Homeless individuals, families and communities: The societal origins of homelessness

Monde Makiwane\textsuperscript{a}, Tsiliso Tamasane\textsuperscript{b} & Marguerite Schneider\textsuperscript{a}

\textsuperscript{a} Child, Youth, Family and Social Development, HSRC, Pretoria
\textsuperscript{b} Child, Youth, Family and Social Development, HSRC, Cape Town

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This article uses case histories to document the experiences of 30 homeless people from a range of backgrounds in Pretoria and Rustenburg, South Africa. Factors that contributed to their becoming homeless were poverty, unemployment, a lack of affordable accommodation, divorce, disability, illness and an underprivileged childhood. More than one-half of the interviewees reported growing up in dysfunctional families. There was evidence of solidarity among homeless people, especially those living in shelters, and there were informal networks for identifying job opportunities. Many of the interviewees hoped to improve their circumstances by finding affordable accommodation or some form of employment or receiving a state grant.

Keywords: family; community; homelessness; social networks; origins of homelessness

1. Introduction

This exploratory study provides qualitative information about the lives and experiences of homeless people in two urban areas of South Africa. Data were collected during March 2005 through interviews with homeless people in Tshwane Metropolitan area (Pretoria) and Rustenburg. Pretoria is a metropolitan area in Gauteng Province, with service industry as the main driver of its economy. Rustenburg is a large town in North West Province that tends to attract many low-skilled people who hope to find employment in the mines, against the background of an economy that is shrinking because mine productivity has declined. The aim of the study was to explore pathways to homelessness and the social structures among the homeless. It was undertaken as part of the formative research for a larger Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) homelessness study (see Cross & Seager et al., this issue), and served to identify priorities for further investigation.

2. Homelessness in South Africa: Origins, definitions and challenges

As with many other developing and developed countries, South Africa faces the huge and daunting challenge of homelessness. It is not known how many people are homeless here. Olufemi (2000:224) estimated that in the late 1990s there were three million homeless people and in 2000 about eight million shack dwellers. These large figures probably reflect a broad definition of homelessness, the lack of homogeneity in this population and the many reasons for homelessness.

A number of authors have documented the reasons why women, men and children become homeless (Olufemi, 1998, 1999, 2000; Aliber et al., 2004; Rizzini & Lusk,
1995; Olufemi & Olufemi, 2003; Pinzon-Rondon et al., 2008). While homelessness affects all races in South Africa, Africans are disproportionately affected, followed by the coloured population. There are more homeless adults than children and more homeless men than women (Olufemi, 1998, 2000).

Defining homelessness is a difficult task. It is important to note that the various definitions reflect different purposes, values, ideologies and political agendas (Olufemi, 2002; Tipple & Speak, 2005). Frankish et al. (2003) regard homelessness as a continuum, ranging from people at risk of becoming homeless to those who currently have no shelter of their own and live and sleep on the streets. Olufemi defines the homeless in South African as ‘those who lack real homes, live in bad housing, sleep on pavements; lack basic needs (with no access to safe water, sanitation) and lack personal needs (self-determination, creativity, dignity, expression and voice)’ (2000:224).

This study defines the homeless as ‘adults and/or children who live on the streets at least part of the time, with emphasis on true homelessness or rooflessness’ (Cross & Seager et al., this issue). As Kok et al. (this issue) argue, while people who live on the streets may be considered of lower priority within the total homeless population since they are a only a small part, their visibility may mean they have a disproportionately large impact on the areas they inhabit, thereby attracting urgent attention from the authorities.

The main drivers of homelessness in South Africa are political, social and economic. Krige (1962) and Davenport and Hunt (1974) show that homelessness in South Africa can be traced to the displacement caused by the competing demands for labour and land from both agriculture and mining, and by the early years of industrialisation and later the industrial manufacturing boom (Aliber et al., 2004). Social causes include divorce, domestic violence, ill-health, disability and substance abuse. As in many other countries of the world (see Wolch & Dear, 1993; Vissing, 1996; McCreary Centre Society, 2001), homelessness in South Africa is also a result of rural–urban migration to escape poverty (Olufemi, 2000, 2002; Aliber et al., 2004). Poverty and homelessness are intrinsically connected (Daly, 1996; Olufemi, 2000, 2002; Tipple & Speak, 2005).

