

## VAGRANT COMMUNITY AND THEIR BASIC NEEDS: A CASE STUDY BASED ON THOTALANGA HOMELESS PEOPLE

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**Abstract:** This study explore a unique side of the homeless people with their requirement of the basic needs and the struggles they face to accomplish their needs. This cross-sectional, observational study was conducted in one of the marginal areas of Colombo – Thotalanga. This is a significant area for such research since many homeless people can be encountered in the area. Two groups were selected for the study – a) 50 people were selected for the questionnaire survey among the public from Thotalanga using purposive sampling method; b) 50 vagrant people were chosen by snowball sampling method for the interview. Overall information was collected from 100 persons. The society’s perspective of homeless community is low and disappointing. Very few people are ready to help the poor with their basic needs. According to the homeless people’s statements, they struggle a lot and neglected by the society often in many ways. As a recommendation from the study, there needs to be more effective coordination of services across ministries and departments by providing housing models, temporary tents, mental health and sanitization facilities support, education and food.

**Keywords:** Basic needs, Homelessness, Perspective, Vagrant community

### Introduction

Homelessness is highlighted as a social problem that exists in many societies and countries around the world (Alowaimer, 2018). People abandoned for various reasons become homeless and are known as vagrants. A program in Canada defines homelessness under four categories - living on the street; staying overnight in a temporary shelter; staying in places not meant for human habitation and moving continuously among temporary housing arrangements provided by strangers, friends or family. Though homelessness is seen as a wide-ranging problem, and every county is facing this issue in different ways. Though there are possibilities to mitigate the issue, it is continuously ignored by the respective authorities as well as the larger population, and therefore has become a more complex social and public health phenomenon than the absence of a place to live (Mabhala. et.al, 2017). Homelessness is a problem in many perspectives: social, economic, cultural, health, and environment.

There are more homeless people in urban areas than in the rural sector (Taylor, 2018). Homelessness tends to be concentrated in urban areas, especially in developed and industrialized cities where social and economic inequalities are high and the safety of socially vulnerable populations are low. Being homeless and helpless impacts the vagrant in several ways – As one example living a life trying to manage different climate settings and social conditions is a heavy burden. Homelessness is not the result of a particular person’s fault. Rather homelessness is created by various factors such

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as; social ignorance, incurable diseases, family ignorance, among other. Homelessness is viewed as either the result of individual choices and/or a poor work ethic, or as a symptom of, or response to more complex social problems (Taylor, 2018).

In Sri Lanka the number of homeless people have risen over time and homelessness has become a central feature of life in the Western province (Rewathy, 2018), and homelessness is more visible to the researchers and policy makers at present.

### ***Problem statement***

High prevalence of homelessness lead to many social, economic, cultural and health problems. These problems effect not only the vagrant, but also the people living in homes. While circumstances that led people to become homeless are numerous, they are also facing many struggles in their day to day life, such as meeting their basic needs, being under the poverty line and, not being able to find job opportunities.

The vagrant community in Thotalanga, who are the focus of this study also have many problems. From another angle, since there are vagrants living on the streets day and night, it has become a hindrance to the aesthetic beauty of the place and heart wrenching to watch. A range of people, from young children to elderly are encountered in on the streets of Thotalanga, many of them begging on the street with children. These people are economically unstable and are unable even to get low waged employment, and thus struggles to fulfill their basic needs. Some people assume that all people have equal opportunities to provide for themselves through hard work and self-determination, and that those who fail to work hard are responsible for not making it in society (Donna et al, 1992). However, every person in a particular society do not get the same opportunities and life is not the same for everyone. It depends on many things, for example, the way people have been raised, their physical ability, family income, race, religion, residential location, education etc. In the traditional anthropological sense it is a culture when it provides human beings with a design for living, with a ready-made set of solutions for human problems, and so serves a significant adaptive function. This is called the “Cultural Poverty” (Lewis, 1966). Poverty and homelessness travel in a parallel manner. People who are impoverished, are frequently unable to afford proper housing, healthy food, sanitation facilities, education and, mental health care.

### ***Significance and the objectives of the study***

In this highly susceptible vagrant population, communicable diseases spread easily, violence and abuses grow unconditionally, and unhealthy social behaviors develop. Those phenomenon lead to social problems which become serious public issues. Due to the lack of proper basic sanitation needs, these homeless communities face health, economic and, social problems.

