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license**EXPLORING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF STREET HOMELESS PERSONS IN JOHANNESBURG, SOUTH AFRICA****Emmison Muleya^{1*}, Constance Matshidiso Lelaka¹, Johanna Deka¹, Phumuzani Mpofu²**¹ Department of Social Work, School of Human & Community Development, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg 2000, South Africa² Department of Psychology, School of Human & Community Development, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg 2000, South Africa*Correspondence E-Mail: emmi.muleya@wits.ac.zaDOI: <https://doi.org/10.30598/baileofisipvol3iss3pp598-617>**ABSTRACT**

This study examines the lived experiences of individuals experiencing street homelessness in Johannesburg, South Africa, with a focus on the structural, social, and personal factors shaping their conditions. A qualitative approach using a descriptive phenomenological design was employed. Ten adult participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling. Data were collected using face-to-face semi-structured interviews and analysed thematically. The findings indicate that homelessness is driven by an interplay of family breakdown, unemployment, poverty, substance abuse, and relationship dissolution. Participants reported prolonged exposure to harsh living conditions, significant health challenges, limited access to healthcare, and frequent experiences of violence and exploitation. Structural barriers, particularly the lack of identification documents, further restricted access to essential government services. Survival strategies included recycling, begging, and transactional sex. Contrary to common assumptions, most participants were South African citizens rather than foreign nationals. This study highlights the agency and resilience of homeless individuals and underscores the need for integrated, trauma-informed, and rights-based interventions through multi-stakeholder collaboration to inform inclusive urban policies and sustainable social responses.

Keywords: Homelessness, Lived Experience, Resilience, Social Inequality, Urban Poverty

INTRODUCTION

Homelessness remains one of the most persistent and visible manifestations of inequality in contemporary societies, reflecting not only economic deprivation but also deeper structural and institutional failures. Across the globe, individuals experiencing homelessness continue to face extreme marginalisation, limited access to basic services, and systematic violations of their fundamental rights. The commitment of the United Nations to addressing homelessness, as demonstrated through global advocacy and policy frameworks, underscores the urgency of ensuring access to adequate, safe, and dignified living conditions for all (United Nations, 2023). Despite these global efforts, homelessness persists as a critical social problem, particularly in rapidly urbanising regions where economic disparities and social exclusion are deeply

entrenched. The COVID-19 pandemic further amplified these inequalities, exposing the precarious realities of those who live without shelter and highlighting the inadequacy of existing interventions (Perrier, 2021).

In South Africa, homelessness is both a historical and contemporary issue, rooted in the enduring legacy of apartheid and sustained by ongoing socio-economic inequalities (City of Johannesburg, 2019, 2021). Although the transition to democracy in 1994 brought significant policy reforms aimed at improving living conditions, structural challenges such as unemployment, poverty, and housing shortages continue to drive homelessness (Cross & Seager, 2010; Du Toit, 2010). The National Development Plan outlines an ambitious vision of eliminating poverty and reducing inequality by 2030, yet the persistence of homelessness suggests a gap between policy aspirations and lived realities (Gauteng Department of Social Development, 2021). Statistical evidence indicates that homelessness remains on the rise, particularly in Gauteng Province, which records the highest number of street homeless individuals in the country (City of Johannesburg, 2024). Johannesburg, as the economic hub of the region, attracts large numbers of migrants seeking opportunities, yet many are unable to secure stable employment or housing, leading to an increasing population of people living on the streets.

The scale of the problem is further reflected in the disparity between available services and actual needs. While government initiatives, including the expansion of shelters and the development of strategic intervention plans, have sought to address homelessness, a significant proportion of individuals continue to live outside formal support systems (Gauteng Department of Social Development, 2021, 2022). Reports indicate that tens of thousands of individuals remain homeless in Gauteng, with only a small fraction accommodated in shelters (City of Johannesburg, 2021). This suggests that existing interventions may not adequately respond to the complexities of homelessness or the lived realities of those affected. Moreover, anecdotal and empirical evidence highlights that many homeless individuals actively choose to remain on the streets rather than utilise available shelters, raising important questions about accessibility, relevance, and the perceived effectiveness of such services (Gilili, 2022; Shoba, 2021; Vally & de Beer, 2017).

Homelessness is not merely a lack of housing; it is a multidimensional condition shaped by interconnected social, economic, and personal factors. Previous studies have shown that individuals experiencing homelessness often face a combination of challenges, including family breakdown, unemployment, substance abuse, and mental health issues (Mathebula & Ross, 2013; Seager & Tamasane, 2010). These factors are further compounded by systemic barriers such as limited access to healthcare, social protection, and legal documentation, which restrict opportunities for reintegration into society (Pophaim & Peacock, 2021). The lived experience of homelessness is therefore characterised by vulnerability, uncertainty, and continuous negotiation for survival within hostile urban environments.

