Homelessness and water insecurity in the Global North: Trapped in the dwelling paradox

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FOCUS ARTICLE

Homelessness and water insecurity in the Global North: Trapped in the dwelling paradox

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Abstract
In this article, we introduce the “dwelling paradox” to explore how the state actively produces water insecurity for people experiencing homelessness in the Global North. We explain that the dwelling paradox is (1) produced by a modernist ideology of public service delivery that privileges water provision through private infrastructural connections in the home; (2) is reproduced by the welfare-warfare state, which has increasingly weaponized public water facilities and criminalized body functions in public space; and (3) is actively contested by some homeless communities, who challenge hegemonic ideals of the “home”—and its water infrastructure—as a private, atomized space. In advancing a relational and spatial understanding of water insecurity, we use the dwelling paradox to illustrate how unhoused people are caught in a space of institutional entrapment that is forged by state power and amplified by anti-homeless legislation. Such spaces of entrapment make it extremely difficult for unhoused people to achieve a safe, healthy, and thriving life—the basis of the human rights to water and sanitation.

This article is categorized under:
Human Water > Water Governance

KEYWORDS
homelessness, housing-water nexus, household water insecurity, anti-homeless policies, austerity

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Think about the last time you urgently had to pee or poop, without a toilet in sight. In many cities across Europe and North America, the Covid-19 pandemic temporarily closed public water and toilet access, upsetting the linkages between secure water, housing, and public space. In London, for example, emergency policies during the spring 2020 lockdown led to the temporary closure of public toilets and drinking water fountains. By early summer, as weather improved but public toilets remained closed, city parks were filled with human excrement as Londoners resorted to using their surroundings as a toilet (Richards, 2020).

In the London borough of Hackney, “local officials issued so many fines to public urinators in a single May weekend that they reportedly ran out of paper to write citations” (Meehan et al., 2022, p. 1). Banners posted on park gates by Hackney council declared: “It’s a park, not a toilet. Go home if you need to go” (Figure 1).

London’s closure of public toilets and water sources illustrates the dwelling paradox at the heart of modernist water provision in the Global North: without a conventional home or workplace, access to water and sanitation is increasingly precarious, difficult, and/or non-existent. In other words, water security in wealthy nations largely depends on whether a person has regular private access to piped (and running) hot and cold water, a flush toilet, and a bath or shower, such as in their apartment, workplace, or house. For many “housed” Londoners, the Covid-19 emergency toilet closures were likely their first taste of the harsh realities of the dwelling paradox. Meanwhile, such conditions are daily realities for unhoused (homeless) people, for whom no fixed or stable “home” means limited or no secure water facilities. People without housing must often access water in public space, but these spaces are increasingly closed, limited, or policed. When the official government message is “go home if you need to go” (Figure 1), what happens if you do not have a conventional “home”?

In this article, we introduce the “dwelling paradox” to explore how the capitalist state actively produces water insecurity for people experiencing homelessness in the Global North. Safe, reliable, affordable, and sufficient water are necessary ingredients for a thriving and healthy life (Jepson et al., 2017; Wutich, 2020). Improving access to safe and secure water and sanitation is a global development priority, enshrined in the UN Human Rights and Sustainable Development goals. Yet, recent studies indicate that high-income nations may be in fact reversing some gains made to the Human Rights to Water and Sanitation over the past decade, with stagnant or increasing levels of households without secure water, particularly in cities with unaffordable housing (Meehan et al., 2020; Meehan et al., 2020; Wutich et al., 2022). We posit that the dwelling paradox may help to explain one facet of this trend.

What is the dwelling paradox? Two points are key to our conceptualization. First, water insecurity is both a social and spatial experience. In high-income countries, the human right to water and sanitation tends to be realized through the private space of a home. This model of water provision is the result of what Maria Kaika (2004) calls the “domestication of water” through gendered, racialized, classed, and technoscientific solutions to modern infrastructure and public service delivery. In recent decades, the restriction and closure of toilets and water sources in public space (a product of austerity policies), the “customers only” access rules in business establishments, and the criminalization of “normal” human body functions (such as urinating, defecating, showering, and bathing) in public spaces all combine to severely limit secure water and sanitation for people—especially unhoused people. In other words, people without housing must access water in public space, but water (and water services) are increasingly only available through private means. The dwelling paradox therefore denotes a space of entrapment: no home, no secure water.

