



Concept of homelessness: Complex issues and challenges

Ravi Bundela

Research Scholar, N.L.U., Delhi, India

Abstract

Homelessness has been a worldwide problem. In the UDHR it has been mentioned as one of the aspect of 'right to adequate standard of living'. The problem of definition has been a vital issue and which is why addressing the problem of homelessness is quite complex.

Keywords: massage, sports psychology, sports performance, sports massage, sports recovery

Introduction

The concept of home is very complex and comprehensive in nature. The very essence of well being in the nature of comfort, belongingness, societal identification and social security is promised by the concept of home. Many sociological thinkers have made efforts to understand and deliver a universal definition to this dynamic concept of home and it's opposite, homelessness. Somerville has given 'Shelter, hearth, heart, privacy roots abode and paradise' as seven significant indicators of the concept of home [1]. Along with these indicators, the concept of home features the ideas of warmth, love, relaxation happiness, homeliness, stability, and psychological and emotional security [2]. On contrary to this homelessness denies the above indicators resulting in discrimination, neglect, banishment, misery, instability and precariousness. Home ensures emotional, economic and social stability and is the most vital factor for overall growth of an individual.

Definition of Homelessness

Homelessness is a condition where individual is denied of basic right of secure and bare adequate housing and is often alternatively described as rooflessness, houselessness or inadequate housing. The European Federation of National Organization working with Homeless (here in after mentioned as FEANTSA) in its effort of defining the homelessness has adopted a four-fold path by including the conditions of sleeping and living rough (rooflessness), having temporary state-provided or no-state entity shelters (houselessness), insecure living environment and lower standard housing. [3]

Definition of Homelessness: Narrow Interpretation

The earlier definition of the homelessness concentrates much on highlighting the denial of safe and bare minimum adequate housing, which can be explained as-

"rooflessness (living rough), houselessness (relying on emergency accommodation or long-term institutions), or inadequate housing (including insecure accommodation, intolerable housing conditions or involuntary sharing)" [4]

There was also literature, which points out the categories of

homelessness, that is, absolute and relative homelessness. Complete denial of shelter and any other indicators as discussed above amounts to absolute homelessness, whereas having a shelter, though in a temporary nature but not have the elements of home is considered to be relative homelessness. Cultural elements such as social exclusion also play major role in defining home and its contrary homelessness. Social exclusion is also one of major driving factor in creation of discrimination, neglect and marginalization. In connection with the above ideas some of the social thinkers have given the following definition to homelessness.

"Homelessness is a condition of detachment from society characterized by the absence or attenuation of the affiliative bonds that link settled persons to a network of interconnected social structures" [5]

The above definition may be more suitable to the situation of homeless, in specific to male adults in developed countries such as USA and UK. It is not apt to those who are vagrants or live on pavements and so many families who live in bare minimum or substandard places across the globe. [6] This narrow definition of homelessness forgets that homelessness is not just lack of place to sleep or live, it is rather idea of non-belongingness to anywhere. They may have bare minimum space of half built or abandoned construction sites, pavements, temporary roofs and four walls, the real denial is the idea and essential elements of home.

United Nations in 1998 has defined the destitute as follows:

"Households without a shelter that would fall within the scope of living quarters. They carry their few possessions with them sleeping in the streets, in doorways or on piers, or in any other space, on a more or less random basis." [7]

This definition highlights the characteristics of vagrants who live and sleep in random places. This definition has attracted many social thinkers since it has rightly stroked the chord of the features of the homeless people commonly found in 1960s mainly suffering from strained family and societal relations. However by 1980s, the definition of homelessness is settled to those situation where there is absolutely no place to stay or there is availability of shelter only in case of exigency or temporary in nature. Thus this definition is confined to the

bare idea of 'houselessness' [8]. This idea of adopting the concept of 'houselessness' to define the 'homelessness' does not suit the present complex conditions of contemporary society. It will also be a failure to address the various realistic situations in countries across the globe. Late man countries such as USA, India and France etc. have identified the importance of wider definition of homelessness and added the section of people who are availing the temporary shelters provided by the Government institutions or NGOs into the category of homeless. For instance, in the USA, the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act of 1987, defined 'homeless' as:

"(1) An individual who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate night-time residence; and

(2) An individual who has a primary nighttime residence that is:

A supervised publicly or privately operated shelter designed to provide temporary living (including welfare hotels, congregate shelter, and transitional housing for the mentally ill);

An institution that provides a temporary residence for individuals intended to be institutionalized; or

A public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, regular sleeping accommodations for human beings.

