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Author (s): Kainaaf Yousaf and Rafia Rafique

Affiliation (s): University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan

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Psychological Experiences and Coping Behaviors of Children Living on Streets: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Kainaat Yousaf* and Rafia Rafique

Institute of Applied Psychology, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan

Abstract

The qualitative research explored the experiences of children aged 6–12 living on the street, investigated their experiences, and examined their coping behaviors. A volunteer sample of six participants was recruited using purposive sampling, including three male and three female participants who had been living on the street for more than a year. In-depth interviews were conducted with the respondents. An interpretative phenomenological approach by Smith and Osborn (2014) was used to analyze the data. The IPA resulted in four superordinate themes, twenty-three subordinate themes, and eighty-two individual themes. The superordinate themes included social and environmental experiences, psychological experiences, acting out and overt behaviors, and coping styles. The study has significant applications in the fields of social psychology and community psychology by shedding light on the experiences of children in overcoming challenges and establishing strategies that foster the enhancement of adaptive coping among children living on the streets. Moreover, it encourages the design of community-based programs to enhance the well-being of children by addressing the adversities they face.

Keywords: coping strategies, childhood experience, lived experience, streets

Introduction

One of a person's most basic desires is the need for safety, which serves to fulfill both the psychological need for security and the evolutionary need for survival by protecting them from natural disasters and threats from others. A person's home is often considered the place where their soul resides. A person who is homeless suffers both physical and psychological harm (Barry et al., 2024). Depressive symptoms, anxiety, and issues such as shoplifting, bickering, abuse, and other conduct-related problems are on

*Corresponding Author: kainaatyousaf8@gmail.com

the rise. According to the recent estimates, depression and anxiety are the most prevalent disorders in low- or middle-income countries (LMICs) (Edwards et al., [2023](#)). Children's experiences highlight the daily struggle between their desire to escape homelessness and the forces that kept them on the streets (Myburgh et al., [2015](#))

Homeless children may engage in illegitimate and self-defeating coping behaviors such as avoidance, identification with, and idealization of their urban tribe, as well as social loafing. Avoidance may manifest as staying in shelters for extended periods or begging for money. Temporary escape is also a commonly used strategy to diminish stress (Hennessy et al., [2020](#)). Spiritual support can also be a means of overcoming the loss of identity and sense of meaning associated with homelessness. Emotional coping strategies include smoking, alcohol use, drug abuse, and the misuse of prescribed substances. Drinking can help reduce this stress, allowing them to momentarily escape from reality, while smoking may serve as a coping crutch in high-risk living conditions (Syed, [2020](#)). These coping behaviors are perceived by some homeless children as appropriate responses to a stressful environment.

People develop survival-oriented coping mechanisms resulting from the loss of economic resources and limited access to social and psychological support from family and friends (Bondarchuk et al., [2024](#)). These stressful situations expose them more than others to crises. They face high rates of serious mental illnesses (Hong et al., [2023](#)), suicidal behaviors, substance abuse (Xu et al., [2024](#)), and increased exposure to sexual and physical victimization (Anombem et al., [2023](#)). Marginalization from their communities and exposure to chronic stressors make homeless individuals especially vulnerable (Calvo et al., [2024](#)). Many also experience identity crises, as ongoing stress and instability disrupt their sense of self (McKinnon et al., [2023](#)). A qualitative systematic review using thematic analysis identified themes such as lack of personal care, complexity of survival, poor person-centered care, and limited access to healthcare, to be responsible for this (Ali et al., [2024](#)).

