

Impacts of the Second Wave of the Pandemic on Delhi's Homeless Population

Findings of a Rapid Assessment Survey



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I. Introduction

In April 2021, India was struck by a devastating ‘second wave’ of the coronavirus pandemic, with the total number of COVID-19 cases exceeding 25 million by the middle of May 2021.¹ Like the first wave, the raging second wave also disproportionately impacted marginalized groups and communities, including those living in homelessness. In the absence of housing, healthcare, and access to vaccines, homeless persons faced a greater risk of contracting the virus. Furthermore, curfews and lockdowns enforced by state governments to control the rampant spread of the virus resulted in severe economic distress and impoverishment for a large section of the population.

This report presents the findings of a rapid assessment survey conducted by Housing and Land Rights Network (HLRN) on the impacts of the second wave on people living in homelessness in Delhi.

II. Background

It is estimated that one per cent of India’s urban population—or over 4 million people in urban areas—live in homelessness.² Independent experts and activists suggest that Delhi has a homeless population of between 170,000 and 200,000 people, including women, men, transgender persons, children, and people living as families. The Government of Delhi runs 195 perennial ‘permanent-use’ shelters across the city to provide shelter to the city’s homeless people.³ Additionally, 10 temporary shelters have been established during the pandemic and four isolation centres were set up in May 2021 for homeless persons affected by COVID-19 (‘Covid’).⁴ Although Delhi has the highest number of shelters in the country, these still cater to less than 10 per cent of the city’s total homeless population. Consequently, the majority of homeless persons in Delhi have no choice but to live out on the streets or in other precarious locations.

Persons living in homelessness had already been struggling to survive amidst the pandemic-induced crisis in the country. Renewed restrictions on movement and trade during the second wave in April and May 2021 exacerbated their challenges and resulted in a severe hunger crisis, financial insecurity, and other deprivations.

Restrictions Imposed by the Government of Delhi During India's Second Wave

- **6 April 2021:** Night curfew enforced (from 10 p.m. to 5 a.m.)
- **15 April 2021:** Weekend curfew announced
- **19 April to 28 May 2021:** Complete lockdown imposed
- **29 May 2021:** Operation of Production Units and construction activities allowed
- **5 June 2021:** Opening of shops and markets permitted

¹ ‘India second after US to cross 25 million Covid cases,’ *The Times of India*, 18 May 2021. Available at: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/india-2nd-after-us-to-cross-25-million-covid-cases/articleshow/82725653.cms>

² Estimate of the Supreme Court Commissioners appointed to monitor the implementation of orders in the case of *PUCL v. Union of India* [W.P. (C) 196/2001].

³ Shelter Homes Occupancy Report, Delhi Urban Shelter Improvement Board (DUSIB). Available at: <https://www.delhishelterboard.in/occupancy-report/> (last accessed on 28 July 2021)

⁴ *Ibid.*

III. Survey Methodology

To assess the impact of India's second wave on homeless persons living in Delhi, particularly on their access to food, livelihood, and healthcare, HLRN conducted a rapid assessment survey of 115 homeless persons in Delhi, including people living in government-run shelters and people living on the streets. Participants were selected through random sampling. The survey was carried out by the HLRN team, telephonically, from 23 June to 1 July 2021.

Overview of Survey Respondents

- A total of 115 homeless persons were interviewed; 72 identified as men and 43 as women.
- The average age of participants was 35 years. The youngest was 17 while the oldest was 90.
- Almost 82 per cent of the respondents live on the streets; 17 per cent of them live in shelters.
- Nearly 44 per cent of the participants live with their families; the majority (56 per cent) live by themselves.

