Signposting invisibles: A study of the homeless population in India

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Abstract
The overarching goal of this article is to sensitize the insensitive governments, institutions, and civil societies for homeless population in social sphere. Routes into homelessness are complex, multiple and interlinked. The complex triggers consist of biographical, structural and behavioural factors, when combined, increase people's vulnerability to homelessness. Despite the high economic growth and double digit GDP growth that gives opportunity to celebrate the country's achievement, the worsening condition of the homeless, underlaid by huge inequality, creates the huge contradiction for such celebrations. The problems and complexity associated with homelessness require several stages of prevention, intervention and system-based response for a solution. Thus, policy response requires the urgent need to move away from discussions on general welfare policies to context-specific policies; otherwise, the aspirations of sustainable development will be castles in the air.

Introduction

Homelessness, a typical example of 'social exclusion', is neither new nor rare across the world. The homeless are perhaps the most invisible section of society, with its 'symptoms' appearing as vagrants, vagabonds, tramps, beggars, bums, mendicants, idlers, indigents, itinerants and the underclass. All these symptoms are interrelated with social issues that

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create the gap between homeless people and the rest of society. Homelessness is a potent and evocative social issue that has become emblematic of social inequality and injustice in otherwise affluent societies (Barker, 2012). Although problems associated with home-lessness can be discussed in various spheres, social questions arise such as why homeless people 'lack ambition', why they are socially maladapted, why they are ignored by the larger part of society, and why they are considered to be a group lying somewhere outside the social system. These issues associated with homelessness have huge investigatory potential. Many authors have identified homelessness as a major and growing worldwide social problem (Forrest, 1999; Marsh and Kennett, 1999; Chris, 2006). Moreover, the homeless have significantly higher rates of exposure to violence and drastically lower rates of social support (Kennedy, 2007). In the sociological enquiry of Durkheim, Parsons and Merton, homeless people were considered to be aimless people living outside society or on its fringes who had, for different reasons, given up their former lifestyle or behaviours that were considered normal (Barak, 1991). Attributed to various structural factors and individual issues, homelessness is a major social and public health concern worldwide.

Homelessness is estimated to affect 100 million people globally (UN Commission on Human Rights, 2005). Although a majority of the population in the world has some form of dwelling, roughly half the world population does not have the full spectrum of entitlements necessary for housing to be considered adequate. UN estimates indicate that over one billion people are inadequately housed. Discussions of homelessness tend to be shaped by a number of discourses concerning causation, definition, counting the homeless and appropriate responses (Robinson, 2003). Underpinning these discourses, assumptions about homelessness typically involve antiquated beliefs about who experiences residential instability, lack of respect for the right to adequate housing, and a range of issues related to adequate housing such as the impacts of globalization, privatization of essential services, conflict situations and poverty. Further, attention to homelessness has waned since the early 1990s, though the current economic downturn and housing crisis are once again bringing the issue to the fore (Lee et al., 2010). Issues of being homeless also pose challenging problems to study because they are interconnected with so many other equally complex issues. Moreover, interest continues to be high among social scientists (Buck et al., 2004; Lee et al., 2010) as problems of homelessness are not only confined to underdeveloped or developing nations but are pervasive due to their complexities in terms of socio-economic and structural problems.

The complex nature of being homeless

There is a vast expansion of homelessness across the globe. The loss of a home and family, and the material struggle to survive, sap the emotional strength (Kapur, 2010). Although it is visible, people portray it as invisible. Although it is real, people choose not to acknowledge its reality. It can affect men and women, young and old. It can exist in a village, town or city, although it is mostly cities that are the home of the homeless population. The homeless are often treated like beggars, and they are acutely aware of the indignity, humiliation and insecurity of their situation, which they feel every day. The fact that often they are unnoticed should not lead us to believe that the problem of homelessness is anything but a shockingly common experience among poor families.

Needless to say, it is the homeless who are forced to live outdoors suffer the vagaries of nature and an unjust society. The urban homeless are predominantly those who have escaped from rural destitution and oppression, and who provide all forms of casual labour to the urban economy without having any protection for their body or dignity. The experience of homeless people can be traced through the following powerful statement:

> The day starts with hunger, the whole day struggling for food, the first night you don't sleep. Searching for a place to sleep, the next day you are so tired and dead on your feet, desperate to sleep. Now, the night is not so bad, you can sleep anywhere. You accept the ignorance of society. . . . Unfortunately, that's the grim reality and real experience of being homeless.

The above account is not unique. Every homeless person has a similar story. The complex culture of homelessness renders the life of those people who are struggling for their dignity, rights and recognition a constant struggle. Their inner life, and particularly the problem of generating and maintaining a sense of meaning and self-worth, is rarely a matter that is considered (Snow & Anderson, 1987).