Second, the dwelling paradox is produced, not accidental. A contradiction—like the dwelling paradox—is not an aberration, but inherent to systems of capitalist social and spatial order that privilege particular spaces, places, and peoples while devaluing others (Gilmore, 2007; Harvey, 1990, 2014; Pulido, 2016; Smith, 1984). As Don Mitchell (1997, p. 305) explains, “[t]he anti-homeless laws being passed in city after city in the United States work in a pernicious way: by redefining what is acceptable behavior in public space, by in effect annihilating the spaces in which the homeless must live, these laws seek simply to annihilate homeless people themselves, all in the name of recreating the city as a playground for a seemingly global capital.” Water insecurity is not an innocent state of being. The dwelling paradox illustrates how unhoused people are caught in a space of institutional entrapment that is forged by governance and public policy that, on the one hand, realizes a right to water primarily through private, individualized infrastructural connections in the home; and on the other, sustains the austerity and criminalization of water and sanitation in public spaces.

We argue that the dwelling paradox—and its entrapment of unhoused people—is (1) produced by a modernist ideology of public service delivery that privileges water provision through private infrastructural connections in the home; (2) is reproduced by the welfare-warfare state, which has weaponized public water facilities and increasingly
criminalizes body functions in public space; and (3) is actively contested by some houseless communities, who challenge hegemonic ideals of the “home”—and its water infrastructure—as a private, atomized space. Homelessness is often described as a “crisis.” In contrast, this article seeks to interrogate the “crisis” narrative and shift focus to the production of the dwelling paradox and the reproduction of inequality and water insecurity in high-income countries.

2 | KEY DEFINITIONS AND INSIGHTS

“Homelessness” is an imperfect term that refers to a spectrum of living conditions: ranging from exposed or “rough sleeping” on streets and open areas, to encampments and group settlements, to motel residents and “doubled-up” households living under a shared roof (Culhane et al., 2007; Lee et al., 2021). The US Department of Housing and Urban Development (2019) defines homelessness as different categories of people living without a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. Experts understand homelessness as the lack of regular and adequate housing (Lee et al., 2010; Rossi, 1989) and urge caution when making broad-based claims about such a diverse population (Goodling, 2020). For example, the act of grouping a diverse group of people and labeling them as “homeless” may contribute to their erasure and further marginalization (Lurie et al., 2015).2

Unhoused people may have places they call home, but for a variety of reasons those dwellings may be unstable, temporary, or inadequate. Experiences and causes of homelessness are diverse and varied (Culhane et al., 2007). Reasons for the loss of stable housing may include eviction, natural disasters, job loss, mental or physical illness, drug addiction, divorce, domestic violence, dowry-related and land conflicts, affordability, or abuse by political and family power structures (DeLuca & Rosen, 2022; Desmond, 2012; Lee et al., 2010; Rossi, 1989; Uddin et al., 2016). The causes of housing loss are situated within financial constraints and social relationships (or lack thereof) and exacerbated by institutions and policies (DeLuca & Rosen, 2022) and diverse and intersecting social identities, such as age, disability status, race and ethnicity, gender identity, and sexual orientation, to name a few (Fraser et al., 2019; Goodling, 2020; Lurie et al., 2015; Otiniano Verissimo et al., 2021).

Housing is not the same as shelter. Unhoused people may obtain shelter with varying levels of comfort and protection, from space under a bridge to a bed in a single room occupancy (SRO) building and organization (Silfee, 2019). By definition, shelter offers protection from the elements and is considered temporary. Housing tends to be more stable and formalized through rental agreements, home ownership, or kin arrangements (Lee et al., 2010; Rossi, 1989), although this “stability” is increasingly challenged in cities with unaffordable rents. Overall, and in contrast to shelter, housing in high-income countries offers increased security, permanence, and the ability to connect to vital public utilities like water and sewerage (Desmond, 2012).

