



Homelessness in Nigeria: An Extensive Analysis and Global Contextualization

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Abstract

This study comprehensively examines the multifaceted issue of homelessness in Nigeria, exploring its causes, characteristics, and the effectiveness of current policies. It contextualizes the Nigerian situation within a global framework, drawing comparisons with both developed and developing countries. Structural factors such as rapid urbanization, economic inequality, political instability, and inadequate housing policies are identified as primary drivers. The study also highlights individual causes like family breakdown and mental health issues. By integrating theoretical perspectives like structuralism, post-structuralism, recognition theory, and social field theory, the research underscores the need for holistic and sustained interventions. Effective solutions must encompass robust social protection systems, increased affordable housing, and enhanced collaboration between government entities, NGOs, and international organizations to alleviate homelessness in Nigeria.

Keywords: *Homeless Youths; Homelessness in Nigeria; Housing Policies; Theoretical Perspectives; Structural Factors*

Introduction

Homelessness remains one of the most pressing social issues globally, impacting both developed and developing nations. In Nigeria, homelessness is a multifaceted problem influenced by various socio-economic, political, and cultural factors. This paper delves into the complexities of homelessness in Nigeria, examining its causes, characteristics, and the policies aimed at addressing it. Furthermore, it situates the Nigerian context within the broader global landscape, drawing on comparative studies and theoretical frameworks to provide a comprehensive understanding.

Conceptualizing Homelessness

Homelessness is often broadly defined as the lack of a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. However, this definition encompasses a range of living situations, from sleeping rough on the streets to precarious housing arrangements. According to the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, homelessness can be categorized into four types: unsheltered, emergency sheltered, provisionally accommodated, and at risk of homelessness (Gaetz et al., 2012). The European Observatory on Homelessness also emphasizes the diversity within homeless populations, advocating for nuanced definitions that reflect different lived experiences (FEANTSA, 2019).

In the Nigerian context, homelessness primarily manifests as street living, with a significant number of people residing in informal settlements or overcrowded conditions. The lack of comprehensive data and varying definitions across regions complicate efforts to address the issue effectively (Edawor, 2014).

Causes of Homelessness in Nigeria

The causes of homelessness in Nigeria are multifaceted, encompassing structural, economic, and individual factors.

Structural Causes

- 1. Urbanization and Population Growth:** Rapid urbanization, coupled with population growth, has led to a housing shortage in Nigerian cities. The World Population Review (2020) highlights that cities like Lagos and Abuja have seen exponential population increases, outstripping the availability of affordable housing.
- 2. Economic Inequality:** Economic disparity is a significant driver of homelessness. According to Enoch and Jacobus (2022), extreme poverty is pervasive, with many Nigerians living below the poverty line. The lack of economic opportunities forces individuals into precarious living conditions.
- 3. Political Instability and Conflict:** The Nigerian government's ongoing conflicts with insurgent groups, particularly in the northeast, have displaced millions. The Norwegian Refugee Council (2019) reports that violence has forced many Nigerians to flee their homes, contributing to the homeless population.
- 4. Inadequate Housing Policies:** The absence of effective housing policies and social protection systems exacerbates homelessness. The Federal Republic of Nigeria's Draft National Social Protection Policy (2016) outlines plans to improve social welfare, but implementation has been slow and insufficient.

Economic Causes

- 1. Unemployment and Underemployment:** High unemployment rates, especially among the youth, lead to economic instability. The National Youth Policy (2019) identifies youth unemployment as a critical issue, with many young people unable to afford housing.
- 2. Inflation and Cost of Living:** Rising inflation and the cost of living make it difficult for low-income families to sustain housing. Budgit (2018) notes that in Lagos, the cost of living is particularly high, putting pressure on vulnerable populations.

Individual Causes

1. **Family Breakdown:** Family breakdown and domestic violence often lead to homelessness. Many homeless individuals, especially women and children, have fled abusive situations (Edawor, 2014).
2. **Mental Health Issues and Substance Abuse:** Mental health problems and substance abuse are prevalent among the homeless population, complicating their ability to maintain stable housing (Ekhaese et al., 2021).

Characteristics of Homelessness in Nigeria

Homelessness in Nigeria predominantly affects urban areas, with significant variations across regions.

Demographic Characteristics

1. **Age and Gender:** Homelessness affects all age groups, but children and young adults are particularly vulnerable. Edawor (2014) highlights that many street children engage in begging and petty trade to survive. Women are also disproportionately affected, often due to domestic violence and economic dependency.
2. **Ethnic and Religious Backgrounds:** Homeless individuals come from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds, reflecting Nigeria's multicultural society. However, certain groups, such as internally displaced persons (IDPs) from conflict-affected regions, are overrepresented.

Living Conditions

1. **Street Living:** A significant portion of the homeless population lives on the streets, particularly in major cities like Lagos and Abuja. These individuals face harsh living conditions, lacking basic amenities and security.
2. **Informal Settlements:** Many homeless individuals reside in informal settlements or slums. These areas are characterized by overcrowding, poor sanitation, and inadequate infrastructure. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2019) notes similar conditions in informal settlements globally.
3. **Temporary Shelters:** Some homeless individuals find temporary accommodation in shelters or with friends and relatives. However, these arrangements are often unstable and short-term (Edawor, 2014).

