Climate Change and Homelessness

Subjects: Environmental Sciences
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Although climate change is a global issue, it disproportionately affects homeless populations due to increased exposure and vulnerability associated with homelessness. Climate change is defined as "a change of climate which is attributed directly or indirectly to human activity that alters the composition of the global atmosphere and which is in addition to climate variability observed over comparable time periods". Homelessness can be defined as circumstances in which "an individual, family or community without stable, permanent, appropriate housing, or the immediate prospect, means and ability of acquiring it".

Keywords: homeless ; housing ; climate ; weather ; health

1. Introduction

There is a diverse and expanding body of knowledge evaluating the existing impacts of climate change and predicting the future consequences. Global climate change has a wide range of significant, direct, negative consequences for human populations. These impacts include illness morbidity and mortality related to heat exposure and extreme weather events alongside systems effects upon agriculture, trade, labor, energy supply and demand, social interactions (violence, disrupted institutions), population growth, structure, and movement [3].

An equity-based perspective on how climate change impacts individuals and populations is fundamental to improving and nuancing our understanding of the health and social effects of changing environments. Social vulnerability refers to the sensitivity of a population to natural hazards and the ability to respond to the impacts of those hazards [4]. Socioeconomic disadvantage, race, and gender are key to social vulnerability–climate intersections. Impoverished and marginalized individuals and communities globally are more exposed to weather hazards that impact food security and health, threats to safety due to climate-linked conflict and social breakdown, and displacement and migration [5]. These threats apply to both exposure and the resources with which a response can be generated and manifest as a function of sociopolitical and geographic factors. Furthermore, just as social vulnerability interacts with climate change, it also interacts with emerging climate change mitigation policies that can impose more significant burdens upon impoverished populations [6].

2. Key Themes

Some of the key themes related to climate change and homelessness are associated with migration and exposure and vulnerability. Migration and the associated issues are expected to increase due to climatic events. It is projected that energy insecurity will be exacerbated as a result of climate change and will lead to further loss of housing [7]. And those of low SES and living in precarious housing tend to be unable to prepare for and recover from climatic events as few financial and social resources are available [8]. Loss of housing for these populations frequently means migration to city slums. However, the poorest of the poor may be unable to migrate, which means staying in environmentally degraded areas [9]. Thus, the availability of and opportunity to access the available services is essential. Further, it is recommended to focus on building low-cost housing relying on knowledge and practices of local dwellers; upgrading slums; and introducing rent-control policies.

Exposure and vulnerability of homeless populations render them more susceptible to climatic events and less able to prepare and respond to them. For instance, it is unclear if heat alerts reach the homeless populations [10]. Further, cold temperatures appear to have more severe effects in wet weather conditions [11]. Homeless populations also tend to be not included in the disaster planning. Thus, the health of the homeless and precariously housed populations is predicted to be affected negatively as a result of increased infectious and vector-borne diseases, exacerbated by more prevalent pre-existing conditions. Mental health is expected to deteriorate as well due to the experienced stress. Also, it is projected that violence, both family and interpersonal, may increase due to resource scarcity and stress.

2. Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA)

Given the wide range of interventions found (see Table 1), there is a need for a framework to better understand how to organize policy, planning, and practice responses. The HRBA could be useful as an integrative framework to help organize housing-related responses to climate change. Within the HRBA framework, extreme poverty is considered to be a violation of human rights. Consequently, those that are able to provide support are not seen as giving charity, but as having an "obligation to respect, protect and fulfill rights" [12] and are thus defined as duty bearers, whereas the beneficiaries are rights holders. The HRBA framework is particularly useful in the design and implementation of projects tailored to the demands of a given context.

Table 1. Interventions.

Homeless and vulnerably-housed populations and weather extremes: • Offer outreach programs to establish relationships with homeless populations • Provide information on shelters to homeless populations in advance • Ensure shelter accessibility (e.g., shuttle buses in emergency situations) • Examine heat-health risk perceptions • Educate community entities on local homeless populations to ensure homeless people have access to the available resources • Draw on existing practices in relation to weather extremes (e.g., the guidance from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for cooling centers; Toronto's extreme heat and cold response plans; Heat–Health Warning Systems) • Increase number of cooling and warming centers
Housing and Urban planning: • Rely on existing practices to upgrade urban slums (e.g., Health Impact Assessment and Health in All Policies frameworks) • Design low-cost housing by relying on knowledge of local dwellers • Establish clear and consistent definitions of the terms "sheltering" and "housing" in literature focused on disasters • Implement city-based rent control policies as well as mandate or provide subsidies to landlords to improve low-cost rental housing quality • Avoid de-densification, land to low-income urban groups instead • Focus on green infrastructure in urban planning • Pursue research focused on rights-based approaches and in varying contexts • Include homeless populations in disaster planning

Research:

- Examine the relationship between climate change, energy insecurity, and health from the perspective of the energy–health–justice nexus
- Identify racial and gender-based injustices
- Consult those working in communities during research development
- Cover a wider range of countries
- Focus on systematic data collection and on intervention, with qualitative and in-depth comparative studies
- Evaluate the effectiveness of existing strategies
- Integrate practices based on the available evidence
- Examine individual and structural responses that enable resilience

Other:

- Commit funds from high to low-income countries
- Ensure local governments' willingness to work with low-income groups
- Use technology for climate modeling, the development of warning systems, and vulnerability zonation
- Use "health" as a rallying point

The HRBA framework could be applied across a range of contexts where climate change is impacting or will impact homeless and marginally housed populations. The recommendations by Kjellstrom and Mercado, 2008 [13], for instance, can be adapted as follows: high-income countries (duty bearers) should provide funding to low-income countries (rights holders) to ensure the availability of necessary resources. Low-income countries, in turn, should act as duty bearers towards their citizens (rights holders), ensuring the appropriate use of funds.

3. Conclusions

Climate change and associated weather extremes present significant and immediate risks for populations lacking shelter. Climate change-related events seem to contribute to the prevalence of homelessness through migration, poverty, and other intersecting stressors. These problems are likely to become worse as the climate change emergency worsens, but there is a lack of reliable data syntheses of these risks and how they are unfolding, which hampers prevention and crisis response planning, policy development, and risk modeling. Thus, there is a need for the further identification and integration of research related to homelessness and housing precarity. However, efforts to intervene should concentrate on systemic responses to inadequate housing and lack of shelter. Prevention-oriented work, in most contexts, will need to occur alongside crisis response activities, given the large and growing number of individuals displaced by weather extremes and exposed to the elements while experiencing homelessness and compromised health. Inclusion and equity in crisis response will require advocacy and education in most contexts where homeless individuals are not considered in disaster planning and other risk mitigation efforts (e.g., green urban infrastructure). Planning and implementation should involve close collaboration with direct service providers and individuals with lived experience to develop effective ways of engaging these marginalized populations and implementing strategies that are relevant to a given context. While activities targeting homeless and at-risk populations will be essential to reducing mortality and morbidity associated with climate change in this population, it will be crucial to integrate this work into broader risk mitigation and response efforts. Considering homelessness as a somehow separate entity from overall policy and planning considerations will likely lead to ongoing stigmatization, inefficiencies, and reduced effectiveness.

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