IV. Main Findings

1. Severe Impact on Livelihoods

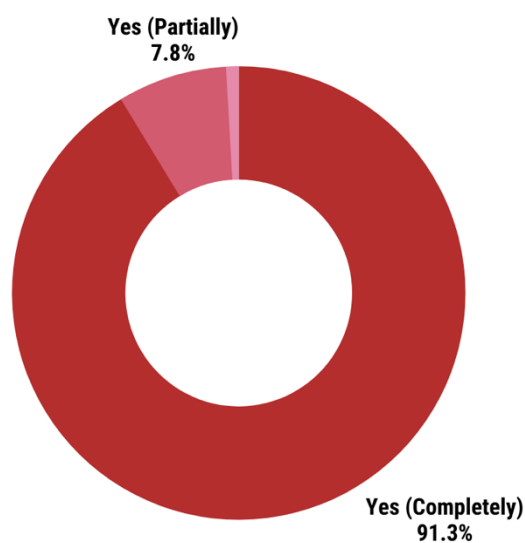
With the steep rise in Covid cases in April 2021, state governments across the country imposed restrictions to curb the spread of the pandemic. In Delhi, initially a night curfew was implemented (from 6 April to 18 April), but then from 19 April, a complete lockdown was enforced. This greatly affected the livelihood of homeless persons who are dependent mostly on daily-wage work to earn a living. Given their meagre earnings and almost hand-to-mouth existence, they did not have any savings to fall back on during this crisis. This is corroborated by the findings of HLRN's survey, which revealed that **91 per cent of the respondents completely lost their livelihood during the lockdown**. Approximately 8 per cent of survey participants stated that their livelihood was partially affected by the lockdown.

Even after the easing of lockdown restrictions, on 1 July 2021, 46 per cent of the respondents stated that they did not have any work, while 47 per cent stated that their work has only partially recovered. Only 7 per cent of the participants stated that their work had resumed to its pre-lockdown status.

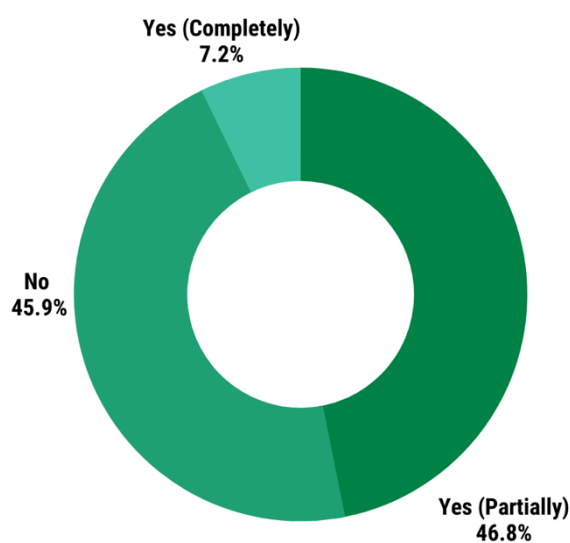


Figure 1: Loss of Livelihood During the 2021 Lockdown

Was your livelihood affected during the lockdown?



Has your livelihood recovered after the lockdown?



2. Hunger and Lack of Access to Food

The sudden cessation of daily earnings and the lack of savings to fall back on, resulted in homeless people—especially those living on the streets—being unable to buy food during the lockdown. Moreover, strict restrictions on movement and the closure of shops and street vendors’ stalls presented additional challenges for homeless persons in purchasing food and cooking their own meals.

In 2020, soon after the nationwide lockdown was enforced, shelters operated by the Delhi government, started distributing two free meals daily to residents. This beneficial provision was subsequently extended and continues to remain operative in most shelters in Delhi. Additionally, during March to May 2020, the Delhi government had also established ‘hunger relief centres’ across the city and provided free meals and food grains to all those in need. However, during the April–May 2021 lockdown in Delhi, state response was limited to the provision of cooked meals for those living in shelters. The majority of the city’s homeless people do not live in shelters, and thus, did not have access to any government-provided food. Although the Delhi government announced the distribution of free ration to all those in need—including to those without ration cards—reports indicate that the majority of homeless persons were unable to benefit from this relief measure because of delays in implementation, shortage of food grains, and other challenges.⁵

This survey confirms reports received by HLRN of widespread hunger and the lack of access to food among the homeless population, particularly people living outdoors.