(3) This term does not include any individual imprisoned or otherwise detained under an Act of Congress or a state law. People who are at imminent risk of losing their housing, because they are being evicted from private dwelling units or are being discharged from institutions and have nowhere else to go, are usually considered to be homeless for program eligibility purposes" [9]

On the other hand in India, while defining the 'house less population', the Census of India have taken parameter of 'census house', that is, people who are not living in the above said census homes are considered to be homeless. The Census of India has defined the term 'Census House' as the one, which is having 'structure with roof'. In the view of the above the parameters are given below-

"to take note of the possible places where the houseless population is likely to live such as on the roadside, pavements, in hume pipes, under staircases, or in the open, temple[s], mandaps, platforms and the like" [10]

When it comes to European definition, traditionally only two sections of people are considered as homeless, that is, who are sleeping rough and who are resorting to the governmental and Non-governmental provided shelters. This also throws light on the point that, traditionally how states leaned towards narrower definitions of a real complex issue without having taken the holistic picture into consideration and neglecting the very ideas of denial of major elements of home such as privacy security, social relations etc. [11]

Concept of Homelessness: Broader Interpretation

"Homelessness is the absence of a personal, permanent, adequate dwelling. Homeless people are those who are unable to access a personal, permanent, adequate dwelling or to maintain such a dwelling due to financial constraints and other social barriers" [12].

The very first hurdle to cross for successfully addressing the issue of homelessness is arriving into a potential definition

that can suit to the various forms of homeless situations. Arriving to an effective definition is sine qua non for framing a workable policy on homelessness. However, the concept of homeless is very dynamic in nature and varies with the different economic, territorial, political and social conditions prevailing at different times. Many contemporary social thinkers in their literature pointed out that it is the political will of the state that should carve out the values, concepts and approaches of policy on homelessness. [13] The wider definition that is aimed at should be broad enough to accommodate different kinds of homeless. The journey of narrower definition, that is, just treating those who are sleeping rough has undergone a systematic transformation to a wider one, gradually by initially recognizing those who are living in 'unbearable living conditions' [14] like overcrowded, insecure or substandard accommodation, to those who is forced into involuntary sharing, or those subjected to high levels of noise pollution or infestation. Later the ambit of the definition of the homelessness has expanded to include those without permanent or adequate dwellings. [15]

Definition by United Nations

The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs in 2004 have given the definition of 'homeless household' as follows:

"...homeless households are those without a shelter that would fall within the scope of living quarters. They carry their few possessions with them, sleeping in the streets, in doorways or on piers, or in another space, on a more or less random basis" [16]

After that in 2009, at the auspices of United Nations Economic Commission for Conference of European Statisticians (CES), held in Geneva, Switzerland, the Group of Experts on Population and Housing Censuses defined and identified homelessness in its recommendations as follows:

"The CES has highlighted that homeless are people under two broad groups:

(a) Primary homelessness (or rooflessness): This category includes persons living in the streets without a shelter that would fall within the scope of living quarters;

(b) Secondary homelessness: This category may include persons with no place of usual residence who move frequently between various types of accommodations (including dwellings, shelters, and institutions for the homeless or other living quarters). This category includes persons living in private dwellings but reporting 'no usual address' on their census form."

Though there is no direct definition of homeless in UDHR, reference is made in Art. 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948 by the UN General Assembly, wherein the text regarding housing and quality of living is given a follows:

"Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control." [17]

Definitions by Developed Countries

One can witness the wider interpretations of the term of homelessness when it comes to the rich and industrial nations. Many nations such as USA, Canada has very well accommodated various potential definition of homeless as discussed in the above section under its legal regime and they also have paved way for some meaningful definitions, which are as follows:

1. Canada

The Canadian Observatory of Homelessness has reiterated the definition of Homelessness as follows:

“Homelessness describes the situation of an individual, family or community without stable, permanent, appropriate housing, or the immediate prospect, means and ability of acquiring it. It is the result of systemic or societal barriers, a lack of affordable and appropriate housing, the individual/household’s financial, mental, cognitive, behavioral or physical challenges, and/or racism and discrimination” ^[18]

1. United States

There are definitions given by many authorities in USA. One of the prominent one is given under Section 330 of the Public Health Service Act ^[19] as follows:

“A homeless person is an individual without permanent housing who may live on the streets; stay in a shelter, mission, single room occupancy facilities, abandoned building or vehicle; or in any other unstable or non-permanent situation.”