Unemployment is the main cause of poverty in South Africa. According to the official definition of unemployment,1 out of 17.4 million people who are economically active, only 13.1 million were employed in South Africa in 2006 – putting the unemployment level at a high 25.2 per cent, and exceptionally high for youth aged 15–24 at 33.5 per cent (Statistics South Africa, 2007). As expected, unemployment is particularly high in cities. The South African Cities Network (2004) has recorded that large cities bear the burden of unemployment due to migration. People leave the rural areas in the hope of finding a job in the city, but most end up living on the streets.

Homeless people go through harsh experiences, such as harassment, mugging and exposure to rape and diseases (Rizzini & Lusk, 1995; Olufemi, 2000). The impact of homelessness has long-term consequences. It often leads to deterioration of basic health, loss of self-confidence, dignity and self-respect, and drug and alcohol abuse (Phelan & Link, 1999). Some resort to helping motorists to park, guarding their cars and washing cars on the street, while others do odd jobs such as carrying parcels for

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1Unemployed persons are those (aged 15–64 years) who were not employed in the reference week, who actively looked for work or tried to start a business in the four weeks preceding the survey interview, and who would have been able to start work or would have started a business in the reference week. www.statssa.gov.za/qlfs/docs/Quarterly_Labour_Force_Survey_Guide.pdf p.25 Accessed 31 October 2009.
customers in big shopping malls. More desperate coping strategies are begging, prostitution, theft, robbery and drug trafficking.

Despite recent research into homelessness in South Africa, very little is understood about the plight of homeless people. Compounded by the influx of other economic migrants from her neighbours, South Africa’s homelessness problem warrants further research. As Cross and Seager et al. (this issue) point out, it is important to understand why it is difficult to eliminate this problem, despite the country’s anti-poverty programmes – such as housing subsidies and welfare grants – which surpass those of most developing countries; and also to understand the role of street livelihoods, which current research suggests are drawing people to live on the streets because of the perceived economic opportunities.

3. Methodology

Data were collected through unstructured individual interviews with 30 homeless adults, 15 from a city (the Tshwane metropolitan area, Pretoria, population approximately 1.5 million) and 15 from a secondary town (Rustenburg, population approximately 116 000). A convenience sample was used, whereby prospective respondents were approached at night either at their places of habitation or at shelters and were asked to participate in the study. Although the fieldworkers took the lead in selecting the respondents, their choice was limited to those who were willing to participate. In all cases, incentives were used in the form of food parcels, which were given to each participant at the end of the interviews.

The length of the interviews varied, depending on factors such as the resourcefulness of the interviewees and the comfort levels of the interview setting. On average, interviews lasted not more than one hour. Those who were interviewed in the street seemed exhausted and unable to tolerate a lengthy interview, while those in the shelters seemed healthier and more eager to see the interview through. In some instances, respondents appeared to be under the influence of alcohol or other addictive substances. However, efforts were made to get as much information from them as possible.

Although the selection process was non-random and purposive, our sample varied across gender, race and age. It covered people living both in shelters and outside, and in different phases of homelessness (i.e. transitional and the advanced phases of homelessness).

**Table 1: Sample characteristics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Pretoria</th>
<th>Rustenburg</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place of residence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shelter</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Street</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 1–9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grade 10–12</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1 shows that seven of the 30 homeless people interviewed had no education at all, while 13 were relatively well educated, having passed either Grade 11 or 12. The remaining 10 participants had qualifications ranging from Grades 1 to 10. Table 1 also shows that the respondents were mostly male.

Throughout this paper, pseudonyms have been used to protect the participants’ identities.

