"Damned if we do, damned if we don't": Examining the municipal problematization of homelessness in Edmonton, Canada during COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

Urban marginality has long-been a concern of urban studies. The governance of urban marginality is important empirical terrain, particularly in the context of COVID-19, an event that challenged established governance systems globally. This article contributes to our understanding of the governance of urban marginality during the COVID-19 pandemic by examining urban poverty management responses in one Canadian city, Edmonton, Alberta. The article makes two contributions in this regard. First, the paper theorizes urban poverty management as a dispositif, an approach which draws attention to the role of problematization in the configuration of poverty management landscapes and the implications these configurations have for the spatial management of urban poverty in the city. Second, we show that while municipal officials attempted to reconfigure Edmonton's poverty management landscape, their efforts were inflected, and ultimately limited, by three 'problem spaces': forward fiscal liability, risk management, and legal jurisdiction. These problem spaces comprise what we call the 'municipal mentality.' We argue that this municipal mentality is indicative of the fact that municipal government is a conflict-laden site of articulation and that municipal decisions are often shaped by deliberation, deference and jurisdictional struggles which can have implications for the character of urban poverty management.

1. Introduction

Urban marginality has been in the crosshairs of urban analysis for as long as cities have been the subject of scholarly investigation. Whether defined structurally as the outcome of class- or race-based dispossession (Wacquant, 2009) or interpersonally as the product of everyday interactions and processes (Lancione, 2016), urban marginality has long been recognized by urban scholars as a 'problem space' of urban governance (Uitermark, 2014). In this regard, the governance of urban marginality is noteworthy for many reasons, not least of which is the necessity to overcome social contradictions inherent within capitalist urbanization. It is also important empirical terrain for critical engagements with evolving forms of urban neoliberalism, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, a world historical event that challenged governance systems around the world.

In this article, we utilize the concept of *urban poverty management* to pry open the governance of urban marginality for analysis. More than twenty-years ago, Wolch and DeVerteuil (2001, 150) defined urban poverty management in practical terms as the "organized responses by elites and/or the state, directed generally at maintaining the social order and more particularly at controlling poor people." In political-economic terms, the concept evokes the challenge posed by what Marx (1990)

called the 'relative surplus population,' a segment of society encompassing both the 'reserve army' of the unemployed as well as those Marx called the 'lumpenproletariat' (i.e., vagabonds, criminals, the impaired). The relative surplus population is "systemic to the reproduction of capitalism, but it is detrimental to the reproduction of life itself" (Tyner, 2019, 53), thus constituting a social contradiction at the very heart of the capitalist system. Poverty management apparatuses ensure both the control and the survival of surplus populations on an everyday basis, albeit largely constrained to specific zones of dependence (Baker et al., 2019).

Conceived in these terms, poverty management is imbued with an expedient function, particularly regarding the necessity to manage surplus populations within the city and thus "outflank" the contradictions of urban neoliberalization (Peck & Tickell, 2002) and the capitalist system as a whole (Piven & Cloward, 1993). While this functional perspective is of value, we believe further insight into poverty management's politico-economic significance can be gained by attending to the *relationality* of this form of urban governance. In this regard, there is something telling in the composition of urban poverty management: while the management of surplus populations is necessary under capitalism, how this is achieved depends on the way in which parts of the surplus population (i.e. unemployed, underemployed, disabled,

unhoused) are singled out for attention within various discourses, which are linked to specific practices and spaces at a given moment in time. The configuration of these discourses, practices and spaces can mean the difference between forms of poverty management that evoke notions of 'dangerousness' and spatially manage surplus populations through outright containment, or forms that evoke notions of 'citizenship' and operate through more subtle strategies of integration (see Uitermark, 2014).

In this article, we explore the relationality of urban poverty management in two parallel and interrelated ways: first, we theorize this relationality using the concepts of *dispositif* and *problematization* and second, we use these concepts to empirically examine urban poverty management responses in one Canadian city, Edmonton, Alberta. Drawing on the writings of Foucault (1980), a dispositif can be defined as an ensemble of discourses, practices, sites, and spaces that forms in response to an urgent need, a process that can itself be conceptualized as a problematization. Urban poverty management can itself be conceived of as a dispositif: it is an ensemble of poverty discourses, welfare practices, and spaces of containment and integration that coalesce at the local level to manage surplus populations, such as 'the homeless.' However, this ensemble can change as populations, such as 'the homeless,' come to be problematized anew, yielding different socio-spatial outcomes.

Building on this application of the dispositif and problematization to urban poverty management we turn to a case study of homelessness responses in Edmonton, a city in Canada where the COVID-19 pandemic rendered the existing poverty management dispositif problematic. After the onset of the pandemic, Edmonton's dispositif underwent modification at the behest of the municipal government, which sought to 'govern-through-emergency' (Przybylinski, 2024) under the exceptional circumstances of COVID-19; however, this response produced mixed socio-spatial outcomes for houseless populations. On one hand, municipally-led interventions boosted regressive elements of Edmonton's poverty management landscape, such as emergency shelters, while on the other hand, interventions simultaneously developed progressive 'offshoots' such as supportive housing. In this regard, poverty management in Edmonton did not radically depart from pre-pandemic forms insofar as the distinction between care and control were just as blurred (Hennigan & Speers, 2019).