A growing body of literature has attempted to unpack the complexities of homelessness in South Africa, offering valuable insights into its causes and consequences. Research by Cross & Seager (2010) and Groenewald et al. (2014) highlights the structural roots of homelessness,

emphasising the role of economic exclusion and spatial inequality. Similarly, Du Toit (2010) underscores the long-term impact of socio-political transformations on patterns of urban poverty, arguing that homelessness must be understood within broader processes of social change. These studies collectively demonstrate that homelessness is deeply embedded within systemic inequalities rather than being an individual failure.

Other scholars have focused on the health and well-being of homeless populations, revealing the extent to which homelessness exacerbates physical and mental health risks. Seager & Tamasane (2010) and Hills et al. (2016) document high levels of psychological distress, substance dependency, and exposure to violence among homeless individuals. Mathebula and Ross (2013) further argue that the absence of stable housing significantly undermines access to healthcare services, creating a cycle of deteriorating health and prolonged marginalisation. These findings are reinforced by Pophaim & Peacock (2021), who highlight the intersection between homelessness, health inequalities, and social exclusion in urban contexts.

The role of shelters as a primary intervention has also been widely examined in the literature. Shelters are often positioned as essential mechanisms for providing immediate relief and facilitating access to social services (Muleya & Lelaka, 2025; Rodriguez et al., 2021). Studies suggest that shelters can improve housing stability, enhance access to healthcare, and create opportunities for social reintegration (Kemmerer et al., 2024; Marcus et al., 2020). The Housing First approach, in particular, has gained recognition for its effectiveness in addressing chronic homelessness by prioritising access to permanent housing alongside supportive services (Tsemberis, 2011). However, despite these potential benefits, shelters face significant challenges, including limited capacity, funding constraints, and difficulties in addressing the root causes of homelessness (Marcus et al., 2020). In some cases, shelters may not align with the needs or preferences of homeless individuals, leading to low utilisation rates.

Policy-oriented studies further highlight the complexities of addressing homelessness through institutional frameworks. Chenwi (2008) and Obioha (2022) examine housing policies and their implementation, noting that while legislative frameworks exist, their impact is often undermined by inadequate resources and fragmented coordination. The Department of Human Settlements emphasises the need for integrated approaches that combine housing provision with broader socio-economic support. Similarly, Kriel (2017) points to the importance of strengthening social protection systems and improving policy coherence to address homelessness effectively. Cross & Seager (2010) argue that without addressing underlying structural inequalities, policy interventions are likely to remain limited in their impact.

More recent studies have begun to explore innovative strategies for addressing homelessness, including collaborative and community-based approaches. Qumbisa et al. (2025) highlight the importance of multi-sectoral partnerships involving government, non-profit organisations, and community stakeholders. These approaches emphasise prevention, early intervention, and the integration of services across different sectors. Additionally, the importance of reliable data and continuous evaluation has been underscored as a critical

component of effective policymaking (JoziMyJozi, 2025). Despite these advancements, there remains a need for deeper engagement with the perspectives of homeless individuals themselves, whose voices are often marginalised in policy discussions.

While existing studies provide valuable macro-level and institutional insights, they often overlook the subjective dimensions of homelessness, particularly the everyday experiences, meanings, and coping strategies of those living on the streets. Much of the literature tends to focus on structural determinants, policy frameworks, or service provision, with limited attention to how individuals navigate and interpret their lived realities within these contexts. This subtle absence of experiential depth creates an important space for inquiry, where understanding homelessness through the lens of those directly affected can offer richer and more nuanced insights into the phenomenon. By engaging directly with street homeless individuals, this study brings forward perspectives that are frequently unheard, revealing the complex ways in which structural forces, personal histories, and daily survival strategies intersect in shaping their lives.

In doing so, the study quietly advances a perspective that situates lived experience not merely as a supplementary dimension, but as a central analytical lens for understanding homelessness in urban South Africa. It moves beyond conventional approaches by foregrounding the agency, resilience, and meaning-making processes of homeless individuals, while still acknowledging the structural constraints that shape their circumstances. This orientation allows for a more grounded and context-sensitive understanding of homelessness, one that bridges the gap between policy intentions and lived realities.