4. Results and discussion
4.1 Pathways to homelessness
There are several causes of homelessness. One is misfortune, such as disability resulting from illness or accidents. Others are poverty, unemployment and abuse. Table 2 shows that factors such as an underprivileged childhood (mentioned in 16 out of 30 interviews), poor education and unemployment are the most common reasons given by the homeless people who were involved in this study. Six of the 30 interviewees claimed to have become homeless after they were retrenched, but homelessness is ‘more usually the culmination of a long process of economic hardship, isolation and social dislocation’ (Wolch et al., 1988:443). Imprisonment and domestic violence were least frequently cited as reasons for homelessness. Five of the 30 homeless people cited divorce as a factor.

4.1.1 Underprivileged childhood and troubled youth
Herman et al. observe that studies on homelessness have found ‘remarkably high prevalences of adverse experiences during childhood, primarily histories of out-of-home care (foster, group, or institutional care) and running away from home’ (1997:249). This finding is confirmed by this study, in which 16 interviewees reported having had a poorly functioning family structure during childhood. The fact that these adult interviewees mentioned this issue suggests they believe it had some bearing on their eventual homelessness.

Nine out of the 30 interviewees said they had had a difficult upbringing as youngsters. Most of them were raised either by their single parents (in most cases, the mother) or by close relatives while their parents moved to the cities to find work, mostly as domestic workers or labourers. Foster care often substituted for good parenting, to their detriment, as the case of Joseph illustrates:

I was born in KwaZulu-Natal but grew up in Pretoria as my mom worked as a domestic there. But while my mom stayed with her bosses in town during the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Pretoria</th>
<th>Rustenburg</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Underprivileged childhood</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor educational background</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prolonged joblessness</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imprisonment</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disability/poor health</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic violence/abuse</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorce</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retrenchments</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some people gave more than one reason and are therefore counted more than once.
week, I lived with my relatives in an extended family where life was tough and I never had the opportunity to learn further than Grade 5. Lack of opportunities to build a solid home background led to a series of misfortunes of life like the lack of enough education and a general poor upbringing that lacked parental love. The impact of all these is that they finally pushed me into the streets, where you [i.e. the HSRC fieldworkers] now found me. I believe that had I been afforded the opportunity to stay with my parents, like it is normal practice, I could have had someone to see me through schooling and taught me life skills that could have saved me from destitution that forced me into the streets.

4.1.2 Joblessness and poverty

Across all age, gender and race groups, joblessness was cited by 10 interviewees as the major factor that ultimately drove them out of their homes and into the streets. Closely linked to joblessness are limitations such as disability, either from birth or through injuries, diseases or accidents, lack of relevant job skills and retrenchments. This finding is in line with American findings that ‘structural factors such as labour market changes, an inadequate supply of low-cost housing, and cuts in income assistance programs have created the social conditions in which homelessness has grown during the past 15 years’ (Herman et al., 1997:249).

The retrenchments and structural economic factors seem to have had their most devastating impact on middle-aged and elderly men such as Piet, a recently retrenched white male:

As a young man, I began my working career as an apprentice in an engineering company, and later became appointed as a permanent in the same company, for which I worked until it went bankrupt. In the interim, I held numerous casual jobs in various companies. My last straw came about as recently as December 2004, when I also lost my casual job on grounds of bankruptcy. Ever since then, my life has never been the same. A month later I decided to head for Rustenburg to seek jobs. On arrival here I knew no one in particular to be my host, and so I landed on the streets, until I heard about the shelter from a friend I met on the streets and moved in there ever since. I sleep here in the evenings and go out to look for a job during the day. And fortunate enough for me I have already found a casual job at a local mining company [in Rustenburg] after only two days of job hunting. Maybe the job experience I accumulated within the engineering sector over the years has helped. Soon I may be moving out of this shelter.

Others have not been as lucky as Piet in finding employment relatively quickly and easily. Mannie is one of these less lucky persons. He is 47 years old and lives at a multiracial, all-male shelter in Pretoria. In the past he worked for various companies, such as the Government Printer, Iscor and the Reserve Bank. After losing his job at the Reserve Bank he moved from one casual job to another, and the money he earns from his work as a car guard\(^2\) is often very little (R20–25 per day) and only enough to buy food, which his shelter does not provide. As a result, his prospects for leaving the shelter and transcending homelessness are not as good as Piet’s.