Defining homelessness

The importance of defining homelessness should not be underestimated. A wide range of perspectives differs over what homelessness is (Shlay & Rossi, 1992). Homelessness is as complex as the issue of being homeless. Across the globe, various nations have their own approaches for defining the homeless population. No single definition of home is thus adequate given the relativity of meaning and historical variation across different regions or societies. Similarly, loss of a home or homelessness will have varying meanings for individuals (Somerville, 1992), depending upon the economic condition and inequality of the country which will reflect the severity of the homeless population. Contemporary definitions stress housing hardship linked to extreme poverty (Lee et al., 2010). Homelessness has also been defined with reference to what is lacking. The Statistics Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations has defined "primary homelessness" as persons living without a shelter or living quarters and "secondary homelessness" as including persons with no place of usual residence. In some contexts, homelessness is understood as a lack of access to land as well as to shelter. In rural Bangladesh, for example, homelessness is assessed on the basis of whether a household has a regularized plot of land as well as a roof overhead (Speak & Tipple 2006). Another aspect of defining homelessness is the pattern of time spent outside of conventional housing. Many researchers (Culhane et al., 2007; Lee et al., 2010) have stressed the temporal dimensions of homelessness and classified it into three major types: (a) temporary homelessness described as those who are in a transitional phase; (b) episodic homelessness that is cyclic in nature, in which people come in and out of homelessness over a short period of time; and (c) chronic homelessness, describing a situation of permanent homelessness. Some definitions focus on being deprived of a certain minimum quality of housing. The Institute of Global Homelessness has proposed as a global definition: "lacking access to minimally adequate housing", while listing various categories of living situations that fall within this general definition.

Research on homelessness in the 1980s was prompted by the increased numbers and visibility of homeless persons including men, women, and families, as well as young people without families (Shlay & Rossi, 1992). Further, another practical hurdle was the detailed data required to operationalize homelessness as disaffiliation (Lee et al., 2010). Unfortunately, there is a problem with enumeration of homeless population as per the guidelines are given by the Census, as it does not cover the real picture and data of the homeless population. Declaring 1987 as the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless, the United Nations defined a homeless person as not only someone who lived on the street or in a shelter, but also someone whose shelter or housing failed to meet the basic criteria considered essential for health and social development (Jha & Kumar, 2016). These criteria included security of tenure, protection against bad weather, and personal security as well as access to sanitary facilities and potable water, education, work, and health services (Speak & Tipple, 2006). Moreover, census enumeration also poses the problems related to coverage of the homeless population. The most common questions about the homeless concern numbers, composition, and geographic distribution (Lee et al., 2010). A well-known commentator notes that:

> One of the most difficult tasks in the study of homelessness is counting homeless individuals accurately. [. . .] The problem with a census is that it is traditionally accomplished on the basis of domicile, or a dwelling, so that to count the domiciled requires a different methodology. Also, the homeless themselves are a changing group of people [. . .] so that the problems of obtaining an accurate count of 'the homeless' are enormous. Moreover, many homeless people, as a safety precaution, hide themselves from view. Others move around throughout the night, when street counts are typically performed. [. . .] In spite of all the challenges, there is much to be learned (Glasser, 1994).

Homelessness in India: A cause for concern

In India, the Office of the Registrar General of India (ORGI), popularly known as the Census of India, is the authority to define and enumerate the homeless population in India. According to the census of India, there are three types of households, viz. 'normal', 'houseless' and 'institutional'. The individuals living in these households are called 'normal population', 'houseless population' and 'institutional population' respectively. As per the census of India, the homeless households are those "Households which do not live in buildings or Census houses but live in the open or roadside, pavements, in hume-pipes, under fly-overs and staircases, or in the open in places of worship, mandaps, railway platforms, etc. are to be treated as Houseless households" (Census of India, 2011). The Census of India enumerated the homeless households on the night of 28 February 2011. The definition given by the census of India is based on India's socioeconomic conditions, cultural norms, the groups affected and the purpose for which homelessness is being defined. It is not necessary that this definition also fulfil the requirement of other countries, as socioeconomic conditions and cultural norms are different. However, more or less, the definition given by the Census of India reflects the situation of being homelessness in other developing nations too.

Table 1. Temporal changes (2001–2011) in homeless households in India.

| | All Households | | Houseless Households | | | |
| | | | Absolute | | Percentage | |
	2001	2011	2001	2011	2001	2011
Total	19,35,79,954	24,94,54,252	4,47,552	4,49,761	0.23	0.18
Rural	13,77,73,323	16,85,65,486	2,59,742	1,92,865	0.19	0.11
Urban	5,58,06,631	8,08,88,766	1,87,810	2,56,896	0.34	0.32

Source: Primary Census Abstract for Total Population and Houseless Population, 2011, Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India.

