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Toward a victim inclusive policy framework for people experiencing homelessness in South Africa: a consultative and participatory stakeholder engagement

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ABSTRACT

Homelessness is a multidimensional phenomenon that intersects various aspects of life, including social, economic, well-being, safety and access to basic rights and services. The complex nature of homelessness necessitates constant engagement with stakeholders, at various levels; however, the condition itself reinforces barriers, making it challenging for people experiencing homelessness to access essential resources. The dynamics between homelessness, policy and service delivery are constantly evolving, warranting continuous scholarly attention. The aim of the qualitative study, conducted in South Africa, was to obtain input from stakeholders involved in service delivery and policymaking, regarding the development of an evidence-based victim inclusive policy framework. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 38 participants from diverse sectors and analyzed using thematic analysis. Three broad themes emerged in relation to the aim: theme one reports on the understanding of the dynamics of homelessness; theme two delves into some of the main challenges associated with addressing homelessness; and theme three deals with stakeholder perspectives regarding the current directives and their input for advancing inclusivity among people experiencing homelessness. The findings highlight considerable gaps in collaboration and communication within the broader system, leading to several ideological and practical challenges related to addressing homelessness and providing essential services.

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Introduction

Homelessness is a dynamic and multifaceted phenomenon that demands a multisectoral and transdisciplinary response—one that intentionally disrupts siloed functioning and prescriptive mandates, to facilitate the creation of innovative and holistic interventions. Owing to the nature and range of challenges confronting people experiencing homelessness, such as dealing with substance abuse and poor health, the need to access and engage with stakeholders at various levels appears to be inevitable (Heese et al., 2021; Wentzel & Voce, 2012). Based on the level of exposure and sheer vulnerability in various contexts, the homeless should be regarded as a constantly at-risk group, in need of specialized interventions (Heese et al., 2021). Drawing on an analysis of South African policy responses, the absence of a national framework, among other interrelated factors, reflects the political failure to address homelessness holistically and is cited as a pertinent reason why current responses fail at the implementation stage (De Beer & Vally, 2021b; Pophaim, 2025b). However, the constrained response to homelessness should not be ascribed to one source, because, similar to many other social issues, homelessness is context bound, which means that how it develops and how it is addressed, is generally influenced by sociopolitical changes (De Beer & Vally, 2021a). The challenges associated with addressing homelessness tend to manifest in a network of contextual, environmental, societal, structural and systemic issues, which extend beyond the control of the person experiencing homelessness and often amplify individual pathways,

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further exacerbating and prolonging the experience through marginalization, stigmatization and criminalization (Hopkins et al., 2021).

The dearth of local research on homelessness (Pophaim & Peacock, 2021; Pophaim, 2021; Sadiki & Steyn, 2021), has led to numerous practical and ideological challenges related to counting, defining and contextualizing homelessness, as its feasibility usually depends on a clear understanding of what homelessness entails, which enables stakeholders to establish a realistic baseline to better inform redress (De Beer & Vally, 2021a; Sadiki & Steyn, 2021). This can be demonstrated through considering how the challenge of inadequate statistics on homelessness at a global and national level often renders policies and interventions aimed at addressing associated conditions such as poverty, substance abuse and ill-health obsolete (Stats SA, 2023), as there is insufficient information available on how many people are affected and the ways in which they are affected—and how it should be addressed.

In South Africa, albeit limited, information on homelessness is collected as part of the national population census. Apart from academic research, the census is one of the primary sources of data on homelessness that is used to inform national and global agendas (Stats SA, 2023). Population estimates remain a longstanding and pressing issue at a domestic level. While widely cited estimates place South Africa's homeless population at under 1% of the national population, which corresponds to between 100,000 and 200,000 individuals (Cross et al., 2010). The most recent census attempt, in 2022, reported that there were 55 719 people experiencing homelessness across the country (Stats SA, 2023), while also considering the socioeconomic status and sheer visibility of poverty and people experiencing homelessness in the country. Certain limitations regarding the accuracy of the census were reported, including systemic challenges which led to a re-count, the fact that only roofless and in shelters were counted and the fact that the 2022 Census was not compared with previous censuses due to the use of different data collection tools (Stats SA, 2023). As a result, population estimates remain inconclusive and widely contested as many experts are of the opinion that the accuracy needs to be tested, primarily due to the constant mobility and transient nature of populations and because, historically, many conclusions for research on homelessness is often based on assumptions (Awad, 2023, p. 1; De Beer & Vally, 2021a, p. 3; Tenai & Mbewu, 2020, p. 2).

