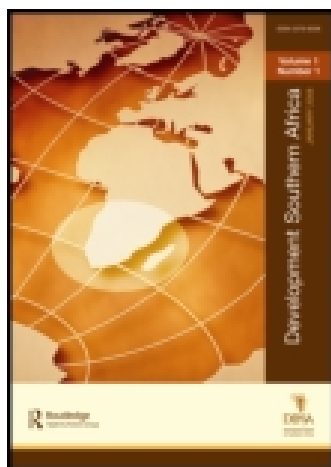


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Towards identifying the causes of South Africa's street homelessness: Some policy recommendations

Catherine Cross & John R Seager

The Human Sciences Research Council's four-year study of street homelessness in South Africa highlights the way unemployment stresses poor households and sets in motion processes of exclusion, and suggests that the social wage safety net is not protecting the street homeless. Although subsidised housing and social grants seem to head off homelessness in many cases, they mainly target the poor in shacks, an economic migrant population who seem more able to access on their own the benefits due to them, without needing institutional help. This paper recommends both prevention and remediation. It highlights the roles of housing delivery and the social wage, which should include measures that will work for both shack residents and the street homeless and will assist failed work-seekers who are at risk of homelessness. Allowing access to street livelihoods may be the only practical alternative to expanding social grant support to include the structurally unemployed.

Keywords: homelessness; street people; housing delivery; social grants; poverty alleviation policy; informal livelihoods; South Africa

1. Introduction

Of all South Africans who live in marginal and unsatisfactory housing that denies them a place in residential society, the street homeless are the most distressed. While the country's housing effort has had some success in bringing slum dwellers into settled society, it has been less successful in finding ways to help the homeless living on the streets. Little is known about how much help social grants have been in saving people from being excluded from their households and families by poverty and unemployment.

Recognising that the street homeless are in many ways the nation's most vulnerable people, since 1994 the South African government has been acting on behalf of citizens who have no adequate shelter, with particular priority being given to children (see Naidoo, this issue). Civil society initiatives to provide shelter and care are already in place and well advanced, but the problem of people sleeping on the streets persists.

The government agencies most concerned with homelessness have been the national Department of Housing (now Department of Human Settlements) and Department of Housing Social Development, which have worked to address shelter and poverty, respectively. Most government spending directed toward homelessness supports the civil society programmes that provide emergency shelters for the street homeless. The shelter programmes have had clear benefits, and transitional housing has also been introduced in some cities. However, attempts to provide access to housing – whether

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in shelters, transitional housing or conventional subsidised housing – have not been able to draw in all of the street homeless.

Of the existing poverty alleviation measures, social grants have saved many impoverished children and their families from destitution, and potential street homelessness, but have not resolved the problem entirely. Attention has recently turned toward preventive approaches, aiming to intervene before children or adults find themselves on the streets. However, public spending has, to some extent, been frustrated by the elusiveness of the problem, its unknown scale, its uncertain determinants, and the lack of clearly identified public-sector measures that can be expected to help with street homelessness.

Against this backdrop of uncertainty, one of the most critical questions is whether street homelessness is simply a matter of lack of affordable shelter. Internationally, various kinds of housing provision have been the most widely advocated solution to street homelessness (National Coalition for the Homeless & National Health Care for the Homeless Council, 1993; Wolch & Dear, 1993; Glasser, 1994), but it has been almost impossible for the South African government to target this kind of initiative for the street homeless given the many uncertainties about the nature and size of the target population. Can we therefore resolve homelessness in South Africa by targeted spending on public housing? Or is street homelessness better understood as a broader poverty issue, requiring a wider initiative on a number of fronts? How can homelessness be prevented at source, and does the street homeless population differ from that of informal settlements in terms of viable policy options? This paper draws on the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) homelessness study (fully described in Kok et al., this issue) to offer findings intended to support policy decisions on how limited resources can best be used to assist South Africa's homeless.

2. Is the social welfare system working for the homeless?

Through its social safety net, South Africa provides more support to the homeless than many advanced democracies, such as the US (Huth & Wright, 1997), although probably less than most states in the European Union (Wright, 1997). At the same time, compared with industrial democracies, South Africa has fewer resources available to help its larger proportion of poor people, and sees those in the shack settlements as the first priority for housing delivery (Department of Housing, 1994).

From a government perspective, how best to direct spending to help the street homeless is not completely clear. With the most inclusive social safety net in Africa in place, large resources are already committed to delivering effectively free housing to the poor as well as to direct income support. However, the impact of social spending on street homelessness is difficult to measure either for prevention or remediation, and is clearly not far-reaching enough to resolve the homelessness situation on the streets. In this light, the social wage is not working for the street homeless.

