

A Dream without sleep : Homelessness

Abhishek Sehrawat (Student Volunteer ID - 12876) , AIIMS, New Delhi
Email Id- abhishek.sehrawat@yahoo.com

Introduction-

Loneliness and social isolation in a physically challenging environment persist as dominant features of street life. Dead-end, hopeless poverty drives many people to the streets of the cities.

“Written for the Homeless
My soul does not find mercy -
Somewhere on the bank of oblivion;
There,
Where hunger freezes my bones to death.”

Methods-

The urban homeless are almost intractably difficult to identify, reach and research for many reasons. This population is extremely heterogeneous, in terms of age group, gender, livelihoods, place of origin, and life histories. They can be met only in the evenings and late nights, because what serves after dark as their dwellings, are public urban spaces by day.

A study for 15 days was conducted at different streets, shelters, porta cabins of South Delhi near AIIMS by spending number of days out in the streets during nights, meeting and interacting with homeless people in order to understand and identify various reasons for homelessness, problems faced by people in shelters and why were they not using the shelters and opting to sleep in the open. To get the closer experience of what the homeless life is, I spent few nights at the street simply observing what all happens on streets when rest of the city goes to sleep. This certainly helped in developing an understanding regarding the issue and to visualize what kind of shelters do we need to ensure that people use them.

Also the patients living in AIIMS and Safdarjung Shelters were given Health Questionnaire on daily basis to find their exact disease/problem and then after examining their clinical history they were guided about the procedure and protocol for treatment in AIIMS and Safdarjung Hospital .

Some individuals, families and patients staying on streets and shelters were interviewed using self-administered semi-structure open ended questionnaire filled by them. Informed written consent was taken from all participants.

Results-

- On 20th January 2015, during a visit under flyover near IIT gate(South Delhi) a lady with name Shanti said ‘This is my hall, on that side is my kitchen, across there is my bedroom, and in that corner is my bathroom, Flyover is roof of my bungalow.’

- There are grave ruptures but also continuities in bonds with their families and communities.
- A group of middle-aged man live on the streets of the city to save as much money as possible to send home. If he rented a room he would have to pay rent and travel to work. There would be nothing left for him to send to his village. So many of the labour seems to stay in Shelters to save money for home.
- A woman come to the streets for the same reason now living in AIIMS Shelter with her husband who is cancer patient to support her ailing husband in cancer situation when they have not much money.
- With rescue team rescued a boy living on street whose family is lost in Badrinath Flood.
- Some relatives who stay in shelter to accompany their patient found unhealthy due to unhygienic/infectious condition of shelters.

Recommendations -

On basis of study DUSIB is requested to assess the following aspects in the shelters:

1. Purified and regular supply of clean mineral drinking water : Water is regularly provided in water tank but it is not purified with Reverse osmosis (RO) facility.
2. Hygiene and cleanliness of toilets, bathing places : No regular cleaning. And lack of water was observed during morning time when there is rush to freshen up.
3. Clean and adequate beddings, sheets and blankets : Every day all the sheets and carpets are kept together after people leave and same are redistributed in the evening. As many of the people could be carrying infectious diseases like skin infection, it is huge error on part of the management.
4. Lockers facility : None of the shelters have any locker or storage facility. People carry their belongings with them.

When on street, they have no means to save their money. It either gets stolen or forcefully taken away. But in the shelter, they will have the option of saving some money with the management and even get help in opening bank accounts. Over a period of time, this saved money could help them in moving out of the situation of homelessness.

5. Recreational services: TV, indoor games etc

Serious efforts are required to design and develop these shelters in a manner that they not only fulfil the most basic requirements of an individual but also serve as the ground from where person could begin to plan his life beyond the hostile and unfriendly streets.

6. Repair and maintenance: In most of the shelters, people complained of dampness during rainy day and proper ventilation.

7. Food- People are not allowed to bring food inside the shelter. However, in the shelters where occupancy is not very high or the people who have been staying in the same shelter for a long period, people are occasionally allowed to bring their food in. It was told that this is done to ensure the cleanliness and discipline in the shelters. This came out as one of the major deterrent for people to use the shelter, especially during rains when people can't move out to get their food.

Conclusion-

The study discovers that they are not homeless in the sense of not having a family, but rather they are 'houseless' in the cities. They reside on the pavements for generations together. There are many roads that lead people to make the city streets their home, but few that lead away from the streets to settled homes. Thus once people slip into homelessness, there does not seem to be an easy escape. The study confirms that being beaten or evicted by the police is a common feature of homeless life, very few respondents admitted to being arrested. We have to persevere in visiting them over long periods to develop bonds of trust and communication.