

Adequate & Affordable Housing for All

Research, Policy, Practice

Centre for Urban and Community Studies, University of Toronto
455 Spadina Avenue, Suite 400, Toronto, Ontario M5S 2G8 Canada**Attitudes to and Interventions in Homelessness:
Insights from an International Study****Graham Tipple and Suzanne Speak**

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Abstract

Public and popular attitudes towards homeless people are important in shaping the way interventions are framed. In general, people and authorities hold quite negative attitudes towards homeless people emphasising their inadequacy and failure, and showing little regard for the many differences within the population who may be regarded as homeless. In this negative and generalized context, interventions to support homeless people or reduce homelessness are limited and are often negative or unhelpful. They are frequently developed without a full understanding of the needs of homeless people or the personal, social or cultural context within which homelessness is experienced. Thus, they tend to be less effective than they might be within a more positive attitudinal context. In this paper, we draw on evidence from nine rapidly urbanizing countries to review attitudes towards homeless people demonstrated through language and images. We highlight current attitudes to, and interventions in, homelessness in developing countries and raise questions about the way in which governments and NGOs support homeless people or deal with what is perceived to be the problem of homelessness. We make some broad and general suggestions to underpin the development of interventions to support homeless people or reduce homelessness.

Keywords: homelessness, housing policy, developing countries

Introduction

“Language used to describe homeless people in the literature is broadly construed. It includes media images, sound bites and defamatory rhetoric, as well as policies and programmes that convey mainstream society’s message of power, influence and authority. The messages that raise a number of dilemmas can become tools of manipulation. Homeless individuals may be silenced by such power relationships, control mechanisms and by messages contained in popular media”. (Daly, 1996: 6)

The negative and exclusionary language used to describe and discuss homeless people helps to construct homeless people as 'other' and institutionalise their stigmatisation keeping them dissociated and disconnected from society. Homeless people can be confined to the periphery of public consciousness because the public perception of them is that they violate social norms and offend public sensibilities (Daly, 1996). In turn, this reduces the extent to which homeless people are included in mainstream policy or special solutions are found for their needs.

This negative labelling of homeless people has caused concern in some countries. For example, in the 1980s in Finland, homelessness had become so closely associated with a growing alcohol problem that there was an active movement to "delabel" the homeless in order to distance them from this negative stereotyping. The result is a coded language in which the homeless are referred to as those having "certain individual needs and inclinations" (Glasser, 1994: 29)

The justification given for the negative perceptions of homeless people fall into four categories.

Competitiveness: economic and business interests with homeless people on the streets outside their premises adopt unsympathetic language and attitudes towards them as they are seen to reduce competitiveness with businesses not so affected (Daly, 1996).

Worth or desert: governments and their agencies tend to use language indicative of worthiness for help, or whether they are deserving or undeserving of whatever assistance may be possible. There is an attempt to ration help in a pseudo-logical way by labelling some potential clients as less deserving of help and, therefore, rightly excluded (Neale, 1997).

Appearance: the image of homeless people as scruffy, unkempt, dirty and repulsive is used to justify street-clearing operations and improvements in a city's image. It is wholly negative and unsympathetic.

Pity, charity and compassion: religious and philanthropic institutions adopt more sympathetic and positive language in their acceptance and inclusion of homeless people. Nevertheless, these can undermine the potential of many homeless people, labelling them as victims, helpless and in need of charity.

These perceptions are self-reinforcing and serve to keep homeless people excluded, making legitimisation, through being housed and employed, more difficult even where both housing and jobs are relatively plentiful. Ill-informed perceptions of homelessness and homeless people guide and form interventions to address homelessness which, most often, serve to reinforce the negative perceptions and stereotypes.

Here we present some of the perceptions, language and imagery used to describe homelessness in developing countries and counter this with what we have discovered about the true characteristics of homeless people. Following this we discuss how these perceptions condition responses to homelessness. We begin with a brief discussion of our DFID-sponsored study.¹

¹ 'Homelessness in Developing Countries' was a UK Department for International Development (DFID) supported project. DFID supports policies, programmes and projects to promote international

About the study

The study was undertaken in nine countries², selected because they present a range of housing and homelessness situation, degrees of poverty, different cultural experiences and understanding of housing and homelessness and a range of institutional situations and welfare regimes. In addition, for logistical purposes, they are all countries in which we have good connections and could employ country based-researchers with whose work we are familiar. Finally, they were all countries in which DFID has research interests.