Many of the common welfarist solutions advocated in the international literature (see Glasser, 1994; Wright, 1997; Cross & Seager et al., this issue) are of questionable relevance in South Africa – being precluded by existing large-scale welfare provision that covers both shelter and income, or by the universal availability in South Africa of relatively cheap self-built housing in the form of shacks.

South Africa's homelessness paradox is that, as the HSRC study indicates, the national social safety net is not accessible for most homeless people living on the streets

(see Cross & Seager et al., this issue). The next question is whether the homeless find that the same applies to the normally accessible self-help shack housing option. Perhaps the heart of the matter, which the HSRC study seeks to explain, is, first, why well-targeted social programmes do not appear to work for the homeless, and, second, why the street homeless population does not seem to disappear into the shack areas.

These issues boil down to the essential question of whether measures that can work for the shack population can also be expected to work for the street homeless – that is, whether those with no housing (i.e. the street homeless) belong to the same population as those without formal housing (i.e. the shack dwellers), and need the same remedial opportunities.

3. The HSRC homelessness study: High-level summary

The background to the HSRC study of homelessness is outlined in the editorial and is also discussed in Cross and Seager et al. (this issue) and Kok et al. (this issue). In summary, the 2005–2008 study involved many HSRC researchers investigating different aspects of street homelessness, and started with a year-long phase of intensive qualitative interviewing to establish the full context of the South African homelessness situation (for qualitative household cases, see Morrow, this issue; Makiwane et al., this issue).

A questionnaire survey was subsequently carried out with reasonable success in the face of the well-known difficulties of locating and counting a mobile population with no fixed addresses (see Glasser, 1994). The total realised sample size was 1245, including 940 adults and 305 children, of whom 147 were female and 1098 male, drawn from Gauteng, Sekhukhune and northern Mpumalanga. The results reflected a predominantly male and predominantly metro-urban street homeless population, which also included a significant rural component not hitherto reported on in South Africa.

Estimating the number of homeless on the streets is difficult. Official Census estimates are normally inaccurate and provide a poor basis for budget recommendations (Glasser, 1994) and there have been no reliable estimates of street homeless numbers in South Africa; indeed, the need for a better population estimate was part of the rationale for the study. However, estimates derived from survey approaches are not stable given the high mobility of the street homeless population. As a result, projections of survey findings to the national population remain very approximate.

The homeless concentrate in the major metropolitan cities. The HSRC estimated there were not more than 3000–3500 street children in Gauteng (see Cross & Seager et al., this issue), which is close to the estimate reported by the Johannesburg Alliance for Street Children (Stone, 2004). The HSRC estimate for the adult Gauteng street homeless population is between 6000 and 12 000, with a national population estimated at between 100 000 and 200 000 when the existence of the previously unreported homeless populations in many rural towns is taken into account. This is higher than Olufemi's (2000) estimate of perhaps 50 000 nationally, which considered mainly the metropolitan urban homeless population.

4. Identifying policy questions

A central question for the HSRC study has been why delivery of housing, free of charge to the beneficiaries, is not enough to prevent homelessness, particularly when backed up

by massive spending on social grants (see Cross & Seager et al., this issue). Both the Department of Housing and the Department of Housing Social Development contribute to shelter and income support. At present, policy recognises that unavailability of affordable housing is a factor in homelessness, while some documents recognise that subsidised housing is not always optimally located for the homeless (on the question of location factors, see Cross & Seager et al., this issue; Huchzermeyer, 2004, 2006). Both the Department of Housing Social Development and the Department of Housing have considered setting up a mechanism for tracking the number of homeless people in order to assist policy development.

However, interviews with officials in the housing delivery programmes indicated that policy efforts have so far concentrated on putting figures to budgetary needs: public spending has been largely devoted to support of shelters for the homeless operated by civil society. While shelters are vital to managing the homelessness problem on the street, they remain largely a remedial measure once homelessness has occurred. In other words, a comprehensive programme of measures to prevent homelessness has not yet been attempted.

In this connection, the issue of social welfare support needs to be addressed more fully. At present, although homeless people in shelters benefit from grants paid to the shelters, the bulk of social grants go to children or their caregivers, the elderly and the disabled (South African Social Security Agency, n.d.). This focus may change: the long-term effects of unemployment are beginning to be assessed and a temporary work-seekers' grant is reported to be under consideration by government. At a time of extreme unemployment, the survey results draw attention to what can be done for failed work-seekers, the older youth and grown men who have now become the permanently unemployed and who are at risk of becoming street homeless.

