



Living On The Streets: A Study On The Homeless In Madurai City, Tamilnadu

KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT

Homelessness is not a contemporary social problem, however the count of homeless seems to be increasing day by day. Homelessness is the condition and a social category of people who lack housing, because they cannot afford or are otherwise unable to maintain, a regular, safe, and adequate shelter. According to the Census of India (1991), "houseless people" are persons who are not living in census homes but rather on road sides, pavements, drainage pipes, under staircases, or in the open, temple mandapams, platforms, parks, railway stations, bus terminuses and the like. This statistically invisible population includes those sleeping without shelter, in constructions which are not meant for habitations and in welfare institutions. Housing is a basic human need and the statistics of United Nations Commissions on Human Rights (2005) estimates that 100 million people or one-quarter of the world's population live without shelter or in unhealthy and unacceptable living conditions. Conservative estimates put the total number of homeless in India at around 90 million. No doubt, homelessness has a profound impact on the individual and society. The present study makes an effort to understand the profile and problems faced by the homeless with specific reference to their place of living, livelihood pattern, food habits and health conditions and the problems faced. Qualitative techniques were used to gather and interpret data. The researcher conducted in-depth interviews with 20 homeless people in Madurai city, Tamilnadu. A semi structured interview schedule was also used to collect data. Purposive and convenient sampling was used to select the respondents for the study. They were individuals with or without families who were found in certain pockets of the city that are inhabited by the homeless. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data.

INTRODUCTION

A Homeless is defined as "a person who do not have house, either self- owned or rented house, but instead live and stay at pavements, parks, railway station, place of worships, out shops and factories, at constructions sites, under bridge, in Hume pipes and other places under the open sky, or places unfit for human habitation. They spent their night at night shelters, transit homes, short stay homes, beggar homes and children homes, live in temporary structures without walls under plastic sheets, thatched roofs on pavements, parks and other common spaces". Within this group there are multiple subgroups with multiple degrees of vulnerability, they include single women, infirm and old, disabled, persons who have special needs, migrants and floating populations unable to find labor or food, those involved in substance abuse, patients with debilitating diseases and the wandering mentally ill.

Homelessness from a global perspective is not a contemporary social problem. In the United States, the problem of homelessness can be traced back to the colonial period. In 1640s the English vagrants in the US were listed as outcasts and were under continuous surveillance of the police. The American Revolution (1754-81) saw an increase in the number of homeless people. The depression of 1857 saw another steep increase in the number of homeless. Till then there was no organized effort to help the homeless. The government did not have concrete programmes for the homeless; however, there were sporadic efforts by private charities to help the homeless by providing food and other basic necessities. In the UK records relating to homeless dates back to the 7th Century. In the earlier days laws were enacted to punish vagrants. Rehabilitation measures in the UK started in the 16th century for vagrants. They were initially housed and later trained to take up professions.

In India homelessness was really recognized as an important social problem in the post independence era. In the beginning, industrialization and later the neo economic policy of the government created opportunities for employment in the cities and its peripheral areas thus drawing a large number of people from villages to cities in search of employment many of whom just came and settled in temporary shelters and in government and unused private lands. In the recent past, unemployment, communal and caste issues, people affected by family discord

and migrants added numbers to the homeless. Other reasons for homelessness include disability, substance and alcoholic abuse, domestic violence and erosion of family and social support.

The census in 2011 enumerated 17.7 lakhs homeless people in India of whom 8.34 lakh lived in rural areas and 9.38 lakh lived in urban areas. The Census data of 2011 shows a sharp decline in the number of homeless in the rural areas whereas there has been a steep increase in the homeless population by 21% in urban areas. The top 5 states in terms of number of homeless population are: Uttar Pradesh (3.3 lakh), Maharashtra (2.1 lakh), Rajasthan (1.8 lakh), Madhya Pradesh (1.46 lakh) and Andhra Pradesh (1.45 lakh). According to Government statistics the number of homeless is 12,371 people in Tamilnadu. However this is a gross underestimate.

The major objective of the study was to study the demographic details of the homeless, the reason for being on the streets, their economic life and the problems they face in their day to day lives.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In this study qualitative technique was used to gather and interpret data. Primary data was collected from the respondents by the in-depth interview method. An unstructured interview schedule was also used. Data was collected from 20 respondents in the city of Madurai, Tamilnadu. A purposive and convenient sampling frame was used for the selection of the respondents as there was no sampling frame available.