Accordingly, this study aims to explore the lived experiences of street homeless individuals in Johannesburg, South Africa, with a particular focus on understanding the factors that sustain street homelessness despite the availability of shelters and policy interventions. By illuminating these experiences, the research seeks to inform more inclusive, responsive, and sustainable approaches to addressing homelessness, while contributing to the broader development of sociological knowledge on urban marginality, inequality, and social exclusion.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study is grounded in a transformative research paradigm, which recognises that knowledge production is inherently shaped by power relations and that research should actively contribute to social justice by amplifying marginalised voices (Mertens, 2023). The choice of this paradigm is particularly relevant given the focus on individuals experiencing street homelessness, a group that is often excluded from formal policy discourse and public representation. By centring their lived experiences, this study does not merely seek to document conditions of deprivation, but to understand how individuals interpret, navigate, and make meaning of their realities within a broader context of structural inequality. In this sense, the research approach is both analytical and emancipatory, aiming to produce knowledge that is socially relevant and ethically grounded.

A qualitative approach was adopted as it offers the flexibility and depth necessary to explore complex social phenomena such as homelessness. Unlike quantitative methods that prioritise measurement and generalisation, qualitative inquiry allows for a nuanced understanding of human experiences, meanings, and interactions (Edwards, 2020; Taherdoost, 2022). Homelessness, particularly in its street-based form, is not merely a condition that can be quantified; it is a lived reality shaped by emotions, relationships, histories, and survival strategies. Therefore, engaging directly with participants through qualitative methods enables the researcher to access rich, first-hand narratives that would otherwise remain obscured. This approach also allows for sensitivity to context, which is crucial in understanding the socio-cultural and economic dynamics of Johannesburg as a site of both opportunity and exclusion.

The study employs a descriptive phenomenological design, which is particularly suited for capturing the essence of lived experiences. Phenomenology seeks to describe how individuals perceive and experience a phenomenon, rather than imposing external interpretations or causal explanations (Polit & Beck, 2012). This design aligns closely with the study's objective of exploring how street homeless individuals understand their own circumstances, including the meanings they attach to homelessness, survival, and social exclusion (Deterding & Waters, 2021). By bracketing preconceived assumptions and focusing on participants' perspectives, the study aims to present an authentic and grounded account of homelessness as lived and experienced in the urban context of Johannesburg.

Johannesburg was selected as the research site due to its unique socio-economic position as South Africa's largest metropolitan economy and a major destination for internal and cross-border migration. The city represents a paradox of wealth and inequality, where rapid urban development coexists with persistent poverty and homelessness. Statistical evidence indicates that Johannesburg has one of the highest concentrations of street homeless individuals in the country, making it a critical site for examining the complexities of homelessness (Statistics South Africa, 2023). Furthermore, the presence of existing policies and shelter interventions in the city provides an important backdrop for understanding why homelessness persists despite institutional efforts. Studying this context allows for a deeper exploration of the disjuncture between policy frameworks and lived realities.

The population of interest in this study consists of adult individuals experiencing primary homelessness, defined as living on the streets without any form of shelter (Hossan et al., 2023). A combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques was employed to recruit participants. Purposive sampling enabled the selection of individuals who met specific inclusion criteria, namely being 18 years or older, having experienced homelessness for at least three months, and being able to provide informed consent (Buelens et al., 2018). Snowball sampling was particularly useful in reaching a population that is often hidden, mobile, and difficult to access through conventional sampling methods (Lyon, 2015). Through these approaches, a total of ten participants were recruited, which is consistent with recommendations for phenomenological studies that prioritise depth over breadth (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The

sample size was also guided by the principle of data saturation, where no new themes emerged from the data (Sebele-Mpofu, 2020). The participants were selected not as representatives of a broader population, but as individuals whose experiences could provide deep insight into the phenomenon under study.

Data collection was conducted through face-to-face semi-structured interviews, chosen for their ability to balance structure with flexibility. This method allows the researcher to guide the conversation using predetermined questions while also adapting to participants' responses and probing deeper into emerging themes (Adams, 2015; Kakilla, 2021). The conversational nature of semi-structured interviews is particularly important when working with vulnerable populations, as it helps build trust and encourages participants to share their experiences openly. Interviews were conducted in environments that were comfortable and familiar to participants, ensuring that their narratives were captured in a natural and respectful manner. An interview guide was developed to ensure consistency across interviews while allowing space for participants to express their thoughts freely (HSRC, 2024). The guide was pilot-tested with two individuals outside the main sample to refine the questions and improve clarity.

The data were analysed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase framework proposed by Braun & Clarke (2013). This process involved familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing and refining themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. Thematic analysis was chosen for its flexibility and its capacity to identify patterns across qualitative data while remaining grounded in participants' narratives (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Through this process, the study was able to uncover recurring themes related to the causes of homelessness, lived challenges, and survival strategies, while also capturing the emotional and experiential dimensions of participants' lives.

