

# Resilient Home Seekers: Social Work Approaches to Supporting the Homeless and Vulnerable Populations in Harare Zimbabwe

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## Abstract

This study explores the role of social work in supporting homeless and vulnerable populations, focusing on the resilience-building strategies employed by social workers. Through qualitative research methods, the responses of participants, including social workers and individuals experiencing homelessness, are analyzed to provide a comprehensive understanding of effective interventions. Interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) were used in gathering data. The study population included 20 social workers and homeless people in Harare suburbs. The study found key social work approaches that include crisis intervention, supportive housing programs, advocacy, and policy engagement as well as resource mobilization and referral services. The study established that homelessness in Harare Zimbabwe is mainly caused by economic instability, urbanization and population growth, and political instability. The existing social work approaches were found to be effective though their efficiency is negatively affected by limited resources and economic challenges. It was recommended that the government should allocate more resources to

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mental health and housing programs, particularly those that utilize a supportive housing model, to ensure that vulnerable populations have access to necessary services.

### **Keywords**

Homelessness, Social Work, Resilience, Vulnerable Populations, Intervention Strategies.

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### **Introduction and Background**

Homelessness is a growing social issue with far-reaching implications for individuals and communities. Various socioeconomic, psychological, and systemic factors contribute to homelessness, including unemployment, mental illness, substance abuse, and a lack of affordable housing (Smith et al., 2018; Jones, 2020). Homelessness is a growing global crisis, with over 1.6 billion people lacking adequate housing. Vulnerable populations, including women, children, the elderly, and LGBTQ+ individuals, face heightened risks. In the United States, approximately 652,000 people experience homelessness on any given night, with families representing a significant portion of this figure. Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified homelessness, pushing many into precarious situations due to job losses and health crises. In countries like South Africa, urbanization has led to informal settlements, with 14% of the urban population living in slums.

In Zimbabwe, the situation is particularly dire. Economic challenges, including hyperinflation and unemployment, have led to an increase in homelessness. Estimates suggest that over 1.5 million people in Zimbabwe are homeless, with many living in makeshift shelters or unsafe conditions. The situation is exacerbated by a lack of affordable housing and social services. Addressing these trends requires comprehensive strategies, including affordable housing initiatives, social safety nets, and targeted support for marginalized groups. Without urgent action, the cycle of homelessness will continue to perpetuate inequality and vulnerability among the most affected populations.

The major factors that influence the problem of homelessness as evidenced in the literature include economic instability, lack of affordable housing, systemic barriers, natural disasters, and climate change (Zhao, 2023). Susser, Lovell, and Conover (2021) argued that developing countries such as Zimbabwe experience homelessness mainly because of a lack of stable housing and the much pronounced economic instability in the country. The impact of homelessness extends beyond the lack of shelter (Susser et al., 2021). It affects health, education, and overall well-being (Gunhidzirai, 2023). Individuals experiencing homelessness often face significant physical and mental health challenges, with limited

access to healthcare services. For instance, children in homeless situations are particularly affected, facing disruptions in education and higher risks of exploitation (Mchale, 2021; Nicaise et al., 2022). This presents a huge gap that demands the efforts of social workers to initiate the implementation of specific interventions that would transform the lives of the homeless and vulnerable populations.

Social work interventions play a crucial role in enhancing resilience by providing emotional, financial, and social support, fostering self-efficacy, and facilitating community integration (Freitas & Downey, 2019). Social workers help individuals develop resilience by encouraging adaptive coping strategies, enhancing their self-awareness, and building connections with support systems. Resilience is the ability of individuals to recover from adversity and adapt positively despite challenges (Ungar, 2017). In the context of homelessness, resilience encompasses personal agency, coping mechanisms, and access to supportive services that enable individuals to regain stability. This study aims to explore the pressing need for effective social work interventions and highlight the significance of resilience-building strategies in helping individuals navigate their circumstances.

The major objectives of the paper are;

- i. To explore social work approaches that can be implemented in supporting the homeless and vulnerable populations
- ii. To investigate the causes of homelessness
- iii. To evaluate the effectiveness of social work approaches in supporting the homeless and vulnerable populations.

### **Trauma-informed care approach**

Trauma-informed care (TIC) is an approach that recognizes the widespread impact of trauma on individuals and emphasizes creating a safe and supportive environment for healing (Alfred and Masamha, 2024). It is built on the understanding that many individuals experiencing homelessness have encountered significant trauma, including physical and emotional abuse, neglect, domestic violence, and systemic discrimination. The key principles of TIC include safety, trustworthiness, empowerment, collaboration, and cultural sensitivity. Social workers play a crucial role in implementing TIC principles when working with homeless individuals creating safe environments, building trust relationships, and empowering vulnerable populations/homeless. TIC provides a framework for understanding the complexities of homelessness by addressing underlying trauma, leading to more effective support (Tlhapane,

2022). Research indicates that TIC can lead to better mental health outcomes, increased engagement in services, and greater overall well-being among homeless individuals through the efforts of social workers. Also, Nam and English (2022) argue that TIC encourages individuals to build resilience and take control of their lives, which is crucial for long-term stability.