⁵ See: ‘Delhi’s poor still wait for Kejriwal’s promised free ration, 2 months into 2nd Covid wave,’ *The Print*, 2 June 2021. Available at: <https://theprint.in/india/delhis-poor-still-wait-for-kejriwals-promised-free-ration-2-months-into-2nd-covid-wave/669562/>

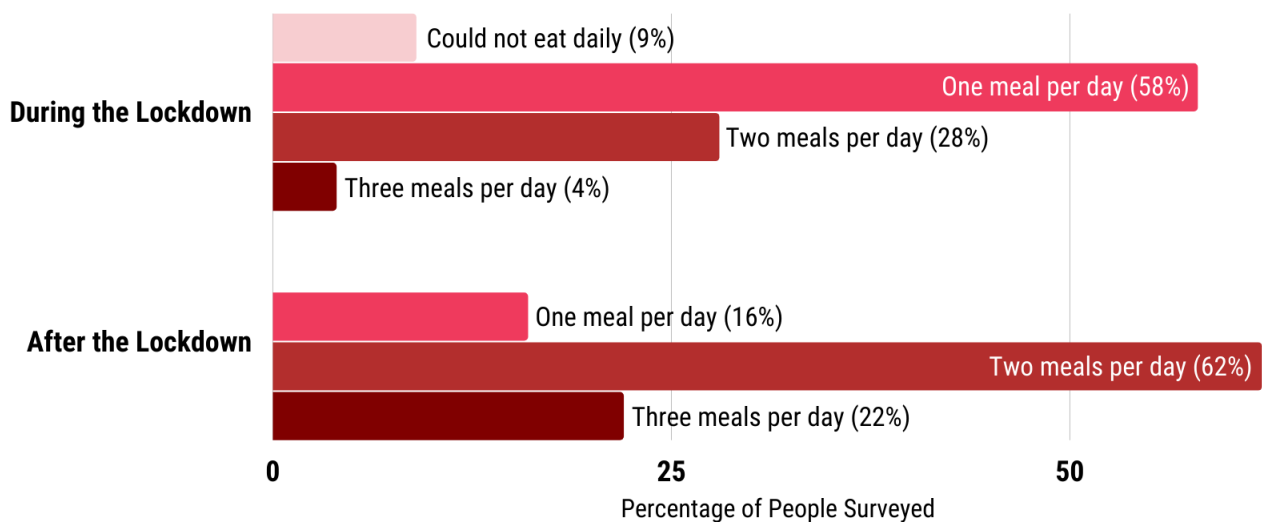
‘Several Delhi govt centres distributing ration to non-card holders run out of foodgrain,’ *The Indian Express*, 8 June 2021. Available at: <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/delhi/several-delhi-govt-centres-distributing-ration-to-non-card-holders-run-out-of-foodgrain-7349941/>

‘Homeless people in Delhi struggle to get ration amid COVID lockdown,’ *The New Indian Express*, 30 May 2021. Available at: <https://www.newindianexpress.com/cities/delhi/2021/may/30/homeless-people-in-delhi-struggle-to-get-ration-amid-covid-lockdown-2309275.html>

Nine per cent of those living on the streets of Delhi revealed that they were unable to eat even a single meal every day during the lockdown, while 58 per cent of them stated that they were able to secure only one meal per day. Nearly 28 per cent of the respondents living outdoors reported having access to two meals a day; only 4 per cent could eat three meals. All the people living in shelters stated that they had access to two meals a day, provided by the Delhi government.

Even after the lockdown was lifted, 16 per cent of the participants living outdoors reported being able to afford only a single meal a day; 62 per cent of them have access to two meals a day; and, only 22 per cent of them are managing to eat three times a day. All those living in shelters continue to eat two meals daily, as provided by the Delhi government.