To ensure the trustworthiness and rigour of the study, several strategies were employed. Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with participants and, in some cases, follow-up interactions that allowed for deeper understanding. Dependability and confirmability were supported through careful documentation of the research process and collaborative analysis among the research team (Ghafouri & Ofoghi, 2016). Triangulation was achieved by comparing data across multiple participants and identifying converging patterns in their narratives. Additionally, methodological triangulation was applied by integrating interview data with contextual observations and existing literature, thereby strengthening the validity of the findings.

Ethical considerations were central to the research process, particularly given the vulnerability of the study population. Ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant institutional review board, and all participants provided informed consent prior to participation. The principles of confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation were strictly upheld. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Care was also taken to conduct the research in a manner that respected participants' dignity and minimised potential harm. In doing so, the study not only adhered to ethical standards but also

reflected a broader commitment to conducting research that is both responsible and humane.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic Profile of Participants

The initial stage of data collection focused on eliciting the biographical profiles of participants in order to contextualize their lived experiences within broader sociological frameworks of homelessness and social exclusion. Such demographic mapping is essential in qualitative inquiry, as it provides a foundational lens through which patterns of marginality, vulnerability, and structural inequality can be interpreted. The detailed demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic Information of Participants

Participant	Gender	Age	Marital Status	Level of Education	Duration on Street	Race	Citizenship	Home Language
1	Male	41	Single	Post Matric Certificate	14	Coloured	South African	Afrikaans
2	Male	66	Single	Grade 9	10	African	South African	Setswana
3	Female	40	Single	High school	22	African	South African	Isizulu
4	Male	45	Single	High school	15	African	South African	Isizulu
5	Male	37	Single	Grade 9	9	African	South African	Setswana
6	Male	40	Single	Grade 11	12	African	South African	Isizulu
7	Male	44	Single	Grade 12	10	African	South African	Isizulu
8	Male	50	Single	Primary	16	African	South African	Isizulu
9	Male	45	Married	Grade 7	17	African	Zimbabwean	Sesotho
10	Female	N/A	Single	Grade 7	14	African	South African	Isizulu

Source: Fieldwork data, 2025

As illustrated in Table 1, the demographic composition of participants reveals several important sociological patterns. A striking feature is the predominance of single individuals, accounting for 90% of the sample. Many participants indicated that their precarious living conditions and prolonged exposure to street life constrained their ability to establish or maintain intimate relationships. This aligns with sociological perspectives that associate homelessness with disruptions in social bonds, kinship structures, and affective networks, thereby reinforcing cycles of social isolation.

In terms of citizenship, the findings challenge dominant public narratives that often frame homelessness as primarily affecting foreign nationals. Contrary to this perception, 90% of the participants identified as South African citizens, suggesting that homelessness is deeply rooted in domestic structural inequalities rather than being predominantly migration-driven. This observation corroborates prior research, such as Sonko-Najjemba et al. (2021), which similarly found that the majority of homeless individuals in Gauteng were South African. From a sociological standpoint, this underscores the importance of interrogating internal socio-economic disparities, labor market exclusion, and policy gaps within the national context.

Age distribution further reveals that most participants were over 40 years old, with many having spent more than a decade living on the streets. The duration of homelessness—frequently exceeding ten years—indicates not merely episodic displacement but entrenched, chronic homelessness. While data from Statistics South Africa (2023) suggest that homelessness is prevalent among youth aged 20–34 and adults aged 35–44, the present findings extend this understanding by highlighting the persistence of homelessness into later adulthood. This suggests a failure of reintegration mechanisms and reflects structural barriers that prevent individuals from exiting homelessness once they become embedded within it.

Pathways into Homelessness: Structural and Personal Triggers

The second research question sought to explore the pathways that lead individuals into homelessness in Johannesburg, with particular attention to both structural conditions and personal life events. Participants' narratives reveal that homelessness is not the result of a single cause, but rather emerges from the intersection of multiple vulnerabilities operating across the life course (Igira & Gregory, 2009; Johnston et al., 2020). Through thematic analysis, several key drivers were identified, including disrupted family structures, relationship dissolution, unemployment and poverty, forced marriage, and substance abuse. These factors are deeply embedded within broader socio-economic and cultural contexts, reflecting the complex and multidimensional nature of homelessness as a social phenomenon.