Based on the most recent census data, although potentially flawed, most people experiencing homelessness were roofless compared to those residing in shelters (79.9% and 20.1% respectively). Furthermore, the majority were male (39,052, 70.1%) compared to females (16,667, 29.9%) and irrespective of the type of homelessness, individuals were predominantly youth aged 20–34 years old and adults aged 35–44 years, there were also more children aged 0–17 years in shelters compared to those that were roofless (Stats SA, 2023). The limited contextual knowledge and scope of local policies and interventions are further compounded by the lack of a consistent definition of homelessness. In the absence of a universal definition, various stakeholders use different understandings which tend to impact the accuracy, type and quality of interventions, as well as who is counted and considered eligible for support (Obioha, 2022; Stats SA, 2023; Weng & Clark, 2018). The narrow and reductive definitions applied by the state agency—StatsSA—during the census, perpetuates the limited contextual knowledge and eventual scope of policies and subsequent interventions. With reference to the census, only two categories of homelessness were included, which were primary homelessness (roofless, on the street, without shelter) and secondary homelessness (no regular residence or moves between various types of accommodation), which was already identified as a limitation previously and implies that this will be the extent to which homelessness is viewed, problematised, contextualised, prioritised to determine the urgency at which it needs to be addressed.

Furthermore, the limited contextual accounts stemming from local reports highlight that the common pathways associated with homelessness, often include unemployment, poverty, mental and physical health challenges, childhood adversity, family dysfunction and abuse, and other more structural and systemic factors such as apartheid capitalism, poorly implemented policies and housing insecurity (Moloi, 2025; Mthembu et al., 2025; Pophaim & Peacock, 2021; Stats SA, 2023; Tenai & Mbewu, 2020). An important take away from these studies is the importance of understanding how these factors shape the phenomenon of homelessness, not only as pathways, but also how it is expressed and experienced. However, few studies demonstrate the interaction and inextricable link between individual and structural factors or embed findings in a theoretical framework to enhance the understanding of pathways into

homelessness (Piat et al., 2015), which is further evidenced by the often narrowly formulated, uncritical, welfare orientated services, that perpetuate that homelessness should only be viewed and addressed as a social welfare issue, which results in the inadvertent disregard for the several other challenges that amount to gross human rights violations, so frequently endured by people experiencing homelessness (De Beer, 2021; Muleya & Mlilo, 2023).

Ultimately, without measures to address the conceptual and contextual limitations, the risk of stigma and stereotypically driven agendas remain a reality, resulting in ineffective or absent stakeholder responses. After all, it is their level of comprehension that determines how they interpret policies, which is driven by their perceptions of homelessness and whether these perceptions align with the structure and directives of policy and intervention. Aligning these factors will adequately define the nature of the service provider–client interaction, thereby facilitating inclusive and accessible services (Tracy & Stoecker, 1993; Weng & Clark, 2018).

One of the key areas that is often neglected is the experience and ensuing impact of victimization among people experiencing homelessness, as it tends to exacerbate thriving levels of social exclusion and marginalization, mainly due to their circumstances, actively compounded by the lack of holistic, inclusive and protective legislation and policy (Pophaim, 2021). In most instances, people experiencing homelessness and those at risk of homelessness are among the most socially and economically disadvantaged (Stats SA, 2023). Consequently, being relegated and ostracized to the peripheries of society, where they continue to face extreme poverty and deprivation, marginalization and vulnerability to crime and victimization remain pertinent characteristics of this condition (Ellsworth, 2019; Pophaim, 2022). Scant reports of the victimization of people experiencing homelessness exist domestically, in 2016, Sadiki reported on experiences among rural and urban homeless persons, revealing a 52.9% (n=70) rate of victimisation. In 2019, Pophaim reported on the experiences of 17 homeless individuals, revealing that 13 participants (76.5%) experienced victimisation since becoming homeless. More recently, Mthembu (2023), among 17 homeless individuals found similar rates of extreme physical abuse and violence (58%), verbal harassment (29%), property theft and damage (24%) and sexual harassment (12%).

In general, victimization has a profound impact on both an individual's well-being and the way in which they navigate life. Accordingly, the nature and patterns of help seeking behavior are significantly impacted by victimization; despite the availability of effective services, the utilization of formal services remains relatively low, with victims of crime more likely to rely on informal support, such as family and friends (McCart et al., 2010). By contrast, the vulnerability experienced by the homeless is often overshadowed by the inclination to criminalize and blame the individual for societal and structural failures.