The emerging scholarship on homelessness and water-related issues yields several key insights. First, houseless people are especially prone to conditions of household water insecurity, which is broadly understood as the lack of
safe, reliable, sufficient, and affordable water for a thriving life (Jepson et al., 2017). Without a stable home, unhoused people must rely on social organizations (e.g., shelters and charities), interpersonal relations (e.g., friends and family) and private or “gift-based” sources of water, sanitation, and hygiene facilities (DeMyers et al., 2017; Uddin et al., 2016; Walters, 2014; Wutich et al., 2018). Such infrastructures and relations can be precarious, context-specific, and granted (or denied) in inconsistent and discriminatory ways (Neves-Silva et al., 2018; Pacheco-Vega, 2019). As a research participant told Neves-Silva et al. (2018, p. 4), “Something that upsets us, homeless people, is to hear people talking about bathroom and water when it is something we only have access as a favor, don’t we? Yes!”

Second, accessing water takes significant effort and time (Avelar Portillo, 2021; DeMyers et al., 2017; Flanigan & Welsh, 2020; Goodling, 2020; Speer, 2016, 2017; Uddin et al., 2016). Unhoused people are often reliant on public transit schedules and must travel to sites like churches, shelters, or SROs on the specific days they are open—a tacit knowledge, often gained through trial and error—to fill a water bottle, use the toilet, take a shower, or clean a wound (Avelar Portillo, 2021). Considerable time is spent on procuring water: for example, a study in Los Angeles found that unhoused people spent up to 2 h trying to access water services (Avelar Portillo, 2021). Research shows that when households lack convenient water supply, the burden of procuring, transporting, and managing water falls disproportionately on women and children (Dickin & Caretta, 2022) and the emerging literature thus far indicates the same is true for unhoused communities (DeMyers et al., 2017).

Third, shelter does not guarantee access to water and sanitation (DeMyers et al., 2017). For instance, DeMyers et al. (2017) observed that people who live temporarily in shelters, low-income housing, and drug rehabilitation centers often cannot afford utility bills, do not have safe and clean water, or do not trust the tap water that is available to them. At the shelters in Phoenix, bottled water was limited and showers were not consistently or universally available (DeMyers et al., 2017). In Los Angeles, access to water in shelter systems may depend on whether a person is enrolled in their programs (Avelar Portillo, 2021). Even if water services are publicly available, the facilities may be out of service and reminiscent of institutionalized systems that discourage people from using them (Avelar Portillo, 2021). Shelters are often closed during the day; refuse the entry of pets; and require government ID or other stipulations (like sobriety) for entry. Many people do not use shelters because they do not feel safe in them (Hochbaum, 2019). Transitional housing options are generally considered to offer safe water sources but are limited in number and availability (Lee et al., 2021).

Fourth, unhoused people are disproportionately exposed to environmental hazards, such as toxic chemicals, waterborne diseases, pollution, unsafe water, and unclean sanitation facilities (Calderón-Villarreal et al., 2022; DeMyers et al., 2017; Goodling, 2020; Uddin et al., 2016; Vickery, 2018). People may build shelter in hazardous or toxic environments like brownfields, riverbanks, road embankments, and railroad tracks (Goodling, 2020). A lack of water may compound other hazards and risks frequently experienced by unhoused people, such as heat/sun exposure and an inability to find cool locations (DeMyers et al., 2017; Harlan et al., 2013).

Fifth, experiences of water insecurity are dependent on the multiple and intersectional identities embodied by individuals. For example, unhoused women, older unhoused adults, unhoused people coping with a physical disability or chronic illness, and Black and Latinx unhoused communities may experience magnified experiences of water insecurity (Avelar Portillo, 2021; Barile et al., 2020; Goodling, 2020; Ho et al., 2007). In an incisive examination, Vora (2020) notes the “double stigma” status experienced by menstruators as they navigate their periods in the context of limited financial resources and water services. “Being on your period is the worst time for a woman to be homeless,” a participant reported (in Vora, 2020, p. 31), “it gives you that extra blow.”

In short, the small but growing literature on homelessness and water insecurity illuminates the complex ways that housing insecurity relates to or compounds pernicious barriers to water, sanitation, and hygiene access in high-income countries. Without an adequate and secure home, access to secure water is extremely difficult. In the following sections, we lay out the social, historical, and political-economic conditions that have produced this crisis.