In that light, policy questions can be made more comprehensive by asking what measures would be best for:

1. ameliorating the situation of the street homeless and helping them gain control of their lives;
2. helping the street homeless out of their present predicament, with either permanent independent housing or permanent assisted living; and
3. preventing homelessness by taking measures that address the homelessness source populations.

Results from the HSRC study suggest that substantially more than affordable housing, or even housing with social grants, is needed to provide the way out of homelessness (for this argument, see Cross & Seager et al., this issue). Access to livelihoods is critical, and access to city centres is likely to be the crucial issue here.

5. How does homelessness work?

There are a number of formulations of how homelessness takes hold (Wagner, 1997; Regional Task Force on the Homeless, 1999; Hurley, 2002). In addition to unemployment as such, or failure of livelihoods, Wolch and Dear (1993) draw attention to spatial factors and the type of urban redevelopment that displaces the low-income inner-city population to the outside of the city, far from their workplaces and beyond easy reach of livelihoods. This kind of dynamic has echoes in South Africa, where

shack areas are often cleared for redevelopment and the population re-housed in just such areas (Huchzermeyer, 2004).

However, efforts to remove the poor from the central city zone commonly fail in the long run, since neither the shack population nor the street homeless themselves can afford to be spatially separated from urban areas where they find a living. Being in both instances unconfined by formal housing, South Africa’s shack population and street population share what has been described as a ‘culture of resistance’ (Wagner, 1997) and often return to the central zone or suburban areas from which they have been removed.

In addition to the economic drivers, in South Africa there appears to be an element of the social alienation that drives voluntary street homelessness in Europe and Australia, and which is often cited as a defining characteristic of the street homeless. That is, some degree of social anger, or refusal to participate as a citizen on society’s terms, appears among contemporary South African youth (Compion & Cook, 2006; Cross, 2008b). Many youths today pursue a precarious lifestyle, without formal employment, based on shared youth-generational identity and connections, while living in temporary rental accommodation or shacks. This is a lifestyle that probably carries a high risk of homelessness in itself. It is not easy to determine how often children and youth on the streets in South Africa are motivated to leave home as a result of their own rejection of society, although this kind of motivation was rarely reported in the HSRC survey.

Some light is shed on the original causes of street homelessness by the survey results, which are summarised in Table 1.

It can be seen that the search for employment or livelihoods, alongside various changes in the family situation that could put pressure on the respondents or leave them marginalised within the household, appear to be the main perceived reasons why the street homeless originally left their family homes and started on the migration paths that eventually led to the streets. These two factors, which in respondents’ replies and in

Table 1: Homeless respondents’ main reasons for leaving original home

Street-homeless respondents’ reasons for first leaving home prior to street homeless condition	Number of replies	Percentage of respondents mentioning
Employment factors (job search, employment, retrenchment, dismissal, income shortfall, other economic factors)	661	53
Family factors (deaths, disputes, marriage, divorce, family relationships, family influence, other changes in family situation)	665	53
Aspirational factors (seeking better life, independence, excitement, other life-improvement factors)	210	17
Shelter and housing (lack of housing, eviction or forced removal, other housing factors)	128	10
Abuse or violence (abuse, mistreatment, injury, other personal suffering)	111	9
Total	1775	

Multiple response distribution, percentage of respondents replying ‘yes’: number of replies may exceed total number of respondents.

household case studies tended to reflect some degree of urgency or compelling immediacy, were recorded by more than one-half of the respondents (53 per cent) in each category. Actual abuse or mistreatment was much less common (10 per cent), and factors involving housing were mentioned only slightly more often. Although more often mentioned than mistreatment or shelter factors, the aspiration for a better life was reported by fewer than one in five respondents as a reason for leaving home.

The overall impression is that livelihood needs and pressures inside the household are the main reasons these respondents decided to leave home, which suggests shortage of resources or some degree of desperation, or both, rather than an aspirational decision.

In this light, and drawing confirmation from the HSRC's extensive qualitative data on personal histories and household dynamics (see for instance Morrow, this issue), there seem to be three common paths into street homelessness in South Africa:

1. *Loss of the respondent's prior economic position.* Individuals lose either housing or jobs and become unsheltered as they use up their network connections. Facing marginalisation, these people usually continue trying to re-enter normal housed society: some succeed, but others eventually find themselves on the streets. This is the classic progression into homelessness described in the literature, often brought about by a personal crisis.
2. *Inability to secure an initial foothold in the economy.* Individuals leave home to find work but fail, and feel unable to return home where their presence increases hardship instead of relieving it. In conditions of acute poverty, unsustainable dependency and lack of alternatives, departing work-seekers perceive that their household cannot support them on available resources, so that return without a job will not be possible. This sequence of events was frequently reported by South African street homeless people in the HSRC survey, and relates to poverty, de-industrialisation and weakening family cohesion.
3. *Displaced youth and children without alternative shelter options.* Children who escape dysfunctional families, or are pushed out of their homes by adversity, may find themselves on the streets if they have no one else to take them in. They cannot enter the formal workforce or obtain their own housing; and as their ties to settled society weaken, they may join peer groups on the street unless they connect with the shelter network. As in the first point above, this sequence of events is a classic one in the literature.