Many studies have been conducted to identify the health issues, economic burden, social issues as well as compare the status of urban and rural homeless people. Despite the identification of the impacts and social, health related issues of the homeless people, there is limited research that examines the basic needs and requirements of the homeless community. Further, though research has been conducted on different aspects of homelessness in multiple contexts, there are only a few studies on vagrant

communities carried out in Sri Lanka. This study aims to fill this research gap, which is a considerable research vacuum.

Therefore, the main objective of this study is to:

- Identify the basic requirements of homeless people in the study area.

The specific objectives are to:

- Examine the reasons for the current living conditions of the homeless people
- Identify the public perspective towards the vagrant community

### **Review of literature**

Homelessness is more prevalent in the developed countries compared to the developing. Hence, more research on the homeless is being carried out in the western world compared to developing countries, especially South Asian countries. Scholars have found various problems faced by the homeless people with different perspectives - health issues (Kiser & Hulton, 2018), social issues (Mabhala et al, 2017), economic problems (Lewis, 1968).

Some scholars stated that the prevalence of homelessness is universal. Earlier a growing number of women and families, including young children, are homeless because of insufficient housing and resources (Bassuk & Rosenberg, 1988). Homelessness exists in all countries and most communities in the world. Therefore, it is known that homelessness is the biggest social problem which the whole world faces in the twenty first century (Alowalmer, 2018). Health and sanitization of homeless community also considered in some researches. Homeless mothers continued to have significantly less social support and mental guidance. Mothers with a history of abuse and poor social integration were more likely to have children with persistent mental health problems (Vostanis et al. 1998).

Few studies have tried to find the causes of homelessness such as deviancy in behavior, social, economic, health and, ignorance. The homeless community are sometimes considered as undeserving of support; they are frequently stigmatized as being mentally ill, out of control, and are viewed by some as personally responsible for their situation (Phelan et al, 1997). Most of the researchers said that homelessness was a terrible issue in the USA. Homelessness began to emerge as a US national public policy and global issue in the 1980s, as a consequence of widening income disparities in the developed world, and in the developing world, growing urbanization and natural disasters (Daiski, 2007). Which gradually become a problem in the developing countries as well. Very few studies were conducted in Sri Lanka related to the urban homelessness.

Rewathy (2018), in her work regarding the homeless people in Kochchikade, of Sri Lanka, managed to explore the challenges faced by the homeless people which were being included such mental illness, economic loss, substance abuse, and deteriorating physical health and lack of access to health care and hospitals. Furthermore, she found in her research that elders are mostly being abandoned on the street and willfully becoming homeless due to their mental health issues, family problems, lifestyle changes and physical disabilities. So, the study only focused on the causes and problems of the homeless people but not the requirement of the community.

Ariyadasa et al (2017), focused on institutionalized children's homelessness in Sri Lanka. The study researched about the causes of homelessness among these children and found that war, natural disasters and poverty lead the children to become homeless. Further they discussed about the status of homeless children in the country and identified that there are some children homes in Sri Lanka, which aim to ensure that all helpless children are safe and that they have their basic needs met in terms of water, food, shelter, sleep and education. But the research only considered the homeless children's needs, causes and, protection but not the elders.

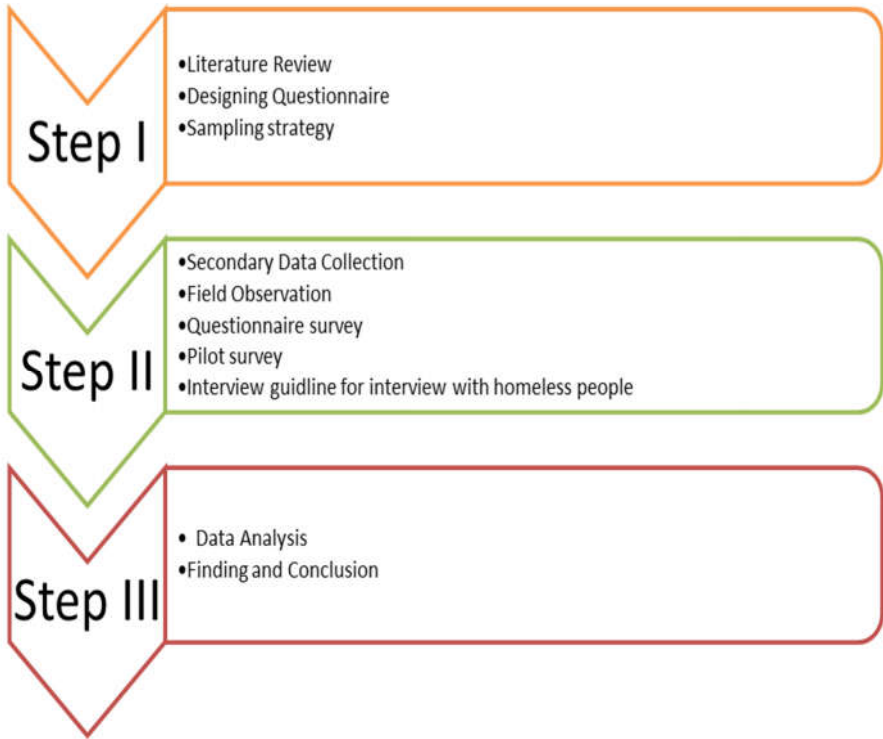
Significantly less published literature was found on the basic needs of vagrant community. Therefore, this study focuses to identify the basic requirement of the homeless community including young children to elderly people. At the same time, the causes and the reasons for their current status also will be discussed.