Table 2. Temporal changes (2001–2011) in homeless population in India.

| | All Population | | | Homeless Population | | | | |
| | | | | Absolute | | Percentage | | Growth Rate (2001-2011) |
	2001	2011	Growth Rate (2001-2011)	2001	2011	2001	2011	
Total	1,02,86,10,328	1,21,05,69,573	17.7	19,43,476	17,72,889	0.19	0.15	-8.8
Rural	74,23,02,537	83,34,63,448	12.3	11,64,877	8,34,541	0.16	0.10	-28.4
Urban	28,63,07,791	37,71,06,125	31.7	7,78,599	9,38,348	0.27	0.25	20.5

Source: Primary Census Abstract for Total Population and Houseless Population, 2011, Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India.

Homeless in India: Magnitude and characteristics

To understand the scenario of homelessness since the new millennium in India, we have tried to capture the official information regarding homelessness data provided by the Office of the Registrar General of India. Data in Tables 1 and 2 show that, overall, there has been an increase in homeless households as well as the homeless population over the decade. This increase is remarkable in the case of urban figures regarding both homeless households as well as the homeless population. However, data indicate that rural homelessness has decreased over the decade. Concerning the growth rate of the homeless population between 2001 and 2011, data revealed that overall the growth is negative but there has been a huge positive growth in the case of the urban homeless population. This grim situation of urban India is partially attributed to the process of rural to urban migration in search of employment. Further, large urban areas with relatively high concentrations of poverty become the natural targets for the placement of emergency homeless shelters and other social services, developing into what Eitzman et al. (2013) have referred to as service ghettos.

Distribution of homeless population across the states

Using the census data, it is possible to map the regional variation in the homeless population. Data revealed that homelessness is uneven across the states of India. The
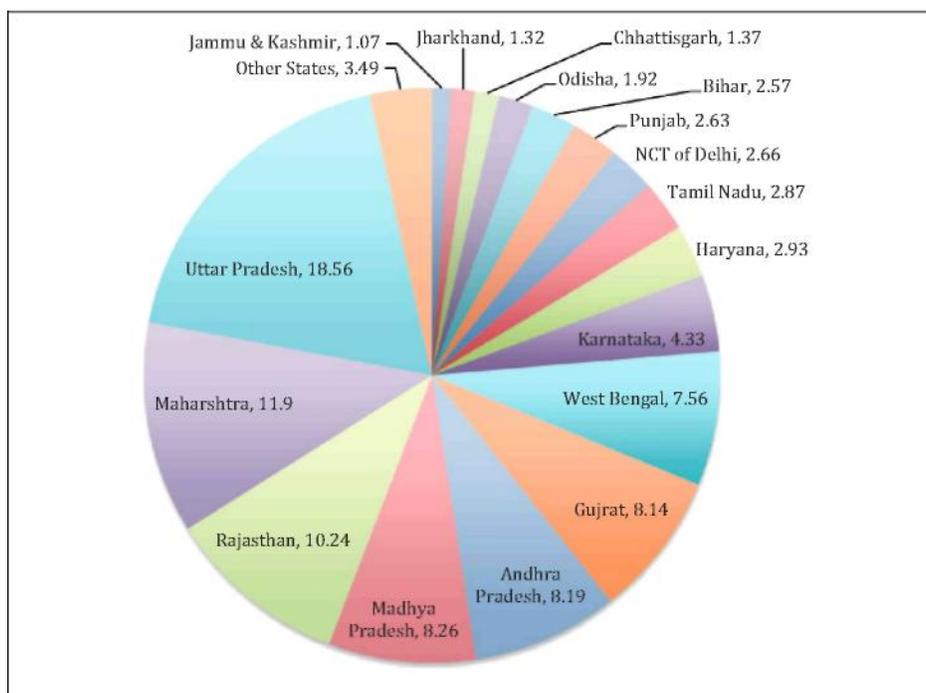
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Figure 1. Percentage share of homeless population among states/UTs, India, 2011. Source: Primary Census Abstract for Total Population and Houseless Population, 2011, Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India. Note: States/UTs having percentage share below 1 per cent have been grouped under "Other States/UTs" – Assam, Uttarakhand, Kerala, Himachal Pradesh, Chandigarh, Tripura, Manipur, Goa, Arunachal Pradesh, Pudducherry, Meghalaya, Dadra & Nagar Haveli, Nagaland, Daman & Diu, Sikkim, Mizoram, Andaman & Nicobar Islands.

proportion of homeless population to the total population in India as well as across the states followed a broad geographic pattern (see Figure 1). More than half of the homeless population resides in only five of the most populous states: Uttar Pradesh, followed by Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh. It is also interesting to observe that in hilly states less than 1 per cent of the total population is homeless. Further, except NCT of Delhi, all Union Territories have less than 1 per cent of the homeless population.