3 | THE DOMESTICATION OF WATER

The “house” is at the heart of many issues and debates about homelessness—including questions of water, hygiene, and sanitation. Starting in the 18th century, visionary engineers and bureaucrats in western societies saw improved planning and housing design as a solution to problems of public health, urban blight, and poverty (Agostoni, 2003; Melosi, 2000, 2011). Geographer Maria Kaika (2004) traces the way that urban planning in 18th-century Europe reflected changing social norms of democracy, progress, and modernity, in which the right to a private space became...
closely linked to liberal and capitalist ideals of individual freedom. In many western societies, the idea of a “house” served to delineate people from nature, inside from outside, the public from the private sphere (Kaika, 2004).

During this period of modernization, a new set of domesticated spaces emerged for the human body to interact with “good water” in a controlled setting, a process Kaika (2004) calls the “domestication of water.” In Europe and North America, architecture and urban planning split and divided the “wet room” into the kitchen and bathroom, key sites of water-related functions and domestic, gendered labor. Bathrooms, that were once shared spaces for multiple households, were moved indoors and attached to the private home. At the same time, normal body functions—such as urination, defecation, and menstruation—were stigmatized and made invisible to the public realm (Benidickson, 2007), a contradiction that resurfaces in contemporary struggles for public toilet access in cities (Lowe, 2018). Over time, the indoor and private space of water and sanitation became the “gold standard” of domestic modernity (Kaika, 2004; Walsh, 2022).

The domestication of water imparts an important lesson: the “housing” of household water insecurity is partial and selective. “Spatial claims made by the private sphere (domestic or other) are always translated into the deprivation of the public sphere from these same spaces and the reduction of spaces of the margin,” argues Kaika (2004, p. 273). One of the reasons why anxiety and discomfort is produced by a “crisis”—such as the emergency closures of the London public toilets during the pandemic—is precisely because it forces people to reflect on the existence of social and economic relations to which the home is connected and which, when disrupted, render the “normal” function of our lives anomalous.

It is important to note that these normative and infrastructural transformations were gradual and uneven in terms of their spatial reach and imagined citizenship. For example, many rural communities in the United States did not receive piped water access and indoor toilets until the 1930s, when New Deal programs targeted water network extension to rural homes (Melosi, 2011). In England, many working-class communities did not get indoor plumbing until the latter part of the twentieth century: in 1967, the British House Conditions Survey found that 25% of homes in England and Wales lacked a bath or shower, an indoor toilet, and a sink with hot and cold-water taps (Meehan et al., 2023). Yet even as the experience of “universal” water and sanitation materialized unevenly, the momentum and ideological vision for “progress” was set.

In sum, the contemporary “crisis” of water insecurity among unhoused communities is produced by the domestication of water: the division and relegation of public waters to the private realm of a “house” under capitalist urbanization and the transformation of the built environment for privileged groups.

4 | DISCIPLINING WATER AND SPACE

As a space of entrapment, the dwelling paradox reveals how public spaces of water and sanitation have become increasingly restricted, criminalized, and even weaponized to discipline people in space (Mitchell, 1997, 2020). Before the Covid-19 pandemic shut down public restrooms, many public toilets and drinking water sources (like water fountains) in Global North countries had already been closed, fallen into disrepair, or functionally replaced with “pay-to-use” services, such as bathrooms in commercial establishments like McDonald’s or Starbucks (Lowe, 2018). A trip to the toilet in London’s Greenwich Park, for example, requires a bank card and costs 20p (Figure 2)—a potential barrier to an unhoused person in the UK, where proof of address (e.g., a lease or rental agreement) is legally required to open a bank account.

In addition to the widespread closures of public water facilities and toilets (Lowe, 2018), normal human functions are increasingly policed and criminalized in public spaces (Avelar Portillo, 2021; Calderón-Villarreal et al., 2022; Herring, 2019; Herring et al., 2020; Meehan, 2013; Speer, 2016). For example, in 2017, the Los Angeles Police Department issued parking citations to LavaMae, an organization that provides mobile showers and restrooms to unhoused communities in Skid Row, a 50-block neighborhood in downtown Los Angeles (LACAN, 2017). Public policy plays an active role in criminalizing human existence. So-called “anti-camping city ordinances” mean that houseless Angelenos may only shelter in public spaces for a maximum of 9 h (between 9 p.m. and 6 a.m.) before they can be evicted and told to “move on” by law enforcement (Avelar Portillo, 2021; Flanigan & Welsh, 2020; LACAN, 2017).