Figure 2: Access to Food for People Living on the Streets

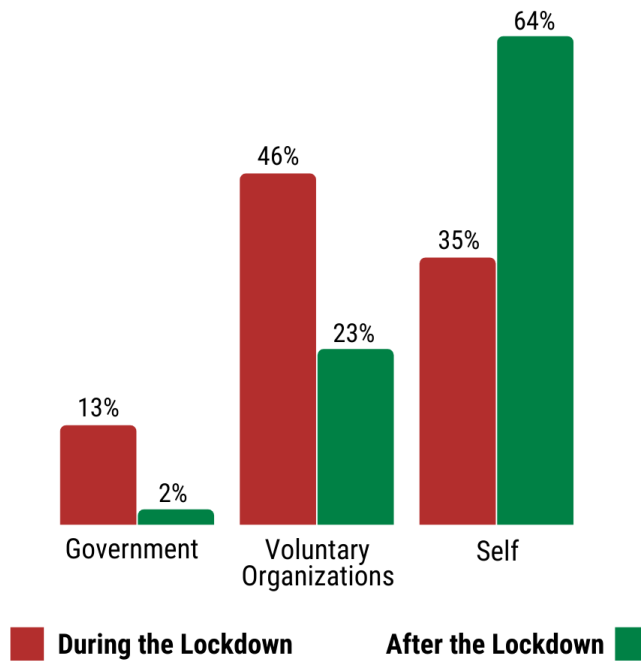


During Delhi’s lockdown, only 13 per cent of those living on the streets received government assistance in accessing food while the majority of them (46 per cent) depended on support from non-government organizations (NGOs), other charitable organizations, and individuals for food. About 35 per cent of those living outdoors reported arranging for food themselves. After the lockdown was lifted, as of 1 July 2021, 64 per cent of the participants living outdoors stated that they arrange food themselves; 23 per cent of them were relying on the help of voluntary organizations; and, only 2 per cent said their access to food is facilitated by the government.

The survey also found that **almost 98 per cent of the participants do not have access to milk for their children.**



Figure 3: Source of Food for People Living Outdoors



Hunger Experienced by People Living on the Streets of Delhi

“My work stopped during the lockdown. I don’t have the money to buy food that I want to eat. We are suffering greatly from the lack of basic necessities.”

“During the lockdown, we felt as if the world had ended. After staying hungry for two days, we found some organizations distributing food.”

“Even our children had nothing to eat and were forced to sleep hungry.”

3. Adverse Effect on Children’s Education

The closure of schools during the pandemic and the shift to online education has adversely impacted homeless children’s fundamental right to education. Their lack of access to smartphones, electricity, data, and the internet has resulted in most homeless children being unable to attend online classes and, thus, losing out on their education.

This study also highlights how the adverse impacts of financial and food insecurity, including on children’s mental health, during the second wave further exacerbated their challenges.

All survey respondents with children highlighted that their education has been severely affected by the pandemic. Moreover, **13 per cent of the respondents claimed that their children had to drop out of school because of the lack of access to a smartphone or other ‘smart’ devices.**

Issues Related to the Education of Homeless Children

“My children could not study during the lockdown, as we do not have a mobile phone. The lack of food, economic difficulties, mental challenges, and our state of homelessness have also affected their education. They do not want to study anymore.”

“During the pandemic, studying online is very challenging. As schools are closed and we do not have a home, where will our children sit and study during the heat and rain? Not being able to eat meals on time and psychological stress make it difficult to study.”

“To study online, you need a mobile (phone) and electricity. How can children study on the pavement?”

“The whole academic year has been wasted. The children have nothing to do and roam around all day.”

4. Lack of Access to Healthcare and the Vaccine

People living in homelessness are bereft of the primary protection from the pandemic: secure housing.