Through a close examination of meetings involving municipal officials and their decisions, we argue that this governance-through-emergency and its ambivalent outcomes was shaped by a style of governmental reasoning we call the 'municipal mentality.' Municipally-led interventions were implemented on the basis of the problematization of homelessness in terms of administrative costs, individual vulnerability, and shelter standards. These problematizations are indicative of wider managerial imperatives of municipal government - namely, forward fiscal liability, risk management, and legal jurisdiction - that functioned as key 'problem spaces' for municipal intervention in urban poverty management. The inward-looking, managerial concerns of municipal officials - or 'municipal mentality' - displayed progressive flourishes but did little to challenge the neoliberal and stigmatizing conceptions of homelessness and actually limited investment in more radical proposals to end the homelessness crisis.

We begin the article by defining the dispositif, linking it to the notion of problematization, and then reviewing their application to urban poverty management. We then apply this framework to our empirical case study - poverty management in Edmonton, Canada during the COVID-19 pandemic - which proceeds in two parts. First, we trace the changing contours of poverty management during the first two years of the pandemic and, second, we share findings from a thematic analysis of municipal discourses that yielded the three problem spaces introduced above. We end the article with a discussion of this process of municipal problematization and its implications for understanding the role of local municipal government - and the 'ordinary politics' (Barnett, 2017) and 'games of jurisdiction' (Valverde, 2021) that shape it - in transcending

managerialism in the governance of urban marginality.

2. Rethinking urban poverty management as a dispositif

Urban poverty management is one form that the governance of urban marginality can take, particularly in the post-welfare, North American city (DeVerteuil, 2015). The ongoing production of surplus populations is a pernicious condition of capitalism: both its existence and management are essential for the reproduction of the system as a whole (Piven & Cloward, 1993). This strategic imperative has long attracted scholarly attention which has produced detailed historical accounts of the localized relief and penal practices that characterized responses during the early industrial period, the subsequent development of the Keynesian welfare state, and the more recent expansion of the penal state that has occurred in tandem with welfare state restructuring (Wacquant, 2009). Many now approach these contemporary forms of poverty management from the perspective of neoliberal governmentality (Fairbanks, 2009; Soss et al., 2011; Willse, 2015). From this perspective, managerial interventions are typified by, on the one hand, the offloading of responsibility to local, non-governmental organizations that operate independently but are nonetheless disciplined into administrating paternalistic programs of relief that aim to transform the dependent poor into compliant and self-sufficient individuals, and on the other hand, increased police surveillance at the neighborhood level and mass incarceration on an industrial scale. Urban neoliberalization in the Global North has not only relied upon, but expanded through, this regime of practices which conceal poverty's rougher edges, while simultaneously providing the bare necessities of life *and* compelling the able-bodied into low-wage work (Baker et al., 2019).

In this way, urban poverty management constitutes a strategically significant and multifaceted space of contemporary urban governance (Evans & DeVerteuil, 2018). As a strategic space, poverty management encompasses a range of complex sites and spaces, each with their own regulatory functions, often operating at cross-purposes but yielding, as a composite totality, a cumulative managerial effect (see Wilton & DeVerteuil, 2006). As such, urban poverty management can be conceived as a collective accomplishment, achieved through the loosely connected efforts of a diverse range of actors (i.e. non-governmental organizations, police, paramedics, government officials) working in the absence of centralized authority or plan, but who nonetheless collectively embody a strategic imperative: the maintenance of social order at the local level and system legitimacy at the larger level of the capitalist system.

In this sense, urban poverty management under neoliberalism is not a single institution per se but rather resembles what Foucault (1980) called a *dispositif*. The dispositif figured prominently in Foucault's (1980, 2007) interviews and writings, particularly in his work around discipline, modern government, and sexuality. Methodologically speaking, the notion of the dispositif orients critical inquiry in three ways. First, Foucault (1980: 194–195) employed the concept of the dispositif to draw attention to the way in which discourses, institutional spaces and practices are connected up together into "heterogeneous ensembles" that constitute, at a given historical moment, a social reality. In this regard, a dispositif is a contingent formation that structures actions within a particular domain. Second, Foucault (1980, 196) asserted that these contingent formations are dynamic as the connections between various elements - a particular discourse and an institutional space, for example - can be blocked, switched out, or reactivated over time. Accordingly, the dispositif, and the social reality it makes possible, evolves based on the nature of its connections. Third, while dispositifs are contingent and subject to change based on how their elements connect, Foucault (1980) asserted that these connections are not random, nor are they overdetermined by an all-encompassing logic. Rather, through their "ever growing coherence," dispositifs produce a net effect and where this net effect addresses an urgent need or vital necessity, the dispositif itself is strengthened. Hence, dispositifs are

strategic in nature, albeit they represent a "strategy without a subject" (Foucault, 1980, 203).