Working status of homeless population

Any community, economy or country relies on working population. Homeless people are also dependent on some kind of work for their survival. One cannot ignore the contribution made by the homeless population in developing national economy. Several studies advocate the importance of employment in the lives of the homeless population, as it may be effective and worthwhile to develop trust, motivation, and hope (Rio et al., 1999; Quimby et al., 2001; Marrone, 2005). Data suggest that there is a considerable

contribution of the homeless population in economic activities, as the work participation rate among the homeless population is about 52 per cent. Moreover, the female homeless population also engage in economic activities. The work participation rate among females is estimated at 32 per cent. Data from Table 3 reflect the fact that homeless people want to work, and they often want to engage in work quickly. Research supports the claim that given the opportunity and support to do so, homeless people with multiple disabilities can work, including those who are chronically homeless (Marrone 2005; Shaheen & Rio, 2007). Therefore, employment should be offered as early as possible and facilitate employment is an unrecognized and underutilized practice for preventing and ending homelessness (Shaheen & Rio, 2007). People who are homeless can do much better with the right opportunities and support, and achieve more success in employment. We must widen our vision to include them in a country's growth. Moreover, the culture of work and employment among the homeless population can become a durable passage to recovery from homelessness.

At the 75th anniversary of India's independence, the prime minister initiated a mission of 'Housing for All' by 2022, under which the Ministry of Housing & Urban Poverty Alleviation launched Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana – Urban[1] in 2015 and the Ministry of Rural Development restructured an earlier scheme, Indira Awas Yojana, as Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana – Gramin[2] in 2016. Both schemes will provide central assistance to implementing agencies through states and UTs for providing houses to all eligible beneficiaries by 2022 (MoHUA & MoRD). However, the road map for providing shelter to each and every homeless person in the country seems to be very tardy and arduous, as suggested by the panel report of the Honorable Supreme Court of India. The three-member panel constituted by the Supreme Court in their final report exposed that about 90 per cent of the urban homeless in India are still seeking for shelter. The vagueness in handling government funds and fallacious actions of the various state governments were revealed as important facts in the final report of the panel. Further, the homeless population did not receive due consideration from policy-makers and researchers in India because of the scarcity of reliable data on homelessness.

Framework to understand homelessness

Since homelessness is a complicated issue, it has neither a single cause nor a single solution. Everyone has one's own reasons and unique story of being homelessness. Bringing all issues, related problems and their solutions under one roof is a difficult task. However, we have tried to develop a framework for the homeless population into three dimensions, viz. causes, consequences/problems and solutions (Figure 2).