However, the reality is that the homeless often live in a state of absolute vulnerability and any intervention aimed at addressing homelessness needs to incorporate mechanisms, in the form of services and infrastructure, to mitigate the negative impact driving their vulnerability (De Beer & Vally, 2021a). Building on the recently explored experiences of victimization in the context of homelessness (n=89; 59.7%), this study confirms that the impact of victimization typically extends beyond the physical and psychological bounds of an individual's well-being (Pophaim, 2025a). More specifically, it significantly disrupts help-seeking behaviors and hampers the ability of service providers to deliver essential services, further compounding the persistent strains confronting people experiencing homelessness. Barriers that restrict the use of services by general crime victims often include, but are not limited to, fear, shame, embarrassment, distrust and stigma (McCart et al., 2010). Based on the nature of homelessness and the compounding prevalence of victimization and its potentially debilitating effects, people experiencing homelessness are also, but even more so, exposed. Due to the adverse consequences associated with victimization, they are often left traumatized and face on-going health problems. They also tend to be extraordinarily marginalized, with weak connections to society and its support structures and systems that could otherwise intervene and provide protection and assistance (Turner et al., 2018). Considering its far-reaching impact, the acknowledgment and understanding of this often-overlooked barrier in both policy and practice is crucial among stakeholders, as it ultimately determines the effectiveness of policy directives and amplifies the already constrained help-seeking behavior among people experiencing homelessness.

The interconnected network of challenges and lack of action reinforces the reactive, yet passive stance in addressing homelessness in South Africa. It is viewed as an unwelcome cost, while failing to understand the consequences of not urgently investing in its resolution (De Beer & Vally, 2021b). Despite multiple factors,

the lack of policy remains a fundamental driver in the under-prioritization of homelessness, as the absence of a dedicated, overarching policy means that no budgetary investments will be made by the government toward combatting the issue and civil service organizations are forced to compete for limited resources, further hindering the much-required robust collaboration public and private sectors. In limited cases where financial support is provided, it is usually not specifically intended to address homelessness; instead, it is generally allocated to all vulnerable or presumed indigent groups (De Beer & Vally, 2021b). Due to the lack of policy guidance and the inability to accurately define and contextualize homelessness, the correct team of stakeholders cannot be mobilized and put to task (De Beer & Vally, 2021b). Additionally, there is a lack of collaboration between sectors, which has led to an inability to agree on who the leading agency is, role ambiguity, and the subsequent misalignment of roles and responsibilities within the policy and intervention space. Most of the interventions are currently being filtered through the Department of Social Development (DSD) and are broadly criticized for being uncritical, welfare orientated services, further perpetuating that homelessness should only be viewed as a social welfare issue and inadvertently disregarding several other challenges that amount to gross human rights violations (De Beer, 2021; Muleya & Mlilo, 2023). Narrowly framing the problem to fit the mandate and budgetary allocations of a single department fails to capture the significance of the collaborative, yet nuanced approach required to address homelessness.

It is due to the isolated contextualization of homelessness, in which exorbitant amounts of money are spent on criminalizing homelessness, where the untransformed minds and practices of institutions fail to acknowledge the systemic failures that persistently exclude and even exploit people experiencing homelessness, instead of investing in developmentally supportive measures (De Beer & Vally, 2021b). The advocacy for the creation of inclusive communities generally strives to protect the rights of all vulnerable populations, including the homeless (De Beer & Vally, 2021b). Homelessness often manifests alongside varying degrees of marginalization and the blockage of basic human rights. Frequently marked as undesirable, people experiencing homelessness generally endure levels of stigmatization that exclude them from institutions and services that ought to provide support (Mahlangu & Kgadima, 2021). To create environments characterized by humanity and equality, any structure or barrier that prevents this, should be addressed accordingly (Powell et al., 2021). Inclusive communities entail the deliberate creation of infrastructure and services that facilitate access to mainstream support networks. It aims to encourage the commitment of every institution and stakeholder to acknowledge the homeless as a vulnerable group, prioritizing the integration of institutional agendas and budgets (De Beer & Vally, 2021b). This venture presents an ideal opportunity to infuse the popular African doctrines and philosophies of *Ubuntu*¹ and *Batho Pele*² to re-inscribe and restore the human element into responses to homelessness by adopting the spirit of a caring community characterized by harmony, hospitality, respect and responsiveness.

Furthermore, the transformation of service delivery to the homeless should reflect the eight principles of consultation, service standards, access, courtesy, information, openness and transparency, redress and value for money (Mahlangu & Kgadima, 2021; Republic of South Africa (RSA), 1997). Considering the harrowing realities and challenges faced by people experiencing homelessness—particularly related to their exposure to victimization and restricted access to services—this qualitative study seeks to inform the development of an evidence-based, victim inclusive policy framework. It draws on the perspectives of stakeholders involved in various sectors of policymaking and service delivery to understand how homelessness is perceived, conceptualized and contextualized, the barriers that hinder service access and the implications for effective, inclusive policymaking. The study is guided by the following broad research questions, tailored to the participants roles and expertise.

- How is homelessness conceptualized and understood across different sectors and what are the perceived causes and challenges associated with it?
- To what extent do existing policies, legal frameworks and service provisions address the rights, needs and vulnerabilities of people experiencing homelessness?
- What are the gaps in current responses to homelessness, particularly regarding the victimization of people experiencing homelessness and what should a victim inclusive policy framework entail?