\(^2\)Guarding cars at shopping centres and outside restaurants and hotels is a common form of casual labour in South Africa.
Lack of job skills and illiteracy were cited as factors that limit the chances of employment by some younger people under 35 years old, such as John from Pretoria:

I was born in Belfast in 1949 and from early childhood I stayed with my granny to help her with the herding of her livestock, as all her sons (my uncles) were now grown-ups and left for the cities to work. As a result, I never had a chance to go to school and hence I am illiterate. When I reached manhood I also followed in the footsteps of my uncles and left for the city to look for work. But due to my illiteracy I could not find a good job. I only worked cheap jobs in the construction sector, working for different construction companies. The last company I worked for finished their work projects in and around Pretoria and left for Cape Town. I was not keen to go because Cape Town is too far from home [Mpumalanga]. I am now hanging around hoping to find another construction job because that’s all the job I know.

Unlike John, some respondents were educated. An example was Clement, a 26-year-old living in a makeshift shelter in Pretoria. He had successfully matriculated, and was clean and presentable, although his face showed signs of stress. Arguably, his case represents a new type of potential candidate for homelessness: often relatively young, better educated, with some basic job skills and hopeful about overcoming their circumstances. Such people are mainly in the transitional phase of homelessness – at risk of becoming homeless but still in contact with their homes. Clement came to the city in the hope of finding a job that would be better than his poverty-stricken livelihood at home, but he has not had much success. He wakes up early every morning, takes a shower, dresses the best he can and then sets out to look for whatever piecework he can get to meet his basic daily needs. Finding a better and permanent job is still his primary focus.

4.1.3 Disabilities

According to the literature on homelessness, ‘persistent physical and mental health problems commonly result in poverty and homelessness, and are only aggravated by life on the streets’ (Health Care for the Homeless, Clinicians’ Network, 2002:1). Mentally and physically disabled persons sometimes feel isolated from the public, neglected by their own families, discriminated against and stigmatised, and as a result may take to the streets to find some relief. There they are exposed to further risk of injury, disease and neglect that may aggravate their initial disabilities. However, people with severe disabilities (e.g. quadriplegia) are not likely to survive as homeless people as they would require significant assistance from technical aids and people.

Some people become disabled while on the streets. The health hazards of this lifestyle can lead to gradual deterioration of overall quality of life and minimise their chances of ever transcending their homelessness. In this study alone, in Tshwane Metro three people reported having become physically disabled due to injuries sustained after being hit by a car, complicated by the difficulty of accessing healthcare facilities. Denise from the Bosman Station area had this to say:

I am at present moment enduring a painful bone fracture on my left leg after I was run over by a car some time ago. I was asleep on the pavement when this guy reversed his car on me and my leg was hurt. Worst still, I cannot access any medical services since the authorities demand an ID document before
they can assist me. I do not have an ID because I lost two of these already while living in the streets. I am therefore reluctant to seek medical services from local health facilities.

4.1.4 Domestic and personal circumstances

Herman et al. note that research in the US has identified risk factors that make some individuals more vulnerable to homelessness. They mention ‘poverty, gender (more males than females are homeless), ethnicity (homelessness affects more African Americans than members of other groups), age group (most homeless persons are between 30 and 39 years old), and psychiatric and substance abuse disorders’ (1997:249).

Our study indicates that women’s dependence on their male partners for their material well-being renders them vulnerable in case of death or divorce and sometimes these women end up on the streets, as the story of Isabel shows. Isabel explained how she and her husband had differences in which jealousy was a factor and they ultimately planned to divorce. However, before the divorce could be finalised, her husband died and she was left homeless because she could not inherit any of his estate or buy a house or rent accommodation on her own. She was obliged to approach the homeless shelter for accommodation and she has been staying there ever since.