Cities in the United States have long defined acceptable behavior in public spaces in a way that targets the homeless (Duneier, 2001; Herring et al., 2020; Mitchell, 1997), a trend that is mirrored in recent UK legislation. Laws making it illegal to sleep, loiter, urinate, and defecate in public were common in cities from New York to Atlanta to San Francisco; rather than offer water infrastructure to accommodate these basic human needs, “survival itself is criminalized”
(Mitchell, 1997, p. 307). As Speer (2016) observes, houseless populations are depicted as “dirty” and “dangerous” in public policy language; and their removal is often described in the language of “cleaning up” public space. Rather than provide sanitary interventions like running water and toilets to homeless encampments, Speer argues, public officials used health and sanitation concerns to justify bulldozing encampments and issuing evictions.

The weaponization and criminalization of water has found its way into UK legislation and policing practice. In 2014, the UK approved the Anti-Social Behavior, Crime and Policing Act that created powers for local authorities to issue on-the-spot fines for certain public “nuisance” activities (e.g., urinating, defecating, etc.), a move that reinforced the criminalization of normal body functions for people experiencing homelessness (O’Brien, 2016). More recently, in 2022 the UK passed the controversial Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts (PCSC) Act. Among its many provisions, the PCSC grants new policing powers and creates a new offense for England and Wales: “unauthorized encampments and developments” (including homeless encampments and vehicle/caravan occupancy). So-called “trespassers” in England and Wales may be arrested and banned (and their belongings seized) if they are found to cause “damage” to the environment (including “excessive noise, smells, litter, or deposits of waste”) and/or “disruption”—including interfering with a supply of water (PCSC, 2022a, 2022b, Section 60C and 84). The human target of this policy action is clear: “For the purposes of this section [60C] a person is to be considered as residing or having the intention to reside in a place even if that residence or intended residence is temporary, and a person may be regarded as residing or having an intention to reside in a place notwithstanding that the person has a home elsewhere.”

The dwelling paradox thus describes a space of entrapment for unhoused people. Research suggests that “anti-homeless laws and enforcement fail to reduce urban disorder but create instead a spatial churn in which homeless people circulate between neighborhoods and police jurisdictions rather than leaving public space” (Herring et al., 2020, p. 131). What, then, do these tactics do? For Mitchell, anti-homeless legislation and policing tactics (e.g., eviction orders for encampments; move-along orders; prohibitions on sitting or sleeping in public spaces) amount to the “annihilation of people by law”—in short, the designation of who gets to “belong” (or not) to public space. Mitchell (1997, p. 311) writes:

As troublesome as it may be to contemplate the necessity of creating “safe havens” for homeless people in the public space of cities, it is even more troublesome to contemplate a world without them. The sorts of actions we are outlawing—sitting on sidewalks, sleeping in parks, loitering on benches, asking for donations, peeing—are
not themselves subject to total societal sanction. Indeed they are all actions we regularly and even necessarily engage in. What is at question is where these actions are done. For most of us, a prohibition against asking for a donation on a street is of no concerns; we can sit in our studies and compose begging letters for charities. So too do rules against defecating in public seem reasonable. When one of us—the housed—find ourselves unexpectedly in the grips of diarrhea, for example, the question is only one of timing, not at all of having no place to take care of our needs.

Beyond the direct criminalization of homelessness in public spaces, unhoused people are often stigmatized and discriminated against even within private spaces, such as by denying access to a business or employment (Mitchell, 1997). Restrictive and reduced access forms lead to further stigmatization and social exclusion (Brewis & Wutich, 2019; DeMyers et al., 2017). In other words, the inability to look “clean” creates a perception of people experiencing homelessness as “disgusting” or “lazy” (Brewis et al., 2019). Moral judgment reduces empathy and creates a society that is unwilling to help (Belcher & DeForge, 2012). This is as true for the Londoners who used public parks as toilets during the first Covid-19 lockdown as it is for unhoused people forced to make difficult choices around water and sanitation every day.