By exploring these perspectives, the study aims to identify and provide contextually grounded policy recommendations to avoid the creation of new competing frameworks or the duplication of resources

and dependencies (De Beer & Vally, 2021b). Instead, the desired outcome would be to integrate and strengthen existing responses to promote universal inclusivity, protection and accessibility in the homelessness sector.

Methodology

The broader project was grounded in the pragmatic paradigm, which embraces the plurality of methods and is often associated with mixed or multi-method approaches and is premised on the notion that the researcher should use the philosophical and methodological approaches that work best for the particular research problem. Furthermore, it facilitates the detection of a socially situated problem and the formulation of adequate action to address the problem (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). For this phase, a qualitative methodological approach was used as it allowed for the consultative and participatory engagement with stakeholders involved in service delivery and policymaking, in the homelessness domain. The selected approach facilitated the creation of a platform for participants to share their experiences, perceptions, ideas, opinions and perspectives within the context in which they function (Ugwu & Eze, 2023). A collective case study research design was used, and cases were specifically chosen in order to draw comparisons between cases and concepts, which aids in both the expansion and validation of theories (Fouché & Schurink, 2011, p. 322). Accordingly, purposive sampling was used to select participants based on their ability to provide appropriate and useful information (Campbell et al., 2020). The final sample consisted of 38 stakeholders from Pretoria, Durban, Bloemfontein and Cape Town,^{F3} drawn from the following sectors (Table 1):

While it would have been ideal to provide more detailed descriptions of the participants' professional backgrounds, to strengthen the validity of their responses. This consideration was weighed against the need to uphold the study's ethical commitments to confidentiality and compliance with the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA, 4 of 2013).⁴ As a result, more pertinent identifiers were intentionally omitted. Following the selection and recruitment of participants, a request was made to engage in one-on-one interviews, for data collection, guided by a semi-structured interview schedule.

An abductive reasoning approach was adopted to frame the study, aligning with its exploratory and interpretive nature. This approach allowed for the blending of empirical insights with theoretical frameworks, fostering the continuous and dynamic exchange between research evidence and theory (Khurshid et al., 2025). More specifically, the development of the semi-structured interview schedule was informed by a triangulated process, drawing from the review of relevant literature, local policy documents and engagements with people experiencing homelessness. This ensured that the questions were not only theoretically sound, but also contextually appropriate and sector specific. The interview questions were designed to explore three core dimensions derived from the study's research questions.

For example, to explore how homelessness is perceived, understood and conceptualized, participants were asked questions such as 'What do you think are the most common causes of homelessness?'; 'What are your thoughts and perceptions regarding people experiencing homelessness?' and 'Based on your own experience and expertise, how would you define homelessness?'. To assess the effectiveness of current policy and service responses, participants were asked 'Do you think current frameworks (directly or indirectly related to homelessness) fully captures the complexities associated with the phenomenon? Please explain your answer'; and to identify and address the policy and service gaps, questions included 'Do you think there is a need for a victim inclusive policy framework in response to homeless victimization. Please explain'; and 'What do you think would have to be included in a victim inclusive policy framework in response to homeless victimization'. Accordingly, questions for each interview were restricted

Table 1. Stakeholder sample description.

Stakeholder group	Number of representatives
Academics and researchers.	3
Officials from the Western Cape DSD office.	3
Staff within the non-governmental/non-profit organizations (NG/POs)/shelter and service center space.	17
Officers from the South African Police Service (SAPS).	14
Officials from the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development (DoJ & CD).	1

to the stakeholders' expertise and how they could assist in advancing the contribution of the study. While the exact phrasing of questions varied according to the respective stakeholder group(s), the core themes—aligned with the overarching research questions—were consistently represented across all groups. This approach preserved thematic comparability while also enabling participants to provide insights grounded in their specific professional and institutional contexts.

At the start of the interview process, all participants were given information sheets to review and were encouraged to ask questions for further clarification. As part of the information sharing process, participants were informed about the nature of the study and what their involvement would entail. Once the participants confirmed that they understood the information, they were requested to sign a written consent form, which also granted the researcher permission to record the interviews. The interviews were conducted in English and took place during October and November 2024. The duration of the interviews varied according to the depth of the participants' expertise and extent of the input they could provide, which resulted in some interviews being as short as 15 minutes, while others were as long as 90 minutes. Lastly, the interviews were held both in person (in secluded areas at shelters, police stations or in the offices of the participants) and virtually, via secure video conferencing (Microsoft Teams).

