

DECODING HOMELESSNESS: Building understanding in Durban

Who are the people living on the streets of Durban, how many are there, where do they come from and how did they land up in this desolate situation? *Candice Rule* and *Furzana Timol* address the plight of homelessness in the city.

'I do not have [a] mother and father and I give up on life. Sometimes we take life for granted. I was staying with my stepmother and things were not too easy, so I just gave up. She was mistreating me and I just felt that I am useless. So, I just saw there is no hope. The only hope is the streets, so I went on the streets. I have been staying on the streets for a long time!' says Mhambi (not her real name), relating how she came to make the streets of Durban her 'home'.

Mhambi is among the 4 000 people defined as 'homeless' who participated in a large research project to establish the nature and extent of homelessness in Durban. Homelessness is more than the absence of a home. In this exploratory study, we present some of the findings of the project.

This study, entitled *iKbaya Lami: Understandings of homelessness in Durban*, was a collaborative initiative between the HSRC and eThekweni Municipality. It aimed to inform local and provincial decision-making around issues of homelessness.

Who is the homeless community?

Given the structural and economic challenges that exist in Durban, we included only those people who classified themselves as living on the street or who live in shelters; thus, anyone we found sleeping on the street, in parks, on the beach, or any other outdoor area, as well as people living in 'formal' shelters. 'Formal' shelters include public spaces with optional private accommodation for which people pay and receive a receipt,

but exclude abandoned buildings, overcrowded flats, and other spaces rented out daily.

We employed various methods, including interviewing participants on their life history over time and conducting focus group discussions.

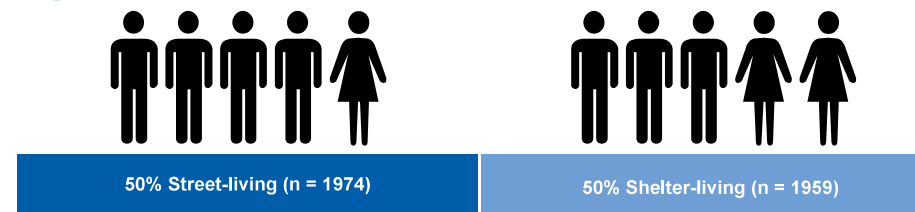
The face of homelessness in Durban

The study showed that there were roughly 4 000 homeless people in Durban at the time of the study. Approximately 50% of this population could be classified as 'primary' homeless – sleeping on the streets – and 50% as secondary homeless – shelter living. Notably, in the week preceding the census, 41% reported that they spent all nights in unsheltered locations and 42% spent all nights in shelters.

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A smaller proportion (15%) reported transitioning between these two locations and only 1% reported that they had spent at least one day a week at home. The proportions of primary and secondary homeless persons on the streets of Durban thus appear to be similar. In terms of gender, we found

Fig 1 Total number of homeless individuals in Durban

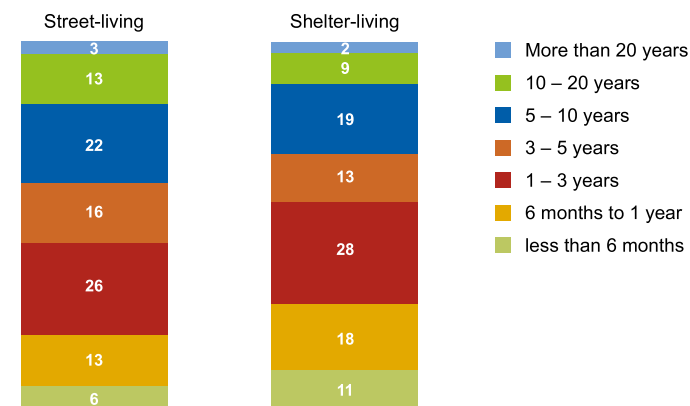


significantly more homeless males than females on the streets (88%) and in shelters (80%) with the majority between the ages of 19 and 34 years.

To determine patterns of homelessness, we assessed the participants' current length of stay on the streets or in shelters. For both street and shelter-living populations, the largest proportion reported episodic to chronic levels of homelessness of between one and three years (see Figure 2 below).

People that are newly homeless were more likely to end up in shelters. Of those living in shelters, 21% reported episodic homelessness, having been homeless for less than one year. A substantial proportion of street-living people report being chronically homeless, where 22% indicated that they have been homeless for between 5 and 10 years, 13% report being homeless for between 10 and 20 years and 3% report being homeless for more than 20 years.

Fig 2 Length of current homelessness episode



Homelessness does not discriminate

Our findings revealed that the homeless community of Durban is not a homogeneous group of substance abusers, thieves or criminals – a common misconception among the general population. Rather, people's reasons for becoming homeless were

varied and included challenges such as poverty, joblessness, experiences of family violence, abuse and neglect, and individual substance abuse.

Many of the homeless persons also indicated that they had come to the city of Durban in pursuit of a 'better life' which unfortunately failed to materialise. Given their inability to

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find a job, they were unable to pay for transport back to their home communities.

Helping people out of homelessness

Based on our findings, Durban's landscape of homelessness appears to be a combination of people who are episodically and chronically homeless, with fewer temporarily homeless persons. The findings reflect an equal proportion of primary and secondary homeless individuals.

The information presented here is important for the development of strategies to support individuals to move out of homelessness. The needs of people who are newly homeless are likely to differ from the needs of those who have spent a substantial portion of their lives on the streets/in shelters. A newly homeless person, for example, may require assistance in keeping their identification documents safe, while someone who has spent many years on the street may require assistance in obtaining a replacement identification document.

Besides the 'time' element of homelessness, we also need to recognise that there are a range of factors that contribute to homelessness and that 'the homeless' is not a homogeneous group. Prevention and interventions efforts for the homeless should thus include strategies that take into account not only the levels and patterns of homelessness but also the drivers of homelessness. It is only through such multi-level interventions that the plight of homelessness can be addressed.

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