### **Methodology**

The research employs a qualitative methodology to gain a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of homeless individuals and the perspectives of social workers. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth exploration of the complex social issue of homelessness, providing rich, detailed narratives that quantitative methods may not capture (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Purposive sampling was employed to select participants based on their lived experiences and professional roles. The study involved 20 people (social workers and homeless people). Social workers with direct experience in homelessness interventions and individuals experiencing homelessness were included to ensure a diverse range of perspectives in Harare Zimbabwe. Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted to allow participants to share their experiences in detail while ensuring consistency in core topics. Thematic analysis was conducted to identify recurring themes and patterns, which were then categorized into broader themes such as challenges, resilience-building strategies, and systemic barriers.

### **Findings**

#### **Social work approaches that can be implemented in supporting the homeless and vulnerable populations.**

The study solicited findings about the social work approaches that can be implemented in supporting the homeless and vulnerable populations in Harare Zimbabwe. The interviews and the FGDs with the majority of social workers and homeless people revealed key approaches such as crisis intervention, supportive housing programs, advocacy, and policy engagement as well as resource mobilization and referral services.

Crisis intervention is about immediate support. We assess the urgent needs of the individual, whether it's finding emergency shelter, accessing food, or ensuring their safety. It is crucial to act quickly to stabilize their situation before we can work on long-term solutions (Interviewed Social Workers).

Supportive housing is a game-changer. It provides a stable foundation where individuals can begin to rebuild their lives. We work closely with clients to help them navigate the application process and connect them with services like counseling and job training once they're housed (Interviewed Social Worker).

I have noticed more conversations about homelessness. Social workers have been out there talking to people, and it feels like there's more support. I think it helps to have someone fighting for our rights and needs (FGD respondent/Homeless Persons).

Social workers play a role in linking us with resources where we can find shelter or join supportive programs for affordable housing to put us in places of safety especially children who live on the streets (FGD Respondent/Homeless Persons).

The insights shared by both social workers and homeless individuals highlight the critical role that immediate support and long-term strategies play in addressing homelessness. Crisis intervention is essential for stabilizing individuals in urgent situations, ensuring that their immediate needs such as shelter, food, and safety are met. This swift action provides a necessary foundation for moving forward. Supportive housing emerges as a transformative solution, offering not just a roof over one's head but also a pathway for individuals to rebuild their lives through access to services like counseling and job training.

Crisis intervention is a critical first step in addressing homelessness. Social workers highlight the necessity of assessing urgent needs, such as finding emergency shelter and ensuring safety. This aligns with findings from Mupedziswa and Mushunje (2021) who discuss how timely interventions can stabilize individuals and prevent further deterioration of their circumstances. The literature emphasizes that without immediate support, individuals may face increased risks, including health complications and prolonged homelessness.

The concept of supportive housing as a "game-changer" is supported by extensive research. Studies have shown that providing stable housing significantly improves outcomes for homeless individuals, allowing them to access necessary services like counseling and job training. For instance, Charamba, Mwapaura, Simango, and Risinamhodzi (2024) document the effectiveness of supportive housing in addressing the needs of chronically homeless individuals, noting that such programs lead to better health and social outcomes. The perspectives of homeless individuals underscore the importance of advocacy and resource

mobilization. They express appreciation for social workers' efforts to engage with the community and fight for their rights, which fosters a sense of hope and support.

### **Causes of Homelessness in Harare Zimbabwe**

The study established that homelessness in Harare Zimbabwe is mainly caused by economic instability, urbanization and population growth, and political instability. Economic instability is a predominant cause of homelessness in Harare. One of the interviewed social workers highlighted that;

Over the past few decades, Zimbabwe has experienced severe economic challenges, characterized by hyperinflation, high unemployment rates, and declining living standards. The collapse of key economic sectors, particularly agriculture and manufacturing, has led to widespread poverty.

According to the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe (2020), the unemployment rate has reached alarming levels, with many individuals unable to secure stable employment. This economic environment has resulted in an inability to afford housing, forcing many to seek shelter in informal settlements or on the streets. Furthermore, the lack of job opportunities has pushed individuals into the informal economy, where wages are often insufficient to meet basic needs. Similarly, the World Bank (2021) highlights that informal employment does not provide the security or benefits necessary to support stable housing, exacerbating the risk of homelessness.

The FGD participants highlighted that urbanization and urban population growth have highly worsened homelessness in Harare. During the discussion, these responses were captured;

Urbanization has made it hard for people like me to find a place to live. More people are coming to the city every day, but there aren't enough houses. I used to stay with my family, but they can't support me anymore because they're struggling too. Now, I often sleep on the streets or in makeshift shelters.

It is much harder to find work now. There are too many people competing for the same low-paying jobs. Even when I try to get a job, employers often overlook me because I don't have a permanent address or because I look homeless. Urbanization has brought more opportunities, but they seem to be for others, not for us.

