

Vagrancy and Experiences of Crime: A Case of Durban City Centre

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Abstract: Homelessness has been an age-long and global challenge from years back; and up till now, it still exists across the human societies. Homelessness is, most of the time, linked with substance abuse, although this is not always the fact. The same scenario was observed in Durban Central City, where there are many people sleeping on the street in order to sustain a means of livelihood. To explore the experiences of homeless people with regards to crime, a qualitative approach was adopted. Fifteen homeless people were selected purposively. One-on-one open-ended semi-structured interviews were used to illicit their views. The findings revealed that people from the street do not have a stable income and they end up stealing for making a life, addiction to substance is another factor that contribute to their involvement in crime.

Key words: Crime, Durban city, Homeless people, Substance abuse.

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Introduction

Globally, 1.6 billion people live in substandard housing, with around 15 million forcibly evicted each year. The youth are the age group most likely to become homeless (UN, 2020). Homelessness is a global issue that is exacerbated by poverty. Poverty and unemployment are common reasons of homelessness in many cases. However, homelessness continues to be a problem in both rich and developing countries. According to (Tenai and Mbewu, 2020) poverty is not the only issue. Homelessness in South Africa is charactered by various dynamics which are probed by one's inherent quality of life.

Homeless individuals are frequently viewed as a source of crime; yet they are more likely to be victims of crime than offenders. Members of the public are responsible for

much of the violence faced by homeless persons, and such incidents go largely unreported. According to a study conducted in Durban CBD by Human Research Council it was found that, those living on the street reported the most intimidation/violence from the police 68 percent. Businesses, service providers, and local people were subjected to low degrees of intimidation/violence. The shelter population encountered less police intimidation/violence 31 percent, but equal levels of intimidation/violence from other street/shelter resident's 38 percent (HSRCM, 2016). Life as a vagrant is especially difficult for women, who face several life-threatening dangers such as rape, assault, and trafficking. Unemployed persons who often use hard drugs and report the highest rates of daily intimidation/violence from police reported the highest rates of daily intimidation/violence. Children also report high rates of police intimidation/violence, with 54 percent having encountered it in the past. Females, on average, report the fewest incidents of violence (HSRC, 2016). According to Perlman and Chalton (2021) 40 percent of women who are vagrants had children with them, making them more vulnerable.

Literature

The street throughout the world is a home to millions of people (United Nations Children's Fund, 2015), and the circumstances on the street render individuals vulnerable to substance abuse and misuse, this is because the streets are considered as a space of illicit substance abuse. This, therefore, indicates an agency to address this global concern of the high prevalence of substance use among vagrant individuals.

Street of vagrancy

According to Tenai and Mbewu (2020), previously the homeless persons have been mostly men, however currently women, children and the elderly live on the streets. Life on the South African streets is a constant daily challenge for the homeless. With no food, clothing, and reliable accommodation, those who permanently live on the streets live from hand to mouth (Tenai & Mbewu, 2020). In addition, securing employment is difficult for the homeless individuals, and they end up making a living from odd jobs, begging, and sometimes even resorting to crime.

Violence and crime, either as victims or as perpetrators, is another daily challenge for homeless persons. "It becomes difficult for the homeless to acquire any property because of the context in which they live, which is often characterised by crime and violence" (Thexton 2014:121). The streets are not safe for all ages and genders, and even more so for women. "Drugs are easily accessible for the homeless people. The abuse of drugs becomes both a survival strategy and escapism from the reality of homelessness and the many challenges associated with the phenomenon" (Tembe 2015:39). Makiwane et al. (2010:41) conclude that the most desperate coping mechanisms for survival on the street include robbery and drug trafficking.

Homeless people and their involvement in crime

Homeless people enter an environment that encourages participation in the crime. They find themselves in need of food, money, and shelter (Hagan & McCarthy, 1997) as cited in (Baron,1995). Criminologists recognize that the experience of homelessness can have a powerful impact on individuals and note its potentially strong connection to criminal activities (Baron, 1995). Research on homeless people in Canada suggests that these individuals are heavily at risk of becoming involved in a range of criminal activities (Baron, 1995; Hagan & McCarthy, 1997; Gaetz, 2004). A study conducted by Baron (1995), found that male homeless persons living on the street in Edmonton committed almost 1,700 offenses each on average in a year. The types of offenses committed by homeless people vary. For example, a study by (Baron, 1995) found that 20 percent of the total number of offenses committed by homeless persons were property related crimes. He further argued that homeless people who engage in property crimes do so for utilitarian purposes.