It is often poverty that sets people off on these paths, but it is not always the direct cause. Although the underlying conditions are generated by the state of the economy, with unskilled jobs becoming more scarce, the immediate cause is often the breakdown of the family noted in the Presidency's social report (Republic of South Africa, 2006). Consequently, an increasing share of the population has no realistic chance of employment in their lifetime, and – in so far as able-bodied adult males do not qualify for grants – no eligibility, as yet, for government support.

From the US, Wolch and Dear (1993) argue that governments know what to do, and how to do it, so that only political will is lacking. For South Africa, there is room to disagree: we do not yet know the causes of street homelessness in any depth, and our cures do not necessarily work. Housing alone may be a simplistic approach given the actual need, and to attempt to prevent homelessness by eliminating poverty is likely to be unrealistic given the scale of the poverty here and the intractable macro-economic background problems. It will also not be realistic to try to make major changes in the fabric of

society in order to reduce homelessness on the streets. Instead, it will be important to work with the current situation, focusing on managing street homelessness in place on the streets, since there is usually not enough space to offer appropriate and accessible housing either in the city centre or the suburbs. Solutions will have to consider what government can do with limited resources, together with civil society and private provision.

6. Origins of the street homeless population

The results of the HSRC homelessness research showing the origins of the homeless on the streets are slightly surprising: in the survey sample, the adults come mostly from the rural townships (Cross & Kok, in preparation). Homeless children, on the other hand, had moved over shorter distances on average – most came from the urban townships. Like rural families, impoverished township families may reach a point where dependency ratios become unsustainable and households lose members or suffer from severe internal dysfunction, substance abuse and domestic violence.

The main determinants of urban homelessness are likely to be located in the rural sector, where unemployment and the accompanying family stresses lead to impoverishment and cause loss of human capital into the urban migration stream, and sometimes from there onto the city streets if jobs cannot be found. A similar sequence of events affects poor urban areas, although there it is less acute.

In the city it appears that most street children are leaving the streets as they reach adulthood, to be replaced as a demographic cohort by the in-migrating rural-born street adult population (Cross & Kok, in preparation). But it is not clear where the older children go to if or when they leave the streets. Unlike adults, stranded children cannot obtain shack housing in their own right and may have nowhere to live other than the streets, so it may be that they only move into shack areas once they are old enough to qualify by community standards to hold a shack.

The literature that deals with the migration flow toward homelessness does not deal with the shack component – it is the unknown factor and was thus an important focus of the HSRC study, although many questions remain that cannot be answered by a study restricted to the street homeless. The survey data show that not many of the migrants who were on their way to eventual street homelessness had ever entered the shack settlements (Cross & Kok, in preparation). This finding is unexplained, since the shack settlements accommodate most rural-to-urban migration, and raises more questions about the relation between these two populations, the street homeless and shack dwellers.

7. The street homeless compared with the shack population

To attempt to answer the persisting questions about how to provide sustainable housing for the homeless in a country where very cheap shack housing is widely available, the next option is to compare the shack population with the street population. Both populations appear to originate mainly from the rural sector; however, they may not come from the same rural source populations (see Cross & Kok, in preparation), or may not share the same demographic profile, as we argue here. By comparing the homelessness survey data with the CSIR/HSRC's Integrated Planning, Development and Modelling (IPDM) survey (Cross, 2008a), which covered the same three provinces in 2007–2008, we can use the statistical logic of difference of means to see whether the

two populations have the same demographic profile and, by inference, whether they are therefore part of the same population today, or only overlap slightly.

A comparison of these two data-sets, looking at their sample means for key indicators on gender, education, formal employment, access to grants and mobility, showed that the street homeless are not demographically or economically the same as the population in the shack settlements (see Table 2).