During India’s second wave, healthcare systems were completely overburdened, with reports highlighting the unavailability of hospital beds and oxygen across the country.⁶ Under these circumstances, the government advised people who tested positive for COVID-19 with mild or moderate symptoms to stay at home, take the prescribed medication, and monitor their illness with the help of thermometers and oximeters. Mobile medical vans visit most shelters on a weekly or bi-weekly basis, but the majority of Delhi’s homeless people live outdoors and, therefore, do not have access to this healthcare measure; they also continue to be deprived of regular medical check-ups and aid.

The findings from HLRN’s assessment reveal that homeless persons were not adequately equipped for self-care or to monitor their own health. While 91 per cent of the respondents stated that they had masks, **66 per cent of them did not have sanitizers, 86 per cent of them did not own a thermometer, and 87 per cent of them did not have over-the-counter basic medicines, including for fever, with them.**

This study also finds that 40 per cent of the people surveyed were unaware of Covid vaccines; 60 per cent stated that they had some information about the vaccine. **At the time of the survey, in end June 2021, 83 per cent of the participants had not been vaccinated;** only 17 per cent had received the first dose of the vaccine. Among those interviewed, 20 per cent of those living in shelters and 17 per cent of those living outdoors had been vaccinated.

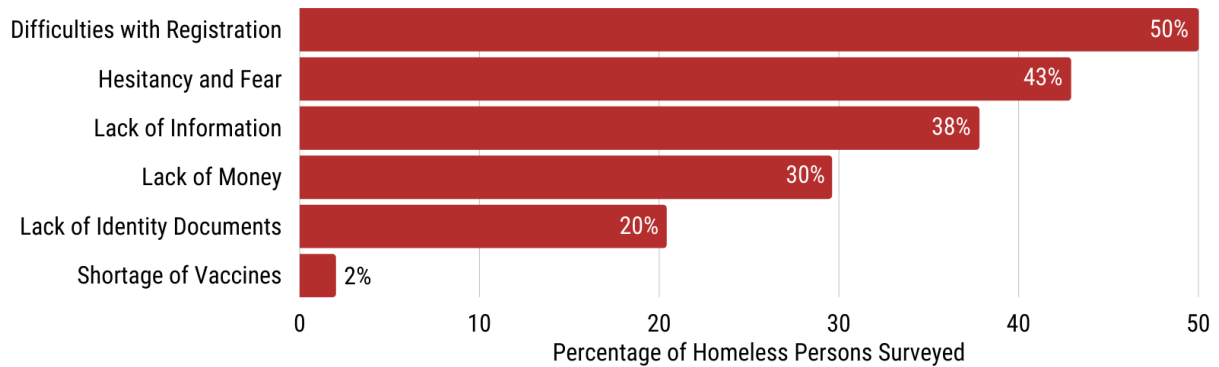
Participants provided several reasons for the low rate of vaccination. Nearly 50 per cent of them stated that they could not get vaccinated due to challenges with registration on the government’s digital ‘CoWIN’ platform,⁷ including the lack of smartphones. Similarly, 43 per cent of the respondents listed vaccine hesitancy and fear as major reasons for not getting vaccinated.

⁶ ‘Dire need of beds, oxygen’: India’s capital under siege from COVID-19,’ *Reuters*, 18 April 2021. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/india/india-under-siege-covid-19-hospitals-overwhelmed-2021-04-18/>
‘Coronavirus: How India descended into Covid-19 chaos,’ *BBC News*, 5 May 2021. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-56977653>

⁷ CoWIN is an online platform to register for COVID-19 vaccination in India: <https://www.cowin.gov.in>

Nearly 20 per cent of those surveyed highlighted that they could not get vaccinated because of the lack of identity documents required for registration.⁸ Of the participants, 36 per cent stated that they do not have an Aadhaar card, while 44 per cent do not have a voter card. Almost 82 per cent of the participants do not possess any other government-issued identity cards.