### **Materials and Methods**

This study is conducted in Thotalanga area in Colombo. Since a huge number of homeless people can be identified in the marginal areas of the urban cities, the location of this research is highly significance for the study. The study area is a busy spot and have a large number of people shuttling day and night. Homeless people could get food and shelter at this location, and sometimes economic benefits as well. Therefore, it was decided that identifying and picking homeless people for the study will not be so difficult at this location. Therefore, it was decided that choosing this location will be beneficial for information collection from the homeless people and therefore easier to achieve the research objectives.

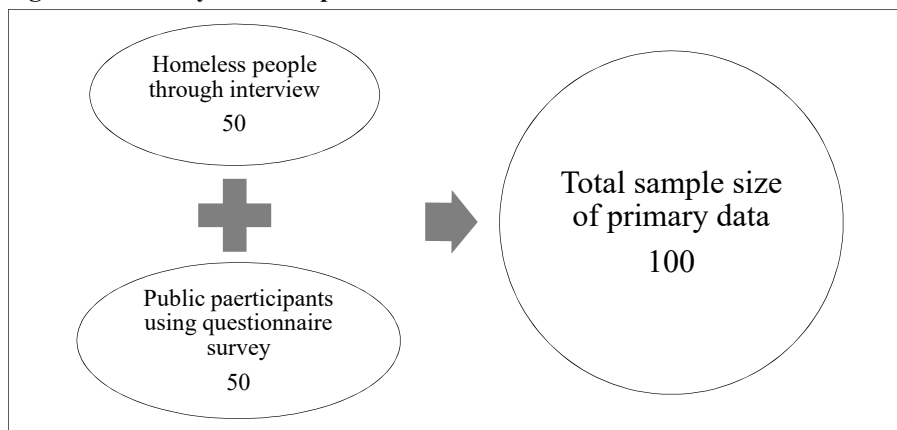
This study relies on both primary and secondary data. The primary data have been collected through observation, interviews and questionnaire survey. Field observation was done multiple times to identify the problem. A literature search was conducted to study and identify gaps in previous research regarding homelessness. All the necessary steps as given below (Figure 1) have been taken into action to achieve the objective of the study.

**Figure 1. Framework for the study**



This cross-sectional, observational study was done with 100 study participants as shown in Figure 2 below. Two groups were involved in the study. Interviews were held among 50 vagrant participants using snowball sampling technique. By using purposive sampling method, 50 participants from the public who are living or doing their economic activity in the study area were also chosen for the questionnaire survey. Structured questionnaire was designed and filled by the researcher with the respondent's answers. The intention of the questionnaire survey was to meet the third objective of the study which is intend to gain the public perspectives towards the vagrant community.

**Figure 2. Primary data sample distribution**



This study relies on both quantitative and qualitative data analysis methods. Hence Excel spreadsheet was used to tabulate and analyze the collected data.

**Results and Discussion**

***Basic information and the causes for the homelessness***

The information regarding the homeless people and the basic needs have been gathered and analyzed through interview. Therefore, the retrieved basic information of homeless people are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Basic information of Homeless people**

	Percentage (%)
Age	
<10	02%
11<25	12%
26<50	49%
>=50	37%
Place of birth	
Colombo	70%
Other Area	30%
Living arrangement	
Alone	91%
With Family	09%
Taking Meals (per day)	
Once	54%
Twice	20%
Thrice	14%
Depends	12%
Years of being homeless	
1-5 Years	25%
6-10Years	34%
>10 Years	41%

Source: - Field Survey, Year 2021

People of different ages are on the street. Elderly and the middle aged vagrant people are mostly seen in Thotalanga streets. Some Majority of them are alone and few are with their families. As we observe and discussed with them it was identified that the homeless men and women give birth to a child and become a family without a permanent home.