The street homeless population consisted of far more men than women (87 per cent male), whereas the shack population contained more women (59 per cent female). The IPDM shack samples reflected a mean level of education higher by a year than the street homeless sample, at eight years as against seven years. In addition, shack residents in Gauteng were generally much better educated (8.7 years of schooling) than those who remained in Limpopo (5.3 years) or Mpumalanga (6.5 years). This suggests a migration related self-sorting process in the shack population, with better educated individuals strongly pulled towards the metropolitan employment market, marking out the shack residents as better educated, more capacitated and engaged economic migrants. By comparison, the homeless samples were less educated, at about seven years in all samples, were not educationally differentiated by the pull of the market, and seem to have migrated under pressure of migration push factors operating in the places of origin.

Loss of access to reliable income from formal work is a classic homelessness factor in the literature (Wolch & Dear, 1993; Wright, 1997), although it has been popularly assumed that much the same applies to the shack areas. However, far more shack residents reported that they were formally employed (43 per cent) than did the homeless (27 per cent); in addition, the survey results and the qualitative interviews combine to suggest strongly that most of the 'formal' employment reported by the street homeless respondents was actually temporary piecework jobs, casual labour for formal businesses, rather than registered formal employment. This appeared to be much less often the case for the shack-resident IPDM respondents. If so, the difference in access to formal employment becomes still more evident, and perhaps definitive.

In terms of access to the government social wage programmes, 24 per cent of the disabled living in shacks were receiving disability grants, but although 11–19 per cent of the

Table 2: Comparison of indicators for HSRC street homeless and IPDM informal (shack) settlement sample populations

Variable	Mean for indicator, homeless adults (HSRC homeless survey 2007)	Mean for indicator, adults in informal settlements (CSIR/HSRC IPDM survey 2007/08)
Male (%)	87	41
Educational level (grade completed)	Grade 7	Grade 8
Formally employed (%)	27	43
Receiving disability grant (%)	1	24
Mean number of reported migration moves during their lives	1.73	1.07
Number of sample cases	943	403

homeless reported some degree of disability (see Seager & Tamasane, this issue), only 1 per cent were receiving a disability grant. It would appear that access to disability grants, a major indicator of access to entitlements, is largely ineffective for the homeless in all three provinces studied. By implication, access to other government programmes is likely to be poor, which further implies a poor outlook for access to subsidised housing and even to transitional housing programmes. By comparison, the shack-dwelling population appears to have better institutional access and obtains social-wage entitlements more efficiently.

Lastly, the level of population mobility and migration in the street homeless population and in the shack-resident population differed substantially. Although the shack population in general was relatively mobile at 1.07 recorded moves on average, the homeless samples reported much higher lifetime mobility at 1.73. It is clear that the homeless are one of the most mobile and unstable populations in South Africa, well ahead of the shack population, which appears stable by comparison.

While it is clear from the qualitative inquiries that some individuals move from homelessness into shack housing – and vice versa – the economic and demographic profiles of the two populations do not match, as explained above. The observed difference of means for the demographic and economic indicators suggest strongly that the street homeless and the shack residents do not share the same profile, and therefore are not the same population. In addition, the migration analysis now in preparation indicates that the street people and the shack residents are from different types of rural area (Cross & Kok, in preparation).

This poses the following question: Why are these populations now separate and different, when historically they seem to have been one population? When compared with the shack occupants, the street homeless group appears to be less resourced, poorer, and less well equipped with access to employment, services or government support. The separation of the two populations is likely to have happened because municipalities have restricted most shack settlements to the outside of the city's economic core, while the homeless depend for their livelihoods on the central zone.

The few central-city shack areas that are still tolerated are extremely crowded with work-seekers who belong to the mobilised poor, and space is valuable and very competitive (see Cross, 2008b; Cross & Seager et al., this issue). Accordingly, nearly all those shack areas that can accommodate additional settlement are located far enough from the city centre to require some kind of transport to access livelihoods on the city streets, while the few shacks inside the central cities are not generally available to the destitute poor. However, the HSRC's homelessness pilot study (Aliber et al., 2004) noted that some street people were not in fact homeless, but had accommodation in Pretoria shack settlements, and the Co-ordinated Action with Street People (CASP, 2000) study noted the same in Cape Town. Among the shack residents there are likely to be some former street homeless individuals, particularly former street children. It would appear that there is probably some interchange of population between the more accessible urban shack areas and the street world, but street children are much fewer in number than street adults, and so far this exchange is not large enough to move the demographic profiles of the two populations closer together, or to cause the population means for gender, education, employment and migration to converge.

It would probably follow that making either shelters or subsidised housing available to the homeless at the peripheral locations where project sites can be afforded could be

of limited help to the street homeless who rely on street livelihoods. Both the San Diego Regional Task Force on the Homeless (1992, 1998) study (Regional Task Force on the Homeless, 1999) and the Checkerboard Square study (Wagner, 1997) state that housing for the homeless in the US needs to be located where it does not exclude homeless street residents, who have little prospect of formal employment, from immediate access to street livelihoods.

