pandemic. The comparison presented reveals numerous convergences that speak to larger issues surrounding the post-COVID city, not least of which is the role of local government as 'bricoleurs' (Lowndes and McCaughie, 2013) in urban poverty management. Local governments used institutional levers and deployed resources that happened to be at hand. In both cities, unhoused populations were managed through a type of 'infrastructural bricolage' in this regard, one that redirected individuals to 'new' shelter spaces - hotels and commercial hostels in the case of Bristol and recreation and convention centres in the case of Edmonton - mainly with the goal of facilitating social distancing to reduce the risk of community spread. In both cities, this spatial management strategy was possible because the pandemic itself had rendered these spaces vacant. For a moment, the balance of punitiveness and care was reconfigured, tipping more towards the latter. However, as society 're-opened,' this form of spatial management was no longer possible, prompting a default to pre-pandemic poverty management strategies.

In ways, this return to the status quo is at odds with the discourse of council meetings which expressed a critical attitude towards poverty management. In this regard, the process of problematization documented here retained some hallmarks of what some call the 'new municipalism' (Thompson, 2021): it did point to failures, named systemic barriers, and pushed back against jurisdictional boundaries while also acknowledging existing social solidarities in an effort to re-politicize the housing crisis. This engendered some progress on the ground; namely, the Bristol council affirming its status as a 'City of Sanctuary,' and the Edmonton council overstepping jurisdictional boundaries to fund supportive housing. Ultimately, however, this critical attitude gave way to resignation. Councils in both cities resigned themselves to doing what they could with what they had.

This resignation is perhaps indicative of the fact that poverty management regimes are themselves difficult to transform, not least of which because their expediency springs from system fragmentation itself. Constructed out of a diverse array of programs, interventions and services delivered by an array of government and non-government actors, poverty management is the reification of "an economy of interests, forces and inertias, the balance of which produce a concentration-containment effect in the city" (Evans and DeVerteuil, 2018, 317). Whilst councils recognized this, they felt they could not upset this balance. What local government could control was time-limited funding, infrastructure, land and whether to make it available or not to the voluntary sector; yet this power was not transformative along the lines of the 'new municipalism' movement (Thompson, 2021).

However, we caution against reading both cases as failures. The Bristol and Edmonton examples bring to mind Barnett et al.'s (2020) notion of 'municipal pragmatism,' an approach that is attuned to the agency of local government and its potentialities in navigating the best possible way forward. From this perspective, alternative pathways are best conceived within and through the everyday realities of local government. Both cases offer lessons in this regard. In Bristol, the local council's affirmation of Bristol as a sanctuary city can be read as an act of resistance against incorporation of broader anti-immigrant policies. In Edmonton, overstepping provincial jurisdiction to build housing using municipal funds and land can be read as an act of resistance against a reticent provincial government (see Evans et al., 2021). In both cases, municipal governments worked to resist forms of urban enclosure through the establishment of a public-commons (Russell et al., 2021). In this regard, strategies that leverage the commons - city-owned lands and infrastructure, for example - to rapidly scale-up adequate housing might also buffer against 'high altitude' forms of poverty governance. This strategic pathway could potentially yield an alternative future where forms of urban poverty management - containment and coercion, for example - are rendered obsolete.

## 7. Conclusion

This article has leveraged insights from two case studies to critically reflect on urban poverty management during the COVID-19 pandemic. Whilst elected officials in Bristol and Edmonton opened a discursive space for critical reflection, they were not able to shift deeply-rooted poverty management regimes. The end result was a slightly rebalanced landscape in terms of control and care but one that granted little more agency to marginalized urban dwellers than what existed before. In fact, the 'time–space of hegemonic control' (Langegger and Koester, 2017), achieved through the co-operation of functionally interdependent 'low-altitude' programs such as shelters and drop-ins, largely endured. In line with recent literature, COVID-induced changes at the urban scale have been difficult to harness towards improving the lives of marginalized groups and promoting the right to the city. However, we urge scholars to not dismiss this moment as a failure or set-back: beneath the resignation that characterized municipal council discourses was a strategic orientation that went beyond simply problematizing to problem-solving, albeit in a limited sense. Whilst neither case provides grounds to reverse recent prognoses of COVID-19 responses, they do

offer examples for thinking about ways to escape the 'local trap' of municipalism (Thompson, 2021).

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**Fiona Long:** Writing – original draft, Data curation. **Joshua Evans:** Writing – original draft.

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## Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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