In each country a researcher was commissioned to undertake the study according to a detailed specification. The specification detailed several main areas of investigation³. The work included conducting a local literature review, trawling secondary sources for statistical data and undertaking interviews with homeless people and representatives of government and non-government organisations. Specific case studies of 'typical' homeless households were sought through interview and oral testimony. The researchers were also asked to identify, through interviews and media reviews, common perceptions of homeless people and language and terminology used in relation to homelessness. It is this latter part of the work which underpins this paper.

The availability of data varied very widely between countries. There are a number of reasons for this. First, the number of interviews with homeless people each researcher conducted depended on the specific situation in that country. For example, the researcher in Zimbabwe experienced considerable difficulties and danger in interviewing homeless farm workers who had fled their homes when President Mugabe's 'War Veterans' reclaimed white owned farmsteads. Second, availability of data is likely to be influenced by the 'service statistics paradox', in that those countries with a willingness to acknowledge homelessness, and to establish services for homeless people, are more likely to be able to locate and count them and, thus, will have more accurate (and higher) figures (FEANTSA, 1999). Third, many countries do not have accepted definitions of homelessness. This is, in part, because of the politically sensitive nature of homelessness. Where housing is seen as a basic right of citizenship, to acknowledge homelessness is to acknowledge a failure of the government to support citizens or that the social system is failing (Jacobs et al., 1999). The lack of 'official' definition was complicated further by cultural differences in relation to homelessness {Tipple, forthcoming 2004 #434}. For example, the languages used in the study areas in Ghana do not even have a word for homelessness, as 'home', in its broadest sense, tends to be related to family and kinship. Therefore, only those people without any family anywhere, however, remote could be homeless.

development. DFID provided funds for the study but the views and opinions expressed in this paper are those of the authors' alone.

² Peru, Ghana, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Egypt, India, Bangladesh, Indonesia and China.

³ The main areas of investigation were: housing theory; current housing supply characteristics; current definitions of homelessness; what the median household would regard as unacceptable shelter; appropriateness of western typologies; numbers of people involved in types of homelessness; systemic causes of homelessness, isolation or exclusion of homeless people; characteristics of homeless people; street children, typologies of street children; causes of street child phenomena; conditions of living; responses to homelessness; actors and agents. Within each of these sub sections were explored in detail.

Language as labelling

A range of negative and judgemental language and images are used to portray homeless people around the world. Sometimes they are light hearted or jocular, such as the terms *Mukomana* (*musikana*) *wekuseri* meaning boy or girl from the back, used in South Africa, to describe adult lodgers who live in back-yard shacks.⁴ More often there is a broad range of terminology which labels homeless people as personally inadequate, belonging to an underclass. For example, in the Indonesian language the term '*tunawisma*', derived from old-Javanese, literally means 'no (*tuna*) house (*wisma*)'. The Suharto New Order government during its three decades of rule often used such euphemisms. Yayasan Humana (www.s-s-net.com/humana/Hirarki.html) believes that the word '*tuna*' was adopted 'specifically for the purposes of evaluating the under-classes by means of what they lack.' Thus, unemployed people are called *tunakarya* ('no work'), blind persons are called *tunanetra* ('no eyes') and sex-workers are called *tunasusila* ('no morals').

In Bangladesh we also found labels which emphasise what the homeless person lacks and linking the lack of shelter to destitution. One term used in Bangladesh is *sharbohara*. Broadly meaning 'utter destitute' it come from *sharbo* meaning 'all' and *hara* meaning 'the state of not having'. Thus the inference is that a homeless person has nothing – which, as we will show, is not necessarily the case. This labelling is particularly pertinent to Bengali society, where individual or group identities, based around home and family reputation, are hugely important in locating a person within a social hierarchy. Thus a woman is the wife or a boy the son of a certain 'home'.

Sometimes, terms used are serious and derogatory labels, which serve to condition and reinforce the public perception of homeless people as drunks, mentally ill, unemployed, thieves and beggars. In China, for example, the term '*Jiaohuazi*', meaning beggar, is often used to refer to homeless people.