This strategic imperative is a key entry point into the analysis of dispositifs. Formed in response to "an urgent need," dispositifs can be examined using another Foucaultian concept, *problematization*. Broadly speaking, a problematization is the 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 (Huxley, 2013). In Foucault's oeuvre, problematization was used in two ways: as a noun referring to a situation that has become uncertain or difficult and as a verb referring to a mode of inquiry that takes up these problematic situations as an object of thought (Koopman, 2013). In relation to the dispositif, both senses of problematization are relevant. It is through processes of problematization that concrete problems and challenges ("urgent needs") are responded to, oftentimes through establishing a new dispositif as connections between existing discourses, spaces, practices, and actors are reconfigured.

An analysis of urban problems and their corresponding dispositifs was central to Foucault's (2007, 2008) own genealogy of 'liberal' governmentality, which traced the re-articulation of sovereign and disciplinary power within emergent 'dispositif of security' that minimized threats to urban social order while maximizing circulation of goods and people, thereby optimizing the conditions necessary for the practice of liberalism (Collier, 2009). Paying attention to the empirical focus of these genealogies is instructive when it comes to problematization (Barnett & Bridge, 2017). Foucault's analysis focused on the thinking of authorities (ex. Physiocrats, British Liberals, Ordo-Liberals and American Neo-Liberals) in the face of urban difficulties. Describing this series of problematizations, Collier (2009, 95) states that "they are situated precisely amid upheaval" where "existing forms have lost their coherence and their purchase in addressing present problems, and in which new forms of understanding and acting have to be invented."

Foucault's notion of the dispositif has found application in recent examinations of urban governance (see Braun, 2014; Bissell, 2018; McGuirk & Dowling, 2021) where it has been used to highlight "the processes through which heterogeneous, widely scattered and dynamically emergent elements are drawn together and cohered to produce the capacity to govern" (McGuirk & Dowling, 2021, 760). Deploying the concept of the dispositif focuses attention on the composition and contingency of urban governance arrangements: more specifically, the way in which governing proceeds by "combining diverse elements into new heterogeneous formations, but also taking hold of new knowledges, technologies, and practices that either did not previously exist or had not previously been appropriated as a means of administration" (Braun, 2014, 51). In this regard, urban dispositifs are socio-spatial formations that make possible a mode of governing a particular milieu.

Urban poverty management exhibits many of the properties associated with the dispositif: it is a broad-scale social strategy operating through a heterogeneous mix of different practices (policing, welfare, medical), each of which manifest in distinct institutional sites (for example, jails, emergency shelters, addiction recovery centers) that co-function in terms of their interconnecting inputs and outputs and, importantly, their spatial proximity and interdependence, giving rise to what geographers have called the "service-dependent ghetto" (Dear & Wolch, 1987; DeVerteuil, 2000) or the "de facto service hub" (DeVerteuil, 2015). Poverty management dispositifs, such as the service hub, have played an expedient role in the management of urban life, in large part due to their capacity to absorb and outflank the negative externalities of urban neoliberalization, such as 'social disorder,' but also uphold everyday survival for marginalized populations. In this sense, they can be seen as vital when it comes to the resilience of urban neoliberalization, but can also work against it by providing specific spaces for marginalized populations to exist (DeVerteuil, Marr, Kienner, 2022a; DeVerteuil, Marr, Kienner, 2022b; Fairbanks, 2009, 2011).

As a dispositif, urban poverty management is itself a 'field of problematization' for urban governance more generally and for local municipal governments in particular. Emerging gradually in a piecemeal fashion, the poverty management dispositif has repeatedly and resiliently organized and structured the urban 'social question,' giving rise to objects of knowledge, such as the pauper, the homeless, and the distressed neighborhood, objects that have served as key empirical referents for the governance of the city more generally (O'Connor, 2001). In this sense they have provided a pivotal target for interventions by state actors involved in urban governance, not least of which are municipal governments.

3. Edmonton's poverty management dispositif before and after COVID-19

As the previous section has demonstrated, urban poverty management can be considered as a type of dispositif, a constellation of knowledges, practices, sites, and spaces that are provisionally connected on the basis of particular problematizations and as a result "produce strategic effects, some of which are aligned with urban neoliberalism, some of which are not", thereby ensuring incompleteness and gaps in the neoliberal project (Evans & DeVerteuil, 2018, 317). This is the stepping off point for our empirical focus on Edmonton, Alberta, a Canadian city of roughly 1 million people where visible homelessness and associated concerns regarding 'social disorder' have long been on the public agenda (Stolte, 2016).

A vast majority of this concern has been projected onto inner city neighborhoods adjacent to the central business district where an overwhelming majority of homelessness services are concentrated, if not shunted by community opposition from the rest of the city. This *service hub* resembles those found in most medium-to-large North American cities and some cities in Western Europe and Australasia (DeVerteuil, 2015). Spread across roughly 30 square blocks, this service-hub encompasses a majority of Edmonton's overnight emergency shelters, daytime drop-ins, detox facilities, short-term transitional housing, and permanent supportive housing (Evans et al., 2019). The voluntary organizations who operate these shelters, drop-ins, and short-term housing have a longstanding relationship with inner-city communities dating back to the 1950s. These organizations gravitated to these neighborhoods to meet the needs of new immigrants who were attracted to low-cost housing in the area. In the context of rapid suburbanization and inner-city disinvestment, this agglomeration of services has matured in the decades since, growing to meet the needs of low income and vulnerable citizens from across the metropolitan region (Evans et al., 2019).