Figure 4: Major Reasons for Not Getting Vaccinated for COVID-19



5. Police Harassment

As revealed by this survey, during the recent lockdown, 78 per cent of the participants lived outdoors, while only 18 per cent lived in shelters. The majority of people living on the streets were affected by restrictions on movement and enforcement of the lockdown by state authorities, including the police. **Approximately 28 per cent of the homeless people living outdoors stated that they faced harassment by the police during the 2021 lockdown in Delhi.**

Experiences of Police Harassment Faced by Homeless Persons

“The police chased us from parks and threatened to beat us with their sticks.”

“They did not let us live on the pavement, where we’ve always lived, during the lockdown.”

“The police rounded up people living in parks and took them to a school to get tested for Covid.”

⁸ On 6 May 2021, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India, issued Statements of Procedures for the vaccination of people who do not have identity cards. See:

<https://www.mohfw.gov.in/pdf/SOPforCOVID19VaccinationofPersonswithoutPrescribedIdentityCards.pdf>

However, these guidelines were not implemented until the end of June 2021 when special vaccination drives were announced for homeless persons in Delhi. See: ‘DUSIB to launch vaccination drive for Delhi’s homeless from Friday,’ *The Indian Express*, 25 June 2021. Available at:

<https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/delhi/dusib-to-launch-vaccination-drive-for-delhis-homeless-from-friday-7374590/>

6. Disproportionate Impact on Women

Women living in homelessness suffered greatly during the 2021 lockdown in Delhi. The restrictions imposed by the Delhi government, without adequate relief measures, adversely affected their access to food, water, and healthcare. Almost all the women that HLRN interviewed for this survey live outdoors. Consequently, they are unable to access free meals provided in shelters. The majority of women (63 per cent) from this survey ate only one meal a day during the lockdown, while nearly 7 per cent of them could not eat daily. After the easing of lockdown restrictions, as of 1 July 2021, nearly 40 per cent of the women surveyed said they were eating three meals a day, whereas 36 per cent of them manage to eat only twice daily.



The lack of access to food of women also affects the health of their dependents, including new-born infants. As primary caregivers, homeless women faced great difficulties in arranging food and milk for their children during the lockdown and subsequently.

As mentioned earlier, the second wave of the pandemic overwhelmed the healthcare system, thereby impairing the access of homeless women to primary healthcare. Pregnant women and those with non-Covid related illnesses were unable to receive adequate medical attention. During April and May 2021, HLRN received reports of women compelled to give birth outdoors in parks and pavements, without any medical assistance. As of 1 July 2021, only 21 per cent of the women surveyed had received the first dose of the Covid vaccine.

Over 53 per cent of women respondents reported being harassed by the police during the lockdown. However, even after the lockdown, women on the streets of Delhi live in fear and insecurity.

Voices of Women Living on the Streets of Delhi

"I was pregnant during the lockdown. Even in such a condition, I did not have access to food and water."

"Our belongings often get stolen from the pavement where we live."

"During the lockdown, we were compelled to shift constantly, even on an empty stomach, because of our fear of the police."

"I want dignity, housing, education, and livelihood."

7. People's Demands

Delhi's homeless persons, interviewed for this survey, have raised several urgent demands from the government. Their primary demand pertains to the provision of adequate housing, preferably in the same area where they are currently living. Their responses also highlight the need for different models of housing—including rental housing and hostels—to cater to the needs of different sections of the homeless population. People also requested the government to provide secure employment; unemployment benefits when work is not available; health insurance; and social security benefits, particularly for widows, older persons, and persons with disabilities. The need for access to food during times of crisis was also emphasized.

Demands of Homeless Persons from the Government

"We have been living in Delhi for 30 years. We want a house, employment, food, and essential facilities."

"We should be provided a place to live. Our children should be provided education, even if it's in a residential school."

"The government should register us, issue a labour card, and provide us work. If work is not available, the government should provide us unemployment benefits."

"The government should pay attention to the challenges faced by homeless persons. Women who live on the streets and in shelters with their children, risk their lives to survive. They should be freed from such dangers by giving them housing."