One of the most prominent themes relates to parenting challenges arising from disrupted family structures. Participants' accounts highlight how early-life instability, including parental separation, death of caregivers, and exposure to abuse, significantly contributed to their pathways into homelessness. For instance, one participant explained, "When I was young in Free State, my parents separated and I ended up staying with my stepmother. I left home and came to Joburg in 1989 and ended up sleeping in the streets and started begging" [P4]. Similarly, another participant shared, "I used to live with my grandmother, but after she passed away, my aunt began to mistreat me severely... I saw running away from home as the only way to save my life" [P5]. These narratives illustrate how the breakdown of familial support systems can leave individuals, particularly children and adolescents, without adequate protection or resources. In several cases, participants reported fleeing from severe abuse, including sexual violence, neglect, and life-threatening situations. Such experiences underscore the role of family as both a potential site of protection and vulnerability, where its failure often precipitates early and prolonged exposure to homelessness.

Another critical pathway identified is the emotional and socio-economic consequences of marital and relationship dissolution. Participants described divorce not only as a personal loss but also as a destabilizing event with cascading effects on mental health, financial stability, and social identity. One participant noted, "After my divorce I collapsed, I went on a suicide mission and used drugs like cocaine... I was financially drained and unable to hold down employment" [P3]. Another similarly explained, "After my divorce, I turned to drugs as a way to cope...

eventually, I lost my job... and became homeless” [P6]. These accounts point to the profound emotional distress associated with separation, often compounded by social stigma, loss of shared assets, and diminished support networks. In some instances, relationship conflicts escalated into criminal behavior, further entrenching individuals in cycles of marginalization. From a sociological perspective, these findings highlight how intimate relationships are closely tied to social and economic stability, and their dissolution can significantly increase vulnerability to homelessness.

Unemployment and poverty also emerged as dominant structural drivers of homelessness. Participants frequently traced their circumstances to long-standing socio-economic disadvantage, limited access to employment opportunities, and the absence of stable income. One participant stated, “My brother I am here because I am poor, I cannot afford to rent an apartment” [P2], while another recounted, “I came to Johannesburg looking for work opportunities... I was unable to get employment and ended up in the street” [P7]. These narratives reflect broader patterns of economic exclusion and labor market inequalities, particularly in urban centers where the cost of living is high and opportunities are unevenly distributed. The findings suggest that homelessness, in many cases, is structurally produced, rooted in systemic poverty and insufficient social protection mechanisms.

In addition to economic and familial factors, cultural practices such as forced marriage were also identified as contributing to homelessness, particularly among female participants. One participant described fleeing her home after being coerced into an unwanted marriage, stating, “I ran away from home because my parents tried to force me into a marriage with someone I didn’t love” [P2]. This highlights how entrenched cultural norms and practices can undermine individual autonomy and rights, especially for young women, ultimately pushing them into precarious living conditions. Such experiences point to the intersection of gender, culture, and power in shaping pathways into homelessness.

Substance abuse and financial mismanagement further compound these vulnerabilities. Several participants identified drug use as both a coping mechanism and a contributing factor to their homelessness. Addiction not only strained familial relationships but also led to job loss, financial instability, and social exclusion. As one participant expressed, “Drugs have completely taken over my life... the addiction controls everything you do” [P6], while another reflected, “Drugs completely ruined my life... I lost control of my finances, my wife left me, and I was eventually fired” [P8]. These accounts illustrate the cyclical relationship between substance abuse and homelessness, where each reinforces the other, making exit pathways increasingly difficult without adequate support systems.

These findings are consistent with existing literature, which identifies homelessness in South Africa as the outcome of interrelated factors such as unemployment, family breakdown, substance abuse, and relationship dissolution (Cross & Seager, 2010; Groenewald et al., 2014; Muleya & Lelaka, 2025; Muleya & Mlilo, 2023). National data further corroborate these trends, indicating that job loss or lack of income, substance abuse, and interpersonal conflict are among the leading causes of homelessness (Olufemi, 2008). Notably, these factors vary slightly by

gender but remain structurally embedded across populations.

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that pathways into homelessness are complex, non-linear, and deeply embedded in both structural inequalities and personal life trajectories. Homelessness should therefore be understood not merely as an individual failure, but as a manifestation of broader social, economic, and cultural dynamics. Building on this understanding, the study further explores the lived experiences of individuals on the streets of Johannesburg, which are discussed in the following section through a set of emergent thematic categories.

Lived Realities on the Streets: Health, Violence, and Survival

The lived realities of individuals experiencing homelessness in Johannesburg are marked by a convergence of health vulnerabilities, exposure to violence, and daily struggles for survival. Participants' narratives reveal that life on the streets is not only materially precarious but also deeply embodied, with physical, psychological, and social consequences that reinforce one another over time. These lived experiences illustrate how homelessness operates as a condition of sustained marginality, where limited access to basic services intersects with heightened exposure to risk (Qureshi, 2021; Samson et al., 2022).