To ensure trustworthiness of the study, four general criteria were relied on, which include credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. To promote credibility, different sources and methods were triangulated. Participants were purposefully selected based on the nature and scope of their engagement with people experiencing homelessness and related matters. During the interviews, the researcher made use of member checking, constantly making sure that accurate responses were recorded, each interview was treated as a conversation which allowed for constant clarification and the credible documentation of the information shared. With reference to transferability, the aim the study was not to generalize, however, to create trustworthy and transferable accounts, where thick descriptions were used and linked to relevant literature (Stahl & King, 2020). Accordingly, the personal interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim and considering the manageable sample size, the researcher opted to manually transcribe, code and analyze the data. Manually engaging with the data can prove useful and can facilitate a deeper immersion into the data to generate a better understanding and a meaningful analysis process (Byrne, 2022). The author made use of an initial content analysis based on the study objectives, followed by a thematic analysis. More specifically, data from the verbatim interview transcriptions were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach to categorize and provide a better understanding and context regarding the nature and scope of the interactions between various stakeholders and their clients, to identify potential gaps and formulate an evidence-based justification for the development of a victim inclusive policy framework.

Phase 1: familiarization with the data

The data were collected by the author and as such, the analysis process was approached with prior knowledge of the content and some initial analytic interest (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After all interviews were completed, the audio recordings were reviewed multiple times to produce verbatim transcriptions that carefully reflect inflections, pauses, breaks and the overall tone, to preserve the richness and depth of participants' accounts (Byrne, 2022). The transcriptions were initially organized categorically, by stakeholder group, with responses grouped under their corresponding interview questions. This was done to identify early patterns and prepare for the subsequent generation of codes (Byrne, 2022).

Phase 2: generating initial codes

Following the verbatim transcriptions of the data and familiarization process, the author followed a structured coding process, that is identifying the fundamental building blocks, that will later become themes (Byrne, 2022). The process began with *open coding*, which entails the initial classification and labeling of the concepts related to the study, which were aligned to the broad research questions (Babbie, 2020). To capture participant views on homelessness, policy and service gaps and their input for the development of a victim inclusive policy framework, open codes included '*unreliable data on homelessness*'; '*homelessness is misunderstood*' and '*limited services due to stigma*'. During the reanalysis of the initial open

codes, *axial coding* was used to identify important, general concepts, allowing them to be grouped into broader conceptual categories (Babbie, 2020). Codes related to were clustered under an axial category such as ‘*fragmented or uninformed understandings of homelessness*’, ‘*data and knowledge gaps*’ and ‘*structural and systemic neglect*’.

Phase 3: generating themes

This process involves the combination of the various codes to establish shared meaning toward the formation of themes and sub-themes (Byrne, 2022). To aid in this process, *selective coding* was used to identify the central code of the study, during this process key categories were synthesized into overarching themes that aligned with the aim of the study (Babbie, 2020), including ‘*understanding the dynamics of homelessness*’, ‘*the main challenges associated with addressing homelessness*’ and ‘*participant perspectives regarding current directives and their input for advancing for advancing inclusivity among people experiencing homelessness*’.

For example, during Phase 3 of the analysis, the theme ‘*understanding the dynamics of homelessness*’ emerged through grouping axial codes that reflected how participants perceived, conceptualized and interpreted homelessness in their professional capacity. To illustrate, the quote from Participant 14 ‘... when I first came here and saw them, I didn’t look deep into it and I blamed them...’ – was initially coded as ‘negative stakeholder perceptions’ and later groups with similar codes all clustered together to formulate the subtheme ‘*Perceptions of homelessness*’.

Phase 4–6: reviewing, defining and naming themes and producing the report

The remaining phases comprises of the review of the initially constructed themes to establish coherence and flow towards the final production of the report (or manuscript in this case). The initial codes were mapped out and reviewed and following the process of reframing and restricting the themes, three main themes with nine subthemes emerged from the data (Table 2) and are presented in the findings section.

The use of reflective thematic analysis was deemed appropriate for this phase of the study as it embraces researcher subjectivity as a resource for research, while rejecting the positivist notion that view subjectivity as the primary source of researcher bias (Braun & Clarke, 2023). In this instance, the researcher is his capacity as a social scientist, applied his expertise to examine how people interact with each other and how subsystems within society work to provide practical solutions to address homelessness. To balance and mitigate any potential researcher bias, the study adopts a comprehensive approach to data collection. Findings from previous phases—including a document analysis of six South African policy responses to homelessness (Pophaim, 2025b) and a survey of 150 people experiencing homelessness (Pophaim, 2025a)—provide an essential backdrop to the current study. In addition, whilst remaining mindful of my own positionality (as researcher and co-creator, seeking to facilitate rather than enforce the creation of the framework) and the data gathered in the first two phases, the aim of the study was prioritized, which was to obtain stakeholder input regarding the development of an evidence-based and contextually grounded victim inclusive policy framework. Accordingly, a constructivist lens was employed, and the themes were collaboratively derived, as this approach acknowledges the importance

Table 2. Overview of themes emerging from the study.