A study by O'Grady Gaetz and Buccieri (2011) found that 19 percent of the homeless youth they interviewed in Toronto had stolen something from a person, 22 percent had stolen food, and 20 percent had stolen clothes or shoes. Generally, homeless people resort to theft for survival or to help cope with being on the street (O'Grady et al., 2011; Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002; Baron, 1995). Research shows that homeless persons use the money gained by theft to buy food or clothes, secure shelter, or to purchase drugs and alcohol (Baron, 1995). Homelessness also provides opportunities for crime. As in some cases, homeless people have no relationships to maintain with family, friends or society, they have little to lose when committing a crime. Homeless people who lack shelter are often forced to spend a significant amount of time in public locations i.e In Durban, you find a lot of homeless people at the Workshop, scouting for potential victims. Baron and Hartnagel (1997) alluded that the public lifestyle brings individuals into contact with tempting property and human targets for victimization.

Life in the street also provides an environment where crime can be learned (McCarthy, 1996; Hagan & McCarthy, 1997). "On the street, youth encounter other young people involved in criminal activities. These other offenders are criminal models for those new to the streets and provide training and encouragement for criminal activities" (Baron,1995). These peers can facilitate criminal activities that require accomplices and can offer approval for their friends' criminal behaviour (Baron,1995). Further, homelessness exposes youth to an alternative culture that values many forms of offending, including property offending, drug dealing, and violence (Baron, 2009a; Baron & Hartnagel, 1997). Research by (Baron,2006; 2008; 2009a) reveals that both having values that support criminal behaviour and having criminally involved peers lead to criminal activity on the street.

Substance Abuse as a Contributory Factor for Crime Proliferation

According to Welte, Barnes, Hoffmaan, Wiezorek and Zhang (2005) as cited in (White, 2016) one of the most reliable findings in criminology is the strong relationship between

substance abuse and criminal offending. The nature of the correlation between substance abuse and crime is complex, it differs depending on the type of crime and type of substance use as well as individual, situational and cultural factors (White, 2016; Gorman, 2000).

The relationship between drugs and crime is complicated and one question is whether drug use does lead people into criminal activity and whether those who use substance abuse are already predisposed to such activity (Clement, 2005). Many illegal substance abusers commit no other kinds of crime and many persons who commit crimes never abuse substances (Chandler, Fletcher & Volkow, 2009). However, at the most intense levels of drug abuse, substance abuse alcoholism and drug defence, there are essentially three types of crime-related substance abuse, the first of which includes use-related crime: these crimes result from individuals who ingest substances, second is the economic-related crime: these include individuals who commit a crime to fund their addictions and the third type is a system-related crime: these result from the structure of the drug system (Jordan & Fedhealth, 2013). According to (IDOC, 2009), a majority of individuals who both drink and smoke do not engage in serious crime, however, higher rates of substance addiction exist among individuals on probation, parole or imprisoned than among the general population. Crime and substance abuse both indicate an individual with lower self-control, those willing to give a try substance abuse are more impulsive and indeed turn to street crime because of addiction. Substance abuse does not create a criminal offender; however, it may strengthen such movements (Da Rocha, 2004).

Few factors make the relationship between substance abuse and crime difficult to gauge. Valdez, Kaplan, and Curtis (2007) found that poverty mediates the relationship between substance abuse and violent crime among male arrestees. The scientific literature points out that substance abuse has multiplying effects on crime. A simple, clear and perfect example is the association between crime and the availability of malt liquors, consistently city by city where it has been tracked, areas in which there has been a great availability of malt liquors have a higher percentage of all crimes in particular alcohol-related violence (Momula, 1999). According to Hewitt (1994), crimes of the homeless are also more visible because of their limited access to private places and may more easily attract police attention. Eberle, Kraus, Serge and Hulchanski (2001) highlighted that some studies suggest that homeless persons may occasionally commit minor crimes to obtain shelter or temporary asylum, especially during the winter months as a method to escape the cold.