Causes of homelessness

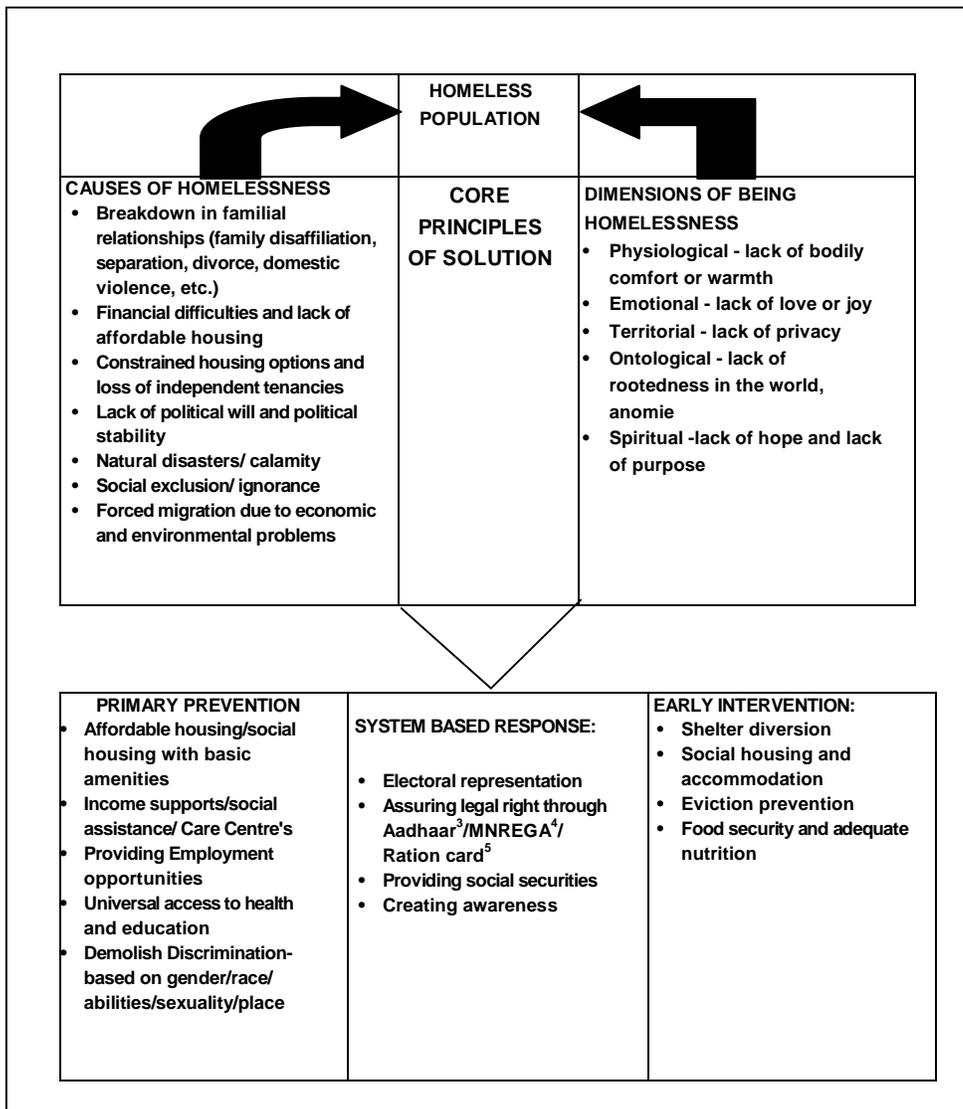Although most people do not become homeless, a significant number of people usually belonging to the poorest section are prone to become homeless. Some of them remain homeless for a very long time while some have episodic homeless experiences. There is not a single cause of homelessness but many. However, there is a long-standing belief that homelessness can be a personally chosen state. Certainly, several scholars have

Table 3. Distribution of workers and work participation rate of homeless population, 2011.

Workers and WPR (All)	Workers (in numbers)		Work Participation Rate	
	2001	2011	2001	2011
Total Population				
Total	40,22,34,724	48,17,43,311	39.1	39.8
Rural	30,98,35,681	34,85,97,535	41.7	41.8
Urban	9,23,99,043	13,31,45,776	32.3	35.3
Homeless Population				
Total	10,80,470	9,19,506	55.6	51.9
Rural	6,65,922	4,24,398	57.2	50.9
Urban	4,14,548	4,95,108	53.2	52.8
Workers and WPR (Males)				
Total Population				
Total	27,50,14,476	33,18,65,930	51.7	53.3
Rural	19,87,99,870	22,67,63,068	52.1	53.0
Urban	7,62,14,606	10,51,02,862	50.6	53.8
Homeless Population				
Total	7,15,211	6,41,880	62.9	61.3
Rural	3,93,211	2,55,741	62	57.6
Urban	3,22,000	3,86,139	64.1	64.1
Workers and WPR (Females)				
Total Population				
Total	12,72,20,248	14,98,77,381	25.6	25.5
Rural	11,10,35,811	12,18,34,467	30.8	30.0
Urban	1,61,84,437	2,80,42,914	11.9	15.4
Homeless Population				
Total	3,65,259	2,77,626	45.3	38.2
Rural	2,72,711	1,68,657	51.4	43.2
Urban	92,548	1,08,969	33.5	32.4

Source: Primary Census Abstract for Total Population and Houseless Population, 2011, Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India.

indicated that this notion is a widely-held perception (Wright, 1989; Snow & Anderson, 1993; Jones, 1997; Blackman, 1998; Pleace, 1998). Notwithstanding, this warrants a debate whether homelessness is a choice, or something different. Debate over the causes of homelessness is caught up in whether the focus of research should be on structural forces that permit homelessness to occur or the immediate reasons why people become homeless (Shlay & Rossi, 1992). Several authors have agreed that homelessness is related to a range of risk factors that can lead to homelessness and a host of negative outcomes (Barker, 2012). Research shows those at risk of homelessness typically face multiple difficulties, which may increase the likelihood of a young person prematurely leaving home and subsequently experiencing homelessness (Echenberg & Jensen, 2009). History suggests that homelessness increases during periods of social disorganization, such as wars, economic depressions, and periods of technological change (Malloy et al., 1990). The increase in today's urban homelessness emerged as the major reason for changes

