

# The right to safety in the city. Homelessness and safety in the city: a developing countries perspective

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Contemporary Western lifestyles are largely compartmentalised into work and home. To a degree, concerns about safety in the city focus on safety when one leaves the security of home or work. For many, interaction with the raw, unprotected experience of the city can be minimised to a short walk to the bus or the car park or collective, protected shopping and dining. The city streets are patrolled and protected for their security and comfort. However, for many people, particularly in developing countries, home *is* the city and their experience of the streets is very different. In many cases, the very security systems set up to assure others of safety are used against the street sleeper and pavement dweller. Drawing on a study of homelessness in 9 developing countries by GURU at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne<sup>20</sup> this paper presents the dangers they experience (see for example Tipple and Speak 2004; Speak 2004).

There are between 100 million and 1 billion people homeless around the world, depending on the criteria used to count them. Whilst the higher number includes many millions of squatters, a lower figure includes a high percentage of those people living who live on the streets of the rapidly expanding cities around the world.

For example, in 1996 a survey of street dwellers in Bangladesh (ADB-LGED-GOB, 1996) enumerated 11,500 (later adjusted as 12,600) homeless people residing or sleeping at night in 105 locations in the Dhaka city. Table 1 summarizes their location for sleeping. It is evident from this table that the possible sleeping locations for extreme homeless people in Dhaka are heavily concentrated in a few types of public outdoor and indoor spaces. A little less than half of the surveyed homeless people were found living in ninety open footpaths. Nearly one-fifth of them were seen in seven public transport stations. The next notable location is the market centres. A study on disadvantaged women in eight cities and town found 79% of the respondents residing in open spaces and the rest in thatched shanties in slums. Open space includes railway station (19%), road side pavements (15%), behind houses (14%), in parks (8%), at river sides and in ferry points (8%), (READ, 2000, p.23).

**Table 1. Major Locations of Street Dwellers in Dhaka**

| <u>Types of locations</u> | <u>Number of homeless</u> | <u>Percentage of homeless</u> |
|---------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Open footpaths            | 5,441                     | 47.52                         |
| Transport stations        | 2,422                     | 21.15                         |
| Market centres            | 1450                      | 12.66                         |
| Graveyard/shrines         | 1108                      | 9.68                          |
| Open spaces (i.e. parks)  | 616                       | 5.38                          |
|                           | 66                        | 0.59                          |
| Religious centres         | 36                        | 0.31                          |
| Parking place/garages     | 36                        | 0.31                          |
| Play ground               | 14                        | 0.12                          |
| Constructions sites       | 60                        | 2.27                          |
| Others                    |                           |                               |
|                           | Total                     | 100.00                        |

**Source:** ADB-LGED-GOB, 1996, p. 180.

Those living on the streets experience a range of physical and emotional threats and dangers. In many countries, for example China, the act of sleeping on the street is illegal and anyone found sleeping

<sup>20</sup> The Nature, Extent and eradication of Homelessness in Developing Countries. Study sponsored by DFID (No.7905)

rough in an urban place is likely to be arrested. Where it is not actually illegal, there other mechanisms for legally removing people found sleeping rough. In India, for example the Bombay Prevention of Begging Act is used as a mechanism for arresting and imprisoning street sleepers. In Bangladesh, the Bengal Vagrancy Act, 1943 and Code of Criminal Procedure, 1898, serve the same purpose.

As table 1 shows, a survey by one NGO in Delhi shows that police harassment is the major problem faced by the homeless. Homeless people also reported that harassment increases when there is a need to 'clean up' the streets for the purposes of economic development or before prestigious occasions such as the Asian Games, when the Bombay Prevention of Begging Act was used liberally to remove many hundreds of people from the streets of Delhi.

Table 1. Problems faced at sleeping places

| <b>Problems faced at sleeping places</b> | <b>No. Of respondents</b> | <b>% Of respondents</b> |
|--|---------------------------|-------------------------|
| Police brutality                         | 386                       | 41%                     |
| Weather                                  | 326                       | 35%                     |
| Harassment by mafia                      | 66                        | 7%                      |
| Others                                   | 21                        | 2%                      |
| No problem                               | 107                       | 11%                     |
| No answer                                | 40                        | 4%                      |

Source: Aashrav Adhikar Abhivan. 2001

Whilst these Acts is often used by the authorities during organised 'clean up' campaigns, they are also open to abuse and it is common for street sleepers to have to pay 'protection' money to police. The amounts payable differ between cities. For example, securing a place on a pavement in Mumbai is more expensive than other Indian cities. Ten per cent of street sleepers surveyed by Kuruvilla (1991) in India made some kind of payments on a monthly basis. The police collected anything from Rs.1 to Rs.15 from a pavement dweller at a time. In addition, people also had to pay for water and use of toilets, as well as up to Rs.500 towards the materials cost of a rudimentary shelter. Some reported making monthly payments to municipal officials.

In all the countries in Tipple and Speak's (2004) study street sleepers reported being harassed and moved on, often even attacked and abused by both police and private security guards. Others, such as Kishwar (2001) report similar findings. In some cultures the dangers people face on the streets, coupled with the hugely negative public perception of street sleepers, contributes to 'hidden homelessness' and skews the gender ratio of the homeless population. For example, in Islamic countries such as Bangladesh homeless families will try to send women and girls to stay with relatives rather than subject them to the dangers of rape and kidnap, whilst the men and boys will take their chances on the street. The result is a false under-representation of women and girls in counts of homeless people and a false impression that homelessness is a predominantly single male phenomenon.

At a less extreme level it is common for subtle measures to be employed to deter street sleepers and pavement dwellers from settling in public places. For example, in one public park in South Africa the taps were removed from public conveniences to prevent homeless people from using water in an attempt to deter them sleeping in the park. In other instances people are employed to hose down pavements and grassed areas, so homeless people will not lie down to sleep.

The common public perception of homeless people, both in cities of the West and in less developed countries is that of beggar and villain. However, it is clear that, far from being perpetrators of crime and violence, homeless people are more likely to be victims of it. Nevertheless, the security and surveillance systems increasingly installed to watch over our urban public spaces do not serve to protect homeless people but to persecute them.

## References

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