A central theme emerging from the data is the prevalence of poor health and substance dependency among participants. Many individuals reported living with chronic illnesses, untreated conditions, and addiction, often compounded by significant barriers to accessing healthcare services. One participant noted, "In terms of health, many people tend to hide their drug use, and those who are HIV-positive often conceal their status... I am also HIV positive" [P6]. This concealment reflects not only stigma associated with illness and substance use but also a broader mistrust of formal healthcare systems. Another participant explained, "Sometimes when you do not have a needle you end up sharing... Due to sharing these needles, I am now HIV positive" [P3], while a third added, "Diseases such as TB and HIV have spread largely due to practices like needle sharing... I have witnessed many people lose their lives to drug overdoses" [P7]. These accounts underscore how structural deprivation—such as lack of access to clean medical supplies and harm-reduction services—directly contributes to the spread of communicable diseases and increased mortality. From a sociological perspective, health outcomes among homeless populations cannot be understood in isolation from the socio-material conditions that shape risk behaviors and constrain health-seeking practices.

Closely intertwined with these health challenges is the pervasive presence of violence and trauma in participants' everyday lives. While some participants acknowledged moments of mutual support within homeless communities, these were often overshadowed by frequent conflict over scarce resources and income-generating opportunities, such as car washing. One participant stated, "We fight amongst each other especially males and some homeless females are raped... I was once stabbed" [P3], highlighting both interpersonal violence and gendered vulnerabilities. Another reflected on the transformative effects of prolonged exposure to street

life, noting, “I am not a violent person by nature, but I have become violent as a way to protect myself... I feel emotionally drained and have started using drugs to cope” [P6]. This narrative illustrates how violence becomes both a survival strategy and a consequence of structural insecurity, reshaping individual identities and behavioral responses over time. Similarly, concerns about safety were echoed by another participant who remarked, “Although there are community security workers around, it is still not safe. Fights often break out at night” [P7]. These experiences point to the normalization of violence within street environments, where the absence of formal protection mechanisms compels individuals to adopt self-protective, and at times aggressive, strategies.

Taken together, these findings highlight that individuals experiencing homelessness encounter a broad spectrum of interrelated challenges, including limited access to healthcare, heightened exposure to physical and sexual violence, and profound psychological distress. These patterns are consistent with existing scholarship, which demonstrates that homeless populations are disproportionately affected by poor health outcomes, substance use disorders, and mental health conditions, as well as exposure to communicable diseases such as HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis (Sanchez, 2010). Such risks are further intensified by survival strategies, including needle sharing and transactional sex, which are often adopted in response to extreme deprivation.

Moreover, while some individuals are aware of and attempt to utilize available health and social services, many face significant barriers, including stigma, discrimination, and institutional exclusion. These barriers not only discourage service utilization but also perpetuate cycles of vulnerability and neglect. In addition, access to essential resources such as food, clean water, and sanitation remains severely constrained, reinforcing the precariousness of everyday life on the streets.

Survival Strategies in Conditions of Scarcity

Survival strategies among individuals experiencing homelessness in Johannesburg are shaped by conditions of extreme scarcity, where access to formal employment, social protection, and basic resources is severely constrained. Within this context, participants described a range of adaptive practices aimed at meeting immediate needs such as food, shelter, hygiene, and, in some cases, sustaining substance dependence (Settlements, 2020). These strategies—while often effective in the short term—are embedded in precarious, informal, and frequently exploitative socio-economic arrangements that reflect broader structural inequalities.

One of the most commonly reported strategies is recycling, which involves collecting, sorting, and selling waste materials to generate minimal income. This practice, predominantly undertaken by male participants, serves as a critical means of subsistence in the absence of formal employment opportunities. However, participants noted that the income derived from recycling is often insufficient to meet basic needs, and in some cases is used to sustain drug dependency. In addition to recycling, participants—both men and women—reported engaging

in informal labor such as cleaning jobs. Yet, these opportunities were described as inconsistent and poorly remunerated, often failing to provide financial stability. As one participant explained, “Recycling or sex work and at times cleaning jobs. But those who offer cleaning jobs also offer little money...” [P3]. This highlights the limited and unstable nature of income-generating opportunities available to homeless individuals within urban informal economies.