	HOMELESS POPULATION	
CAUSES OF HOMELESSNESS • **Breakdown in familial relationships (family disaffiliation, separation, divorce, domestic violence, etc.)** • **Financial difficulties and lack of affordable housing** • **Constrained housing options and loss of independent tenancies** • **Lack of political will and political stability** • **Natural disasters/ calamity** • **Social exclusion/ ignorance** • **Forced migration due to economic and environmental problems**	**CORE PRINCIPLES OF SOLUTION**	**DIMENSIONS OF BEING HOMELESSNESS** • **Physiological - lack of bodily comfort or warmth** • **Emotional - lack of love or joy** • **Territorial - lack of privacy** • **Ontological - lack of rootedness in the world, anomie** • **Spiritual -lack of hope and lack of purpose**
PRIMARY PREVENTION • **Affordable housing/social housing with basic amenities** • **Income supports/social assistance/ Care Centre's** • **Providing Employment opportunities** • **Universal access to health and education** • **Demolish Discrimination-based on gender/race/ abilities/sexuality/place**	**SYSTEM BASED RESPONSE:** • **Electoral representation** • **Assuring legal right through Aadhaar[3]/MNREGA[4]/ Ration card[5]** • **Providing social securities** • **Creating awareness**	**EARLY INTERVENTION:** • **Shelter diversion** • **Social housing and accommodation** • **Eviction prevention** • **Food security and adequate nutrition**

Figure 2. Multidimensionality of homelessness: Problems, consequence and solutions.
Source: Developed by authors.

in economic and social processes. In the 1980s, economic problems converged with social welfare cutbacks to produce an environment ripe for social disorganization (Ropers and Boyer, 1987). Further, problems of care were exacerbated by the contraction of welfare programs in the 1980s, which resulted in serious neglect and homelessness (Mechanic & Rochefort, 1990). Therefore, it can be assumed that there are a number of causes of family homeless, including sociological, economic, psychological or institutional factors. Unlike economic and institutional factors, sociological and psychological explanations are two sides of the same coin. Traumatic situations arise when the sociological

situation becomes unfavourable, and vice versa. In a sociological explanation, one can stretch the importance of various institutions. The role of these institutions provide the basis for formation of society, which connects the people to each other through certain values, norms, help and support. The failure of some important institutions like family, community, lack of social support and networks are the major social problems of homeless family and individuals. Breakdown in familial relationships, including divorce or domestic violence, can have an adverse effect on human psychology and cause household members to separate or to flee their homes in search of safety. There are several triggers such as family breakdown, domestic violence, job loss, unsafe housing, sudden illness or injury, problems with family members, or an unexpected major expense, which prepare the ground for becoming homeless (Kraus & Dowling, 2003).

Economic explanations can be traced through many structural barriers, which lead to poverty, a combination of low wages, hunger, lack of affordable housing and overall increasing inequality, especially in developing nations. Financial difficulties figured prominently in discussions with individuals affected by homelessness (Netto, 2006). Poverty is a common denominator in the experience of the homeless, whether in urban and rural areas, or in developed and developing countries. It plays a key role in increasing vulnerability and threatening the security of the housing situations of individuals and families. The high prevalence of poverty in a country is taken as the causal factor in determining the emergence and persistence of homeless people on the streets (Olufemi, 2001). Robertson and Cousineau (1986) cited factors such as deindus-trialization, unemployment, welfare cuts, limited low-income housing, increasing poverty, de-institutionalization, family disorganization, and increasing domestic violence as the main reasons for this epidemic situation. In the case of migration for livelihood, low income and poverty is further compounded by unaffordable housing and lack of supply of cheap housing, forcing the migrants to either live in slums, in many cases illegal/ unauthorized, or squat in public places. Moreover, most of the homeless population is unskilled or low skilled and undertake either menial and minor jobs or underemployed, which can again trigger their vulnerability to being homeless.

At every stage, institutions like government, civil society, community and the media have failed to recognize the sensitivity of being homeless. They have failed to offer adequate support and none has shown the will for follow-up support. The experience of homelessness can result from the failure of the institutions to provide the necessary support to those vulnerable families – who live in poverty, experience domestic conflict, and/or violence, have addictions or mental health concerns – who want to re-settle. There can be numerous reasons behind not following the homeless population. At a larger scale, the whole society ignores the homeless because they assume that the homeless population have problems of drug abuse, addiction and alcoholism, and even many are labelled as mentally ill. Governments and political parties also ignore them. For instance, before election, every political party sets its own agenda to appease the different sections of the society, as they are the voters with voter identity cards. But in the case of the homeless population, they don't have voter identity cards. As a result, political parities and to some extent government too, have little interest in homeless population. Absence of these rights among homeless populations also put them at the disadvantage from benefits of social security schemes and other government programs. Sometimes the

government and local authorities become so apathetic and insensitive towards the homeless population. Moreover, in the processes of redevelopment and resettlement, many thousands of households have been classified as "illegal" and, therefore, disqualified for relocation entitlements, further leading to homelessness.