In sum, we suggest the retrenchment and enclosure of public water and the policing of houseless people reflects what Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007) refers to as the “welfare-warfare state”—a public policy structure in which states wage war on their own citizens. While the term originally described the wealth produced from public warfare spending, Gilmore (2007) applied the concept to explain the policing and growth of mass incarceration of the Black working class in the United States. We extend this framing to include another “surplus” population of the capitalist state: houseless people. Water-related practices and public spaces have become weaponized as sites of “warfare” whereby states seek to control “surplus” populations—those seen not to contribute “productively” to society—through tools of public policy. Such tactics are often promoted as anti-crime measures, but at the expense of endorsing social stigma, shame, terror, and the forced invisibility of an entire group of people.

5 | CHALLENGING HEGemonic IDEALS OF HOME AND WATER

In some places, houseless communities may challenge hegemonic ideals of the “home”—and its water infrastructure—as a private space. Emerging research suggests how the “entrapment” of the dwelling paradox is illuminated and contested. In ethnographic research with encampments in Fresno, California, Jessie Speer (2017, p. 518) argues that “both anti-homeless policing and housing provision mutually constrain homeless people’s expressions of home, such that the struggle over domestic space has become integral to the contemporary politics of US homelessness.” Encampment residents in Fresno developed complex living arrangements and social infrastructures of water provision that relied on communal spaces, labor, and practices. Speer (2017, p. 523–524) reports:

I visited one woman in her 100-square-foot home composed of pallets, tarps, and flat pieces of wood elevated off the ground to prevent infestations. Inside, she had furniture and decorations on the wall. Her kitchen was an outdoor fire pit surrounded by couches, and her bathroom was a communal portable toilet.

Encampments disrupt modernist notions of the home as atomized, private space. “Tent city residents worked hard to maintain a clean space,” observes Speer (2016, p. 1058), “One woman constructed a shanty with separate rooms for showering and using the bathroom. Another tent city resident said of her community, ‘The streets have been kept cleaner than they’ve been in two decades, believe it or not. Who does that? We do. We sweep the drains. We clean the drains. We keep the trash up out of the street’.”

Fresno officials pursued relentless evictions of encampment residents, largely on the grounds of protecting public sanitation. “In policing public space,” argues Speer (2017, p. 527), “Fresno officials were simultaneously policing the domestic space of the encampment. By continuing to construct homes in public, homeless Fresnans were challenging the public/private divide and the commodification of domesticity that are at the heart of mainstream housing. But the homeless in Fresno did not just make homes in public: they also challenged dominant ideologies of domestic space by calling the encampments home.” In thinking through the implications of Fresno, we suggest that many policy “solutions” to homelessness may unwittingly extend and reproduce, rather than disrupt, the contradictions and modernist ideals of private, domesticated water. For example, the “housing first” model championed by U.S. sector advocates and scholars remains “grounded in...
the paradigm of privately owned, for-profit housing” (Speer, 2017, p. 521). In following market logics, the housing first model reproduces “dominant notions of what it means to live in a home, rather than responding to the needs and demands of local homeless communities” (Speer, 2017, p. 521). Nor does the model recognize that “collective living arrangements may be more beneficial for residents” (Speer, 2017, p. 521).

Like Speer, we do not claim that encampments are necessarily healthy or emancipatory spaces; we also recognize the central importance of public action to support unhoused people. But in listening to and learning from houseless communities—as documented by Speer (2016, 2017), Goodling (2020), and others (Avelar Portillo, 2021; DeMyers et al., 2017; Flanigan & Welsh, 2020; Neves-Silva et al., 2018; Walters, 2014)—we note their tacit and direct critiques of modernist idioms of “home” and “water” services. This point is especially important for water researchers and practitioners, or anyone who may assume a fixed “home” should serve as the principal or only delivery mechanism for the human rights to water and sanitation.

6 | CONCLUSION

Homelessness is often described as a “crisis”—including a water and toilet “crisis” in wealthy cities and countries of the Global North (Lee et al., 2021; Mitchell, 2020; O'Regan et al., 2021). In this article, we sought to interrogate this “crisis” narrative and shift focus to the dwelling paradox, a produced contradiction of advanced capitalist societies and a space of entrapment in which no home normally means no water.