Theme	Sub-theme
Understanding the dynamics of homelessness.	• Perceptions of homelessness. • Contextualization of homelessness. • Conceptualization and operationalization of homelessness.
Challenges related to addressing homelessness.	• Meeting the rights and needs of people experiencing homelessness. • Practical challenges confronting individuals experiencing homelessness. • The criminalization and victimization vulnerability of people experiencing homelessness.
Current directions and advancing inclusive policy reform.	• Stakeholder perspectives on the current policy and legislative environment. • Stakeholder perspectives on the quality, accessibility and delivery of services to people experiencing homelessness. • Stakeholders’ contribution toward a victim-inclusive policy framework for people experiencing homelessness.

of understanding context and allows for the co-construction of knowledge between the researcher and participants (Saleem et al., 2021), and as such elevates participants to co-creators rather than passive subjects.

Ethical considerations

The study was underpinned by the main ethical principles that included informed consent and gatekeepers' permission; voluntary participation; no harm to participants; no deceptive practices; confidentiality; the availability of debriefing services (by a counselling psychologist and social worker), and the dissemination of findings. Before the data collection process commenced, the gatekeeper's permission was requested and obtained from the relevant government departments and organizations, followed by an application for institutional ethical clearance from the University of the Free States' General/Human Ethics Committee (GHREC), which was subsequently approved.⁵

Presentation, analysis and discussion of findings

A summary of the themes and subthemes is presented in the table below, followed by a discussion of the thematically analyzed data in accordance with the aim of the study. The findings are structured and supported by personal accounts from participants, and where applicable, integrated with the relevant literature. Given the participatory nature of the study, recommendations are provided alongside the presentation of findings, which will allow for the immediate contextualization of each insight, linking the evidence directly to the suggested action.

Theme 1: understanding the dynamics of homelessness

A comprehensive understanding of homelessness is critical for all stakeholders who provide services and contribute to addressing homelessness. A lack of understanding is usually at the forefront of oppressive, punitive and ineffective strategies, whereas feasible and targeted approaches usually reflect a clearer understanding of what homelessness entails (De Beer & Vally, 2021a; Sadiki & Steyn, 2021). The logic behind this theme is to illustrate how, through a process of social construction, stakeholders ascribe meaning to certain concepts, that are often impacted by their perceptions, experiences and expertise and generally direct their ability to accurately contextualize homelessness.

Subtheme 1.1: perceptions of homelessness

Historically, perceptions of homelessness have been shaped by socio-cultural and political factors. The process of social construction allows for the creation of meaning, which has led to the creation of definitions, usually found in policies, that often align with perceptions, instead of empirical knowledge of homelessness (Cronley, 2010). The dominant perception tends to ignore larger systemic and social problems, by placing all blame on the individual and ascribing elements of personal choice, failure and mismanagement to the experience. An individualistic orientation generally underpins public views of homelessness, which tends to reduce the level of empathy and increase the likelihood of victim-blaming. These negative responses typically manifest as oppressive and punitive measures which diminish the support of public policies that seek to address the needs of marginalized groups (Turner et al., 2018; Weng & Clark, 2018). In this regard Participant 14 shared

...when I first came here and saw them, I didn't look deep into it and I blamed them, I looked down on them and it was like, you didn't listen to your parents, you didn't want to go to school and now look at you.

Driven by mainstream perceptions, stereotypes generally portray people experiencing homelessness as more likely to engage in crime, untrustworthy, a public nuisance, more likely to have troubled families, and potentially dangerous and unpredictable (Weng & Clark, 2018). As reported by participant 7

Due to the profession that I am doing, first things first when you see a homeless person, your mind clicks straight to the drugs, first, because there is an abuse of the drugs and most of them, if you check, they are involved in the drugs, you see.

The homeless are usually negatively portrayed, as they are regarded as reluctant or unwilling to engage in interventions that lead to productivity. These negative perceptions and stereotypes tend to constrain service delivery and frequently extend beyond the oversimplification of homelessness; these biased over-generalizations usually lead to the creation of stigma (Mahlangu & Kgadima, 2021; Weng & Clark, 2018). The presence of stigma can be rather harmful in the context of homelessness, as outlined by Participant 34 *'...I think people still feel quite stigmatized in trying to access a range of services, particularly health services...you also hear it in the way that people speak of people who are experiencing homelessness...stigma and that othering, kind of comes across for people and they are not willing and could become quite resistant to seeking support...even if the support is available'*.

Stigma is commonly rooted in socially constructed stereotypes that tend to overlook complexity and diminish individuality by creating general categories into which individuals are arbitrarily grouped, with the added effect of socially excluding those who possess one or more of these characteristics. With reference to homelessness, stigma not only devalues individual identities, but also collectively categorizes individuals as being inferior and not deserving of equal rights and opportunities (Weng & Clark, 2018). Perceptions toward homelessness appear to be based on familiarity and contact, as some participants who did not have much experience with homelessness did not have a particular viewpoint to share. Fortunately, within the context of the study, perceptions do appear to be malleable, as Participant 14 reported that her perceptions changed over time

...now when I look into it, I feel for them...they didn't have support, family support and probably poverty... that is why they have to be homeless...I have a better understanding and now I have this in me to want to assist. I look at it very differently, these people are broken, and they need help.

