

Living on the street: sociodemographic, economic, and motivational aspects

Viver em situação de rua: aspectos sociodemográficos, econômicos e motivações
Vivir en situación de calle: aspectos sociodemográficos, económicos y motivaciones

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Abstract

Objective: To assess sociodemographic and economic aspects and motivations for living on the streets. **Methods:** A cross-sectional study of 127 homeless people in the city of Teresina, Piauí, Brazil. Data were collected in person between October 2019 and March 2020. A descriptive analysis of the results obtained was performed. **Results:** The sociodemographic profile observed was that of male, single, brown, with children, with a low level of education and income. The main reasons for homelessness were family conflicts, use of psychoactive substances and unemployment. **Conclusion:** The phenomenon of homelessness is perceived as a broad and complex process influenced by biopsychosocial events that occur throughout the life cycle, which requires a holistic approach by health professionals towards people in this situation.

Descriptors: Poorly housed people; Socioeconomic factors; Public Health; Social Vulnerability.

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Whats is already known on this?

The homeless population has increased over the years, which is an aggravating factor in the context of social vulnerability.

What this study adds?

This study presents the sociodemographic and economic characteristics of people who are poorly housed in Teresina-Piauí, as well as focusing on the motivating situations for this condition.



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Resumo

Objetivo: Avaliar os aspectos sociodemográficos, econômicos e as motivações para viver em situação de rua. **Métodos:** Estudo transversal, realizado com 127 pessoas em situação de rua na cidade de Teresina, Piauí, Brasil. A coleta de dados ocorreu presencialmente entre outubro de 2019 e março de 2020. Foi realizada análise descritiva dos resultados obtidos. **Resultados:** O perfil sociodemográfico observado foi o de pessoas do sexo masculino, solteiras, pardas, que possuíam filhos, apresentavam baixo nível de escolaridade e de renda. As principais motivações para estar em situação de rua foram os conflitos familiares, uso de substâncias psicoativas, bem como desemprego. **Conclusão:** Percebe-se o fenômeno da falta de moradia como um processo amplo e complexo, influenciado por eventos biopsicossociais ocorridos ao longo do ciclo vital, que demanda olhar holístico dos profissionais de saúde para com as pessoas nessa situação.

Descritores: Pessoas Mal Alojadas; Fatores Socioeconômicos; Saúde Pública; Vulnerabilidade Social.

Resumen

Objetivo: Evaluar los aspectos sociodemográficos, económicos y las motivaciones para vivir en la calle. **Métodos:** Se realizó un estudio transversal con 127 personas sin hogar en la ciudad de Teresina, Piauí, Brasil. Los datos fueron recogidos en persona entre octubre de 2019 y marzo de 2020. Se llevó a cabo un análisis descriptivo de los resultados obtenidos. **Resultados:** El perfil sociodemográfico observado fue el de personas de sexo masculino, solteras, de piel morena, con hijos, y con bajo nivel de escolaridad e ingresos. Los principales motivos para estar sin hogar fueron los conflictos familiares, el consumo de sustancias psicoactivas y el desempleo. **Conclusión:** El fenómeno del sinhogarismo es percibido como un proceso amplio y complejo, influenciado por eventos biopsicosociales que ocurren a lo largo del ciclo vital, lo que requiere un enfoque holístico por parte de los profesionales de la salud hacia las personas en esta situación.

Descriptor: Personas con Mala Vivienda; Factores Socioeconómicos; Salud Pública; Vulnerabilidad Social.

INTRODUCTION

The number of homeless individuals has increased considerably in recent years, representing a significant urban issue. In Brazil, the estimated number of homeless individuals in 2020 was 221.869, representing a 140% increase from the period between September 2012 and March 2020. ⁽¹⁾

A number of factors can contribute to an increase in homelessness. These include unemployment, violence, alcoholism, drug use, broken family ties, mental illness, and catastrophic natural disasters. In such circumstances, homelessness may be seen as a viable coping strategy. ^(2,6)

It is widely acknowledged that the motivations behind homelessness are numerous and intricate, emerging from a multitude of adverse experiences that, when accumulated over the course of an individual's life, culminate in a complete dissolution of their connections with their surroundings and those within their immediate environment. Furthermore, studies demonstrate that various socioeconomic and life characteristics are intertwined and influence the probability of an individual experiencing homelessness. Factors such as education, income, and employment status can be significant determinants of homelessness. ^(7, 8-9,10)

