



THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHARACTERISTICS AND CHALLENGES OF HOMELESS YOUTHS IN MAIDUGURI AND LAGOS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT: *Homelessness is a pervasive and multifaceted global issue affecting societies across various economic landscapes. This study provides a critical and extensive examination of youth homelessness in Maiduguri and Lagos, Nigeria. By analysing socio-economic characteristics, pathways into homelessness, living conditions, health challenges and experiences of social discrimination, the study underscores the importance of tailored interventions considering regional variations and the diverse needs of homeless youth populations. The findings highlight both commonalities and disparities, reflecting the complex interplay of socio-economic factors and regional dynamics, and provide valuable insights for developing effective policies and interventions.*

KEYWORDS: Homeless youths, almajiri, social discrimination, poverty, human rights, urbanization.



INTRODUCTION

Homelessness stands as a pervasive and multifaceted global issue that affects societies across various economic landscapes. Whether in highly developed nations or struggling economies, homelessness manifests uniquely in each context, influenced by societal norms, economic conditions, and governmental policies (Springer, 2000). Extensive studies conducted in regions spanning America, Europe, Africa and beyond reveal significant variations in how homelessness is defined and experienced, underscoring its conceptual diversity and the intricate underlying causes (FEANTSA, 1999; Tipple & Speak, 2006).

A critical understanding of the concept of "home" is pivotal to unravelling the complexities of homelessness. Various definitions drawn from dictionaries and scholarly discourse highlight the multifaceted nature of "home," ranging from a mere physical shelter to a social unit, a place of origin or even a cultural and emotional anchor. This diversity underscores the challenge of establishing a universal definition of homelessness, as perceptions and realities vary widely across different cultural, economic and socio-political contexts (IGH, 2015).

Youth homelessness emerges as a critical sociological issue that intersects with fundamental human rights principles and social welfare concerns. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948) unequivocally affirms the rights of every individual to adequate housing, health, and security. However, homeless youths in Nigeria often endure severe violations of these rights due to systemic challenges such as poverty, inadequate housing options, and limited access to essential services like education and healthcare.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed qualitative interviews and surveys to gather data from homeless youths and experts in social work, psychology and human rights advocacy. Participants were selected based on chronic homelessness, defined as being homeless for at least five years, and experiences of social discrimination, conflict, sexual abuse or incarceration. The study also reviewed existing literature and statistical data to contextualize the findings.

FINDINGS

Socio-Economic Characteristics

The socio-economic characteristics of homeless youths in Maiduguri and Lagos differ significantly due to local contexts. In Lagos, youths are more engaged in productive activities such as informal employment, while in Maiduguri, a higher prevalence of chronic health issues is observed, likely due to conflict-related adversities (Mu'azu, 2020).

Pathways into Homelessness

Factors leading to homelessness include conflict, family issues, economic opportunities, and personal circumstances. In Maiduguri, conflict-related displacement and cultural practices like the almajiri system are major drivers (Mu'azu, 2020). In Lagos, economic migration and family breakdowns are more common causes (Jiboye, 2011; Akinwale, 2018).



Social Discrimination and Living Conditions

Social discrimination is a significant challenge for homeless youths in both cities, with higher instances reported in Lagos. Living conditions vary widely, from street sleeping to squatting in abandoned buildings or residing with family, illustrating the precariousness of their existence.

Health and Duration of Homelessness

Health conditions reveal a troubling prevalence of chronic health issues among homeless youths in Maiduguri, whereas those in Lagos generally experience better physical health. The study also found a mix of short- and long-term homelessness in both cities, with Maiduguri showing longer durations on average.

Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified existing vulnerabilities, with homeless youths in both cities struggling with food shortages, economic hardships and movement restrictions. Despite some government support, the inadequacy of social safety nets highlights the need for more robust interventions.

Case Studies: Stories of Homeless Youths

Six homeless youths from Maiduguri and Lagos were selected for further reflection based on the chronic nature of their homelessness. Their stories reveal diverse pathways into homelessness and highlight the intersection of economic factors, conflict, violence and social discrimination.

Maiduguri

Participants MDrsp7 and MDrsp11 fled due to violent attacks or threats, while MDrsp12 became homeless after his father's death. Each faced social discrimination, with one experiencing both sexual abuse and discrimination. Despite their challenges, some expressed a willingness to reintegrate but lacked social advocacy and support networks.

Lagos

Participants OSDrsp5, OSDrsp7 and OSDrsp8 reveal different pathways into homelessness. OSDrsp5 became a bus conductor after dropping out of school due to financial constraints. OSDrsp7's homelessness resulted from rural-urban migration for economic opportunities, while OSDrsp8's situation stemmed from parental divorce. They faced conflicts, law enforcement encounters, social stigma and public disrespect, but expressed a desire to reintegrate independently by working and saving money.

Expert Perspectives

Experts from social work, psychology, and human rights advocacy provided insights into the causes and challenges of youth homelessness in Lagos and Maiduguri. They emphasized the impact of economic hardships, family conflicts, conflict-induced displacement and cultural practices. The experts highlighted the need for comprehensive support systems, including social welfare programs, economic empowerment initiatives and targeted interventions.



DISCUSSION

The comparative analysis of Maiduguri and Lagos reveals substantial regional differences in the experiences of homeless youth. Factors such as conflict-related displacement, economic opportunities and social discrimination vary between these cities, necessitating tailored interventions. The study underscores the importance of addressing youth homelessness as a complex socio-economic issue that requires holistic solutions tailored to local contexts.

Recommendations

1. **Increase Youth Employability:** Implement policies aimed at job creation, relevant education, skills acquisition, and social protections to reduce youth homelessness.
2. **Combat Violence and Insecurity:** Enhance strategies to address widespread insecurity, including the activities of Boko Haram and other antisocial agents.
3. **Regulate Cultural Practices:** Address religio-cultural ideologies like the almajiri system through close communication between clerics or teachers and government entities.
4. **Improve Social Supports:** Develop comprehensive social welfare and protection policies to address youth homelessness and vulnerability, aligning with international human rights principles.
5. **Tailored Interventions:** Implement tailored interventions considering regional variations and the diverse needs of homeless youth populations.

CONCLUSION

This study provides valuable insights into the challenges and experiences of homeless youth in Maiduguri and Lagos. It emphasizes the need for holistic solutions tailored to local contexts to address the complex socio-economic issues underlying youth homelessness. By addressing the root causes and strengthening support networks, meaningful progress can be made towards alleviating the plight of vulnerable youths and fostering inclusive societies.

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