We sought to demonstrate that the dwelling paradox is (1) produced by a modernist ideology of public service delivery that privileges water provision through private infrastructural connections in the home; (2) is reproduced by the welfare-warfare state, which has weaponized public water facilities and increasingly criminalizes body functions in public space; and (3) is actively contested by some houseless communities, who challenge hegemonic ideals of the “home”—and its water infrastructure—as a private, atomized space. Unhoused people are caught in the dwelling paradox—a space of institutional entrapment that is produced by state power and amplified by anti-homeless legislation. This space of entrapment likely goes far beyond water access and extends to many other social goods and infrastructures that are tied to conventional homes, such as rights to privacy, protection, municipal services, and citizenship. Such spaces of entrapment make it extremely difficult for unhoused people to achieve a safe, healthy, and thriving life—the basis of fundamental human rights, including the human rights to water and sanitation.

Water insecurity is fundamentally social and spatial. Our analysis of the dwelling paradox spotlights the roots of normative water delivery, the myriad factors and relations that produce housing insecurity, and the discipline tactics used to police people through water and sanitation. The housing crisis, put simply, is also a water crisis. Following the 2008 financial crash and recession, and coupled with a decades-long reduction of social and subsidized housing, we would expect the loss of affordable housing to result in more water-related insecurities in the Global North, not less. State policy exacerbates the water crisis through austerity reductions in water sources and services in public space (Lowe, 2018). On top of this, states criminalize and stigmatize water-related human practices and behaviors—a strategic targeting of a “surplus population” in capitalist societies.

Homelessness is social and structural—not merely individual—and therefore evades any easy policy “solution” or singular response. We suggest that even as water delivery and sanitation services are a well-established duty of governments in the Global North, they are understood and governed separately from the supply of housing, which is governed privately as a market exchange of goods between individual actors. To focus on the water community (e.g., water utilities and providers), this convenient wedge enables and possibly perpetuates a systemic ignorance of houseless people—water is only “provided” when people are living in a real “house.” This paradox is further exacerbated by the driving values of each public policy area. Public service delivery can be (though often is not) driven by a quest to realize human rights. Rights-based policy approaches often will work if the values of the public organization are aligned with societal values. But, as our article shows, this is not often the case.

In this way, the dwelling paradox cannot be resolved by simply creating more private housing or adding a few more portable toilets. Providing water and sanitation facilities to unhoused individuals requires solving the conjoined challenges of housing supply, sanitation, and water delivery (Meehan, Jurjevich, et al., 2020) using a long-term lens. This challenge requires an integrated approach to public policy design and provision (Pacheco-Vega, 2021), but in the meantime, people need water. One way to help deliver the human right to water to people experiencing homelessness is to re-embrace public water infrastructure and view water and sanitation as a public good—de-coupled from privatized models of the built environment. Such a move has the benefit of helping all people, the housed and unhoused.
Everyone needs drinking water sources, toilets, places to shower and clean bodies and domestic items, even when they are outside of a private, conventional home. Moving beyond the dwelling paradox calls on us to create a new social contract with housing and water.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS
Katie Meehan: Conceptualization (lead); methodology (lead); project administration (lead); writing – original draft (lead); writing – review and editing (equal). Melissa Beresford: Conceptualization (equal); project administration (equal); writing – original draft (equal); writing – review and editing (equal). Fausto Amador Cid: Writing – review and editing (equal). Lourdes Johanna Avelar Portillo: Writing – review and editing (equal). Anna Marin: Writing – review and editing (equal). Marianne Odetola: Writing – review and editing (equal). Raul Pacheco-Vega: Writing – review and editing (equal).

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST
The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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ENDNOTES
1 We use the imperfect term “Global North” to refer to a broad set of countries where modernist development ideologies and practices are influential and pervasive. As we write elsewhere, “[j]ust as the global South cannot be mapped as a stable location or ontology (Roy, 2015), what we call the “global North” reflects much diversity and difference—not a singular history of experience” (Meehan et al., 2020a, p. 3).
2 Following best practices established in the literature (see Avelar Portillo, 2021; Goodling, 2020), we refer to “unhoused” or “houseless” people in recognition that unhoused people may have places they call home. We use the term “homelessness” to describe the institutionalized condition in which a person does not have permanent or secure housing. More recently, DeLuca and Rosen (2022) argue that the term “housing insecurity” is a more apt term to define the broad continuum of housing hardships and housing risks (including homelessness) that affects a wider band of the population.

REFERENCES