Perceptions of homeless people differ according to the type of homelessness. For example, people made homeless by disasters are thought of as 'unfortunate' but those considered destitute are thought to be a "burden on society" (Aashray Adhikar Abhiyan, 2001) and are often harassed and abused. Abusive behaviour is provoked by

"the fear of criminality – particularly of theft and of the consequences of addiction. It involves views on 'idleness' and lack of work, the stigmatisation of occupations as physically dirty, anti-social and illegal (drug [dealing]); and notions of ugliness and of destitution as a challenge to modernity" (Harriss-White, 2002: 12).

Here we reflect on some of the more common examples we found in our study and compare the image they portray with the contradictory characteristics of homeless people our study highlighted.

⁴ These are free-standing ranges of rooms built in the plots of formal dwellings to provide rental accommodation or just extra space for large households. They may be rudimentary assemblies of recycled materials or masonry constructions. Households occupying them usually share services with the main dwelling.

The 'villain'

The perception of homeless people as criminals is common throughout the world. In Peru, street children are referred to as 'Piranitas' – little piranhas, inferring that they are dangerous. A similar child in Bangladesh, is referred to as a thief, illegitimate, or son of a beggar. However, while children do commit petty crimes out of need to feed themselves, the degree to which they are incarcerated exaggerates the seriousness of their alleged offences (El Baz, 1996; Bartlett et al., 1999)

Nevertheless, despite the conditions of Article 40 of the UNCRC, which affords children the same legal protection as adults (with the addition of protection from capital punishment and life imprisonment), there are, no doubt, hundreds of thousands of children incarcerated around the world. Many are held without legal representation or trial and sometimes in the most desperate of conditions. Accounts of torture and murder are commonplace (Bibars, 1998)

In some countries homeless people do not need actively to commit crimes in order to be 'criminals', as states construct various laws, such as the Bombay Prevention of Begging Act (1959) in India, which make vagrancy or begging illegal. Thus, simply being on the streets is cause for arrest. In a statement concerning *Olga Tellis v. Bombay Municipal Corporation* (1985), regarding the eviction of pavement dwellers in Mumbai, the Indian Supreme Court said,

“The boys beg. Men folk without occupation, snatch chains with the connivance of the defenders of law and order, when caught, if at all, they say: who doesn't commit crime in this city?” (Bannerjee Das, 2002: 69)

Our study highlights that homeless people are more likely to be victims than perpetrators of crime. In almost all countries, our researchers report that it is uncommon for adult street homeless people to commit crimes, especially violent crimes.

Street homeless people are, however, the victims of theft and abuse, both verbal and physical. Many struggle to keep their few belongings or meagre earnings safe. In both India and Bangladesh this was perceived to be a major problem. Assault and sexual abuse is common against women, young boys and girls. Moreover, it is frequently perpetrated by police or other authoritarian figures such as security guards.

The 'Beggar'

One of the most common public perceptions of homeless people is that they are all beggars. The Joint Commissioner of Police (Traffic) in New Delhi has been quoted as saying, “the city is plagued by the presence of beggars” (Hindustan Times, 2002).

However, in a study in Calcutta, it was found that only 7.7% of homeless people are involved in begging or marginal work such as rag picking (Jagannathan and Halder, 1988). The majority of homeless people in India are casual labourers who often travel long distances across the city every day to reach work, although in Delhi, only 44% of homeless people manage to find work daily (PUCL, 2000).

Similarly in Ghana, whilst popular imagery and perception again portrays homeless people as beggars, our study found only around 3.3% actually engage in begging. The vast majority of homeless people undertake some form of work to earn their livelihoods. About 53% of the males are head porters and 35% polish shoes for a

living. Around 83% of the females are engaged in head portage while 6.7% sell oranges and sachet water.

The 'mentally ill'

In some countries, the common perception of people on the streets is of their being mentally ill or personally defective. For example, in Peru, those who live on the streets, in parks or in abandoned buildings, are officially referred to as "mentally ill people on the streets".

In Ghana, homelessness, as defined by charitable institutions and non-governmental organisations, refers to beggars, and destitute and mentally ill people who are not under the care of relatives or the extended family and do not have a home. An official at Oxfam's office in Tamale, interviewed for this study, described homeless people in Ghana as '*the mentally ill people whose movement cannot be easily controlled*'.

