

Correspondence

'Alms! Alms! Give us some support!': an inquiry on the homeless

ABSTRACT

COVID-19 is an infectious disease caused by a new coronavirus named SARS-CoV-2. The prevalence of the virus on a global scale led to a global health crisis which prompted countries like the Philippines to address the issue through the implementation of various health-related protocols, legislative laws, and COVID-19 mass vaccination programs for the establishment of herd immunity. Such government actions are undeniably significant in resolving the booming positive cases but the subjects (or who should receive the services) are, to some extent, unclear and overlooked the situation of 'Others' – the homeless. The author argues that the Philippine government, other social institutions, and organizations must consider the well-being of this group as one of the hidden disadvantaged individuals amid the crisis.

Keywords homeless, COVID-19 pandemic, helping

Content

COVID-19 is an infectious disease caused by a new coronavirus named SARS-CoV-2.¹ Many COVID-19-related studies have been conducted since last March 2020. Scholars focused the lens of their academic papers on the living and social settings of several groups – prisoners,² indigenous people,³ families, children, women, nurses,⁴ and others. Nevertheless, very few writings seek to examine the issue of the pandemic within the social context of the homeless. In the age of health crisis and post-COVID-19, social spectators and commentators should necessarily be inclusive in their approach to studying the wide-encompassing effects of the pandemic. Consequently, the author attempts to present a succinct analysis of the homeless Filipinos. In doing so, the paper explores the human rights, governance, and social dimensions of the concerned subjects.

Generally, homelessness refers to the state where people live under the minimum standard or lack of secure tenure. Humans under this social category inhabit the streets, moving between temporary shelters, living in private boarding houses without a private bathroom, and/or marginal caravan park residents who are renting.⁵ Homeless are often labeled as an 'invisible burden' for the society which is (mostly) not included in any census.⁶ Experts claimed that they are also vulnerable to the COVID-19 virus due to weak immune systems, stress, and lack of proper nutrition and sleep.^{7,8} In

the Philippines, there are about 4.5 million homeless Filipinos including children.⁹ And since the implementation of different health measures and with the president's orders to shot and arrest the Filipino violators (either by literal interpretation or not),^{10,11} many people including homeless groups have been arrested for breaking curfew and disobeying authorities. Simultaneously, homeless shelters in Manila have been closed due to quarantine protocol violations⁸ which compelled them to seek churches¹² and schools as an alternative and temporary shelters.

From theoretical and philosophical perspectives, lawbreaking invites a deep and analytical concern from the government, researchers, and ordinary citizens. Food desperation can be one of the major reasons behind the behavior of homeless individuals. However, arresting and punishing the violators to a maximal degree does not guarantee that these would reduce negative behaviors.¹³ More importantly, the COVID-19 pandemic is not a conceptual and practical battle between public health and human rights. There must be a balance between public health promotion and human rights protection. Government officers must recognize that homeless people are not separate and outgroup persons instead they are part of the whole imagined community that deserves equal contemplation. Thus, people's citizenry should not only be interpreted within a political language (e.g. one who can vote, natural-born). Cultural (e.g. values and attitudes) and historical (e.g. national struggles) connections among the citizens

have to be integrated into expressing Filipino identity. In the context of the pandemic, Filipinos' values like bayanihan (the spirit of kinship or camaraderie) can have a reinforcing effect in supporting and providing help to disadvantaged citizens. But beyond such a socio-cultural attitude, this suggests also that helping is not mere citizenship-based activity. It should be grounded on human nature – capable of experiencing pain and suffering – which goes beyond any race, nationality, and social class.

Further, the lack of formal residence and social relationships are not a basis for the depravity of assistance. Either in principles or praxis, public service and government aid must reach the lives of homeless Filipinos. Nevertheless, a negating position argues that helping would make them dependent on the government and society in general. But to overcome this opposition, there are at least three conditions to justify the call for helping the homeless group, namely: they are a) products or victims of social oppression and discrimination; b) personally disable or incapable of sustaining one's needs (e.g. disease or physical impairment); and c) environmentally or socially obstructed to find works or resources (e.g. pandemic or calamities). Given this discussion, to help is indeed good and it is only in one's intention and the possible consequences of the action that make the whole notion a serious question. Yet amid the strike of the virus, it can be a metaphorical death sentence and animal-like treatment if the homeless people are totally removed from the assuagement program of the government and even by individual attention.

Moreover, the possible infection of vagrants and homeless with the virus would only heighten the probable re-emergence of the crisis. If the government will never look into the condition of the homeless population, its current policies and programs would not be an absolute solution as long as other groups can potentially cause another health problem. Henceforth, there is a need to include the homeless populace in the vaccination program of the government for high assurance of herd immunity. Referring to the health department prioritization list,¹⁴ homeless Filipinos are classified under 'Priority Eligible B9' (socio-demographic groups at significantly higher risk areas). In any case, the country's task force against the COVID-19 and the health agency should make a clear vaccination plan and procedure to the concerned group without prejudices and selective treatment based on physical and mental qualities.

In conclusion, the community's stakeholders (e.g. government officials, private organizations, average and capacitated citizens, other professionals) need to structure and construct not just a temporal mitigation program but a sustainable plan. Helping is not purely for the majority's benefits rather

recognizing the marginalized picture of the vagrants and homeless Filipinos who need benevolent and philanthropic aid. Lastly, the following are interrelated major concerns that must be ideally and effectively integrated into any steps and plans of the government and the country towards the homeless population:

a. Basic Needs. Access to basic needs is a major issue and challenge for homeless Filipinos. The government and/or through collaborations with private, non-government organizations, and other sectors are encouraged to extend their institutions to the homeless population. Basic needs include foods, clothing, shelters (from 'temporary' (e.g. vacant schools and buildings, barangay or multi-purpose halls) to 'permanent' (e.g. housing programs)), hygiene supplies, and other essentials goods. Further, either local, national, or international assistance and response have to be inclusive in their programs and policies, particularly during a crisis.

b. Medical and Mental Care. A minority of the homeless are suffering from mental problems (e.g. insanity, anxiety, depression), thus, free public psychological services should be extended to them. Mental institutions can also be another option that can cater and attend to homeless mental well-being. Equally, medical interventions are important to those with medical conditions (e.g. treatable diseases). National and local governments must take the initial step in the identification of homeless citizens with psycho-mental and medical conditions for correct statistics. Any holistic approach and programs for this group incite breaking down into parts the critical parts of their lives that require an immediate response.

c. Livelihood Programs and Education. After meeting the first two actions, the focus must now be on education and livelihood training. Educating and training the minds and physical skills of these people will give them a higher chance of improving their lives. Education, labor, and social welfare agencies of the country can work together to achieve this goal. Likewise, the Philippine Congress should acknowledge the urgency in passing legislative bills seeking the education of homeless children and youths (e.g. Senate Bill No. 1167¹⁵). The need for this action is to secure their right to basic education and work.

d. Virus Testing and Vaccination. A defense mechanism (COVID-19 vaccines) against the existing virus has to be equitably distributed among the population including the homeless. Proper communication with them is necessary to reduce any hesitancy and doubt about vaccination. They must also be fairly treated and be taken to conducive quarantine facilities if tested positive for the virus.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest in this paper.

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