It is important to note that the profile of homeless people commonly described in the literature is that of unemployed individuals experiencing deprivation. These individuals often have guaranteed income from various types of benefits, which are frequently spent on psychoactive substances such as alcohol and cigarettes. In some cases, individuals leave the shelter or hostel to live on the streets due to alcoholism. ⁽¹¹⁾

In response to this issue, the National Policy for the Homeless Population (PNPSR) was established in 2009. One of the policy's objectives is to facilitate research, production, and dissemination of knowledge about homelessness.

It is clear that there is a gap in the scientific literature on studies that investigate the reality experienced by this population and the factors that contribute to this condition of living on the streets, both in Brazil and internationally.

The objective of this study was to evaluate the sociodemographic and economic factors, as well as the motivations underlying the decision to live on the streets.

METHODS

This is a descriptive cross-sectional study. This study was conducted in accordance with the Strengthening the Reporting of Observational Studies in Epidemiology (STROBE) guidelines. Data were collected from homeless people support institutions and a municipal shelter in the city of Teresina, Piauí, Brazil, between October 2019 and March 2020. ⁽¹³⁾

The sample calculation yielded a total of 212 participants. However, in light of the recommendations pertaining to the ongoing pandemic, the data collection process was ceased. Consequently, the final sample comprised 127 individuals experiencing homelessness. The study population was limited to individuals who self-identified as homeless and were at least 18 years of age, regardless of gender. Individuals under the influence of psychoactive substances were excluded from participation.

A structured questionnaire was developed, comprising both open-ended and closed-ended questions. It sought to elicit information on the factors that contribute to homelessness, including sociodemographic and economic aspects, as well as the motivations underlying homelessness.

To ensure the accuracy and precision of the data analysis, the information was tabulated with double typing using Microsoft Excel® spreadsheet software, a method that effectively minimizes the potential for errors. Once the requisite corrections had been made, the data was exported to the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 22.0, for statistical analysis. A descriptive analysis was conducted.

This study is a component of a macroproject entitled "Use of Alcohol and Other Drugs, Common Mental Disorders, and Violence Among the Homeless Population." It has been granted formal authorization from the Municipal Secretariat of Citizenship, Social Assistance and Integrated Policies (SEMCASPI) of Teresina-PI, and has been approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Federal University of Piauí (Opinion no. 3.152.268, 2019).

The research participants were informed of the study's objectives and procedures, and provided informed consent by signing the Informed Consent Form, thereby ensuring adherence to the principles of ethical rigor and anonymity.

RESULTS

The sociodemographic characteristics of the 127 homeless individuals revealed a predominance of males (85.0%), adults with an average age of 39.2 years (standard deviation of 11.9 years), single (59.1%), brown (60.6%), with a low level of schooling (58.3%), who had no income (38.6%) or depended on government benefits (29.1%). A total of 54.3% of the respondents had children. The data are presented in Table 1 for reference.

Table 1. Sociodemographic and economic characteristics of the homeless population. Teresina, PI, Brazil, 2019-2020

Variables	Category	Quantity	Percentage
Gender	Female	19	15,0%
	Male	108	85,0%
Age	Mean ± SD	39,25 ± 11,96	
	Median	37,0	
Marital Status	Single	75	59,1%
	Stable Union	20	15,7%
	Separated/divorced	28	22,1%
Skin color/ Race	widow	4	3,2%
	White	22	17,3%
	Black	27	21,3%
	Asian	1	0,8%
	Brown	77	60,6%
Schooling	Illiterate	9	7,1%
	Up to elementary school	74	58,3%
	Up to high school	40	31,5%
	College education	4	3,1%
Income	Pensioner (minimum wage)	11	8,7%
	Benefit from the government	37	29,1%
Children	Self-employed	30	23,6%
	No	49	38,6%
	Yes	69	54,3%

Source: Elaborated by the authors (2023).

The most frequently cited reasons for becoming homeless were family conflicts (39.4%), substance use (24.4%), and unemployment (19.4%). Table 2 indicates that the remaining motivations were less

prevalent, with other factors accounting for 8.3% of cases, violence for 6.1%, natural disasters for 6.0%, and mental health problems for 1.7%.