The strong association between illegal substance abuse and criminal behaviour tends to show that substance abuse is a number one factor that may explain why some people commit criminal acts. For example, the majority of people who have developed an addiction to expensive substances such as heroin and cannot afford their habit will commit crimes to buy drugs (Logan, 2001). However, they do not represent even most illegal substance abusers, especially in the case of marijuana users, in other words, illegal substance abuse does not necessarily lead to an increase in crime rate even among people who are regular users and have developed an addiction (Logan, 2001). The researcher shows that a number

of social, psychological and cultural factors can be used to identify people who are at risk of becoming substance abusers and criminals. Factors that may explain both substance abuse and criminal activities include poverty, homelessness, lack of social values, personality disorders, association with substance abusers and losing contact with socialization (Logan, 2001). According to Hwang (2000), a large number of homeless people are addicted to alcohol and illicit substances. Furthermore, in an Ottawa study of homelessness, 29% of participants self-reported abusing alcohol, and 40% reported abusing illegal drugs (Aubry, 2008).

Substance abuse was found to be associated with violent crimes such as murder, rape, assault, spousal abuse, and child abuse (Parry, 2001). In about half of all homicides and assaults, the offender, the victim or both parties were reported to have been drinking and smoking. Substance abuse is also a major in violence between people who know each other (Prochaska, Das & Young-Wolff, 2017). Around two-thirds of victims attached a current or a former spouse, and others reported the involvement of alcohol, compared to only thirty-one per cent of stranger-related violence victims (Rehm, 2004). According to White (1990), sixty per cent of people arrested tested positive for illegal substance abuse and a study in 2004 found that around one-third of state prisoners and one-fourth of federal prisoners admitted to committing crimes while under the influence of illegal substance abuse.

Substance abuse is an enormous social problem in South Africa, and worldwide, and it is increasing every day. Research revealed many reasons for drugs use in South Africa, these reasons include unemployment, mental health issues, work stress, financial pressure, homelessness, and relationship problems (NDMP, 2006). These factors can make the person at risk value substance abuse as a coping mechanism. There are also other factors involved, such as peer pressure, particularly when substance use is a norm (<https://www.netcare.co.za/News-Hub/Articles/understanding-substance-abuse-and-addiction>, 2018).

Within the South African context in the poorest neighbourhood and among homeless people, crimes are committed to finance substance abuse while in neighbourhoods affected by the presence of street gangs, people tend to take drugs to increase their confidence and shed their inhibitions (Khulisa, 2013). The degree of addiction also influences crime, the probability of an offence being committed has been observed to be greater where addiction is intense, with the probability minimized when dependence is less (Insulza, 2013). Continuation use tends to reduce impulse control and induce overstated defensive behaviours. Moreover, high substance abuse consumption appears to provoke individuals, resulting in aggressive and violent behaviour (Insulza, 2013).

Theoretical Framework

The lifestyle theory of crime is based on Bandura's (1986) social cognitive model, Sykes and Matza's (1957) neutralization techniques, and Yochelson and Samenow's (1976) work on the criminal personality.

Hindelang, Gottfredson and Garofalo (1987) laid the groundwork for a hypothesis relating lifestyle and its antecedent's victimization (they define lifestyle as "regular daily activities, both activities (job, school, maintaining house, etc.) and leisure activity emphasis added). This description includes almost identical labels to Cohen and Felson's (1979) regular activity approach, as well as a clear relationship between these two victimization models. Both formulations stress the significance of conduct in forecasting the danger of victimization (Maxfield, 1987).

Individuals may be victimized as a result of their lifestyle, which may expose them to situations where victimization may be more likely (Wilcox, 2010). This may include their length of time in public spaces (particularly at night), isolation from support networks, or heightened exposure to potential offenders. Vagrants' lives are based outside with many slumming the streets if unable to afford informal shelter. As a result, they are at most vulnerable receiving end of crime due to the environment on the streets.

Lee and Schreck (2009) hypothesized that homeless individuals' vulnerability to victimization is increased by their lifestyle, which is often a result of desperate choices. They may engage in activities born out of a need to survive such as panhandling, sleeping outside, prostitution, food scavenging, drug and alcohol distribution and use, which may in turn contribute to the likelihood of their victimization.