As an ad-hoc and piecemeal accomplishment, Edmonton's service hub exemplifies what we have been calling the urban poverty management dispositif. This dispositif draws its intelligibility from *provincial* social welfare policy that structures street-level responses, such as overnight shelter, which are delivered by local voluntary organizations and are only intermittently and indirectly coordinated by the municipal government, the City of Edmonton. More specifically, the dispositif draws its intelligibility from two provincially-funded and administered social safety net programs, both deeply rooted in the principle of 'less eligibility' (Baker et al., 2019). The first program provides income assistance benefits to unemployed individuals who are able to work and individuals who are unable to work due to disability (respectively, these programs are called *Alberta Works* and *Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH)*). Both are means-tested and provide subsistence-level income support directly to recipients, albeit AISH is slightly more generous. For example, *Alberta Works* provides a monthly core benefit of $459/month and a shelter benefit of $354/month (Government of Alberta, 2024), a paltry amount given that the median rent for a 1-bedroom apartment in Edmonton was $1066/month (CMHC, 2023). The second program provides funds to local, non-profit organizations who provide emergency shelter to unhoused individuals. These organizations are funded based on the number of individuals sheltered and funding is allocated using a per-diem system. The level of provincial

funding for shelter spaces allows for only the most basic overnight shelter typically consisting of a mat or bunk in an austere congregate setting. Combined, these programs have anchored Edmonton's social safety net which, like in many other North American cities, allows for hardly more than "bare-bones survival" (DeVerteuil, Marr, Kienner, 2022b).

COVID-19 disrupted Edmonton's poverty management dispositif: many service spaces were closed and those that remained open had to modify service delivery to comply with physical distancing requirements. Moreover, as the provincial Government of Alberta deferred many COVID-19 responses to municipal governments, the City of Edmonton was thrust into the role of 'emergency management coordinator.' Over the course of the pandemic, the City of Edmonton facilitated increases in shelter capacity, decentralization of some shelter service facilities, and the development of short-term and permanent supportive housing 'off-shoots.' In February 2020, at the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, Edmonton's five emergency shelters had capacity to shelter approximately 606 individuals per night and all were located within the inner-city. One year later the overnight shelter capacity had ballooned to 1042 spaces, an expansion that was made possible through the repurposing of underutilized municipally-owned infrastructures and vacant church buildings (due to pandemic restrictions). By the end of the 'fourth wave' in September 2021, overnight shelter capacity had shrunk to 916 spaces, but this still represented roughly 50 % more shelter space than existed pre-pandemic. Significantly, a third of this capacity (300 spaces) was now located outside of the downtown core, south of the North Saskatchewan River (Government of Alberta, 2023). In addition to changes in shelter availability, 36-units of city-funded transitional housing spaces (or "bridge housing") and 150 units of city-funded permanent supportive housing spaces were developed during this period.

This raises questions whether Edmonton's poverty management dispositif was transformed for the better in the context of COVID-19. Does it offer, today, more than "bare-bones survival," an alternative mode of life beyond the generosity of the service-dependent ghetto (DeVerteuil, Marr, Kienner, 2022b) or, at the very least, gaps in the neoliberal project? In retrospect, the results are mixed. The expansion of temporary, overnight shelter space was largely aligned with the deeply-ingrained strategy of 'containment'; however, the municipal-led development of short-term and permanent supportive housing departed from this management strategy offering something closer to what Uitermark (2014) calls 'integration.' Nonetheless, despite these progressive 'off-shoots,' Edmonton's dispositif remained lodged within the ambivalent and blurry pathway characteristic of poverty management landscapes elsewhere (Hennigan & Speers, 2019).

4. The municipal problematization of homelessness in Edmonton during COVID-19: three problem spaces

How did Edmonton arrive at this mixed, ambivalent result even under the exceptional circumstances of COVID-19? How was the management of homelessness rationalized by municipal officials? What challenges were singled out for attention? How were the unhoused themselves cast? These questions serve as the focus for this section. It is the level of municipal government where we aim our inquiry; more specifically, towards moments of critical reflection among elected officials, planners, lawyers, and administrators that occurred during deliberations around key municipal decisions related to Edmonton's poverty management dispositif or 'service hub.'

We analyzed transcriptions of Edmonton committee and council meetings (all meetings were video recorded) that included discussion and voting on actions taken by the City of Edmonton (a total of 18 meetings) in response to homelessness between the onset of the pandemic in March 2020 and the end of the fourth wave in September 2021. More specifically, we focused our attention on two municipal decision-making structures; namely, (1) City Council and (2) one of its sub-committees, the Community and Public Services Committee. In

addition to what was said at these meetings, we also examined the supporting documents that were included as part of these meetings, which represent policy documents in their own right. Working with this textual data, we developed a thematic analysis focused on identifying and describing specific patterns of problematization.