Clearly, mental illness is a contributory factor in some people's homelessness. Conversely, homelessness is a contributory factor in some people's mental illness. However, what we see here is a perception that homeless people, especially street homeless people are likely to be mentally ill. Our study found no evidence to uphold this view and, clearly, the vast majority of even the most destitute of street dwellers must be emotionally robust in order to construct the complex strategies by which they survive.

The 'Immoral'

The negative labelling found in the Indonesian 'tuna' terms, especially '*tunasusila*' used for 'women having no morals' is repeated in Bangladesh, where a young homeless divorcee or widowed mother is publicly called a whore, especially if she is homeless, regardless of her sexual activity.

Despite a raft of international legislation meant to protect the rights of women to inherit land and property, homeless women in developing countries are frequently so because of abandonment or widowhood. Domestic violence, a strong factor in homelessness amongst women in the West, is also a major cause of homelessness for women in developing countries. In some parts of Latin America, for example, family violence is very pervasive.

There is an arguably stronger international acceptance of the rights of the child to a safe home, through legal instruments such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989. Nevertheless, entrenched cultural attitudes to widows mean that they and their children are often turned out of their homes. The stigma of perceived immorality then attaches to the children. Discussing the plight of homeless women and children in Durban, Gray and Bernstien, (1994) note that children left with relatives are less stigmatised while their mother is away than when she briefly returns to the village to check on them.

The stigma of immorality leads many homeless families to split up. In the strongly Islamic moral culture of Bangladesh, for example, it is uncommon to find women or girl children living on the streets. When a family becomes homeless, the women will most often be sent to live with relatives whilst the man sleeps rough on the streets. This produces a self-fulfilling prophecy, in which any women or girls who are living on

the streets are perceived not to care, or be cared about, and are abused, even being raped.

The 'Transient'

In the past, homeless people were often only manifest in the transient individuals seeking work in new places. In South Africa, the use of labels like 'malunda' originated in that past time. One ex-homeless man interviewed there recounted:

"...In the olden days people used to tie their stuff on a stick and put it around their shoulders and they look like a bull hump and they trek from Eastern Cape to Johannesburg. Because they sleep in different places, they used to call them 'Umanlunda', or 'Malunda'..."

This reference to homeless people as on the move, with no real location, is common in all countries. For example, a term often used in Indonesia to describe homelessness (though not in official documents) is '*gelandangan*', meaning 'tramp', is derived from '*gelandang*' meaning to wander. In China, housing reforms introduced in 1988 to change housing from a form of welfare to a commodity, coupled with relaxation of the control over movement between cities, has led to greater choice for Chinese people but also to a growing number of homeless people (Chang, 1996). This group of homeless people is known as '*Mangliu*', which means the 'blindly floating population' (Ye, 1992). Another term, '*Liulanghan*', meaning 'people who are floating or vagrant' is also used to describe homeless people. These terms reinforce the perception of homeless people as being alone and without permanence. In reality, these people are relatively stable, living in '*chengzhongcun*'; villages which have been subsumed into the expanding cities, often as tenants in housing developed by local villagers on their communally-owned land {Zhang, 2003 #444}. Certainly, strict policing of Chinese cities means that transient, itinerant street sleepers or informal squatters would not be tolerated.

However, whilst homeless people do suffer extreme insecurity of place and are frequently moved on, the perception that they are all transient, constantly wandering, with their few possessions on their backs, is generally misleading. Even if we only consider pavement dwellers, we can see that they often live together in stable clusters, in some cases for a considerable time. Pavement dwellers in India, and others who squat in small numbers, often collect in small groups and form semi-permanent settlements on the edge of the road or on vacant land plots. Although their dwellings are poor and they do not have access to services, they build social networks and may become an accepted part of the local community, often employed or self employed, performing valuable tasks, such as garbage collection and recycling. Figure 2 shows one group of several households, which has settled in a vacant plot at the side of a road in Bangalore. They work as roofing contractors to the booming development industry in the city. Although their living conditions are poor (having no roofs themselves), they have been in the same small and mutually supportive community for several years.