Aim

To understand experiences of crime and violence amongst the group of homeless people in Durban City Centre

Methodology

The study aims at analyzing the experiences of crime among homeless people in the Central city of Durban. The study adopted a qualitative research approach to collect, interpret and/ or analyze data. The qualitative research approach entails understanding individuals' subjective meanings of their social worlds. The approach was viewed appropriately because it enabled the researcher to obtain detailed experiences of the study participants. Semi-structured interviews were conducted consisting of 15 participants. Participation was voluntary and included homeless individuals that leave their homes to settle in the central city of Durban. The type of research design utilized by the study is the Phenomenological research design, which was used with the aid of describing the meaning that experiences hold for each subject.

Selection of Participants

Purposive sampling technique was used to recruit participants. A sample from the Durban central city under Umthombo shelter an NPO that assists and keeps homeless individuals

was selected by the researcher. A total of 15 participants were selected, and one-on-one interviews were conducted with open-ended questions. This was to maintain confidentiality and allowed for an in-depth discussion on the subject matter. Participants in this study included the youth between the ages of 18 years and above, the homeless adults, regardless of gender or race and strictly around the Durban Central City, ward 26. The interviews were audio-recorded by the researcher and with the permission of the participants. The interviews took approximately 60 minutes per individual. Thematic content analysis was applied to analyze data.

Result and Discussion

This section of the study is focused on the analysis, interpretation and presentation of the raw data that were collected from the study location using a qualitative methodological approach that employed in-depth, semi-structured interviews as the research instruments. Names used are not real names of the participants but pseudonyms.

Experiences of the Homeless People about Abuse and Victimization

Following the responses from the participants about the victimization that might have occurred during their historical background, majority of participants revealed that they were experiencing abuse before moving to the inner city of Durban. Seven participants showed that they had been abused in many senses of living involving emotional, physical, and psychological. The study also revealed that some of the participants were abused by their stepmother in the absence of the biological mother.

Evidence in support of this assertion is given in the statement below.

“I do have experiences, when my mother was abused then I got abused emotionally as my mother was always victimized by my father”

“I was abused physically most of the time, emotionally and I ended up having a problem mentally, but I got well”

“Home duties were too much compared to other kids in the yard, I couldn’t even do my homework”

Taking a critical look at the above expression, this kind of behaviour and treatment is common especially in rural areas. The strain theory is obvious in this situation since the loss of the mother, and the child was abused by the stepmother; of which the child has nowhere else to go to avoid this kind of behaviour. Some of the people who end up homeless due to drugs are those from the disciplined townships such as the coloured South Africans, who come from Collita and the Indians who come from Phoenix. These people claimed that they were never abused at homes before, but they were said to use substances more often. A coloured South African guy from Estcourt offered this statement in support of this argument.

“My family hated me I couldn’t stay there”

..... “Right after my parents died my aunt beat and insulted me always”

The study shows that Black people, Coloured and Indians are all victims of homelessness as declared by some of the participants interviewed during the course of the research. The study also reflects that victimization, substance abuse and crime occur across all races

Homeless People and Involvement in Crime

Indeed, there are people who do commit crime especially those who are homeless. When majority of people were interviewed, they denied that they steal from anyone around. Although other people did confess that they do have a background of stealing. They put various reasons as to why they steal and those who say they do not steal have their reasons as to why they do not steal. Zamo had this to say

“I once stole”

“Few times I was involved in theft, but I was never arrested”

Findings also make it clear that it is not every homeless person that steals while some of them they need clothes, food and money since they left home because of their depressive situations.

“I don’t steal, it’s a stereotype that all homeless people steal”

Interviews with a young boy from the township revealed that he was never arrested before. This serves as an alert that not every young male black person from the township is capable of being involved in crime. It is reflected that it is not all the people from the street that are criminals as what brought them there on the street it is different, and their ideas and thoughts are not the same. According to the findings of this study, all the Indians that were interviewed said they had never stolen, and they were never involved in any crime situations around the city centre. Furthermore, the reflection from the study is that all races and genders out there in the community of homelessness are capable of stealing and getting involved in all forms of crime. Interviews with Zamo, Cebo and others offered the following responses:

“I never stole anything from anyone, the moment I realized I moved to find the assistance from the shelter for food since at home I was never comfortable”

“Yes I stole something before especially when I couldn’t get anyways of making money”

“I never stole I was nearly tempted but I reflected back the cousin of mine who is still in prison”

The Consequences of Crime among the Homeless People

Strain theory unfolds that the structures that are within the society can pressurize the individuals to participate in ill behaviours. According to the participants, majority of

the homeless people are against the use of substances. This means they are no longer themselves but being controlled by the substances and addiction whenever they are involved in crimes.