Our analysis identified a series of 'problem spaces,' each of which locates a form of municipal thinking that structured how Edmonton's poverty management dispositif was rendered into an actionable domain of municipal intervention. More specifically, three problem spaces emerged from municipal council meetings: the economic, risk management, and legal. We argue that the post-outbreak responses to homelessness outlined in the previous section - weighted much more heavily towards shelter than housing - can be understood in the context of these problem spaces. Ultimately, as the following shows, the breadth and scope of municipal action was limited by inward-looking, managerial concerns. As a result, Edmonton's poverty management dispositif developed some progressive 'off-shoots' but remained largely the same as before.

4.1. Going it alone: the economic problem space

Homelessness was already a high-profile issue in Edmonton before the pandemic began. In fact, the city's *10-Year Plan to End Homelessness* (City of Edmonton, 2009) reached its end shortly before the pandemic was declared (see Evans & Masuda, 2020). While progress had been made over the previous 10 years, there still remained a significant homeless population, largely reflective of the unmet demand for permanent supportive housing. Recognizing this, the City of Edmonton developed its own three-year Affordable Housing Investment Plan (AHIP). Endorsed by councilors in October 2018, this plan gave top priority to permanent supportive housing, aiming to create 900 units by 2024 (600 units by the end of 2022). As initially conceived, the AHIP did not position the City of Edmonton as a major project funder, both in terms of capital and operational costs. Achieving the targets set forth in the AHIP was to be achieved through partnerships with other orders of government and non-market housing providers. Thus, the role of the city was to support the development of a 'pipeline of projects' by making public land available and by providing limited funding to cover project planning and project implementation costs.

The AHIP itself was reflective of the established view, among councilors and city staff, that Edmonton's 'housing ecosystem' was incomplete. The very visible problem of street homelessness - commonly referred to as 'social disorder' - was linked, by city staff and councilors, to the city's service hub and the need for more permanent supportive housing. This situational understanding prefaced the post-pandemic problematization of homelessness. As Colton Krisop, a City of Edmonton planner, put it in a Council meeting held in June 2020, the 'social disorder' of visible homelessness, and homeless encampments in particular, "is a symptom of a lack of supportive housing and other supports for people living in homelessness in Edmonton."

The early months of the pandemic brought tremendous uncertainty, and the need for supportive housing seemed all the more urgent. At the June meeting, city administrators brought councilors a plan to accelerate the development of two types of housing that they believed could make the housing ecosystem 'whole': bridge housing (temporary, low-barrier, safety-net housing) and permanent supportive housing (long-term housing with on-site supports). To accelerate the production of bridge housing, city staff proposed utilizing an empty dormitory located on the city-owned exhibition grounds. Moreover, city staff presented two funding scenarios to cover the capital costs of both bridge housing and PSH: (1) paying 100 % of the capital costs; or (2) cost sharing with government partners. In either case, the City of Edmonton would be, in the words of city staff, "clearly stepping outside its traditional role as initially envisioned for itself."

Councilors were concerned with the cost of "going it alone." Housing was a provincial responsibility and putting municipal dollars into

housing was stepping outside its jurisdiction. In questioning the plan, councilors applied a number of rationales to the prospect of "going it alone." Councilors emphasized what Mayor Iveson called "the human case," that "people should be looked after and lifted up by their community and the best, evidence-based, way to do that is to provide them supportive housing." Simultaneously, councilors also articulated the "financial case" that, in Mayor Iveson's words, supportive housing returns "substantial benefits back to community and to the taxpayer." Along these lines, Councilor Paquette questioned whether council was "going to get some sort of cost-benefit analysis on this, how much money would we actually save in the entire system by making this move?" Speaking further, Councilor Paquette shared the example of Ambrose Place, a much celebrated PSH project in Edmonton:

> I've actually pulled up some of the stats on Ambrose Place, and they serve as a good example. So 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.

This economic rationale resonated with the Mayor and the council. For example, Councilor McKeen remarked, "moving ahead on supportive housing is the most business-friendly thing we can do." Councilor Paquette, again affirmed the economic argument: "we will save their lives and we're going to save money in the process."

In the end, Council unanimously voted in favor of scenario two and, over the subsequent months, city administration moved forward with the implementation of a bridge housing program at the city-owned dormitory, at a cost of roughly $7.8 million, and the development of four PSH projects (150 units) costing $26 million. Remarking on the decision, Councilor Cartmell stated, "making the decision to go it alone is probably the biggest thing, […] that we're prepared to actually do this without waiting for others, I think it's a milestone in the city's history." Later in September, council directed city staff to continue their advocacy efforts to Federal and Provincial Governments for capital and operating funding to support housing supply. This posture was timely as a few weeks later the Federal Government announced a $1.1 billion Rapid Housing Initiative to cover the construction of modular housing and conversion of existing buildings into affordable housing across Canada. Additionally, the Government of Canada announced a $236 million fund for homeless serving community agencies ear-marked for responses to COVID-19 outbreaks. This more generous (if temporary) funding landscape proved instrumental in local responses moving forward given that the newly-funded PSH projects were years from welcoming new residents.