Figure 1 Community of roof construction workers in Bangalore, India



The 'non-citizen'

Homeless people and squatters in many developing countries are perceived as 'non-citizens' and have no civic rights and generally no vote. The residents of *permukiman liar* (squatter settlements), in Indonesia, are not registered as citizens of the city (which must be verified with the possession of an identity card or *kartu tanda penduduk* (KTP) issued by the respective local authority). The KTP is the sole defining element for both inclusion and identity. Not having a KTP is a serious offence for which a person can go to prison and be expelled from the city. At a more personal level, even to obtain a marriage certificate one needs to have a KTP. Therefore, in *permukiman liars* it is commonplace to find couples who have been living together for many years who are not recognised as married couples and are not given the rights extended to married couples by the authorities. Consequently, their children are not issued birth certificates, which will be a problem when they are to enter school. Likewise in India, street homeless people do not have ration cards allowing them access to important nutritional supplements, the right to vote and access a range of services. A similar situation also exists in China where *mangliu* are virtually invisible to the authorities.

In some instances, people at the upper end of the homelessness continuum, squatters, may have some rights. Moreover, they may be perceived as a political opportunity. For example, in India, local campaigns often focus on promises of settlement formalising and/or slum upgrading in order to secure the votes of the occupants. When an informal squatter settlement is given formal status as a slum, indicating it will be programmed for upgrading, the residents may receive voting rights. A strategic game is played, in which local leaders secure votes in forthcoming elections by placing slums on upgrading programmes. Nevertheless, the vast majority of homeless people can exert no pressure on politicians to improve their situation or to highlight their true characteristics. They are certainly not perceived as equal citizens.

The 'Loner'

Perhaps one of the most common stereotypes, perpetuated particularly by cartoons, is that of a homeless person being alone, indeed, generally a lone male. The Spanish term used to refer to homeless people is *desamparado* (without protection or comfort from other people), which implies loss of family (Juliá and Hartnett, 1999).

Glasser (1994) quotes a definition of homelessness as suggested by Caplow et al. (1968: 494):

“Homelessness is a condition of detachment from society characterised by the absence or attenuation of the affiliative bonds that link settled persons to a network of interconnected social structures”.

The nature and causes of homelessness in developing countries mean that this may not be the case for the majority of homeless people. Dupont (1998) noted, for example, that many of the handcart pullers in the Khari Baoli wholesale market, in Delhi Old City, group together at night, cook food collectively and sleep on their handcarts in the security of a group. Migrants from the same village, who follow brothers, cousins and friends on a well-travelled migration route to the city, also tend to stay in a group on the pavement.

Moreover, in many countries, (in our study India, Indonesia and China in particular), there has been a rapid increase in the number of households with children, living on the street. In India, whilst the majority of homeless people are lone men, either unmarried, or married with families residing in their villages, households also exist amongst the homeless population. However, they are more likely to be found in Calcutta, Mumbai and Chennai than in Delhi, where it is unusual for family units to reside on the pavements (Dupont, 1998; Singh and de Souza, 1980). In Calcutta, 37% of homeless people were found to be living with their families (Jagannathan and Halder, 1990). Moreover, in the 1980s, the percentage of homeless families increased (from 39.35 in 1976 to 74.4% in 1987). This increase in homeless families is considered a good indication of their social stability.

In Peru, homelessness, in the form of squatting on poor desert land under makeshift shelters of straw mats and without any form of services, is commonplace, even for parents with children. In terms of their dwellings, access to services and insecurity, many of these people can be considered as being homeless and likely to remain so for many years. However, like others in comparable circumstances in many countries, they often form tight and supportive social networks as they band together to gain secure title. In some cases, they form community groups to campaign and to improve their environment. If even a small percentage of the millions of squatters around the world in these circumstances are to be included in a definition of homelessness, the reference to a ‘lack of affiliative bonds’ presented by Caplow et al (1968) would be inaccurate.



Figure 2 Squatter community groups planting ‘community gardens’ in Villa El Salvadore settlement in Lima, Peru – a clear demonstration of affiliative bonds.

The ‘Helpless’

Some labelling is unhelpful although intended not to be so. Many advocacy or religious organisations portray homeless people as victims, emphasising their helplessness. NGOs, for example, routinely use emotive pictures of homeless people to gain sympathy for their cause. Homeless

people are also given labels such as 'unfortunate shelterless souls' (Birdi, 1995) which help to portray them as helpless or weak.