Routes into homelessness are multiple, interlinked and multifaceted. Contemporary studies suggest that the extreme situation of homelessness may be more accurately portrayed as the result of the convergence of many factors that drive this phenomenon, including housing market dynamics, housing and welfare policy, economic restructuring and the labour market, and personal disabilities (Shlay & Rossi, 1992). The intricacy of the triggers for homelessness increases with the age of the individual and the duration of their homelessness or episodic homelessness. The multifaceted triggers consist of biographical, structural and behavioural factors, when combined, increase people's vulnerability to homelessness. Such triggers are also closely associated with weak social networks, poor self-esteem or confidence, few or no protecting factors and people on the margins of society. This worsens and quickens the process of homelessness.

Problems and consequences of being homeless

There are various dimensions of problems related to homelessness. These include material conditions and standards, privacy, space, control, personal warmth, comfort, stability, safety, security, choice, self-expression, and physical and emotional well-being. Homelessness has predominantly adverse effects on certain vulnerable groups like women, children and the disabled. They have missed their respective opportunities in several ways. Children have missed the opportunity of education and health that causes illiteracy, low birth weight and malnourishment. Women have missed the opportunity for self-respect, privacy, security and emotional love. Disabled and elderly people have missed their opportunities in terms of health rights and social dignity. Youth and adults are vulnerable to risky and harmful addiction. Most of the literature focuses on health and well-being issues of being homeless. Apart from the direct health impacts of homelessness, such as those resulting from exposure to the elements (e.g. respiratory infections, hypothermia, skin diseases), both direct and indirect consequences of substance abuse are common in this population (Hwang, 2000; Frankish et al., 2005). Direct consequences include liver disease associated with excessive alcohol consumption and the toxic effects of various narcotics. Indirect effects are less well known, but include risky sexual behaviour – multiple partners, prostitution and sexual abuse (affecting women and youth disproportionately) – which is likely to result in a high prevalence of sexually transmitted infection (STI) and HIV in the homeless population (Manzon et al., 1992; Haley et al., 2002).

Alcohol and drug abuse are also strongly correlated with violence and unintentional injury, which can be another feature of the lives of homeless people (O'Toole et al., 2004, Seager & Tamasane, 2010). These problems worsen when the homeless suffer from unemployment and difficult economic situations. Snow and Anderson (1993) hypothesized that many individuals turn to shadow work as their duration of homelessness increase. Shadow work comprises resource-generating efforts outside the formal economy, including scavenging, panhandling, recycling, bartering, street vending, plasma

donation, and illegal acts such as theft, prostitution, and drug sales (Hagan & McCarthy, 1998; Duneier, 1999; Lee & Farrell, 2003; Lee et al., 2010). Therefore, homelessness is a complex issue associated with several problems such as physical, mental, psychological, social and economic as well as health-related problems. When a person becomes homeless, even briefly, the impacts can be complex and long-lasting. The results of vagrancy are often shocking, disturbing and greatly affect their wellbeing and relations, subsequently resulting in reduced opportunities and an amplified probability of social exclusion. Many homeless young people become exposed to a number of factors that have detrimental effects on them, such as drug use, inadequate nutrition, limited access to medical care, very limited social support, repeated abuse and violence, unsafe sexual practices and inadequate or unsafe shelters (Jacobs & Manzi, 1999).

Solutions

Homelessness is a complicated and widespread problem. Similarly, solutions are also complex, and it is easy to imagine how homeless people could feel overwhelmed by their difficult circumstances (Lee et al., 2010). The problems and complexity associated with homelessness require several stages of prevention, intervention and system response for solutions to exit from homelessness. Prevention is the proactive process that targets those populations who are at risk of abuse, neglected and vulnerable to being homeless. On the other hand, intervention measures focus on those who already suffer from vicious cycle of homelessness. Another set of measures is system-based responses, which can be major forces for implementing the measures for prevention and interventions. Therefore, system-based responses such as providing Aadhaar[3] cards, MGNREGA,[4] and Ration cards[5] should be the key area of concern for providing an exit from homelessness. However, institutions are not only responsible for solving these issues, but they can also play a vital role through recognition, social security schemes, providing electoral representation and political rights.

Primary prevention from homelessness could be affordable housing, social housing, creating employment opportunities and demolishing discrimination. Homelessness is largely driven by the lack of affordable housing. Families with extremely low incomes, thin support networks, poor credit and employment histories, and individual problems may find themselves at a disadvantage in the competition for rare affordable housing units. Providing employment opportunities will not only enable people to earn money and make them self-reliant but it will also help to prevent social exclusion from other members of the society. Better health and education services will enable poor people to do work and can make them a resource for the country. Further, socioeconomic equality will also make people realize their humanity that will enhance the understanding of common people towards the problems associated with homelessness.