This viewpoint highlights the malleability of perceptions and how overtime, views and understanding can change, based on new experiences, information and engagements. Therefore, the impact of these negative perceptions needs to be mitigated through continuous awareness raising and positive exposure, at all stakeholder levels, to reframe and reduce negative perceptions toward homelessness. With the envisioned positive perceptual shift, the acknowledgment that the causes and consequences of homelessness are usually out of the individual's control could lead to more effective responses (Turner et al., 2018). As expressed by Participant 35 *'...I think a lot of education still needs to happen within this sector, within the communities as well, to understand that not all people that are homeless or living rough on the street can be viewed with that kind of demeanor, obviously the person still has value, they can still contribute to society, it's something that happened in the person's life, if the person is assisted'*.

Summative note and implications

The subtheme explores the impact of socially constructed perceptions on the delivery of services to people experiencing homelessness. Through this exploration, the findings contribute to a deeper theoretical understanding of how social constructions and stakeholder perceptions shape responses to homelessness. It highlights that stakeholder definitions of homelessness are not neutral or uniform, but are often shaped by socio-political influences, professional roles, personal experiences and institutional norms. The findings advocate for the use of multiple or flexible definitions that are contextually sensitive to avoid the inconsistent or unfair application of standardized or frequently called for universal definitions of homelessness.

The findings more importantly highlight how stigma can function as a structural barrier to service access, reinforcing and exacerbating the marginalization of people experiencing homelessness. Overall, the subtheme demonstrates how perceptions can act as powerful drivers in the way homelessness is perceived, understood, addressed or even ignored, which ultimately depends on the nature of the perceptions. Notably, the findings illustrate that these perceptions are often malleable, which highlights the importance of meaningful engagement and training that raises more awareness to facilitate a transformative shift in harmful and prejudicial stakeholder perceptions to promote empathy and inclusivity in both policy and practice.

Subtheme 1.2: contextualization of homelessness

Well-informed stakeholders are central to creating and implementing effective responses to homelessness, which should translate into targeted, human-centered interventions characterized by inclusivity and the development of holistic and sustainable services. As previously mentioned, the effectiveness of policy responses and interventions requires a clear understanding of what homelessness entails (Mahlangu & Kgadima, 2021; Sadiki & Steyn, 2021). The ability to empirically contextualize a problem, free of negative perceptions, is essential toward the development of evidence-based and contextually sensitive responses that are both flexible and able to address the diverse needs of people experiencing homelessness (Desmond et al., 2017). However, often homelessness is *'both very visible and invisible at the same time. We all see homelessness, yet we see through them, we are not aware of what it really means'* (Participant 37).

Central to the poorly framed contextualization of homelessness, is the dearth of local research, as explained by Participant 38

...often our work with homelessness is not intelligent...it's not driven by the facts and the figures, we are in the space and there we recycle what we do...the data is not reliable... it's once off and then it disappears... we've seen during COVID, what really works is when you have reliable day-to-day data... having the right data, on a daily basis so you know where people are and what are the gaps and addressing that through a plan that has a will behind it.

Therefore, the accurate contextualization of homelessness at a local level is significantly compromised, as it is frequently based on assumption. The high rates of mobility among people experiencing homelessness and the marked absence of comprehensive, longitudinal research, ultimately pose a great challenge for policymakers who are responsible for formulating evidence-based responses (Tenai & Mbewu, 2020).

In the South African context, the policymaking process is guided by the The Presidency of the Republic of South Africa (2020), which aims to guide all government departments in drafting public policies (The Presidency of the Republic of South Africa, 2020). Without sufficient contextual knowledge, the historical trend of adopting generic responses to homelessness (Groenewald et al., 2023), will most likely continue, as the policies will simply be developed to meet standardized criteria and fulfil international obligations, once again failing to capture the unique, individual complexities. This concern is shared by Participant 34

...the policies at a local level are useful but there are still some gaps, in terms of how people live their lives.... there is a lot that needs to be done, there is a lot of consultation that still needs to happen, to get us to a point where we are at a uniform level...the gaps are not related to recognizing the problem, rather what we are going to do about it....a lot of these policies follow a step wise approachwe can think of it in that way and I think that complexity is missing in our policies...it's the way policies are set up, policies are supposed to be these short, but kind of very focused documents, that don't always allow for depth in many ways.