Garcia et al. ([2024](#)) explained that homelessness represents much more than just rootlessness; rather, it is characterized by the deprivation of satisfactory, sheltered, and secure accommodation. It can profoundly affect a person's identity and sense of self (Padgett, [2020](#)). Therefore, homelessness is disempowering, traumatic, and isolating. Homeless people

are left unprotected, vulnerable, and powerless to fulfill their other basic needs and experience higher rates of morbidity and mortality, largely due to limited access to healthcare services leading to their life expectancy of approximately 42 years (Forchuk et al., [2016](#)). Moreover, homeless individuals are 34 times more likely to commit suicide than those with stable housing (Rollins et al., [2011](#)). At times, the children may be asked for small change, a cigarette, or assistance. This kind of helping behavior is often linked to the stabilization of the homeless person's self-esteem, sense of security, social identity, or communication needs (Marcus et al., [2018](#)), social exclusion, helplessness, conflicts with medical staff, dissatisfaction with the level of choice in treatment, and mistrust of healthcare providers (Zhao, [2022](#)). The study also highlighted inadequacies in hostel services and suggested improvements for support structures.

Rationale of the Study

The absence of a home undermines one's sense of safety and well-being, negatively affecting mental health and overall development. According to a Gallup survey, 38,415 Pakistani nationals were reported to be homeless in 2017 (Fowle, [2022](#)), underscoring the magnitude of the issue. As the problem remains unresolved due to economic constraints, community programs can serve as a valuable tool for mitigating the impact of homelessness.

While existing studies have focused on the stigmas and experiences of homeless adults, there is a clear gap in research concerning the experiences of homeless children. This study aims to address that gap by employing a qualitative approach to explore the subjective and lived experiences of homelessness among children. It will also examine how they perceive, cope with, and respond to life on the streets.

Research Questions

- General Question: What is the experience of living on the street, and what coping behaviors can be adopted to manage the stressors associated with being without shelter?
- Specific question I: What are the experiences of children living on streets with reference to the psychosocial context?
- Specific Question II: What are the behaviours children adopt to cope with the experiences of being without shelter?

Method

Research Design

A qualitative research method was employed using the Interpretative Phenomenological Approach (IPA) to incorporate the lived experiences of participants and to access their understanding and interpretation of the phenomenon. The researcher evaluated the phenomenon while striving to set aside personal biases. In the present study, the aim was to gain an in-depth and holistic understanding of individuals who have experienced and lived the reality of street life.

Participants

Data were collected from a sample of six street children from Lahore, aged between 6 and 12 years. Participants were selected from areas near Emporium Mall, Township, and Data Darbar, according to pre-determined criteria. The sample included both male and female children who had been living on the streets for more than a year. Children residing in temporary shelter homes or those engaged in professional begging were excluded from the study. Additionally, children diagnosed with any psychiatric disorder, such as schizophrenia or substance-induced disorders, were also excluded. The participants were interviewed to explore their lived experiences of street life. These criteria align with the principles of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which typically employs small, homogeneous samples recruited through non-probability purposive sampling. The characteristics of the participants are described below.

Table 1

Summary of Key Characteristics of Participants

Participant pseudonym/ Label	Age	Sex	No of Siblings	No of family members	Birth order	Education	Working Status
P1	12	Male	06	08	First	N/A	Working
P2	13	Male	01	06	Second	N/A	Working
P3	12	Female	06	15	Third (Middle)	N/A	Working
P4	12	Female	06	15	Third (Middle)	N/A	Working
P5	11	Female	06	15	Last	N/A	Working
P6	12	Male	06	08	Second	N/A	Working

Note. P: participant number N/A: No education/ Never get education or go to school

Interview Guide

A structured interview approach was used to collect the lived experiences and coping behaviors of children, aiming to understand the personal interpretations of individuals who had been living on the streets for more than a year for the purpose of the present research. This approach often yields rich, meaningful data by combining a flexible structure with appropriate guidance from the interviewer. Semi-structured interviews, where the interviewer and interviewee work together toward a shared understanding and perception, serve as an empowering tool (Kakilla, [2021](#)). The interview protocol was developed using ten main questions, twelve probing questions, and five clarification questions, covering participants' experiences, obstacles, difficulties, coping behaviors, societal and governmental responses, and incidents of abuse, in order to explore the lived experiences of the participants.