System-based responses can provide legal and political rights to poor and homeless people so that they could be considered as an important segment for political parties and local government. Further, the homeless movement can also play a major role in exiting from homelessness. Cress and Snow (2000) found that the homeless movement can achieve significant results if it can adeptly frame the major issues, attract support from influential community members, and fine-tune tactics to the local context, negotiating

with government officials or threatening to embarrass them as need be (Rosenthal, 1994; Wright & Devine, 1995; Cress & Snow 2000; Lee et al., 2010). Creating awareness and providing social security will enable them to work and receive recognition from the society. To exit from homelessness, early intervention could be prevented from the eviction and shelter diversion, and providing social housing, food security and adequate nutrition. These will help in the safety and security of the homeless population from the vicious cycle of poverty.

Concluding remarks and policy concerns

This paper discussed the issues of homelessness with causes and consequences of being homeless. Although it is very difficult to cover issues and problems related to homelessness under one roof, this study is a small attempt to understand the relationship between social science research and social policy for future discourses on homelessness, especially in developing nations like India. We do not attempt here to provide a comprehensive overview of the worldwide homeless population, which is available from various governmental and non-governmental agencies, but the main objective of this paper is to sensitize insensitive people and institutions towards the situation of being homeless. Understanding homelessness is difficult when people have an apathetic attitude. There is not a single and effortlessly recognizable cause of homelessness. They are miscellaneous and multi-layered, including an absence of reasonable and affordable housing, speculation in housing and land for investment purposes, transfer of civic services into the private sector, urban gentrification and excessive growth of migration, especially in urban areas. Destruction and displacement caused by conflicts or natural disasters are also major forces that cause people to enter into homelessness. Major forces like urban gentrification, disasters and conflict accompanied by rising property prices and rental rates are pushing poor families into risky circumstances, including homelessness. This actively pushes people out of mainstream society and at times into homelessness.

The flaws and gaps in formal policy triggered the homelessness. This major social problem requires a policy response from the very early stages. Recent policy responses to prevent homelessness recognize that it is the consequence of a range of social and economic problems, requiring multi-pronged strategies extending beyond the delivery of housing services to address diverse, and often complex, individual needs (Pawson et al., 2007). Despite double digit GDP growth providing an opportunity to celebrate the country's achievement, the worsening condition of homelessness, underlaid by huge inequality, creates a major contradiction for such celebrations. It is clear from the attitudes and actions of the various authorities that the homeless population lacks political rights. Most of them are not even registered as voters and consequently not a subject of concern for the government. It is easy for government to ignore their humanity and involvement in the economy, especially in urban areas. They are "invisible" to policy-makers as well as for governments and institutions. Homelessness is expected to increase as a result of increasing socioeconomic inequality. Addressing the role of employment and social ties in producing homelessness, comparing the economic and social situation of homeless and non-homeless persons, evaluating programs designed to aid homeless

persons, and developing international comparisons of homelessness could be the future directions leading to an exit from homelessness (Shlay & Rossi, 1992).

Thus, there is an urgent need to move away from discussion on general welfare policies to context-specific policies. Policies and schemes should focus upon a context-specific segment of the population rather than the general population. Good practices such as reliance on social ties and identity management could be favourable for sensitizing the insensitive. Civil society and government should emphasize sensitive approaches to individual needs and require different types of interventions and services. The rights of the homeless population are not only state's responsibility; civil society actions, political mobilization and activism can also play crucial role in safeguarding their rights and saving them from some of the worst forms of exploitation, exclusion and structural violence.

Notes

1. This mission, implemented during 2015–22, provides central assistance to Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) and other implementing agencies through States/UTs for in-situ rehabilitation of existing slum dwellers using land as a resource through private participation, credit linked subsidy, affordable housing in partnership, and subsidy for beneficiary-led individual house construction/enhancement.
2. This was launched by the Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD) to provide housing for the rural poor in India.
3. Aadhaar is the Unique Identity Card provided by the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI), a statutory authority established under the provisions of the Aadhaar (Targeted Delivery of Financial and Other Subsidies, Benefits and Services) Act, 2016 ("Aadhaar Act 2016").
4. MGNREGA, or the "Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act", is an Indian labour law and social security measure that aims to guarantee the 'right to work'. It aims to enhance livelihood security in rural areas by providing at least 100 days of wage employment in a financial year to every household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work.

5. The Ration card is an initiative of the Government of India to ensure food security to every eligible household in India.

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