V. Recommendations

Based on the demands of homeless persons interviewed for this survey and critical issues highlighted, Housing and Land Rights Network would like to propose the following key recommendations to the Government of Delhi and the Government of India:

- Conduct a **comprehensive survey** of people living in homelessness, including those living on the streets and in shelters. Disaggregated data should be collected, including by age, gender, and disability, to ensure adequate policy response to the needs of different sections of the homeless population.
- Adopt the **‘Housing First’** policy approach that prioritizes homeless people for housing in all government schemes, with the aim of ending homelessness by 2030, as per India’s commitments under the Sustainable Development Goals. In this regard, also develop housing options along a **‘continuum of housing’** – including hostels for single working men and women; short-stay homes for survivors of domestic violence; recovery homes for those with emergency and chronic health issues, including chemical dependency; collective housing for persons with disabilities, older persons, single mothers, and others who do not want to live by themselves; and, access to subsidized rental and ownership housing with access to adequate finance. Provide **rental vouchers** to those who want to live in rental housing.
- Ensure that **permanent housing is provided close to people’s places of work and study**; that it is developed with their active participation; and that it is subsidized/free and based on their ability to pay. Furthermore, no one should be denied housing for not meeting the government’s ‘eligibility criteria.’
- Establish **community kitchens** to provide **subsidized meals** to people living on the streets. These could be set up in consultation with, and the support of, civil society organizations. Vans could be used to distribute food in areas of high concentration of homeless persons.
- Make all **welfare schemes** of the government accessible to homeless persons, irrespective of their documentation and proof of address/residence. Conduct special camps to provide all homeless persons with ration, election, and Aadhaar cards.
- Ensure **universal health insurance** and **universal coverage under the Public Distribution System** for all persons living in homelessness.
- Introduce an **urban employment guarantee act** and also provide **unemployment allowances** to all those who have lost their livelihoods, including as a result of the pandemic.
- **Conduct skill-training workshops** for all homeless persons and take measures to link them with job portals and other livelihood opportunities.
- Provide **disability pension** and **disability insurance** to persons with disabilities, including those who incur disabilities while at work.
- Uphold the **Fundamental Right of all children to education**. Facilitate the provision of ‘smart’ devices, including smartphones and tablets, and free data cards to all homeless children to enable their participation in online classes as long as schools remain closed.
- Provide **universal coverage for all homeless children under the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme** and ensure that they are able to access *anganwadis* and related facilities, including for nutrition and healthcare. As long as schools and ICDS centres are closed, ensure that mid-day meals, nutrition packets, and milk are provided to

school-enrolled homeless children and infants. In addition, **free milk and food** should be distributed to all children living on the streets to ensure their access to adequate and nutritious food.

- Conduct **awareness drives** for homeless persons in order to answer their queries and remove any misinformation about Covid vaccines. Ensure that homeless persons living on the streets are included in the vaccination drives organized by the government.
- Ensure **free testing and treatment of COVID-19** for all homeless persons and others in need. Create adequate quarantine centres and care and recovery facilities for homeless persons who test positive for Covid.

VI. Conclusion

Since the onset of the pandemic, people living in homelessness have been struggling to survive amidst exacerbated challenges. Even after over a year of the pandemic, the Indian government has not introduced or implemented adequate social protection systems for the most marginalized. Though adequate housing has been underscored as the basic defence against the pandemic, the state has not accorded any priority to developing housing solutions for homeless persons. Instead, they have been left to fend for themselves during this public health emergency that has been further compounded by the grave economic crisis.

This study by HLRN highlights several undocumented challenges experienced by homeless persons during India's second wave of the pandemic. It draws attention to the silent and persistent violation of their human rights to, *inter alia*, food, health, work, education, participation, and adequate housing. Unless these issues are prioritized by the government and addressed immediately, it is likely that people living without housing could witness greater human rights violations in the future.

Housing and Land Rights Network hopes that the findings from this rapid assessment survey will draw the attention of the state to the plight of those living in homelessness and encourage the formulation of policies for their protection during the pandemic and after.

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