The responses from homeless individuals provide a poignant illustration of the challenges posed by urbanization in Harare. The first statement highlights the direct impact of increased

migration to the city, which has resulted in a severe housing shortage. As more people flock to urban areas seeking better opportunities, the demand for affordable housing has surged, yet the supply has not kept pace. This mismatch forces many individuals into precarious living situations, such as sleeping on the streets or in makeshift shelters. The mention of families unable to provide support further underscores the pervasive nature of economic hardship, suggesting that even traditional safety nets are failing under the strain of urbanization. It is evident that urbanization in Harare has created a dual-edged scenario: while it has the potential to drive economic growth and development, it simultaneously exacerbates issues of homelessness and unemployment for the most vulnerable. The responses indicate that increased migration to urban areas has outstripped the available housing supply. This finding is consistent with research by UN-Habitat (2020), which notes that urbanization often leads to the proliferation of informal settlements and inadequate housing. The mention of families being unable to offer support reflects broader economic trends identified by Muleya and Mlilo (2023), who argue that economic instability in Zimbabwe has eroded traditional safety nets.

### **Effectiveness of social work approaches in supporting the homeless and vulnerable populations**

Social work plays an instrumental role in addressing the complex needs of the homeless and vulnerable populations. The majority of the study participants expressed satisfaction with the existing strategies for enhancing the lives of vulnerable populations. The key strategies that were rated in terms of their effectiveness included; crisis intervention, supportive housing programs, advocacy and policy engagement, and resource mobilization and referral services. The responses below were captured during the interviews and the discussions;

Crisis intervention is vital in our work. When someone is facing homelessness, they're often in a state of panic. Our immediate goal is to stabilize their situation whether that means finding emergency shelter or connecting them with mental health services. I've seen first-hand how quickly a person can shift from despair to hope with the right support at the right time (Interviewed Social Worker).

Advocacy is essential. Many of our clients are unaware of their rights or the resources available to them. By engaging with policymakers, we can influence changes that benefit the homeless community. For instance, when we pushed



for increased funding for mental health services, it directly impacted many of our clients' lives (Interviewed Social Worker).

The referrals I received from my social worker opened doors for me. I got connected to a job training program and food assistance. Without those resources, I wouldn't have known where to start. It's made a big difference in my life (FGD respondent).

When I was in crisis, the social worker stepped in and helped me find a place to stay right away. I was scared and didn't know where to turn. That immediate help made a huge difference. It felt like someone cared (FGD respondent).

The findings gathered from interviews with social workers and focus group discussions (FGD) with homeless individuals highlight critical aspects of social work practice that resonate with existing literature in the field. Social workers emphasize the importance of crisis intervention for individuals facing homelessness, noting that immediate support can stabilize clients during moments of panic and despair. Homeless individuals reported that timely assistance from social workers had a profound impact, providing a sense of care and direction. Recent literature underscores the significance of crisis intervention as a foundational aspect of social work practice. Studies indicate that timely and effective crisis responses can lead to improved mental health outcomes and facilitate access to necessary resources (Harris & De Jong, 2020). The literature supports the notion that immediate assistance can help individuals regain a sense of control and hope. While the interviews reflect positive outcomes from crisis intervention, some literature critiques the sustainability of such interventions, arguing that they may provide short-term relief without addressing underlying issues such as systemic poverty or lack of affordable housing (Burt, 2021).

Social workers highlighted the crucial role of advocacy in educating clients about their rights and mobilizing resources through policy changes. Increased funding for mental health services was cited as a direct benefit of these efforts. The importance of advocacy in social work is well-documented. The literature emphasizes that social workers not only serve as direct service providers but also as advocates who can drive systemic change (Reisch, 2020). Engaging with policymakers enables social workers to influence legislation that directly benefits vulnerable populations, aligning with findings that advocate for increased mental health funding. However, some studies indicate that social workers may face challenges in advocacy due to bureaucratic constraints or limited resources, which can impede their ability to effect change (Gunhidzirai, 2023). This contrast highlights the need for social workers to



navigate complex systems while advocating for their clients, a reality not fully captured in the positive testimonials from the social workers in this study.

### **Recommendations to Social Work**

- Schools of social work should provide ongoing training for social workers in crisis intervention techniques to ensure they are equipped to handle acute situations effectively. This includes mental health first aid and de-escalation strategies.
- Develop integrated service models that combine crisis intervention with long-term support, such as mental health services, job training, and substance use treatment, to address the root causes of homelessness.
- Establish and maintain comprehensive referral networks that facilitate easy access to essential services, ensuring that social workers can quickly connect clients with resources like job training and healthcare.

### **Recommendations to the Government and relevant stakeholders**

- The government should allocate more resources to mental health and housing programs, particularly those that utilize a supportive housing model, to ensure that vulnerable populations have access to necessary services.
- Foster partnerships between government agencies and community organizations to create a cohesive support system for homeless individuals. This collaboration can enhance service delivery and resource mobilization.

### **Conclusion**

The study concludes that a multifaceted approach is necessary to address homelessness effectively. Social work interventions should be comprehensive, inclusive, and long-term focused.

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