Accordingly, either transitional housing or subsidised rental accommodation in the central city zone would appear to be the best options for assisting the street homeless – as far as realistically possible – to enter formal accommodation. Up to that point, subsidised housing – either owned or as rentals – may well be the main preventive housing option for the marginalised population at risk of homelessness, and could help to the limited extent that the precipitating conditions of homelessness appear to be located in the housing situation.

8. Street homelessness and South Africa's social safety net

The findings of this study illustrate why the existing comprehensive social package does not prevent or cure homelessness in South Africa, but also suggest that it helps significantly to limit the scale of the problem.

The profile of the homeless population in South Africa clearly differs from that of the US, and the role of housing in particular appears to be different. While South Africa does have a crisis with affordable housing, it is not a crisis of absolute rooflessness among the working poor (see Cross & Seager et al., this issue), so that housing alone may not be the key intervention. Basic shack housing is generally available, although of very poor quality; what is often missing is the combination of available housing and reliable livelihoods within easy reach.

Accordingly, street homelessness is less often a housing matter in South Africa than in the US, and thus housing delivery probably plays a smaller role in preventing homelessness. But it is also likely that the South African street homeless population is much smaller than it would otherwise have been if the large at-risk population here was not commonly able to provide their own housing, permanent or temporary, at point of need, and also to access government grant support in many cases. In other words, the government's social wage provisions appear significant for the at-risk population, although these programmes lose effectiveness once the homeless are on the streets.

Rather than pointing to a housing crisis as the origin of homelessness, the data on why the pre-homeless leave their family homes suggest that the homelessness problem in South Africa is mainly a socio-economic crisis of societal change and family change (see the Presidency's social report; Republic of South Africa, 2006). This critical situation is driven by unemployment and living costs, closely involved with poverty but not attributable to poverty alone.

In order to situate the options, we need to ask how the South African homeless population looks overall in comparison with the shack population. The quantitative evidence depicts the homeless as a mobile, unstable population with less education than the metropolitan shack residents, many with no work experience or only a low-quality employment record, and few if any job qualifications. The qualitative evidence shows them as de-skilled and often discouraged as work-seekers, often disabled but not publicly supported, and usually inclined to try for piecework and temporary jobs only. This is

in many ways a portrait of the permanently unemployed, the part of South African society structurally excluded as failed work-seekers.

In addition, the homeless, in their own stories, appear cut off from their earlier networks in settled society, nervous about approaching government, suffering learned helplessness and friendlessness, often ashamed of their situation, vulnerable to exploitation, ill-health and injury, and living in fear as they drift in toward the economic centres of the country.

By contrast, the population of the shack areas – generally seen as severely disadvantaged and in need of help – appears relatively active, mobilised and engaged, fairly successful in the job market, willing to move to look for opportunities, but not, in comparison, an unstable component of the population.

In this light, one reason why the social safety net often fails to reach the street homeless is probably that the safety net measures are targeted at, and delivered for, a different population – one that is more capacitated, socially better resourced and more engaged. For the disempowered and isolated street homeless, existing delivery measures for the safety net benefits may require a degree of engagement and connectivity that these expected beneficiaries do not commonly possess.

As a result, access to grants, housing, medical care, jobs training and even safety and protection are often inaccessible to the street homeless in reality, and the critical benefits of housing and grants may also be effectively out of reach for many in the high-risk pre-homeless population who have lost their livelihoods and are on the brink of falling out of ordinary society. The street homeless face barriers in applying for benefits because most do not have identity documents, and either do not know how to obtain them or have tried and failed, or are unable or personally ashamed to approach government offices on their own. In most cases, the homeless receive grants only if they are living in shelters. The same often, although not always, applies to medical care and institutional mental care (see Seager & Tamasane, this issue).

For the street homeless, subsidised housing rarely appears to be seen as an option once they have joined the roofless population on the streets. For subsidised housing to do any good, the programme will need to think seriously about the location of subsidised housing developments in relation to street livelihoods. To be sustainable for the street homeless who cannot pay for transport, housing and livelihoods must be made available in the same localities (Wolch & Dear, 1993; Cross & Seager et al., this issue). Even given appropriate housing, without effective grant support some access to street livelihoods remains a practical requirement. At present, subsidised housing is built on the cheapest land at the urban periphery, and inner-city access remains highly problematic.

The same limitations may often apply to the shack settlements that serve as stopgap housing for the at-risk population. And street children are a clear exception to the rule that such housing is accessible to people at risk – as an informal safety net – since children can obtain neither subsidised housing nor shacks in their own right.

