

# Exploring the Socio-Economic Challenges and Vulnerabilities of Homelessness Individuals in George Town, Chennai

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## Abstract

Homelessness is a prevalent social problem in many countries across the globe. India, including Chennai is no exception. The Chennai Metropolitan city, experiencing an influx of residents seeking job opportunities alongside increasing infrastructure and industrial development, has also witnessed a growing number of urban poor who remain homeless. This paper aims to study the multifaceted problems faced by homeless individuals and also to explore the causes leading to homelessness. With the help of detailed surveys, observations, interviews and focused group discussion the basic entitlements, education, health, hygiene and employment aspects are studied at Jaffar Sarang Street and Narayanappa Street of George Town, Chennai.

**Keywords:** Homelessness, Basic Entitlements, Education, Health, Hygiene, Employment

## Introduction

Shelter is one of the basic needs in human life. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights defines "homelessness" as the state of people who do not have a regular dwelling because they are unable to obtain and maintain regular, safe, and adequate housing, or because they do not have a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. Chennai Metropolitan City, in contemporary times, has seen drastic development in its industrial, technical, and infrastructural spheres. With this increase in all amenities and enhanced employment opportunities, many people have migrated to Chennai. With increasing advancement in various fields, there is also a heightened increase of urban poor. This paper explores the various reasons and outcomes of homelessness in the urban poor residing at Jaffar Sarang Street and Narayanappa Street of George Town.

## Background

George Town has been a commercial space in Chennai where many individuals are employed for daily wages. Being a commercial hub, George Town also accommodates numerous residents. The Narayanappa Street with 31 houses is nestled between the Chennai District Collectors' Office and Customs Office, and adjacent to it is the Jaffar Sarang Street with 45 houses.

## Methodology

The research study employed a descriptive research design using a mixed methodology. The paper aims to study the contemporary issues faced by homeless individuals, particularly exploring education, health,

hygiene, and employment aspects.

For the quantitative study of these days, 68 homeless individuals were interviewed using a structured survey questionnaire. Focused group discussions and semi-structured interviews were used to examine multifaceted issues across different age groups. Despite being three years since the initiation, the Union Government's AMRUT scheme has not yet commenced. Chennai was selected as one of the few cities for pilot projects under the scheme. The data indicates no progress in the scheme planned by the government.

## Major Findings

### Demographic Details:

The respondents were above the age of 15. 51% percent of the respondents were female, and 49% were male. An almost equal proportion of male and female respondents were studied to examine the gender lens. 70.5% of the respondents were married with 17.6% being unmarried, 8.8% were widows, and 2.9% were separated from their partners. 94% of the respondents have been homeless since birth.

### Housing Conditions

The respondents' housing condition in the community presents substantial challenges, as they mostly live in kutchra or semi-pucca dwellings with tarpaulin roofs. During the summer, this living arrangement exposes 91% of the people to considerable challenges due to excessive heat and pain. Furthermore, the arrival of monsoon season heightens their problems, with reports of floods and roof leaking. These housing-related issues highlight the critical need for interventions to improve living conditions, with an emphasis on long-lasting and climate-resilient, permanent housing structures to improve the community's overall well-being.

### Basic Entitlements

Being nestled closest to the Chennai District Collector Office and being sole residents in one of the important areas of Chennai, the data of the surveyed homeless residents lacking basic entitlements imposes a critical concern.

A significant majority, 77%, do not possess a birth certificate, indicating potential challenges in accessing official documentation. While the majority 84% of the respondents own a Voter ID, suggesting a relatively higher level of political participation among the surveyed individuals, the absence of this document for 16% still signifies gaps in civic participation.

The vast majority of 94.1% own an Aadhar Card, enrollment in this government identification system. However, the significant gap arises from the fact that 77% of the respondents lack a Birth Certificate, a fundamental document for establishing one's birthdate. This gap is critical as Aadhar cards rely on accurate demographic information, including the individual's birthdate. Without a Birth Certificate, there may be challenges in ensuring the accuracy and reliability of the information on Aadhar cards. This mismatch between Aadhar enrollment and the absence of Birth Certificates raises concerns about the completeness and accuracy of the demographic data in the Aadhar system for a considerable portion of the surveyed population.

A considerable 56% of the respondents do not own a Community Certificate which might impact their eligibility to access certain government services like reservation.

Additionally, the possession of essential documents like ration cards and bank passbooks is not universal, with 40% lacking a ration card and 71% without a bank passbook. The financial literacy of the respondents

is put to stake. 67% of the women who are widows are not benefited by the widow pension scheme and 33% of widows are benefited by the widow pension scheme.

These findings underscore the need for targeted interventions to address the documentation disparities and enhance access to basic entitlements among the surveyed population.

### **Education Status**

More than half of the respondents, that is 58%, were illiterates. 2% having pursued only up to their primary level of education, 5% having pursued only up to their secondary level of education, 16% having completed or tried completing SSLC, and 8% having completed or tried completing HSC. The children of 28% of the respondents study in government schools, 29% in private schools, and 43% in government-aided schools. The children of only 14% of the respondents were registered under RTE. Additionally, 71% of the respondents have an average annual fee below Rs. 5000.

Instances of many school dropouts from the age of 7 were present in the community.