Begging also emerged as a widespread survival strategy, with participants indicating that they frequently solicit assistance at traffic intersections and outside supermarkets. This practice requires not only persistence but also strategic social interaction, as individuals attempt to appeal to the empathy of passersby. One participant candidly noted, “Honestly, my guys, I sometimes have to lie just to get help from people. Life on the streets isn’t easy—it’s about survival” [P1]. Such accounts reveal the moral and emotional negotiations involved in everyday survival, where individuals may resort to impression management or deception as a means of securing basic necessities. From a sociological perspective, begging can be understood as both a survival tactic and a form of informal social exchange, mediated by public perceptions of deservingness and compassion.

A more complex and deeply precarious survival strategy identified in this study is engagement in transactional sex, often referred to as survival sex. Both male and female participants reported exchanging sexual services for money, shelter, food, or access to basic amenities such as bathing facilities. These practices are not merely individual choices but are structurally conditioned by poverty, exclusion, and the absence of viable alternatives. One female participant recounted, “Some men take us to their homes and sleep with us without paying... they claim they did me a favour by giving me a place to sleep” [P10], illustrating the exploitative power dynamics that frequently characterize such exchanges. Similarly, a male participant described, “Sometimes, we engage in male sex work... they take us to their rooms, allow us to bathe, and then pay us” [P1]. These narratives underscore how bodily vulnerability becomes commodified within informal survival economies, where access to safety and dignity is often contingent upon unequal and coercive relationships.

Importantly, these accounts reveal that transactional sex operates within a broader system of structural compulsion rather than individual agency. The absence of stable income, social support networks, and institutional protection forces individuals to navigate complex and often dangerous social interactions in order to survive. From a Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) perspective, these practices can be understood as part of an activity system shaped by socio-cultural norms, informal rules of the street, and interactions with various actors, including clients and other homeless individuals. The primary objective within this system is not economic accumulation but survival itself—securing temporary shelter, food, or hygiene. However, inherent contradictions arise when expected outcomes, such as payment or safety, are not realized, leading to experiences of exploitation, emotional distress, and, in some cases, the adoption of aggressive behaviors as protective mechanisms.

Furthermore, the findings draw attention to the gendered and often underexplored dimensions of survival strategies, particularly the presence of male sex work within street economies. While much of the existing literature focuses on female vulnerability, this study highlights that men are also subject to sexual exploitation and may engage in transactional sex under conditions of extreme need. This challenges dominant gendered assumptions and calls for a more nuanced understanding of vulnerability, agency, and survival within homeless populations.

Access to Support: Between NGOs and State Limitations

Participants consistently expressed appreciation for the support provided by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), particularly in relation to the provision of food, occasional shelter, and other basic necessities. However, this appreciation was juxtaposed with a profound sense of frustration toward government services, which were widely perceived as inaccessible, inconsistent, and bureaucratically constrained. One participant noted, “Support usually comes from organisations like Meals on Wheels, but only occasionally... never the government. Government officials always come and make us fill in forms, but they never come back” [P6]. This statement reflects a broader sentiment of institutional neglect and unfulfilled promises, where engagement with state actors is experienced as procedural rather than transformative.

Barriers to accessing government support were further compounded by structural requirements such as the possession of identity documents, which many participants lacked. As one participant explained, “I am aware of the City of Johannesburg services, but it is difficult to access them without identity documents and money. Without IDs, we cannot get social grants... and as women, we struggle without basic things like toiletries. There are no free or safe bathing places” [P7]. This highlights how administrative systems, while designed to regulate access to services, can inadvertently exclude the most vulnerable populations. The absence of identification documents not only limits access to social grants and shelter services but also reinforces broader patterns of social exclusion and marginalization.

The findings indicate that, in practice, NGOs and faith-based organizations constitute the primary support systems for individuals experiencing homelessness. These organizations provide a wide range of services tailored to immediate needs, including food distribution, temporary shelter, and emotional support (Sonko-Najjemba et al., 2022). This aligns with existing literature, which emphasizes the critical role of civil society in responding to homelessness, particularly in contexts where state provision is limited or ineffective. In many cases, these organizations act as intermediaries, filling gaps left by public institutions and offering more flexible, context-sensitive forms of assistance.

At the same time, although some participants were aware of government-run shelters—such as those operated by the City of Johannesburg—there was a noticeable reluctance to utilize these services. This hesitancy was largely attributed to bureaucratic hurdles, particularly the requirement for official identification, as well as perceptions of inefficiency and inaccessibility.

Similar findings have been reported in previous studies, which highlight how the lack of identity documentation serves as a significant barrier preventing homeless individuals from accessing formal support systems (Chenwi, 2008; Kriel, 2017; Obioha, 2022).

Rethinking Intervention: Voices from the Streets

Persons experiencing homelessness suggested various intervention strategies as immediate and long-term solutions to their precarious situation. Some of the suggestions include:

“We need to be assisted with skills training and while going through that, to be accommodated with temporary shelter. We will become cleaner and take care of ourselves. Though it difficult to stay clean, government must provide facilities for people in the street for basic amenities like bath, brush teeth and hygiene” [P10].