Given the above, it would appear that government's new focus on providing rental options in the central city by redeveloping old buildings may hold out more promise for those already street homeless than for independent house ownership. Provision of transitional housing – or of subsidised privately owned hotels or rooming houses – could make it easier for homeless people to move off the streets, while still remaining in contact with networks and livelihoods. To save them having to manage an owned housing unit,

subsidised rentals for the very poor could offer managed facilities in the central zone at extremely low cost and could be linked to grant access.

After provision of housing, income support is the second critical safety net option. Like able-bodied men, children over the age of 15 are not eligible for government social grants available for younger children, and it is probably not surprising that most homeless street children in South Africa are older youth aged 15 and above (Ward & Seager, this issue). It would therefore seem that most street children still slip through the social safety net; this seems to be the case even though, once they begin life on the street, from then onward most of the after-the-fact efforts aimed at helping the homeless actually focus on street children rather than adults (CASP, 2000).

As noted earlier, social grants do help prevent homelessness in South Africa, and are probably the reason why it is not mainly a family phenomenon here. Instead, it mostly strikes the very people who are not eligible for grants: unemployed older youth and single adult men. Street homelessness in South Africa is only partly a problem of welfare delivery. The full picture is one of unemployment and imperfect welfare delivery combined with inappropriate spatial planning, complicated by the fact that the planning problem is not seen clearly from the policy level even when it comes to the related problem of shack housing, although the spatial access constraints on livelihoods have been widely discussed (see for example Huchzermeyer, 2004, 2006).

To see the causes of homelessness in depth means taking into account the exclusionary processes that result from metropolitan spatial planning for world-class cities. City efforts to upgrade the streets continually operate to take the street homeless away from the livelihoods they need to survive, and set going the characteristic cycle of clearance and return.

To break this cycle could require a package of options that would provide the poor with secure sleeping accommodation outside the city core zone, halfway houses with ablution facilities, subsidised transport, and perhaps access to urban work opportunities. However, even with these facilities, many homeless people will probably prefer to remain on the streets. If this level of investment, and readily available grants for the unemployed, cannot be budgeted for, then managed housing options on a subsidised rental basis within the city core zone may be the most cost-effective way to manage the street homelessness problem in close proximity to street livelihoods.

9. Identifying causal factors

The South African government's social wage provisions safety net catches many of the at-risk before they end up on the streets, but many of those already on the streets slip through. The HSRC study aimed to offer more information on where the homeless come from and how they become homeless, to support targeting of government and municipal measures.

Since homelessness mainly affects those not eligible for social grant support and not in housing programmes – the older unemployed youth and single unemployed men – the key determinants appear as unemployment and unsustainable household dependency. Effective livelihoods support to counter the effects of unemployment is therefore vital. Subsidised housing programmes that work for others are unlikely to work for the homeless unless packaged with either income support or access to earning opportunities.

The survey found that most adult street homeless came from rural townships and most street children from urban townships. Both groups appear to be displaced household members who move toward the primary cities in a reluctant push migration process when they cannot find jobs or livelihoods in their home areas. The origin dynamics of homelessness seem to be largely a household response to unemployment, which damages and breaks up families: the most frequently mentioned reasons for leaving home in the first place were family situations and unemployment. By pushing up dependency ratios past a point of sustainability, unemployment stresses households and obliges members without jobs or grants to leave to seek work or make their own way.

Under these conditions, the social safety net is not always effective for the street homeless. The data reviewed here point to shack residents and the homeless as different populations, with very different capacity to engage government delivery. Methods of delivering the social safety net seem to work as intended for the shack settlements, where the majority of the poor live, and where residents often appear as relatively confident economic migrants. Social delivery may be less effective for the destitute street homeless outside shelters, who rarely reported receiving government benefits or possessing identity documents, and did not easily interact with government.

10. Recommendations

To target the predicament of the street homeless as outlined here, interventions for those already on the streets need to address delivery of the social wage, improving livelihoods access and shelter options, and enlisting the help of stakeholders. To prevent new street homeless at source, interventions need to address the effects of unemployment on the family. Options include the following.

10.1 Reduction/alleviation

To make the social safety net effective against homelessness once the homeless are actually on the streets, outreach capacity needs to be strengthened to bring the social wage programmes to the homeless who are eligible for benefits. Since the institution of shelter outreach workers works well for street children, similar dedicated capacity – either from civil society with government support, or from government social workers directly – is needed to make social benefits accessible and help draw as many street adults as possible into permanent accommodation.