According to the data gathered from the homeless community, 54% of them have only one meal a day. They said that they could enjoy a proper meal only if someone offers good food. 41% of the homeless people have been homeless for more than 10 years indicating that the respective authorities are still not considering providing these poor community members to provide their basic shelter need.

Basic needs include any resource deemed necessary for persons or households to achieve and maintain physical well-being (Collin & Campbell, 2008). Basic requirements are generally taken to include food, water and shelter. But, basic needs have now expanded to include healthcare, sanitization, social recognition and education.

The identified and selected homeless people for the questionnaire survey exposed their educational qualifications and which is shown in the Table 2. Only 42 % of the vagrant people went to school. From them 52% of the homeless people have a primary education level and they haven't even completed their primary education. The interviewed vagrant participants disclosed that dropping out from school was the reason for not completing their education. Hence, providing basic jobs for them is questionable without a basic education.

**Table 2: Educational qualification and health condition of the homeless people**

	Percentage (%)
Attend to school	
Yes	42%
No	58%
Level of Education	
Primary	52%
Ordinary	48%
Prevalence of diseases	
Yes	82%
No	18%
Preference to be on the streets	
Yes	19%
No	81%

Source: Field Survey, Year 2021

Eighty two (82%) of them are diagnosed with chronic and infectious diseases without proper sanitation facilities and food behaviors. Due to their physical fitness and mental stability, employers prefer not to recruit them. Before stabilize them economically, the government should provide basic requirements and help them to be safe and sound mentally. They also prefer to spend a happy life under a safe roof as a family. But multiple reasons caused for their current status on the street, such as; abandoned by the family due to the severe drug, smoke and, alcohol addiction, left the family in

order to be free and independent, Left the family from village due to the poverty, ended homeless by seeking job opportunities without a basic education, neglected by the children due to chronic illness; diabetes, cancer, heart diseases, etc., divorce or separated from their partner, being a transgender, eloped with a partner and ultimately cheated by him. Further reasons were given in Table 3.

**Table 3: Reason for the homelessness (More than one reasons told by one homeless person)**

Reasons	Number of person
Consumption of drugs	17
Unemployment	24
Mental health disorder	09
Physical health problems	34
Domestic violence	13
Abandoned by family	18

Source: Field Survey, Year 2021.

The reasons given by the homeless people for being homeless left us to re think about the human society and the humanity. 17 people have been reported to consume drugs and abandoned by their family. And they are from the urban areas and saying that they couldn't control their cravings for drugs and alcohol.

Unemployment causing a huge change in a men's life, 24 homeless people said that being unemployed and could not find a mere job led them to be on the street with the family. And few of the homeless people exposed that they are from rural villages and came here seeking for a job opportunity and couldn't afford a home due to high rental prices.

Mentally ill conditioned folks and physically disabled homeless people also can be seen in the area. Due to their health problem they have been neglected by their busy families and left behind. Indeed these ill people do not like to get treated for their diseases. They prefer to be free and roam around. 13 homeless people said that they escaped from their house due to physical torture and domestic violence caused by their foster parents and life partners.

The studies show that homeless people are highly vulnerable for the infectious disease, premature death, acute illness, and chronic health problems than the general population. They are also at higher risk for suicide, mental health problems and drug or alcohol addiction" (Gaetz, 2004). Due to the lack of basic education, the unemployment among the vagrant community is high. Poor nutrition is one of the main causes for the diseases. As we know that homeless people do not have money to have food which means they do not have the financial capacity to pay to the hospital in order to manage to be treated (Alowaimer, 2018). Therefore, all the basic requirements are interlinked for the human resource development.

Though the homeless people end up on the street due to multiple reasons, their basic needs should be fulfilled by the respective authorities and government since they are a part of the country and the citizen of our nation.



***Past life stories shared by the participants***

There were different types of past stories told by the vagrant people via interview. The causes for being homeless, the problems faced by the vagrant community and, the effects and issues of homeless people also identified through those stories.

The loss of one parent and the neglecting of the other living parent also affecting the children’s life. One of the example retrieved from the interview is given as, “I used to get beat up by my Punchi (step mother) for every single action of mine. Therefore, I ran off from my home” – The statement given by a teen vagrant boy. The uncertainty of life was exposed by one of the elder homeless man. “I was a well off businessman once in my young age and I suddenly lost everything due to my bad behavior. My wife and children left me and I end up here” Most of the people ended up homeless due to their own mistakes and wrong decisions. Only couple of stories were short listed in the above statements.