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EMPIRICAL FINDINGS OF THE STUDY DEMOGRAPHIC DETAILS

Profiling the homeless it was seen that a majority of them were male, women represented a small population. Regarding the age of the respondents it was seen that they were in the

age group of 40 to 75 years. A large proportion of the homeless were in the age group of 45 to 60 years. A majority of them had entered school but dropped out somewhere in the primary level and few of them were not literate. A large number of respondents were married and significant numbers were unmarried. Widowers/widows constituted a sizeable number. A majority of the respondents were Hindus while there were a few Muslims and Christians. They inhabited and slept at the small mandaps around the Meenakshi Temple, in the entrance of the Railway station and in the parking bays of Periyar bus terminus, parks and entrance of shops that were locked for a long period of time. Women preferred to sleep at places where there was movement of people during the night time. The presence of fellow homeless created a sense of security in them. The respondents at the railway station also complained that they were often driven away from railway station by the policemen. The respondents who were interviewed said that they have been living on the streets for a period of 2 to 10 years. Interestingly most of the respondents came from nearby villages around a few kilometer radius.

REASON FOR BEING ON THE STREETS

Among men it was seen that death of the spouse was one of the most important reasons for coming to the streets. The death of the spouse created a vacuum in their lives. Emotionally disturbed and lack of proper care by the children forced the men to the streets. A few men reported that they did not want to stay with their children as they were married and were living in a very distant place. Among women it was seen that chronic illness and lack of family support was the main reason as to why they were driven to the streets. However, a majority of the respondents had children and with whom they had contacts. Other significant reasons for being on the streets include, relationship breakdown with the family members, alcoholism/drug abuse, debts. One of the respondent said that both his kidneys were not functioning and was taking treatment at the Government Hospital. He even showed his medical records to prove this.

OCCUPATION

The major occupation of the homeless in the city of Madurai was begging. While some occasionally do errands like filling water in the shops, disposal of waste and cleaning. This they do not do on a regular basis, however they do these works on request or when there is a need for money. The respondents said that they earned around Rs 75 -100 per day. Madurai as a temple town draws a lot of pilgrims and devotees throughout the year. Each day of the week is earmarked as an auspicious day for temples and devotees through those places. For eg. If it is Saturday, the devotees go to Perumal Alagar temple. So the homeless go to this temple on Saturdays for alms or on Fridays they position themselves near the mosques. Some of them go to nearby temples especially during the festival of those temples. The homeless go and occupy a place marked for them. They are not allowed close to the temples. They spent the money earned for lunch or dinner and to buy tea/coffee. Some of them said that they get food at the temples that are given by the devotees. They are tamarind rice, lime rice, Pongal, sundal and pulses. When they were hungry they ate at hotels or road side eateries. Some of the respondents said that they also took food from the government managed AMMA canteen. None of the respon-

dents said that they cooked for themselves. Some of them spent the money they had with them almost completely as they felt that it was not secure during the night. A few of the respondents said that they kept their money with certain shopkeepers (especially tea shops) with whom they shared a cordial relationship. One of the respondents said that after a particular period he would collect the money from the shopkeeper which would range to a few thousands and return to his village with clothes and sweets for his children/grand children. He would give the remaining money to his children and would come back to Madurai after a few days. Some of the respondents said that they spent a portion of their money on alcohol and cigarettes.

Personal and Social Life

The homeless are generally identified by the belongings especially a bag which they carry always with them. It generally consisted of a plate and a tumbler, one or two sets of clothes a plastic sack, which they use to put it on the ground to sleep on and a few plastic water bottles. One of the respondents led an ascetic life and was very conservative. He kept himself clean and used a begging bowl which was made of wood. A majority of the respondents said that they bathed once or twice a week. When they were very sick they went to government hospitals otherwise they relied on self medication. A majority of the respondents said that they were depressed. The homeless shared a sense of concern with fellow homeless people. They shared food and money they had with them with fellow homeless

Rehabilitation

The Madurai Corporation in 2010 converted a old marriage hall for the abandoned and homeless senior citizens. This center at Sellur supports about fifty homeless who make use of this shelter. This shelter is managed by an NGO. Similarly there are a few NGOs that provide food for the homeless at least once a day, especially for the mentally ill. A few of mentally ill homeless were rehabilitated in the center run by the NGO

Conclusion

The homeless are a unique group of people who are statistically invisible. The Census of India Report 2011 about the homeless is strongly disputed by NGOs and organization working for the homeless. A complete enumeration and the living conditions of the homeless have to be done by the government. It is only then that a complete picture of the homeless would be got. Policy makers should incorporate the cause of the homeless in the government policies. Police should be sensitized about the issues revolving the homeless. Though the Supreme Court in its order dated, 10 February 2010 has issued guidelines to Madurai Corporation for a rehabilitation plan for the homeless; nothing concrete seems to have been done. In the years to come the number of homeless would definitely increase and it is high time that the government and NGOs seriously consider their rehabilitation.

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