The most important need is to supply the homeless with access to livelihoods, while also delivering housing or shelter close at hand. To supply the homeless with fishing equipment is of little use if they cannot reach the pond. A way will have to be found to manage this in core-zone urban spaces where planning for world-class city status involves upgrading, to prevent the cycle of clearances and returns.

Effective planning to address street homelessness will mean recognising the need to manage the problem in place, ameliorating the street predicament by allowing for livelihoods and enabling access to the social wage, and providing appropriate housing options for as many of the homeless as possible. This implies either locations with access to street livelihoods, or extended grant support and access to jobs, which may involve specially targeted initiatives within the Expanded Public Works Programme or skills delivery programmes, or both.

Measures to help the homeless escape their predicament should start by drawing the street population into assistance programmes that can lead to permanent shelter and livelihoods, assisted or otherwise. To do this, an important priority will be bringing the private sector and the local business community – the single constituency most affected and often the force behind police clearances, and also next to civil society the group most able to help – into a city-based civil programme to address street homelessness.

10.2 Prevention

To limit homelessness, interventions need to be implemented through the source populations in the rural and urban townships so as to forestall the exclusion process, at source, in as many cases as possible. Doing this will require additional social work capacity for the rural townships, to identify the households at risk of being forced to send out jobless youth and adults to find work or make their own way with few resources.

Interventions should include programmes of training or apprenticeships or an extension of grant support, or both. A minimal grant award for long-term unemployed adults might be considered. Even a very small grant to at-risk individuals might be enough to prevent their becoming homeless, by restoring their contributory stake in household support.

In the case of child homelessness, the risk appears to increase when the child support grant runs out at age 15. Older children burden the impoverished household with steeply rising costs for food and education, but are not yet eligible for social grants. Implementation of the Polokwane resolution¹ to raise the upper age for child support grants could save desperately poor families from having to send children out to find livelihoods when they are too young to enter the formal job market or obtain their own housing.

Extending grant support might also lessen any risk of abusive home conditions by reducing the pressure on income, and could encourage families to keep older children at home. Limiting the corrosive effects extreme unemployment has on households would not end street homelessness, but would probably reduce it significantly.

10.3 Targeted interventions

Because the street population is relatively small, targeted measures to address the homelessness problem would not need a large budget even if the costs per individual were relatively high (cf. CASP, 2000). The following is a list of possible interventions.

Housing and shelter sustainability through:

- appropriately located subsidised housing, with transitional assistance;
- support for subsidised single-room-occupancy hotels;
- transitional housing and assisted living facilities;
- social outreach servicing to help people obtain documentation essential for realising rights;
- increased support to non-governmental organisations providing drop-in services and shelter accommodation; and
- institutional care for the mentally and physically disabled homeless where necessary.

¹A resolution of the ANC 52nd National Conference in Polokwane, South Africa, 16–20 December 2007.

Access to services, which would include the following elements:

- intermediary help with access to social services;
- police, municipal and health staff trained and tasked with liaison; and
- social services case review to help determine individual service and accommodation needs.

Access to livelihoods, requiring:

- toleration of the presence of the street homeless in specific areas;
- skills training for earning and employment, including managing money; and
- spatially appropriate housing and shelter allowing access to street livelihoods.

Perhaps the most critical concerns will be help with obtaining identity documents and grants for which the homeless are eligible, additional dedicated social work capacity in the critical areas, and increased support for civil society organisations that provide shelter, beds and services. Once the homeless are on the streets, subsidy housing may be too demanding for them even if delivered at urban locations close to the source of their livelihoods, and subsidised managed rentals may be preferable.

Since so much of the effort to house the street homeless and help them access welfare services is currently provided by civil society, greater governmental efforts to reduce homelessness will put more burdens on civil society and state social welfare services. To budget appropriately will mean explicitly recognising the human rights entitlements of the homeless in South Africa, while also recognising the potential gains for the competitive positions of municipalities, through reducing the impact of visible poverty in the city core zones critical to finance and investment inflows. Street homelessness sits at a chokepoint for metropolitan city regions' development planning, and is set to increase as recessionary unemployment rises. The problem cannot be ignored in a developmental South Africa – and not only because of its human rights impact.

In respect of prevention, the support measures needed will include, but not be limited to, appropriate housing delivery. Extended grant support may be the only practical alternative to tolerating street livelihoods into the indefinite future. To prevent families being forced by severe impoverishment to split up – which often sends out into the job market marginal members who may not be able to support themselves on their own if they cannot find work – will require action on several fronts. In this light, a broad inter-departmental response from the city region level is likely to be the most appropriate, but success will depend on political will, and on successful liaison between national and municipal tiers of government.

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