Procedure

After designing the interview protocol, participants were recruited from the streets of Lahore. Only those who were willing to participate were selected. An incentive, in the form of food after interview was given to each participant as a token of appreciation. The informed consent form and participant information sheet clearly stated that the interviews would be audio recorded. Participants had a right to withdraw from the study at any time for any reason. Confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed. Participants were interviewed about their experiences, and all interviews were conducted in a manner that ensured privacy. The interviews were transcribed and translated into English from the native languages, Punjabi and Urdu. Data were anonymized at the point of transcription, and personal and non-verbal gestures were also documented during data collection.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

The data was evaluated using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to identify themes and subthemes. IPA integrates two elements — phenomenology and interpretation — to focus on the lived experiences of participants. It first shares the purpose of idiographic phenomenology, which involves an extensive examination of the reflective, personal, and subjective views of individuals' experiences of living on the street, and how they interpret or perceive these experiences. By taking into account the researcher's personal worldview, IPA would aim to provide deeper insight

into the participants' experiences, going beyond a purely phenomenological description of their accounts (Smith & Osborn, [2014](#)).

Results

Table 2
Superordinate and Subordinate Themes

Superordinate Theme	Subordinate Themes	Interpretative Narrative
Societal abandonment	- Hurdles from Government - Unjust Social Dynamics - Lack of Basic Needs - Environmental Neglect - Help from Some Community Members	• They beat us abuse us • People force us to shift they put off our goods, they beat us they order us to wipe up the shrugs • There is no electricity for light • there is nothing that I can say is affordable. Flour, grains, sugar. • some people help me, they give me money • I get worried due to rain and I cry to get relief
Emotional labor	- Negative Emotions - No Future Plans - Acceptance/Fatalism	• We don't know about today how can predict tomorrow no one knows what will happen • This is my faith can't do anything about it • If a common man come to fight then we beat them, beat them with sticks
Rebalance	- Defiance toward Authorities	• when I try to earn for home but some people help me, they give me money and direct me to join school but how can I
Coping Strategies	- Religious Coping - Emotional Expression - Complaining as Catharsis - Substance Use as Emotional Numbness - Seeking Social Support - Micro-entrepreneurial Efforts - Flight from Threats	• We feel sorry; we pray from Allah (S.W.T) that how brutal this world is they break every belonging of us they beat us, how much pile driver (kafir) this world is • I curse them when they beat me • I work, I sell snacks to get money to decrease my problems

Following an interpretative phenomenological analysis, twenty-three subordinate themes, eighty-two sub themes, and four superordinate themes were identified. The data from six participants revealed four superordinate themes: acting out and overt actions, psychological experiences, social and environmental experiences, and coping techniques.

Societal Abandonment

The participants reported experiencing various hurdles from the government and its officials, including the impoverishment of their basic and secondary needs, as well as encounters with cruelty and injustice from society. Some participants mentioned receiving assistance from the community in the form of financial aid. They also described challenges related to extreme weather conditions, the burden of daily expenses, and shared their expectations which they had from the government.

One participant shared their frustration about not having a permanent place to live:

Our foremost issue is not having permanent land. I wish to get a permanent place where I can build my home, a permanent house. There is no electricity for light, so we have to buy electric batteries, and the rental cost is 150 rupees per day. This is an extra burden for us. Everything is getting expensive—there is nothing affordable, like flour, grains, sugar—and due to our shack, we have to deal with extra expenses. [P1]

Another participant reported the burdens and difficulties caused by rain, which not only disrupts their daily routine but also adds financial strain:

Our tents get filled with water, we put our stuff on the beds, but we get wet and catch cold. There's water everywhere, and we don't know what to do—either save ourselves from the rain or save our household items. We can't even cook because the stove gets wet; we can't bake bread. We get sick from being wet in the rain, and then we have to pay extra hospital and medicine bills. [P4]

One participant spoke about the abuse and cruelty they experienced from LDA officials, along with some assistance from people in society:

They beat us, abuse us. My relatives are not good; they tease me when I try to earn for a home, but some people help me. They give me money and direct me to join a school, but how can I? [P2]

Another participant shared their experience of mistreatment and destruction of their belongings:

People force us to shift. They throw off our goods, beat us, and order us to clean up the shacks. We beg them not to break our goods. We request them and assure them that we will move everything, but they don't listen. They break our beds, destroy our things, and leave after ruining everything that belongs to us.[P4]

One participant expressed a lack of trust in the government, stating: "The government doesn't assist us. There is no shelter home. They just say big words but don't do anything. We only pray to Allah, because Allah is the one who listens to us."