The definition given by the Canadian Observatory of Homelessness and the one given in Section 330 of the Public Health Service Act have successfully included the various levels of homelessness, i.e., absolute homelessness, sheltered temporarily, provisionally sheltered and those who are at risk of homelessness. The wider connotation of the homelessness as discussed above is very prominently witnessed from the above said definitions with respect to developed countries.

Definition In Developing Countries

Many developing countries have developed the definition of the homeless in their regimes as a first step to eradicate the homelessness. But the third world countries cannot afford to develop the definition and often tend to lean towards narrower definition. Some of the definitions given by the developing countries are as follows:

1. India

The Census of India defines ‘*houseless people*’ – as persons who are not living in ‘census houses.’ The latter refers to ‘a structure with roof. One of the most prominent definitions in India is given by Census India, 2001 in which it defined Homeless households as follows:

“Households who do not live in buildings or census houses but live in the open on roadside, pavements, in Hume pipes, under flyovers and staircases, or in the open in places of worship, mandaps, railway platforms, etc. are treated as Houseless households” ^[20]

National Human Rights Commission in its booklet of ‘Know our Rights- Right to Adequate Shelter’ has pointed out what homelessness meant, which is as follows:

“Homelessness is the condition and social category of people who lack housing, because they cannot afford, or are otherwise unable to maintain, a regular, safe, and adequate shelter.”

2. South Africa

The recognized concept of homelessness in South Africa applies to those who live in small structures informally. The category of people coming under this interpretation is around one and a half million in South Africa. This is one of the manifestations of adoption of narrower definition. The apex court of South Africa also has supported this narrower interpretation by defining shelter as *“tents, portable latrines and a regular supply of water (albeit transported) would constitute the bare minimum”* ^[21]

Conclusion

The evil of homelessness is prevalent everywhere irrespective of developed and developing countries in various forms. Many countries and international organizations have defined the concept of home and homeless, suiting to their economic, political, sociological requirements. Though bringing in perfect harmonization of the definition is not pragmatic, striving for inclusion of wider definition to eradicate homelessness in wholistic manner is very much crucial. The bizarre picture of the statistics and figures across the globe shows the extent of the homelessness. In addition to this, developing countries lack efficient estimation skills owing to many policy and procedural limitations. The causes of homelessness and characteristics of the homeless as pointed above is multi dimensional in nature and it throws light on potential solutions.

References

1. Somerville P, *Homelessness and the meaning of home: Rooflessness or rootlessness?* International Journal of Urban and Regional Research. 1992; 16(4):532-534
2. *ibid* 529-539
3. FEANTSA, *strategies to combat homelessness in Western and Eastern Europe: trends and traditions in statistics and public policy*, UNCHS (Habitat) Nairobi, 1999.
4. Edgar, B *et al.*, Services For Homeless People: Innovation And Change IN The European UNION 2, 1999.
5. Caplow, T *et al.*, “Homelessness”, in Sills, D.L, International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences. 1968; 6:494-498
6. Glasser, I Homelessness IN A Global Perspective (1994)
7. United Nations, *Principles and recommendation for population and housing censuses*. 1998; 98:8.
8. Cooper B, Shadow People: The Reality OF Homelessness IN The 90S 34, 1995.
9. USA, *Priority: Home! The Federal Plan to Break the Cycle of Homelessness*, 1994.
10. The Census of India
11. Feantsa, *Strategies to combat homelessness in Western and Eastern Europe: trends and traditions in statistics and public policy*, 1990.
12. Avramov. D, *Homelessness in the European Union*, Feantsa, 1999.

13. Cooper B, Shadow People: The Reality OF Homelessness IN The 90S, 1995.
14. Watchman. P Robson. P, Homelessness AND THE Law IN Britain, 1989.
15. Avramov. D. *The Invisible Hand Of The Housing Market*, Feantsa, 1996.
16. United Nations, *National reporting of household characteristics, living arrangements and homeless households Implications for international recommendations*, Demographic Year Book Review ESA/STAT/2004/6 (2004)
17. Article 25, The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948.
18. Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, *Canadian Definition of Homelessness*, 2012.
19. (42 U.S.C., 254b)
20. Census of India, 2001.
21. High Court of South Africa, 1999.