4.2. Bridging the gap: the risk-management problem space

In 2020, as summer turned to fall, council met on October 5 for an update from city staff regarding the current homeless situation. Councilors heard from city staff that the closure of one provincially-funded emergency shelter (the Herb Jamieson Centre) for renovations had severely constrained the supply of emergency shelter, and a COVID-19 outbreak in one of the remaining shelters was deterring clients, worsening the situation. In the midst of this, non-profit shelter operators were experiencing difficulty in securing additional facilities to meet physical distancing requirements. To complicate matters, the homeless population was growing from month to month (city staff estimated it was now around 1800–2000 people), approximately 600 people were sleeping outside, forming numerous large encampments, with winter approaching. As Councilor Knack summarized, "it's an ongoing flow that needs to be managed."

City staff presented a three-part strategy conceived after several weeks of meetings with non-profit housing providers and shelter operators. The first and second parts of the strategy were a continuation of the bridge housing and PSH plans. The third part moved the City of Edmonton into new territory: low-barrier, 24/7 shelter accommodation. During the summer months, a non-profit agency, funded by the Government of Alberta, had been operating a daytime shelter at the municipally-owned Expo Convention Centre, however this was being decommissioned. In lieu of this, city staff were recommending that the City of Edmonton activate another city-owned facility for the purpose of offering 24/7 shelter accommodations. At the meeting, City staff clarified that "the City should not be providing shelter accommodation as this is a provincial responsibility" and that "we gingerly stepped into the space because there was a need in the community."

This point was not lost on councilors. Councilor Nickels, for example, stated bluntly that "This isn't our job. This is the province's job […] and this is not an inexpensive proposition." A bulk of the discussion, however, focused on what Councilor Cartmell termed the "social disorder impacts" of homelessness, "the other [cost] is the human toll on people living rough." Councilor Nickell elaborated stating:

> in our business districts, [social disorder] represents a tremendous challenge to struggling mom and pop businesses who are trying to stay afloat amidst suppressed demand. Very, very challenging economic outlook, even from before COVID. And so there's a double whammy happening here on Main Street, and not just Jasper Avenue, not just White Avenue, but in all of our business districts and residential neighborhoods, who are feeling quite overwhelmed by the social disorders and challenges.

Speaking to these unfair burdens amid this spillover, Councilor Cartmell inquired whether operators of 24/7 shelters will be able to reduce this social disorder. Responding, City staff noted the missteps characterizing sites, such as the Expo Centre, where "people had to leave in the early evening."

Reluctantly (but unanimously), the City council agreed to support this plan, further embracing its emergency management role, and committing $8 million towards a city-owned facility offering day programs, meals, and overnight shelter; however, the motion was amended to emphasize the "provision of a full spectrum of addictions treatment and recovery options for people accessing space at City-led Temporary 24/7 pandemic accommodation." In addition to this facility, which operated out of the Edmonton Convention Centre, two other 24/7 pandemic accommodation centers were eventually activated in subsequent months - one at Commonwealth Recreation Centre and one in a building on the south side of Edmonton - which together increased the shelter system capacity by 530 beds.

In 2021, as winter rolled into spring and the threat of new variants loomed, the three 24/7 pandemic accommodations were scheduled for closure. In response, city staff, the Government of Alberta, and non-profit shelter providers began planning a second phase of pandemic response, in the words of city staff, "a transition to a more dispersed model of smaller emergency shelter locations spread out across the city." This plan was presented to the City Council on April 6, 2021. Recognizing that the need for emergency shelter was continuing to grow, and enabled by $24 million from the Government of Alberta, city staff proposed making the city-owned Spectrum facility, also known as the former horse racing track, available to a non-profit shelter provider to operate a 24/7 shelter. In addition, the staff proposed supporting daytime drop-in spaces, operated by non-profit shelter providers, at three different locations in the city.

Council was unenthusiastic about its continued role as a provider of emergency shelter, which was in their view a provincial responsibility. However, the council felt their "backs were up against the wall." Mayor Iveson summarized their position:

> it really does feel like we're damned if we do and we're damned if we don't. If we open shelters and they have spillover effects, that's our fault. If we don't open shelters but bring to our public the attention that the province isn't opening sufficient shelter space, then we're

passing the buck. And if camps form and we don't close them immediately, then we are allowing the disorder from the camps. So, it seems to me that we are more or less in a corner at this point.

One of the council's principal concerns were the spillover effects. Councilor Henderson expressed concerns that the plan was "a recipe for just transporting the kind of problems we've had downtown elsewhere." An initial question was posed to staff by Councilor McKeen: does "this plan of yours include more sophisticated security for nearby folks?" City staff responded by pointing to learnings from past months and acknowledged that "these facilities cannot be parachuted in without any kind of connection to community." To facilitate this connection, staff emphasized the importance of 'good neighbor plans,' procedures for "building the relationship between the facility operator and the community." When pressed further regarding the issue of social disorder, staff noted they have been working with Edmonton police services stating, "the peace officers are doing more patrols, there's more integration in terms of how we dispatch officers."