Homelessness Policies and Interventions in Nigeria

Addressing homelessness in Nigeria requires a multi-pronged approach, involving government policies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and international aid.

Government Policies

1. **National Social Protection Policy:** The Draft National Social Protection Policy (2016) aims to enhance social welfare through various programs, including housing subsidies and support for vulnerable groups. However, implementation has been limited due to funding constraints and bureaucratic inefficiencies.

2. Youth Development Programs: The National Youth Policy (2019) focuses on creating employment opportunities for young people, which could indirectly reduce homelessness by improving economic stability.

3. Housing Initiatives: Various housing schemes have been launched to increase affordable housing stock. However, these initiatives often fall short due to corruption, mismanagement, and insufficient funding (Budgit, 2018).

Non-Governmental Organizations

NGOs play a crucial role in addressing homelessness in Nigeria. Organizations like the Homeless Hub and the Borgen Project provide support services, including shelter, food, and healthcare. These organizations also advocate for policy changes and greater government accountability (Borgen Project, 2019).

International Aid and Collaboration

International organizations, such as the United Nations and the European Union, provide funding and technical support for homelessness interventions. Collaborative efforts, such as the FEANTSA's European framework for defining youth homelessness, offer valuable insights and best practices that can be adapted to the Nigerian context (FEANTSA, 2019).

Comparative Analysis: Homelessness in Nigeria and Global Context

Homelessness in Developed Countries

In developed countries, homelessness often results from a combination of economic factors, mental health issues, and systemic failures. Countries like the United States and Australia face significant homelessness challenges despite having more robust social safety nets compared to Nigeria.

1. United States: The US faces a homelessness crisis, with significant numbers of unsheltered individuals. Economic inequality, high housing costs, and insufficient mental health services are key contributors. The USICH (2018) outlines federal definitions and strategies to combat homelessness, focusing on permanent supportive housing and prevention programs.

2. Australia: Homelessness in Australia is characterized by high rates of youth homelessness and Indigenous homelessness. Policies focus on providing temporary housing and support services, but challenges remain in addressing the root causes, such as economic disparity and housing affordability (Homelessness Australia, 2019).

Homelessness in Other Developing Countries

Homelessness in other developing countries shares similarities with Nigeria, including high rates of urbanization, poverty, and inadequate housing policies.

1. India: India faces significant homelessness challenges, with large populations living in slums and on the streets. Rapid urbanization and economic inequality are primary drivers. Government initiatives, such as the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana, aim to provide affordable housing, but implementation is uneven (Speak, 2019).

2. Brazil: Brazil's homelessness issue is exacerbated by economic instability and inadequate social policies. Informal settlements, known as favelas, house a significant portion of the urban poor.

Efforts to address homelessness include housing programs and social assistance, but corruption and funding issues persist (Speak, 2019).

Theoretical Frameworks and Critical Perspectives

Structuralist and Post-Structuralist Perspectives

Structuralist theories emphasize the role of systemic factors, such as economic structures and social policies, in creating and perpetuating homelessness. Giddens (1984) argues that social structures shape individual actions, highlighting the need for comprehensive policy interventions to address homelessness.

Post-structuralist perspectives, drawing on Foucault's concepts of power and knowledge, suggest that homelessness is also a product of societal discourses and power relations. Stevenson and Cutcliffe (2006) argue that policies often pathologize homeless individuals, focusing on individual deficiencies rather than structural causes.

Recognition Theory

Honneth's theory of recognition emphasizes the importance of social recognition in achieving justice and social inclusion. According to Honneth (2004), homelessness results from a lack of recognition of individuals' rights and needs. Policies should therefore focus on recognizing and addressing the diverse needs of homeless populations.

Social Field Theory

Bourdieu's social field theory provides a framework for understanding the social dynamics and power relations within the field of homelessness. Hilgers (2015) suggests that homelessness can be analyzed as a field where various actors (government, NGOs, homeless individuals) interact and struggle for resources and recognition.

Conclusion

Homelessness in Nigeria is a complex and multifaceted issue that requires comprehensive and multifaceted solutions. Structural factors, such as urbanization, economic inequality, and inadequate housing policies, are primary drivers. Effective interventions must address these root causes while also providing immediate support to homeless individuals.

Comparative analysis with other countries highlights common challenges and potential solutions. Lessons from developed and developing countries can inform more effective policies and practices in Nigeria.

Theoretical frameworks, such as structuralism, post-structuralism, recognition theory, and social field theory, offer valuable insights into the underlying dynamics of homelessness. These perspectives underscore the need for policies that address both the structural and individual dimensions of homelessness.

To effectively combat homelessness, Nigeria must implement robust social protection systems, increase affordable housing, and foster collaboration between government, NGOs, and international organizations. Only through comprehensive and sustained efforts can the plight of the homeless be alleviated.

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