A-22-year-old black male Mthobisi validated what was said by the black female respondent that substances are not bringing anything good to people in the society. Therefore, this means the way both genders observe the outcome of substances abuse is common since no one has ever concluded that drug is beneficial to both male and female individuals. Empirical evidence in support of this statement is stated as follows:

“They are results in terms of physical structure, mental structure but if you use them you Don’t see that”

“Temporarily I forget about my problems because it erases stress, but if there are no substances you get sick”

“Nothing is good about drugs”

Through the course of interviews with the participants, it was discovered that people who use substances have a belief that it adjusts the numb feelings of the stressed person. The below was an explanation of a young black male who grew up at uMlazi.

“It takes you to your own world in a good way, but I had to realize there is nothing good about them at the end they are bad”

If the society is putting pressure on the individual who is also a victim from home, death through strain may set in. However, from the standpoint of strain theory, the individual fails to maintain the expectations of the society and feels unaccepted. Therefore, they would look for the things that are possible to suppress the strain even though it is not possible by engaging in substances abuse alone. At some point, the substance abuse functions differently on different people; though its aim is to serve one purpose at the end. Other people who use substances have a belief that these substances make them active and awake; and at the same time, they know the outcomes of abusing these substances. An interview with a coloured male Kade unfolds the following statement:

“As said smoking would make me think and be active since I grew up smoking, but it is dangerous as everybody knows”

“At some point you run out of cash and its addictive you end up not feeling well at some point and you can decide to commit suicide”

Kade also highlighted that he grew up smoking before he went to the street. This means that he was not thought to abuse substances on the street. Following the conceptual argument of the strain theory, it was the behaviour from home that thought people how to smoke and drink. In fact, it is a norm for them to engage in the use of substances. Interviews with participants highlighted the situation whereby one can end up committing suicide because of these substances. If people are addicted to substances and cannot afford

the cost of buying them on daily basis due to financial constraints, they can end up killing themselves because their body system cannot operate without using substances. The finding also revealed that the users sometimes fall sick in the absence of substances.

One of the major consequences of using substances is health hazard. It was established during the course of the interviews that substance abuse is dangerous to human health. The study revealed that substance abuse affects people across genders and ages. It was highlighted in the literature review that mentally people get affected because of substance abuse; and even physically, an individual can be drained because of this abuse and end up in an extreme illness, loss of weight and finally, death.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study reveals that homeless people's experience of violence, varies from being involved in crime themselves in order to survive, to being victims of crime and witnesses of crime and violence on the street. This include being abused from home before they came to live on the street, which affected them emotionally, physically as well as psychologically.

One of the main factors that push crime to a rise among homeless people is that they are financially broken. The people from the street do not have a stable income and they end up stealing for making a life. Addiction is another factor that relates to crime. Since they are unemployed and they are willing to nurse the addiction, they need to be financially stable. If all does not happen, they have an alternative of stealing and robbery to get the money to buy the substances they use. Other people do not start abusing drugs on the street, but they have learnt this from their respective homes. Since there is no proper income at various homes, people decide to join the gang that deals in substances as an alternative means of generating money.

This study recommends that the best intervention that could be done by organizations or institutions in charge of the homeless communities includes that, the government should establish the relationship between the Department of Social Development and the Non-Governmental Organisations so that they can be more efficient to oversee the over congested communities of the homeless people. Some of the homeless people know exactly that the correct action is to consult the Home Shelters and go back home through social workers' platforms. This would assist them from being the victims of the police officers in town and avoid running whenever they see them.

Whenever the individual is facing stress at home, thinking that it would lead them to the street they should first consult the local structures of the government and ask for assistance because the street survival has no progress at all in terms of fixing life that was damaged before. Also, the better way is not to run away from the challenges, rather face them with the ultimate desire to resolve them and avoid living a life of stress on the street. Furthermore, punishing the homeless people is another way to minimize crimes among this category of people in society.

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