Some young homeless females end up on the streets for reasons such as domestic conflicts with parents, early pregnancies, lack of sufficient education, poverty, or a difficult upbringing involving relatives or foster care. Maria’s case illustrates all these causes. She is 22 years old and has education only to Grade 6:

While I was still a learner at home in Mafikeng I was hit by a car and injured my left arm and was then hospitalised. When I became discharged, I come back home only to find that that my single-parent mother is married to a stepfather I hardly knew. The stepfather did not treat me and my sisters good and I had to leave my home to stay with my grandfather. My grandfather is a pensioner and he could not afford to cater for us sufficiently. I then decided to go elsewhere to look for a job to provide for myself and my baby. I ended up in Pretoria. I knew no one over here, which means that I have been staying in the streets since day one because I cannot afford accommodation of my own. I still have not found work but I do some piece jobs for hawkers who give me food and about R20 at the end of the day.

4.2 Living on the streets: ‘Families’, social structures and hierarchies

4.2.1 ‘Families’

Families did not exist in the conventional sense of the word amongst the 30 homeless people we encountered. However, some perceived themselves and their fellows as ‘family units’. This perception was particularly common among those who were living in shelters, where living arrangements are more formalised. In some cases, people had developed close relationships with fellow shelter residents because this ‘filled the vacuum’ left by their own families. Some people said they had lost contact with their families since they had become homeless.

While each person has their own unique story about how they lost contact with their family, poverty remains the overriding factor, since they could not afford to call or visit their families. For example, Willie was robbed of his bags and cellphone shortly
after he arrived in Rustenburg to look for a job. As a result he could not make any calls to his family since he had stored their contact numbers in his phone. Others were estranged from their families and chose not to contact them because they did not want to bother them with their problems. However, some said they maintained close contact with their families, like Piet, our most recent entry into homelessness (he had been homeless for only three days and had slept at the shelter for only one night when we met him). He said:

I maintain a close contact with my family even if I am far away. I call them regularly to update them with developments in my job hunt endeavours. I regularly talk to my wife, my daughter who is 20 at varsity as we speak, as well as my son who is 19 and serves his internship with one of the mining companies in Rustenburg.

Similarly, Clement, the young and hopeful man with a Matric certificate at a Pretoria shelter, said that as a prospective breadwinner for his family in Kroonstad he keeps in regular telephonic contact with his family and draws strength from them to face the daily challenges of being homeless.

Among the men, contact with family appeared to be rare, perhaps because most of them did not originate from the cities where they now live. But they reported bonding well with fellow homeless people, and claimed to look after each other during the day or at night. Some of them team up to collect and recycle paper and cans, and support each other should one of their trolleys break or they fall sick, in which case they call the ambulance. Some reported occasionally paying their homeless friends a visit when they were in hospital, to give them moral support. Our data did not suggest that race and age affect homeless people’s bonds with one another or the contacts they maintain with their families. There are, however, slight gender differences in their opinions about the importance and role of these bonds.

Women living on the streets also reported maintaining good relationships with their families or their fellow homeless. For them, staying together was important, as they shared information about prospects of piecework. However, their primary concern was for safety – such common bonding is crucial for their safety at night, since it is risky for women to sleep in the open areas owing to the threat of robbery and rape. This became particularly important for women living around Bosman Station in Pretoria after one of them was raped by a young boy also living on the street.

4.2.2 Social structures and hierarchies

Our interviews revealed no sign of any formal structures or hierarchies among the homeless people in the two areas covered. However some said they often network to exchange information about job prospects, health and other matters.

When asked about the nature and significance of their relationships with their fellows, most said they keep company to socialise and look after each other, but were also quick to add that they never invest too much trust in one another because essentially they are all strangers who come from different places. James from Pretoria’s Church Square had this to say about socialisation patterns on the streets:

While on the streets I maintain a normal social relationship with fellow homeless brothers and sisters. We provide mutual assistance and are brother to one another and sometimes we socialise with our female counterparts until they leave us in the evening to their own sleeping places. But you
never trust each other to a level where you leave your belongings with them, unless you are very close.