Table 2. Motivations for homelessness among the homeless population. Teresina, PI, Brazil, 2019-2020

Motivations	Quantity	Percentage
Family conflicts	71	39,4%
Alcohol and other drugs	44	24,4%
Unemployment	35	19,4%
Violence	11	6,1%
Natural disaster	10	6,0%
Mental illness	3	1,7%
Other	15	8,3%

Source: Elaborated by the authors (2023).

It is important to note that the percentages shown in Table 2 refer to the total sample, but participants had the option of answering more than one option, so the figures shown can be viewed independently.

DISCUSSION

Homeless people live on the margins of stigma, prejudice, social exclusion, extreme poverty and are vulnerable to problems related to the use of psychoactive substances. This study sought to assess the sociodemographic and economic aspects and motivations for living on the street in a capital city in the Northeast of Brazil. Street life must be considered in order to better understand the adaptive processes of individuals over the course of their lives.

The sociodemographic aspects of the participants revealed a group of individuals who were predominantly adult males, with low levels of education, living alone, unemployed and on low incomes or dependent on some form of social welfare.

Living on the street is a historical problem that further compromises the health of individuals who need very special attention. The reasons why individuals end up living on the street are due to various biopsychosocial factors, but are strongly influenced by social issues that are often inseparable. ^(14,15)

In this study, the majority of individuals were male, and there is evidence to support this finding, such that being male can increase the likelihood of reporting homelessness by up to 2.6 times compared to females. In addition, masculinity, which is linked to social imaginaries related to issues such as money and providing for the family, can be affected. When the individual finds himself on the street, this masculinity tends to collapse, which can be a factor that generates suffering. ^(3,5,9,16,17)

In terms of marital status, the majority were living alone (single, separated/divorced and widowed). These data are reminiscent of family relationships, and the lack of ties and family conflict ultimately increases the risk of homelessness. Although having a partner is part of social support and a protective factor against various health and well-being problems, the absence of a partner can almost double a person's risk of homelessness over the course of their lifetime. ⁽⁹⁾

In terms of race/skin color, brown people had the highest percentages in the results of this study. In this sense, a study conducted in Brazil highlighted that people with brown skin were also more prevalent among the homeless people surveyed. ⁽³⁾

In addition, low levels of schooling have been described as intrinsic to the family history of this population and can contribute to the triggering of various factors such as unemployment, family sustainability and precarious quality of life and well-being, as well as almost doubling the likelihood of homelessness throughout one's life. On the other hand, higher levels of schooling were associated with a lower risk of homelessness. ^(4,9)

With regard to the socioeconomic context, the results of this study generally confirm data in the literature to the effect that the majority of the unemployed may be living in extreme poverty. ⁽¹¹⁾

People living on the street, who are in the midst of social vulnerability, share the characteristics of low income, precarious family ties, living on the edge of poverty as a result of profound social inequality, and may be exposed to elements that contribute to vulnerability, such as drug problems, violence, and mental illness. ⁽¹⁸⁾

The presence of family conflict among the reasons for homelessness observed in this study has previously been described as one of the main reasons for living on the streets. The factors associated with

or triggering these conflicts are diverse: institutionalization, unemployment, non-heteronormative sexual orientation and gender identity, behavioral disorders, disagreements, and the use of PAS (psychoactive substances).^(2,4,5,19-20)

In this sense, data from the National Survey on the Homeless Population, developed by the Ministry of Social Development and Fight against Hunger (2007 - 2008), showed some factors that contribute to homelessness, such as alcoholism and/or drug use (35.5%), unemployment (29.8%) and family conflicts (29.1%). Of those surveyed, 71.3% identified at least one of these factors as one of the three main causes.⁽²¹⁾

The use of psychoactive substances was the second main reason for homelessness in this sample. The use of PAS has been described as a fundamental determinant of street life.^(3,16,20)

In addition, homelessness can occur as a result of a series of adverse events over the course of an individual's life cycle that contribute to the ultimate process of a total breakdown in their relationship with their environment.⁽⁷⁾

This concept is illustrated by the example of unemployment and PAS abuse, which were identified in this study as two of the main causes of homelessness, and which can also be triggers of conflict in the home. This illustrates how the interplay of socio-demographic and economic characteristics, along with events that occur in a person's life, can all contribute to the breakdown of family and social relationships, with the end result being homelessness.^(2,22)