Emotional Labor

The experience of living on the street significantly impacted the participants mentally, leading to negative emotions, hopelessness, unfulfilled desires, a lack of future vision, and an acceptance of their fate. Some participants shared their emotional struggles, such as: "I get worried due to the rain, and I cry to relieve myself." [P2]

Other participants expressed a desire for respect and dignity from society but acknowledged their lack of vision or goals for the future: "Whiff! If we were rich, no one could abuse us. We would have our own car." [P6] "We don't know about today, so how can we predict tomorrow? No one knows what will happen..." [P1] "I don't have any complaint from anyone; maybe it's my fate." [P5]

Rebalance

Participants reported that, due to a lack of control over their situation, they often preferred to escape or act out in aggressive ways when they perceived they had power in certain situations. One participant shared: "If a common man comes to fight, we beat them, beat them with sticks." [P6]

Another participant explained that, when faced with higher officials or police whom they couldn't fight back, they typically chose to escape the situation: "We try to save ourselves by moving away from people." [P4]

Coping Strategies

To cope effectively with their daily life experiences, including social, environmental, and psychological challenges, participants employed

various coping strategies, including religious coping. One participant shared: “We feel sorry; we pray to Allah (S.W.T) because of how brutal this world is. They break every belonging of ours, they beat us. How much of a pile driver (kafir) this world is!” [P4]

Participants also reported using emotional-focused coping, where they dealt with their emotions without directly solving the problem. One participant explained: “I curse them when they beat me; I try to run away to save myself. I wish to have my own home, where we might get respect.” [P2]

Different coping styles were also used, including problem-focused coping, appraisal-focused coping, avoidance-focused coping, and coping through complaining or seeking social support. Participants shared: “I work, I sell snacks to get money to decrease my problems.” [P2]

“Yes, I eat tobacco to get relief. They beat us, so we started taking drugs. Yes, we eat tobacco, but only when we are tense. No one eats or takes drugs without tension.” [P4]

One participant described their coping strategy as complaining, which provided a sense of catharsis: “There are problems and problems only. Are there any facilities for us? Just for water, we have to walk for kilometers. People scold us when it rains, we usually drown. There is no electricity for us; we are miserable.” [P5]

Participants also reported seeking social support, with one participant saying: “I used to cry, or I talk to my mom.” [P2]

Discussion

The present study sheds light on the lived experiences of people living on the street, including their social and psychological experiences and coping behaviors. Four superordinate themes emerged from the data of six participants: social and environmental experiences, psychological experiences, acting out and overt behaviors, and coping styles. A pattern of unhealthy coping behaviors, such as complaining, was noted, but these behaviors were eventually replaced by coping strategies that were more religiously oriented and constructive in nature. This revealed a unique, hierarchical, and overlapping pattern of coping behaviors.

Social and Environmental Experiences emerged as a superordinate theme where participants reported hurdles from the government and its

officials, impoverishment of their primary and secondary needs, and experiences of cruelty and injustice from society. Some participants reported receiving assistance from society through financial aid. They also described the difficulties caused by atmospheric conditions, bearing the burden of expenses, and expressing their expectations which they have from the government. The findings of the study align with those of Fornaro et al. (2022), who found similar experiences of unjust behavior from society, hindrances caused by government officials, some assistance, and the impact of the environment. Difficulties in meeting basic needs while being homeless are particularly pronounced in countries like Pakistan, where primary and secondary needs are often fulfilled with difficulty. Living on the streets exposes individuals to further cruelty, with the wealthy often becoming more selfish and exploitative (Alowaimer, 2018). These conditions lead to the exploitation of homeless individuals, as they are unable to receive adequate wages for their work. Without permanent land, homeless individuals have no choice but to live on private or government properties, which is considered a crime under Pakistan's Penal Code. This situation leads to a sense of frustration and helplessness, as the government fails to provide shelter homes as promised.