While acknowledging, in the words of Councilor Nickel, that the city "can't shelter our way through the problem and we certainly can't enforce our way out of that problem," city council resigned themselves to their continued role in bridging service gaps and unanimously supported administration's plan to direct $7.5 million towards continuing shelter responses. City staff remarked, "when you're in a corner like this one, you've got no perfect answers." Councilor Henderson concurred, remarking "what we have is an imperfect, temporary solution that hopefully will be the best we can do to get ourselves through this summer."

4.3. Using our powers: the legal problem space

In the spring of 2021, the end of the pandemic was nowhere in sight. The city's homeless population continued to grow, as did the number of homeless encampments on public lands. Stemming the growth in homelessness faced multiple barriers, not least of which was the continued shortage of affordable and supportive housing in the community. While the City of Edmonton had committed in 2020 to "go it alone," the realization of several PSH projects was contingent upon contributions from other levels of government. When the provincial government did not commit operational funds for several proposed projects, the federal government rejected the applications. As a result, by spring fewer projects were underway than initially hoped for.

Housing aside, the city's shelter system was under increasing scrutiny. Many critics linked the increasing incidence of visible homelessness, and encampments in particular, to the poor conditions within shelters. Council interest in shelter conditions and operational outcomes stretched back to November 2020, when the Community and Public Services Committee asked city staff to provide a report on current operational models for shelter, funding provided by orders of government, and best practices and standards. Before the pandemic, emergency shelter provision was the sole purview of the provincial government, which provided shelter beds in the community by contracting non-profit organizations, most of whom were faith-based (for example, Salvation Army). However, in post-pandemic times the City of Edmonton had been providing some shelter, temporarily, and innovating within this space of service provision.

In March 2021, council received the report from city staff and renewed its discussion of shelter operations and funding. At issue were the day-to-day conditions and practices of shelters - hours of operation, types and frequency of services, allowances for storage - and how these contributed to perceived social disorder in the community. Councilor McKeen articulated the issue:

part of the problem is the line-ups to get in and even in really cold weather. This is demeaning and dehumanizing. And evicting people early in the morning, before 7 a.m., to a world that isn't even open yet, has created nothing but conflict, conflict all over our city.

Council's interest lay in whether they could establish minimum expectations that could produce better operational outcomes. Reflecting back, Councilor Nickel expressed the rationale:

Why I launched the inquiry was I asked myself a very basic question: if I was hired tomorrow to open a shelter, what would I do? Where would I get my money? What kind of standards do I have to meet to do this in a compassionate and responsible fashion?

For council, however, the crux of the issue was whether the city had the legal ability to establish better shelter standards. The City of Edmonton was not directly funding the main shelter providers; however, could the municipal government use its powers to regulate these shelter operations?

Council engaged directly with the City of Edmonton's legal team on the matter. The legal team first pointed out the obvious: given that the City of Edmonton was not directly funding these shelters they did not have the authority to dictate their operational models (as they had previously with some of the city-funded, temporary shelters). Councilors queried the legal team with regard to human rights law and its application within this realm. Again, the legal team foreclosed this as a possibility stating:

Human rights are generally dealt with on multiple levels. We do have provincial human rights legislation that sets out human rights in a statutory form. We also have the Charter of Rights and Freedoms on the federal level. But neither of these documents actually create an active human right, affordable housing as a human right. So, because the municipality is not jurisdictionally in the position to amend Alberta human rights legislation nor the Charter, I don't think that we're positioned to make commentary on human rights if it's outside of our jurisdiction.

Finally, council probed the possibility of using municipal bylaws, suggesting that, in the words of Mayor Iveson, "when we regulate and license businesses, for example, we have valid public safety reasons for doing so." The legal team conceded that this would require more analysis.

Acknowledging the constraints and limitations on municipal powers, Mayor Iveson saw more promise in "getting funders, providers, the City, […] pulling in the same direction on housing focused shelter that meets people where they're at." Articulating further, Mayor Iveson suggested that "we need to get the system tuned up, this is an opportunity for us to help put some guardrails in." Council directed city staff to develop guidelines for shelter standards and operating guidelines.

In August 2021, city staff returned to council with a report confirming the opinion that council did not have the authority to impose minimum standards but instead could propose a 'minimum emergency shelter standard' as a guideline. Working in consultation with shelter providers, the province, and neighborhood associations, City staff prepared a set of proposed guidelines covering operational standards relating to hours of operation, sleeping accommodations, storage for guests, hygiene services, nutrition, and pets, as well as service delivery standards applicable to expectations of guests, intake of guests and programming. Summarizing the approach, city staff remarked, "we're looking for voluntary compliance now that we have a solid foundation of what the standard should be in an ideal state. We can rally around those standards and work towards them with all of the agencies in our city." The council unanimously endorsed the shelter standard. Affirming this decision, Councilor Paquette remarked "by encouraging the province to align with this, perhaps that can make a change."

5. Urban poverty management and the 'municipal mentality'

Our aim in this article has been to develop a relational account of urban poverty management through an examination of the municipal problematization of homelessness in Edmonton during the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in interventions that boosted traditional

elements of Edmonton's poverty management dispositif, such as emergency shelter, while simultaneously developing new 'offshoots' such as supportive housing producing, in the process, a mix of socio-spatial outcomes for the unhoused. In the previous section we linked the City of Edmonton's role in this evolving dispositif to a series of three problem spaces: economic, risk, and legal.