One study found that the primary cause of homelessness was the breakdown or weakening of family relationships due to circumstances and life choices that created an imbalance in those relationships. There are reports of how situations of family discord (motivated by PAS abuse) and weakened interpersonal relationships, sometimes coupled with loss of employment or a desire for freedom, culminated in the participants becoming homeless.⁽²³⁾

The economic factor plays a role in the motivations for homelessness, not only in this study but also as highlighted by other authors, with almost double the odds of reporting lifetime homelessness when unemployed.^(9,20,23-24)

It can be seen that events in a person's life, as well as their personal characteristics, contribute to their motivations for homelessness, highlighting more and more how the particularities of the individual, their social and life characteristics, play an important role in determining their housing instability.

Furthermore, although the experience of mental comorbidity was the least reported motivation in this sample, its influence is well described in the literature. In one study, mental distress was described as a trigger for family conflict (the main cause of homelessness in the study in question) in 19.7% of cases. There is an accumulation of life events (represented by mental distress) that leads to a breakdown in relationships with the environment (characterized by family conflict), which results in the participants leaving home.⁽²⁾

Another important motivation identified was the issue of violence. The literature indicates that the experience of violence (whether physical, sexual and/or psychological) is an important factor that can increase the risk of homelessness and links the perpetration of violent acts to factors such as non-heteronormative sexual orientation and gender-based violence/domestic/marital violence.^(5,19,25,26)

In their interrelationship with life history, sociodemographic and economic characteristics, and home abandonment, specifically assessing domestic violence, reports describe how concerns about potential abuse and revictimization, life experiences marked by traumatic violent events, fear of abuse/aggression (sometimes involving the children) at home (by spouses), influenced victims' conceptualization of a safe environment.^(23,27)

Regarding natural disasters as a cause of housing instability, it is known that catastrophic natural disasters cause immense damage and can trigger a large number of homeless people. In addition, the rental of shelters after natural disasters and the resettlement of victims are problems that are recognized to be complex on a large scale.⁽⁶⁾

It should be reiterated that all the reasons that could lead an individual to leave his or her home and live on the street are relevant and worthy of attention by the State, through the creation and maintenance of public policies, actions to support this population and incentives for research on their living conditions and health. They are also relevant to society, given the clear social invisibility into which the chronically homeless are inserted.

Factors such as increased rates of co-morbidities and hospitalizations, as well as decreased levels of mental health, education, and social well-being associated with homelessness, should serve as a call to

action for nurses in all settings of care. It is essential that they recognize housing as a factor directly related to health care and pay attention to this forgotten segment of society, thereby promoting more holistic care that is responsive to the needs and complaints of the homeless. ^(20,28)

A limitation of this study is its quantitative approach, which does not allow us to go deeper into the determinants and motivations of street life in an individualized way. Additionally, the data should be interpreted with caution, since the study was carried out in a region that has its own characteristics and is different from others.

This study makes important contributions because it evaluates social and life characteristics with the causes of homelessness, thus providing scientific support for the construction of guidelines that allow a more humanized care of the homeless. It also makes it possible to add nursing knowledge to that of other fields of knowledge in order to strengthen the scientific literature on this public, with a view to health promotion and educational actions that strengthen the possibility of new life projects for these individuals.

CONCLUSION

The homeless population surveyed was predominantly male, adult, single, brown, with low levels of education, no income and with children. The most common reasons for homelessness were family conflicts, the use of psychoactive substances and unemployment.

The phenomenon of homelessness is seen as a broad and complex process influenced by biopsychosocial events that occur throughout the life cycle, which requires a holistic approach by health professionals to people in this situation.

CONTRIBUTIONS

Contributed to the conception or design of the study/research: Fernandes MA, Santos JGR. Contributed to data collection: Fernandes MA, Santos JGR. Contributed to the analysis and/or interpretation of data: Fernandes MA, Santos JGR, Costa APC, Pillon SC. Contributed to article writing or critical review: Fernandes MA, Santos JGR, Costa APC, Pillon SC. Final approval of the version to be published: Fernandes MA, Santos JGR, Costa APC, Pillon SC.

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