This is particularly the case for street children, whose visibility on the streets is an emotive issue. However, the act of leaving home and taking up a life on the streets, whilst it exposes the child to all manner of dangers, can also be a mark of control and strength for many children (Beazley, 2003). Indeed, it has been noted that some street children can provide for themselves better than their parents could. We should not confuse vulnerability with helplessness.

The reinforcing role of interventions

Our research confirms the common perception of homeless people as 'others'. The cause of their homelessness is perceived to lie in their personal inadequacies (Neale, 1997). This view is perpetuated in the popular media, in articles and cartoons. When constructed upon these largely false perceptions, interventions to address homelessness, are frequently unhelpful, even victimising and harmful. The perception of homeless people as anti-social and unclean leads to clearance operations in every one of the countries we studied. These operations affect both street homeless people and squatters. They range from the nightly moving on of people sleeping in public and semi-public locations, such as shopping centres and bus stations, to more concentrated and organised evictions or 'cosmetic' clearances before civic events or to improve the value of land and property (Berner, 1997 and 2000). For example, Agbola and Jinadu (1997) discuss the eviction of 300,000 residents of Maroko, Lagos, from land close to a high income area, where residents were concerned about crime and threats to property values.

Homeless people's efforts to maintain standards of health and hygiene can be thwarted by actions such as those in Joubert Park in Johannesburg, South Africa, where taps were sealed to deny homeless people access to water. This is not only demoralising, reducing the people's chance to be clean, but dangerous as access to water for drinking is of major importance to people who have no facilities of their own.

The perception of homeless people as criminals leads to many being arrested and imprisoned, without trial. In most Indian cities, for example, the Bombay Prevention of Begging Act is used to clear the streets of homeless people, regardless of their criminality. Street children are particularly hampered by this perception of criminality, with many thousands of children arrested and imprisoned without trial for crimes they did not commit (El Baz, 1996).

The concept that homeless people do not work not only undermines their vital role in the informal economy but also leads to the development of interventions and initiatives which further hamper their livelihood strategies. For example, night shelters, whilst built in good faith, are generally positioned out of sight and seldom close to the city centre (Vanderschueren, 1998). This overlooks homeless people's need to be close to the city to support opportunistic lifestyles. Moreover, in Delhi, cycle rickshaw drivers and handcart pullers cannot use the Municipal Corporation of Delhi's (MCD) night shelters, as they have no safe parking for their vehicles.

Indeed, there is so little storage at these shelters that they are clearly not intended to serve entrepreneurial homeless people, who may have valuable stock or equipment. Nine of the Delhi shelters have been closed down in the last four years because of under-occupation, while thousands of people still sleep on the streets at night. Further night shelters have also been threatened with closure because the MCD say they are not being "used optimally" (The Times of India, 2001).

The perception of homeless people as dirty and without personal standards conditions the quality of facilities built for them. In both India and South Africa, homeless people prefer not to use night shelters because they were both unsafe and dirty. As one homeless India man points out 'the night shelter are too dirty for humans to live in' (The Pioneer, 2001).

"We prefer sleeping on the pavement. The night shelters are full of bed bugs, the blankets are stinking and, worse, one has to pay for this filthy facility"
(Menon, 2001).

Interventions to address the growing phenomenon of street children tend to respond to them in one of three ways. Some see the children as villains or criminals, from whom society should be protected and use shelter as a mechanism for control (Karabanow and Rains, 1997). In extreme, but not infrequent, cases, many end up in inappropriate institutions such as jail or mental institutions (Bibars, 1998). Despite the assertion of Article 40 of the UNCRC, that imprisonment of children is to be a last resort and for the shortest possible time, street children around the world are frequently arrested for minor misdemeanours. In India, street children are regularly arrested for begging and locked in jail, to be tried later in the beggar's court. In Zimbabwe some street children's centres even collaborate with the police, who use dogs, teargas and truncheons on the children, usually in the dead of night. Arrested children are sent to institution to be 'screened' and 'reformed' (MPSLSW, 1999). Alternatively street children are regarded as naughty runaways, who should be returned to the safety of their families. However, research shows that the majority of street children run away from home because of extreme poverty or abuse. To return them is, in many cases, to condemn them to a worse life than they can construct for themselves on the streets.