***Public perspective regarding the homeless community***

Homelessness is always displayed among the society as either the result of individual choice or poverty. Homelessness considered as a complex social problem and a burden to the aesthetical beauty of the urban areas. The following Table 4 has the information gathered from the societal view of the homeless community.

**Table 4. Societal perspective of homeless people**

	<b>Answered by the public respondents</b>
Reason to the homelessness?	
Laziness	8%
Illiteracy	20%
Bad behavior	40%
Poor thing	12%
Drug consumption	20%
Ever helped a homeless men/women for their basic needs	
Yes	57%
No	43%
Helping them to enhance their economy	
Yes	44%
No	30%
Why would I?	26%

Source: - Field Survey, Year 2021

The responses from the selected participants for the questionnaire survey was so clear of the perspective of the society towards the homeless population. Most of them are not ready to help the poor as they are busy with their own businesses. Some are preferring to help, but with conditions. And the public think that the reason for the homelessness as their own way of choice. One of the 48 years old respondents who is also a businessman said that “The situation made by their own behavior and characteristics. Therefore, suffering is familiar for them”. And, another 27 years old young hotel worker said that “They are drug consumers and lazy to work. That’s why sleeping all the day”. If we talk about the people’s perception towards the

homelessness, some people think that working hard and having a determined self could be worked to be a strong part in the society. The society we live in has different perspective over different things. Some tend to help one another and tries to lift their self. But few people just love the way they live and expect others to stand below of them. This social behavioral condition is what we call cultural poverty (Lewis, 1961).

### ***Suggestions and recommendation to enhance the life of Vagrant community***

Previously done studies related to homelessness have been suggested so many ideas and strategies for the betterment of homeless community. Mainstream benefits and services consist of a wide variety of publicly funded services, programs, and entitlements for low-income people that address basic needs, including, but not limited to, income and employment, housing, food and nutrition, health and behavioral health services, child welfare, and transportation (USDHUD, 2010).

Around the globe almost each and every country face the social issue of people being homeless. However, providing them their basic requirement won't cost much to a government since the homeless community are few in numbers. So providing them basic shelter will not be hugh burden on the economy. In the western world, housing models have been built to reduce the homelessness. The Housing First model has been described as the "clear solution" to chronic homelessness by developing immediate access to private-market, scatter-site housing without prerequisites for sobriety, psychiatric stabilization, or completion of previous treatment programs (USICH, 2010).

Another basic need of the vagrants are health and sanitation. Communicable diseases can easily be spread through the homeless community. Health care for the homeless is a great basic need. It is increasingly acknowledged that homelessness is a more complex social and public health phenomenon than the absence of a place to live (Mabhala, 2017). The homeless people are mentally down and seeking for health care. These people who seeks for medicine are denied to visit the hospital since the government hospital is far to travel. Therefore, providing them free health clinics in the areas and medications is important. Good health will enhance their social connections, educational attainment, secured employment and other life opportunities.

By joining hands together, government and non-government, nonprofit organization also could take an action towards the homeless community to minimize their problems and fulfill their utmost requirements. Not only the respective organizations but also the community people could get involved them in the community related work. and provide them opportunities to be part in programs. Respecting their pride and treating them with humanity will be an added benefit.

### **Conclusion**

Mostly people who are abundant and neglected become homeless. The society see the homeless people as no self-care nor love to their life. Accordance with participant's statements regarding the homeless people, their maladaptive behaviors which led to them becoming homeless and struggling for the basic needs. Due to their unfriendly and deviant behavior are responsible for their low quality of social connection, poor educational attainment, insecure employment and other reduced basic opportunities

available to them. Previously done related studies regarding homelessness and homeless community also revealing the same problems and bottlenecks of this people.

Ignorance and disrespect by the society create a mental suffering for these people. Due to the behavior and consumption of alcohol and drugs, homeless community often ignored by other community and society. Thotalanga area is much more famous for the alcohol and other substances consumptions. Hence, people living in the street consuming alcohol related beverages daily. The public neglecting them due to this behavior.

Basic education, health benefits and other community involvement have been refused to these homeless people in the study area. Therefore, accomplish their basic requirement such as education, health, sanitization, nutrient food, cleanliness, shelter, and so on are being unreachable. Therefore, the poor people couldn't be able to fulfill their basic requirements.

Health care, education for the children, sanitization, protective shelter and other basic requirements are what the homeless community is requesting from the society and the relevant stakeholders. Increased amount of homelessness is a symbol of urban poverty. Homelessness created not only with one incident of a particular person's life but also it created by series of adverse incidents in one's life.

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