



PRESS RELEASE

New Delhi, 3 August 2021

Homeless Persons Experienced Severe Hunger, Destitution, and State Apathy During India's Second Wave of the Pandemic: Survey

A study conducted by **Housing and Land Rights Network (HLRN)** reveals that people living in homelessness in Delhi experienced violations of their human rights during the second wave of the coronavirus pandemic, in April and May 2021. In the absence of adequate state support, homeless persons continue to suffer from severe food insecurity, loss of livelihoods, adverse health impacts, and other forms of deprivation and destitution.

Since the onset of the pandemic, persons living in homelessness have been struggling at multiple levels, including from the absence of a secure home to stay protected in, and from hunger, livelihood loss, and inadequate healthcare. The pandemic's second wave and resultant lockdowns in India further exacerbated their challenges. Given widespread reports of growing distress among Delhi's homeless population, HLRN decided to conduct a rapid assessment survey to better understand their plight and to document the impacts of the second wave and lockdown on their access to food, work/livelihoods, healthcare, and education. From 23 June to 1 July 2021, the HLRN team carried out telephonic interviews with 115 homeless persons (72 men and 43 women) living in shelters and on the streets of Delhi.

Main Findings of the Study

- 1. Hunger Crisis During the Lockdown:** The majority of persons living on the streets of Delhi suffered from acute hunger during the 2021 lockdown, in violation of their human rights to food, health, and life. **Nine per cent of those living outdoors revealed that they were unable to eat even a single meal daily during the lockdown, while 58 per cent of them stated that they were able to secure only one meal per day.** Even after the lockdown in Delhi was lifted, as of 1 July 2021, 16 per cent of the participants living on the streets reported being able to afford only a single meal per day while 62 per cent of them had access to two meals a day. **Almost 98 per cent of the homeless people surveyed do not have access to milk for their children.**

During the lockdown, only 13 per cent of those living on the streets arranged their meals with **government assistance. The majority (46 per cent) depended on food from charitable organizations.** After the lockdown, 64 per cent of the participants living outdoors said they were able to organize their own meals while others continue to rely on organizations (23 per cent) and the government (2 per cent) for food.

- 2. Loss of Livelihoods:** Almost **91 per cent of the respondents reported having no work or income during the lockdown**, while 8 per cent stated that their livelihood was partially affected. As of 1 July 2021, even after easing of lockdown restrictions, 46 per cent of the people did not have any work.
- 3. Impact on Health and Low Rate of Vaccination:** Of the people interviewed, 66 per cent did not have sanitizers, 86 per cent of them did not own a thermometer, and 87 per cent did not have basic medicines for fever and other ailments. At the time of this survey, over 40 per cent of the homeless persons interviewed did not know about the COVID-19 vaccines and almost 83 per cent of them had not been vaccinated.

They cited several reasons for not being vaccinated, including difficulties with registration (50 per cent), vaccine hesitancy and fear (43 per cent), and lack of requisite documents for registration (20 per cent). Twenty per cent of those living in shelters and 17 per cent of those living outdoors stated that they had received the first dose of vaccine.

Of the homeless persons interviewed by HLRN, 36 per cent do not have an Aadhaar card and 44 per cent do not have an election card.

4. **Lack of Shelter and Police Harassment:** Approximately 82 per cent of those surveyed live outdoors, mostly on pavements; only 17 per cent of them live in shelters. About 28 per cent of the respondents living on the streets reported facing police harassment during the lockdown.
5. **Violation of the Right to Education:** All respondents with children highlighted the adverse impact of the pandemic on their education. Nearly 13 per cent of them reported that their children have had to drop out of school because of the lack of smartphones, access to data, and other challenges related to living without housing.
6. **Impact on Women:** Challenges faced by homeless women were exacerbated during the 2021 lockdown. All the women surveyed by HLRN live outdoors. The majority of them (63 per cent) ate only one meal a day during the lockdown, while 7 per cent of them could not eat daily. Reports received by HLRN also indicate that pregnant women were unable to access healthcare during the lockdown. Only 21 per cent of the women interviewed had received the first dose of the COVID vaccine, at the time of the survey.

Recommendations

Based on the demands of homeless persons interviewed, Housing and Land Rights Network would like to propose the following recommendations for the central government and Delhi government:

- Conduct a **comprehensive survey** of people living in homelessness to determine their needs.
- Adopt a **‘Housing First’** approach that prioritizes housing for homeless persons in all schemes.
- Develop housing options along a **‘continuum of housing’** – including hostels, short-stay homes, and access to subsidized rental and ownership housing with access to adequate finance.
- Establish **community kitchens**—in proportion to the homeless population—to provide subsidized meals to those in need. Distribute **free milk and meals to homeless children**.
- Make all **government welfare schemes** accessible to homeless persons, irrespective of documentation and proof of address/residence.
- Ensure that homeless persons have **universal coverage under the Public Distribution System** and their children have access to the **Integrated Child Development Services** scheme.
- Introduce an **urban employment guarantee act** and provide **unemployment allowances** for those who have lost their livelihoods, including as a result of the pandemic.
- Facilitate the **provision of ‘smart’ devices**, including smartphones and tablets, and free data cards to **all homeless children** to enable their participation in online classes as long as schools remain closed.
- Ensure free universal COVID-19 vaccination for all homeless persons across the country.

Housing and Land Rights Network hopes that the findings from this rapid assessment survey will draw the attention of the state to the plight of those living in homelessness and encourage the formulation of policies for their adequate housing and social protection during the pandemic and after. While this study was conducted in Delhi, the findings are likely to be similar across India and thus the recommendations also hold national relevance.

The survey report is available at:

https://www.hlrn.org.in/documents/Homelessness_Delhi_Pandemic_Second_Wave.pdf

For more information, please contact: 95822-29754 / 98319-43885

Housing and Land Rights Network

G-18/1 Nizamuddin West, New Delhi – 110013, India

contact@hlrn.org.in | www.hlrn.org.in | @HLRN_India