The harsh living conditions on the streets are a burden for homeless people generally, but particularly for those who are old, sickly or disabled. Fitness, speed and courage are important for generating any income on the streets. Those who lack these attributes find it even harder to survive as they face stiff competition for piecework, the main opportunity for making a living on the street.

In instances where street people associate on the basis of their shared physical location, looking for paper and cans for recycling often becomes a collective effort. The cash this brings in is used to buy food, tobacco and alcohol, which they share in the evenings on their ‘home grounds’. This is the form relaxation and socialisation takes in most cases. In the shelters, bonding seems much stronger because an institutional culture prevails. However, race seemed to be important in people’s choice of ‘buddies’. Some interviewees said that while all races live together harmoniously at their shelter, race was still a factor in socialisation preferences because, as one Pretoria interviewee observed, ‘white guys confide in other fellow white counterparts and the same applies to blacks, and it all happens in a shelter that is completely multi-racial in its composition’.

4.3 Strategies used to escape homelessness

4.3.1 Employment

Homeless people’s views on how they envisage changing their circumstances vary considerably. It seems that those who have been homeless for a long time tend to lose hope of ever being reintegrated into the mainstream society. For example, eight interviewees who were affected by poor health or disabilities, or simply old age, thought that the solution to their problems was to get access to state grants. Implicit in this view is the belief that finding a job is no longer an option for them because they consider themselves no longer physically able to work. They would appreciate any welfare benefits they were offered. This sentiment was predominant amongst the street homeless.

Those in the transitional phase of homelessness were more hopeful. For them, the answer lay in finding steady jobs. In the interim, they were keeping themselves going with piecework. Those already working were doing their level best to find better paid jobs and finally find accommodation of their own. These sentiments were expressed mostly by the younger, healthier respondents, most of whom were living in shelters. This category of homeless people includes ambitious young people (in a Tshwane Metro shelter), some with Grade 12 certificates, such as Clement, who says:

Unemployment is a major problem and if this is addressed, the situation of people like myself can change for the better because we can find jobs and make the best out of our lives and the lives of those who depend on us.

4.3.2 Pensions and state grants

As mentioned above, for the homeless who are sickly, disabled or elderly the solution lies in obtaining a state grant such as a disability or old age grant. As Peter explained:

Because now I am injured, since I was run over by the car around that corner, I can’t perform any work now beside simple tasks like paper recycle. I can only appreciate it if the state can help me by processing my applications for the ID without which I cannot apply for the disability pension.
Others (particularly the middle-aged or elderly) who have some technical skills and job experience but who cannot compete fairly for the few available jobs in the local labour market perceive their disadvantage as deriving partly from their age, poor job skills and even affirmative action, in the case of white males who said they had to make way for females and blacks in the workplace. When asked what could be done to assist them, one of the respondents suggested better support for their children’s education to break the cycle of poverty that leads to homelessness. This was a rare view, as most of the homeless people interviewed expressed their wish for immediate and more direct interventions such as job creation, affordable accommodation and pensions or state grants.

5. Conclusions

This study confirms that the homeless population is not homogeneous but cuts across race, age, gender and class. The participants in the study came from a range of socio-economic backgrounds – the illiterate and the relatively educated, the unkempt and the well-groomed, the unskilled and the skilled but retrenched workers. Many hoped to find a job and earn something to provide for their families.

Those who are in the transitional phase of homelessness can still be assisted by a set of measures provided in time, such as job creation, better paid jobs and affordable accommodation. The social challenge of homelessness cannot be isolated from the broader context of massive unemployment and widespread poverty that characterises our society today. The homeless people we interviewed hoped that their circumstances could be improved mainly through some form of employment, self-employment or state grants. It would seem that high accommodation costs in cities like Pretoria and Rustenburg and high unemployment levels contribute to making people homeless. Any strategy that aims to eradicate this problem should tap into job creation and provision of affordable accommodation.

Acknowledgements

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