Case Study 1: A 10-year-old boy lost his father in the early years. The father's suicide and emotional abuse faced, impacted the child. Lacking attention from his mother has always been a contributing factor. The arrogance level of the boy has increased with dropping out from school.

Case Study 2: A 9-year-old boy who has been facing abuse for years from his alcoholic father and post the separation of his parents, loss of his younger sibling has highly impacted his mental well-being. Growing under the care of his grandparents, and being enrolled in two schools he now attends neither. In the early age of 9 he is now a school dropout.

Case Study 3: A 14-year-old boy engaged in smoking and substance abuse, influenced by older teenage friends has discontinued school now faces kidney issues.

Case Study 4: A 24-year-old BSc. Mathematics graduate opts for daily wages over a job matching his educational qualification. Higher salary, lesser commute time and part-time employment in the enterprise, has influenced his current decision.

The different case studies illustrate the various influencing factors which reveal the complex interplay of socio-economic challenges. The challenges include disruptive family dynamics, post COVID-19 impacts, substance abuse, the current environment the child lives in and also the financial constraints. Family, friends and the environment in which the child grows impacts its developmental outcomes. The child's growth environment coupled with limited or absent role models not just influences the child's current well-being but also the child's future characteristics as an adult. A holistic approach is required to address the educational challenges of children.

### **Employment Status**

32% of the respondents are daily wage labourers which indicates the reliance on unstable income sources and 38% of the respondents are unemployed underscores the economic vulnerability of the respondents. Among women in the community, 66.67% of the women are homemakers (unemployed) and only 33.3% are employed. When seen through the gender lens, the data significantly implies the intersectionality of homelessness where both gender and unemployment plays a crucial role. Furthermore, the employed 33.3% of the women respondents are not employed in formal sectors yet are engaged in care works and sanitation works. Addressing these economic disparities is vital in uplifting the community.

## Health and Hygiene

Majority of the respondents 74%, prefer private hospitals and 26% of the respondents prefer government hospitals for treatment. The potential inclination towards private services was due to quality services and lesser wait time compared to government hospitals. 94% of the respondents do not own a Government Health Insurance Card as well.

68% of the women in the community are Menstruating, 29% of the women are in their menopause phase and 3% of the women in the community had their uterus removed. 46% of the menstruating women change sanitary napkins twice a day and 54% of the women change thrice a day.

There is only one common bathroom available in the community. The mobile bathroom which is present a few metres away from the community has been reportedly closed for an extended period of time. The respondents encountered severe sanitation challenges due to the same. Open defecation was also present in the community which highlights necessary health interventions. The available common bathroom was reported to be unclean by the respondents with men consuming alcohol inside the same which imposes both health and safety concerns. The closure of the public bathroom by 08.00 P.M., particularly challenging for women, underscores the restricted access to essential facilities during nighttime hours.

The respondents engage in multiple activities which includes eating, sleeping, bathing and cooking in the same space which emphasises the limited and integrated nature of the living environment. The absence of waste management practices in the community highlights the challenge of maintaining a hygienic environment. The prevalence of alcoholism within the community raises concerns about the overall well-being of the community. A significant majority (91%) cook food in front of their houses or in the street. Water usage patterns also reflect challenges, with 92% relying on unboiled lorry water for drinking, 8% using canned water, and 94% utilising lorry water for all other purposes.

Early marriages are comparatively high in the community. The elevated number of separated couples points to underlying issues such as domestic abuse or substance abuse, highlighting the detrimental impact on mental health for those victims. Adding on, alcoholism is also a contributing factor.

## Suggestions

- The basic shelter needs of the majority of the respondents is not being satisfied. Addressing this requires a tailored approach. According to the respondents, resettlement in Perumbakkam has been previously proposed and rejected. They argue that it is too far from their current livelihood opportunities. Instead, they have requested resettlement in nearby areas that won't adversely affect their livelihood conditions. Facilitating the same would aid in uplifting the community and addressing the felt needs of the community.
- Organising entitlement registration camps can bridge the gap.
- Family Counselling is essential to boost the family dynamics of the community.
- Informal education alongside the formal education can be facilitated in order to fight absenteeism and school drop-outs. Children Panchayats can be facilitated through NGOs which can boost children's decision making capacity, aid in personal development and group development.
- Mapping the available skills and tapping the job opportunities can improve the livelihood opportunities. Adding on, organising skill-training and facilitating in acquiring skilled services and formal occupational opportunities.
- Awareness sessions on menstrual hygiene, waste management, hygiene practices, substance abuse and alcoholism can enhance the community's current conditions.

- Not every community is the same. Need based, tailored interventions to address the unique needs and challenges of the community can lead to sustainable growth of the community.

### Conclusion

Homelessness being a global issue, the common intervention for all communities does not entirely meet the needs of the community. The study highlights the need for holistic and tailored interventions to cater to the unique needs of the community. It is solely the duty of the government but also the duty of the Social Workers, NGOs and Policy Makers in advocating for the rights and necessities of the community. Recognising that every individual has a different identity, the homeless individuals have different identities as well coupled with their homelessness and addressing the spectrum of the needs perceived by the community with targeted interventions is needed. The study advocates for a holistic, tailored and community-centric approach to create sustainable improvements and ensure a better future for this vulnerable population.

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