Finally, many interventions for street children see them as helpless and in need of safe custody, housing and morally corrective tuition. Yet it is often an overly authoritarian home which has led them to the streets (Lusk, 1992; Korboe, 1996). They tend to be fearful of adults and resentful of authority. In many cases they are resourceful and mutually supportive, able to find relatively secure accommodation for themselves, amongst their own kind, in the city at night. Indeed, it can be argued that the very act of leaving an abusive, neglectful or poor home is an indication of a degree of agency and control over the situation (Beazley, 2003). Interventions which aim to control and contain street children frequently serve to scare them away. Thus, the children do not even benefit from the education or medical care which such interventions provide (Karabanow and Rains, 1997).

The director of one very well resourced residential project for street children in Bangalore, India, which was visited for our study, commented on the difficulty he has in preventing children from running away and returning to the streets.

"It's like a constant war, us against them, just trying to keep them here, they steal from us and run off to the streets, then, when they need more money, they come back, sometimes we have to say 'you can't come back again if you continue like that.'"

Conversely, another project in the same city which can only provide education, health care and food, but leaves children to find their own accommodation at night, cannot handle the number of children who come and, more importantly, remain with the project for many years. The training and development of street-based outreach workers, who work 'with' rather than 'for' street children may be more effective than

housing-focused projects. Indeed, some of the best out-reach workers have been street children themselves in the past (Copping, 1998).

A misunderstanding of cultural values is probably the cause of much wasted money, spent on well-intentioned but unnecessary projects. One project in Bolivia was established to house and feed the migrant workers, and their children, who visit the cities from the rural Andes every year to trade. Its aim was to provide safe daytime accommodation and education for the children, while their parents worked on the streets, and night shelter for them and their parents. Neither children nor parents chose to use the project, which had overlooked the fact that both saw working and playing on the streets of the city as more appropriate education in a society which values a child's ability to earn.



Figure 3. Bolivian boy learning to earn, Cochabamba, Bolivia.

However, there are examples of interventions which work well because they have not only recognised homeless people's needs but also because they are capable of collaboration and organisation. For example, SPARC⁵ formed an alliance with the National Slum Dwellers Federation and Mahila Milan to support 60,000 low-income people in a voluntary move from their settlements beside the railway tracks of Mumbai to make way for improvements to the infrastructure. With the support of these organisations, the people helped to plan their new settlement and moved without forced eviction and without the further impoverishment which usually accompanies such moves (Patel et al., 2002).

Another innovation in Mumbai acknowledges the dignity of street youths in a scheme to provide employment. The police have trained older street children in traffic control over a period of 6 months, given them uniforms and put them to work for the city. The scheme was so successful that it was extended after the first year.

Conclusions

Underpinned by false perceptions and an apparent apathy to the plight of homeless people, many of the interventions to address homelessness in developing countries will fail to help homeless people. As economies and societies around the world are stretched to breaking point, and safety nets such as extended family support or more official Keynesian welfare systems erode, we are all subject to increasing risk of insecurity. In placing homeless people outside society and regarding them as 'others' we are in danger of disenfranchising an ever growing population which we are all, increasingly at risk of joining.

A change in attitudes towards homeless is required. Actions to change attitudes might begin with increasing the understanding of the realities of life on the streets

⁵ Society for the Promotion of Areas Resource Centres.

and in the worst housing in cities. If more is known about the causes of homelessness, the lifestyles of homeless people, and contributions they make towards the economy, there is likely to be a more positive attitude towards them. The activities of NGOs in lobbying to end arrests, imprisonment and abuse of street sleepers by the police, for example, the action taken by Aashray Adhikar Abhiyan or SPARC to improve the situation for street sleepers, are an important baseline for action. The repeal of hostile legislation may be important for improving homeless people's lives and changing attitudes towards them. The Bombay Prevention of Begging Act (1959) is a case in point. Even if legalising street sleeping is too great a leap of acceptance, homeless people should, at the very least, be afforded the rights of other citizens especially in terms of identity cards and all to which their possession entitles the citizen. If homeless people can be released from their exclusionary labels helpful interventions are more likely

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