



## **COMMUNITY INSIGHTS: EXPLORING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF HOMELESSNESS THROUGH PHOTOVOICE**

### **RESEARCH SUMMARY REPORT FOR KHULISA SOCIAL SOLUTIONS**

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The research for this report was conducted as an Honours Dissertation based on a request for such research by the Khulisa Social Solutions. This summary report focusses on the findings of the study preceded by a brief introduction.

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## **In Sum**

The following paper represents a summary report of the research project focused on exploring the lived experiences of homelessness in Cape Town, South Africa. This report provides background on the research project, specifically the issue investigated, the key aims of the research and the methodology used. It outlines the main findings of the project, which provide insight into the challenges along with strengths embedded in the lives of those who live on the streets.

Participants foregrounded the positive impact of Khulisa's Streetscapes programme and the report aims to highlight the programme's effectiveness. Lastly, recommendations are outlined on how to further improve the lives of homeless individuals.

## **Introduction**

Khulisa Social Solutions is an organisation that aims to address the challenges experienced by marginalised members of society through community development. The organisation has developed and implemented a range of interventions. One such intervention is the Streetscapes programme which is a job creation scheme for homeless individuals in Cape Town. The programme offers employment in various sites ranging from the Greenmarket Square to numerous vegetable gardens located in the CBD. By providing employment, counselling services and skills development, the Streetscapes programme aims to facilitate the movement to independent living and reintegration to greater society.

The researcher was able to recruit participants for the project through Khulisa's Streetscapes programme. Khulisa also provided a space in which the project could be conducted.

## **The Issue Investigated**

In South Africa research has generally focused on the prevalence of the homeless phenomenon, its conceptualisation and causes, and the demographics of the population. These inquiries have mainly been quantitative in nature. Comprehensive qualitative research is limited. Through qualitative research, valuable insights on the homeless community can be attained, such as who they are as individuals and what complexities and strengths they encounter in their daily lives. This important knowledge can in turn facilitate the development of more relevant policies and interventions.

## **Main Aims**

The study qualitatively examined the lived experiences of homelessness in Cape Town. The main aims were to explore the challenges and the strengths embedded in the lives of these individuals. The researcher, furthermore, hoped that with the use of the Photovoice methodology, participants would attain critical consciousness of their conditions, become empowered and develop new social connections.

## **Method**

The research project used a research method called Photovoice. It is a grass-roots approach that entrusts individuals with cameras to capture their lives through photographs and stories.

The project consisted of two focus groups, a photography training session, individual interviews and an exhibition. At the first focus group, participants were asked a range of open-ended questions to start reflecting on their experiences (e.g. Do you remember the first night you spent on the streets?). This was followed by a photography workshop. Participants were then given a few weeks to capture photographs that portrayed the challenges and strengths embedded in their lives. After the capturing period, they met up with the researcher to discuss the stories behind their photographs. The photographs and their stories were then exhibited at the Psychology department of the University of Cape Town. Participants presented and discussed their photographs to the audience.

A final focus group was conducted after the exhibition as to gain feedback from participants on the research project. The feedback was very positive. Participants disclosed how sharing their stories with others had made them feel brave, valued and acknowledged. They explained how they were now inspired to make important changes in their personal lives.

## **Findings**

The transcripts from the focus groups, individual interviews along with photographs were analysed using thematic analysis. The following themes emerged from the analysis:

### **The challenges faced on the streets**

The **harsh living circumstances** participants were subjected to – while living on the streets – are a great cause for concern. They lived in spaces where basic facilities, such as showers and toilets, were inaccessible to them. This in turn rendered the process of satisfying their basic needs as challenging. Access to water on the streets was described as restricted given that the facilities are protected by guards. One individual explained that when he would become desperate to wash

himself, he would have to beg security guards for permission to access water. This is a dehumanising and demeaning experience. Narratives of open defecation, trash picking for food, and a lack of decent shelter and protection against harsh environmental exposure, were shared by participants.

Experiences of **multiple victimisations and substance use** further aggravate this dire situation. It became apparent from the analysis that life on the streets is filled with violence. Participants shared experiences of theft, as well as physical and sexual assault. It was found that homeless individuals victimise each other. This victimisation often stems from feelings of envy. When individuals on the street attain certain material resources that others do not possess, they commonly become victims of theft. Individuals are often compelled to resort to violence as a way to protect themselves from this envy. Participants disclosed how guards would chase them away from their sleeping spots in the early hours of the morning. Those individuals who had lived on a vacant plot expressed their frustration of their shelters being routinely demolished by law enforcement. They deemed this experience as extremely taxing, as they would have to continuously search for materials to rebuild their shelters.