Being homeless directly impacts an individual's psychological state. It exacerbates the difficulties in meeting basic needs, resulting in negative emotions such as worry and anxiety (Sleet & Francescutti, 2021). Participants reported a strong sense of psychological pressure, expressed through negative emotions. They also described a desire for a home, a car, and other luxuries. As Richards and Kuhn (2022) noted, humans are social beings influenced by society, and participants' desires were shaped by observing others enjoying the comforts of life. The study participants also reported a profound sense of hopelessness, as poverty increases day by day, inducing a state of despair. This finding aligns with the study of Pizzulo et al. (2025). When no solution to their problems is visible, participants reported a sense of acceptance, which they viewed as the only way to find peace, regulate emotions, and enhance well-being (Jacobsen et al., 2025).

The study revealed that participants responded to difficult situations by either escaping from the threatening stimulus or acting out when they had the resources to do so. Participants reported moving away from difficult situations caused by heavy rain or oppressive government officials (Srivastava et al., 2025). The primary reason for escaping was the inability

to stand up to the situation or a lack of resources. When participants had the means or confidence to act, they fought back. This coping mechanism aligns with the withdrawal and decamping strategies identified in other studies (Yamaguchi et al., [2025](#)). Religious coping mechanisms were also used, with participants praying or asking for God's help to find relief and enhance their well-being (Regos-Stewart et al., [2025](#)). God was seen as a safe haven during emotionally stressful situations.

Emotion-focused coping, where participants acted to minimize negative emotions and psychological strain, was also evident. For example, participants reported avoiding government officials when they were forced to vacate their land, fleeing to avoid physical abuse and torture. When things were within their control, participants acted out by fighting back (Sankar et al., [2025](#)). Problem-focused coping strategies, such as earning money to save for a house, were also evident. Some participants turned to drugs to alleviate the distress caused by physical and verbal abuse from government officials, a coping strategy aimed at reducing psychological strain (Sankar et al., [2025](#)).

Support-seeking behaviors were also common. Literature suggests that females tend to be better at receiving support from family and close friends. Participants reported that talking to family members, especially mothers, helped them relax and better adjust to their situation (Konrady & Talarska, [2024](#)).

Conclusion

This study, based on the Interpretative Phenomenological Approach (IPA), incorporates phenomenology and ideography to interpret the lived experiences of children living on the streets. The study is hermeneutic in understanding the psychological and social experiences of these children, giving a voice to their concerns (O'Regan et al., [2021](#)). It is idiographic in focusing on the individual experiences of the six participants, rather than making generalizations for the entire homeless community.

Implications

This study highlights the outcomes of homelessness and can assist clinicians in developing community programs aimed at improving the wellbeing of individuals living on the streets. While the environment may be difficult to change, enhancing coping mechanisms and perceptions of their experiences can improve overall functioning and wellbeing,

potentially reducing unhealthy coping strategies like substance abuse and violence.

This research can help shape policy by providing evidence-based insights into the living conditions, needs, and challenges faced by homeless children in Pakistan. By highlighting gaps in existing services and legal protections, the study can inform the development of targeted and effective policies. It offers data that policymakers can use to design child-focused welfare programs, allocate resources more efficiently, and create legislation that ensures the rights, safety, and development of homeless children. Furthermore, the research encourages a holistic and coordinated approach, guiding the government to work collaboratively with NGOs and communities to implement sustainable, long-term solutions.

Limitation and Suggestion

The data in this study was qualitative, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Future researchers are encouraged to use quantitative methods to enhance the applicability of the results. As the data was collected from children, it is recommended that future studies also include adolescents to highlight developmental differences and identify barriers specific to each age group. While this study focused on experiences and coping mechanisms, it is suggested that these findings be used as a foundation for conducting experimental research on psychotherapeutic interventions. Such studies could aid in the development of effective treatment plans for children living on the streets.

Conflict of Interest

The authors of the manuscript have no financial or non-financial conflict of interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

Data Availability

The data associated with this study will be provided by the corresponding author upon request.

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