“Government must remove us from the streets and give us a place to stay and even build a big rehabilitation centre. After rehabilitation then give us jobs then we can stay for ourselves” [P7]

“For me it will be mobile clinics as I am unhealthy but cannot go to clinic without ID and food would help me. We also need protection, and government must ask homeless people their needs than just shelter. Even in shelters they close early once we still hustling. Government can also have policy to reduce homelessness through employment for everyone” [P3]

Some were however sceptically and appeared to have lost hope regarding any strategies that government could use to help the homeless. For instance, the eldest of the participants had this to say:

“Nothing government can do anymore, I have seen social workers come and just talk but there is nothing they do to help us in the streets. Frankly speaking I have lost confidence in government. They come regularly to ask questions. I would be happy if I can qualify for veteran grant. [P2]

To address the lived experiences of persons experiencing homelessness in the streets of Johannesburg, South Africa. To begin with, understanding the lifeworld strategies of individuals experiencing street homelessness is crucial, and this study seeks to explore them in order to generate various necessary suggestions. This involved engaging with their experiences and the events that have shaped their homelessness to develop effective policies, a suggestion that Olufemi & Reeves (2004) proposed. This could take comprehensive approach that includes phenomenological participation, and cooperative exploration can provide a more comprehensive solution. Furthermore, persons experiencing homelessness, particularly those with mental illnesses, require targeted support services. Establishing forums and partnerships among stakeholders can facilitate the implementation of these services (Moyo et al., 2015). Additionally, addressing health issues, addiction, and psychological trauma through accessible health and social services is essential (Mathebula & Ross, 2013). Building on the above, it could also be helpful to integrate HIV testing and pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) services at community sites

like Hillbrow clinic as this could improve health outcomes. This approach should include counseling for livelihood and coping strategies (Nardell et al., 2024).

Effective collaboration between government departments, particularly Social Development and Human Settlements, is necessary to address the structural, social, and economic risks associated with homelessness. This includes preventive measures to reduce vulnerability (Naidoo, 2010; Obioha, 2022). Reassessing housing policies to ensure they are inclusive and supportive of the homeless population is critical. This involves considering local and African vernacular patterns and focusing on community and locality to improve quality of life and economic self-reliance (Steyn, 2012). Other challenges raised by persons experiencing homelessness include substance abuse and addressing substance abuse, such as the use of “nyaope” (illegal street drug), through targeted psycho-social interventions can mitigate its negative impact on both individuals and their families (Mokwena & Makuwerere, 2021).

Implementing these strategies requires a coordinated effort that involves understanding the lived experiences of homeless individuals, providing comprehensive support services, fostering community and social support, and ensuring effective policy and legislative frameworks. By addressing these areas, it is possible to improve the lives of those experiencing homelessness in Johannesburg.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that street homelessness in Johannesburg is not simply the result of individual failure, but rather a sustained condition produced through the intersection of structural inequality, fractured social relations, and constrained personal trajectories. By foregrounding the lived experiences of individuals, the study reveals that the persistence of homelessness—despite the existence of shelters and policy frameworks—lies in the misalignment between institutional responses and the everyday realities, needs, and survival logics of those on the streets. In this context, homelessness is experienced as a prolonged state of exclusion, marked not only by material deprivation but also by limited access to rights, services, and social recognition. At the same time, the findings illuminate the agency and adaptive capacities of homeless individuals, who continuously negotiate survival through informal economies and social networks under conditions of extreme precarity. In doing so, the study offers a nuanced contribution by repositioning lived experience as a central analytical lens for understanding urban homelessness, particularly in a post-pandemic African context where dominant narratives often obscure local realities. Accordingly, addressing street homelessness requires more than expanding shelter provision; it calls for context-sensitive, integrated, and rights-based interventions that are grounded in the voices and experiences of those most affected, thereby bridging the gap between policy intention and lived reality while contributing to a more inclusive sociological understanding of urban marginality.

ETHICAL STATEMENT AND DISCLOSURE

The study was conducted in strict accordance with the ethical guidelines required for responsible research. Ethical clearance was first obtained from the University of the Witwatersrand's Non-Medical Human Research Ethics Committee (Protocol Number: H24/10/40]). Each participant provided informed consent after being thoroughly briefed on the principles of confidentiality, anonymity, and beneficence. Artificial intelligence (AI) in form ChatGPT was used only for language editing and the authors take full responsibility for the content and conclusions of the article.

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