Substance use – specifically the violence resulting from it – was deemed as problematic by participants. Substance use served as an initiation process into some communities, and that certain individuals may feel coerced into this behaviour for protection and acceptance. Personal battles with substance dependency were raised as well.

The findings uncovered that participant's experienced **stigmatisation** from greater society. Stories of discrimination by means of name-calling, labelling and being laughed at were mentioned. Several participants described how they were reluctant to show their faces in public due to feeling ashamed of their social positioning and a fear of social judgement. It became clear that participants were very much aware of the stereotypes ascribed to them by society, and through the narratives shared they aimed to challenge these negative perceptions.

### **The strengths embedded in their lives**

Despite the various challenges raised by participants, it became apparent that they are not passive victims of their condition. They exhibit resilience in the face of severe socioeconomic adversities, and use their ingenuity to survive.

Participants developed a set of **skills and strategies to survive**. They adopted various street-based occupations – ranging from car parking to recycling – to earn an income. They navigated their lack of basic amenities by developing creative solutions unique to their circumstances. An

example of this ingenuity is the use of fences as washing lines on the vacant plot, and the discovery of a water hole in close proximity to the plot used to bathe and do washing.

The analysis revealed that social relationships within the homeless community played an important role in the survival of individuals. Participants explained how their peers provided them with protection against danger and violence, and how the common desire for survival resulted in the sharing of resources, such as food, shelter and employment.

Another significant strength for participants was the **assistance they received from organisations**. It was mentioned how various services substantially lessened the daily stressors in their lives. Participant's photo-stories reflected their gratitude for this formal support structure. The soup kitchen was deemed as an imperative resource on the streets. Furthermore, the 'Winter Readiness Programme' which is a temporary shelter for the street homeless during the winter months, was regarded highly by participants. The 'winter programme' provided beds, food, toilets and hot showers; all of which are basic resources unobtainable on the streets. Although it only offered a short-term solution, it was apparent that it left a positive mark on their lives as it encouraged them to think critically about their futures and inspired them to realise long-term goals. One participant, for example, explained how the programme helped her overcome her substance dependency and transition from the streets back home.

The **positive impact of the Streetscapes programme** was very prominent. The employment offered by the programme was perceived as particularly helpful. It had reduced the stressors that come with chronic economic insecurity and provided participants with hope for the future. It has allowed them to pursue things that were previously beyond their reach (e.g. purchasing clothing from regular stores) and this had made them feel human again. The financial security has also been connected with reduced substance abuse in some individuals.

The Streetscapes programme has been found to offer a crucial social support network within the work space. Individuals described the counsellors and supervisors at Khulisa as great sources of support as they motivate them to improve their lives. This emotional assistance has lead these important figures to be perceived as family by certain participants. It is important to note that the programme enabled participants to build a range of strong relationships external to their homeless community. It therefore promotes inclusivity and directly challenges the social exclusion generally experienced by homeless individuals.

## Recommendations

The aforementioned findings demonstrate the positive impact of the **Streetscapes programme**, and therefore confirms its relevance and effectiveness. For that reason, the researcher recommends for it to be continued as well expanded in other locations in the future, as to target more homeless individuals. The researcher additionally encourages the continued implementation of the ‘winter programme’ in the years to come.

The exhibition was a great success. Participants provided positive feedback on the exhibition. They explained how sharing their stories with others had enabled them to recognise their own capacities and had made them feel acknowledged. Homeless individuals experience great social exclusion and thus often feel invisible. Spaces that foreground their narratives, however, emphasise the value of their contributions and therefore can enhance their self-worth. As such it is recommended for Khulisa to **hold more exhibitions** in the future, which could either take place with the same participants or through new Photovoice projects.

By organising more exhibitions public awareness surrounding the lived experiences of homelessness can be enhanced. According to the participants, the success of the exhibition and their accomplishments had stunned the audience. Their commitment throughout the project thus challenged the negative perceptions others had of them. Participants considered the process of sharing their photo-stories as important, as it allowed others to gain a better understanding of their experiences, thereby alleviating the stigmatisation surrounding homelessness.

The project had strengthened participants’ commitment to improving the lives of their community members. It had encouraged them to want to serve as motivators to others. It is recommended for Khulisa to incorporate this in their programme by, for example, **allowing participants to share their photo-stories with their peers**. This could perhaps take place during the daily class time. Participants explained how they had learned from each other and felt less alone when they shared their stories amongst each other. This sense of belonging could also be fostered when participants discuss their photo-stories with others in their community.

## Final Words

I would like to thank Khulisa for providing me with the opportunity to conduct this important research. Thank you to the Streetscapes team for allowing me to use the board room space, for making me feel at home and for your constant support. I would like to thank Jesse for her guidance, patience and kindness. To the entire Streetscapes team, I admire you for your devotion to helping those who live on the streets, and I am inspired by your hard work and its positive outcomes.