These problem spaces can be considered as an overlapping series, forming a process of problematization: the solution emerging from one, the expansion of supportive housing for example, functioned as the field configuring event that organized the thinking that followed, i.e., grappling with the consequences in the community of not meeting housing targets. This process of problematization is the composite product of how municipal authorities *saw* the problem of homelessness: first, in terms of an economic imperative to find efficiencies and social returns on municipal investments; second, in terms of expanding low-barrier, 24/7 shelter accommodations to reduce vulnerability across the city while also managing the negative externalities associated with these new facilities; and third, in terms of the absence of legal powers that could establish minimum expectations of shelter operators and alleviate shelter resistance among the unhoused.

Close examination of these problem spaces reveals some basic coordinates of what we call a *municipal mentality*; namely, inertial preoccupation with municipal government realities such as forward fiscal liability, risk management and legal jurisdiction. Our analysis shows how efforts to transform the poverty management dispositif - and by extension the governance of urban marginality - was subject to 'inward-looking' managerial concerns of municipal government, a body that is primarily empowered to administer land development, maintain infrastructure and services, and ensure social order, but which at times, under exceptional circumstances, can go beyond its prescribed modus operandi. This nonetheless raises a tension, one that is exemplified in this paper's title, "damned if we do, damned if we don't." By nature, the municipality is self-limiting, raising questions regarding the extent to which it can serve as the modality for transformative change, even under exceptional circumstances such as COVID-19, a proposition raised in the 'new municipalism' literature (see Russell, 2020). The early pandemic period emboldened the municipal state to extend its powers, albeit briefly, but this yielded mixed results, expanding temporary shelter while adding modest amounts of supportive housing.

The Edmonton case thus highlights one way in which poverty management dispositifs can be interpolated by municipal ways of thinking and styles of governing, providing insight into the relational character of urban poverty management more generally. First, it illustrates the central importance of the local, municipal state as a *site of articulation* in the formation and transformation of poverty management dispositifs. Sites of articulation bring together different forms of thinkability that, in conjunction, can reorganize or strengthen existing relations among elements comprising a dispositif. In this regard, municipalities can themselves present epistemological springboards or obstacles to more radical thinking and practice (Russell, 2020). In our case, different forms of thinkability were located in the administrative ledgers and forward fiscal liabilities calculated by bureaucrats, in councilors deference to propertied interests of their constituents, and in interjurisdictional struggles with other levels of government. These were brought into a relationship with each other in the 'corridors of power' (municipal council chambers, committee meeting rooms) which served as an important, and too often under-acknowledged, site of articulation when it comes to poverty management and the governance of homeless lives in particular.

Second, it invites us to consider the importance of conflict in the unfolding of municipal problematizations. The machinations of municipal government, considered differently as a site of articulation, cannot be reduced to a post-political space of technocratic action: it is a conflict-laden space of problematization (see Huxley, 2013). Carefully considering these spaces of problematization, orientates urban scholars to the importance and pluralized nature of conflict in shaping the emergent

qualities of poverty management dispositifs. The space of problematization outlined in this article provides a glimpse into the negotiation of what Barnett (2017, 325) calls 'ordinary politics' - "agitation, deliberation and compromise, bargaining and deal making, decision and delivery, accountability and revision" - as well as to the "games of jurisdiction" (Valverde, 2021) that all levels of government play in federated systems. They also point to the formulation of 'political will' at the municipal level. An important register of urban politics can be located here, where political will is assembled and reassembled in relation to the myriad infrastructures that maintain urban livability for some while also facilitating the dispersal or containment of others (Walby & Lippert, 2012).

6. Conclusion

This article serves to deepen understanding of how the governance of urban marginality has unfolded in the midst of COVID-19 by employing relational understandings of urban poverty management, conceiving it as a dispositif shaped by processes of municipal problematization. Our central argument is that there is something telling in this process of composition. Poverty management dispositifs are (re)shaped by and through municipal strategies, the configuration of which can depend upon how surplus populations - such as the homeless - are problematized by municipal officials on the basis of municipal 'problem spaces.' While the process of problematization examined here did periodically evoke moral arguments and even reference human rights, it largely consolidated a municipal style of reasoning, what we termed the 'municipal mentality,' focused principally on fiscal prudence and the creation and maintenance of urban social order. This suggests that the default setting of local municipal government is administrative and managerial and when it turns its attention to poverty management, either by choice or necessity, this mentality structures its responses and, by extension, the potential re-configuration of poverty management dispositifs. These insights contribute to relational understandings of poverty management and the governance of urban marginality more generally. These insights also shed light on why existing urban poverty management arrangements are so difficult to change and invites future research that can point to municipal styles of reasoning that can, alternatively, act as catalysts for remaking poverty management dispositifs altogether into something 'beyond managerialism' (DeVerteuil, Marr, Kienner, 2022b).

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Joshua Evans: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization. **Fiona Long:** Writing – review & editing, Formal analysis. **Geoffrey DeVerteuil:** Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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