Accordingly, the inaccurate contextualization of homelessness means that the correct team of stakeholders cannot be identified and mobilized (De Beer & Vally, 2021b). In this instance, the lack of knowledge and information could lead to the exclusion of homelessness from the agenda of some stakeholders, as reported by Participant 32

...I think that one probably doesn't really know enough about the homeless, the group itself, they might comprise women, older persons, people with mental disabilities, we don't know. You sort of just group them as this homogenous, homeless group, but not going into the actual composition...how do you contact them, if one were to consult or engage, even have a workshop, how would you go from one street corner you know, walk the streets. How is this group represented, because that's also a real aspect of stakeholder engagement and consultation. With homelessness it's just difficult, it's a number of people, really, so it just makes the practical engagement much harder.

While the complexity of homelessness evades many individuals, organizations and government departments, it remains fundamentally important to have a sound understanding of homelessness and recognize that *'...the way the world works and how we are engaged and connected to different people, is very different'* (Participant 34). The sentiment conveys the importance of moving away from the historical static, one-size-fits-all approach that is generally used to address homelessness

(Groenewald et al., 2023). By acknowledging and promoting the notion of heterogeneity within the context of homelessness, to foster the creation of contextually specific and targeted solutions that are able to address the root causes, instead of only remedying the visible symptoms: *'...if we don't recognize those nuances, around how people's lives are, it means that our interventions we put into place is not going to be complex enough and fitting enough for people's stories'* (Participant 34). The dynamics of homelessness present differently across geographies, as noted by Participant 37 *'...smaller cities tend to be those socially triggered homeless and the ones in the bigger cities tend to be economically triggered and yes some are socially triggered, but they are proportionately much smaller, they are not the main examples we see'*. The variation in experiences of homelessness in rural and urban spaces has been documented by Sadiki (2016), highlighting the need for a more particular contextualization, which demonstrates how understanding the unique circumstances can allow for targeted and more effective responses. Interestingly, Participant 37 provided an international perspective related to homelessness as observed in the United Kingdom (UK) and New York *'...people became homeless because they left a mental institution... prison...the army...a care home or they had some kind of mental breakdown...it was those kind of things which led to people falling out of the system and becoming homeless...very different experiences'*.

However, the risk of victim-blaming and attributing the onset of homelessness to personal mismanagement or a matter of choice remains problematic when emphasis is placed on understanding the individual's reasons for becoming homeless and how that fits in with the broader contextual factors. As participant 18 confirmed

there is a lot of miscommunication with why people end up on the street, often people think that it is a choice, but there is a lot of factors that contributes to a person actually ending up on the street.

In the midst of miscommunication, negative stereotypes, stigma and discrimination could impact the degree of contextualization, which would result in negative experiences and ineffective interventions (Weng & Clark, 2018). Fully understanding and accurately contextualizing homelessness requires a delicate balance, one that demonstrates the cognizance of the complex interplay between individual and broader social and systemic factors. This can be observed in Participant 16's view *'...there are various factors, the predominant factor, out of the many reasons is underlining substance abuse that is there and because when you understand substance abuse or addiction, you will find the first phase, or first step is that your life becomes unmanageable. And due to that you basically give everything up for your drug addiction, which means your job, your family and you become homeless. It is the domino effect'*.

Most participants were able to specifically recall the prominent causes they had dealt with during their engagements with people experiencing homelessness, while also mentioning structural and systemic causes. A delicate balance was maintained to incorporate individual-level explanations that are frequently overlooked in policies. Participant 22 provides an insightful approach to gaining a better understanding *'...addiction is a very strong point, and it's something I am fully versed in, but I was quite shocked coming into the program, I didn't know, I know about homelessness, but compared to addiction, it probably looked like that [used fingers to show the comparable size of homelessness and addiction]....so I had to put myself in a homeless persons shoes...and then realize who I am dealing with, and the mindset I am dealing with, addiction is one thing, homelessness is another thing, combine the two and you have got a very unique individual'*. Based on the preceding discussion, a uniform understanding is not forthcoming as each participant attributes the onset of homelessness to the factors they have been exposed to, within the context of their client base. This indicates the need for a policy framework that acknowledges the debilitating impact of the interaction between individual and socio-structural factors. In as much as guidance and structure are required, due to the dynamic differences and interpretations of homelessness, policies need to be context-sensitive, allowing for the mobilization of resources and stakeholders which depend on the individual needs of the respective beneficiary.

Summative note and implications

The subtheme highlights the critical importance of reliable and evidence-based information required for the accurate contextualization of effective and inclusive responses to homelessness in South Africa. The findings highlight the impact of the dearth of local research and how evident it is among stakeholders

at various levels of service delivery. This aids in underscoring the importance of contextual specificity that is required to understand and comprehensively respond to homelessness. The findings make a significant contribution to the growing body of scholarship that extends on the conceptual critique of generic policy frameworks, by emphasizing the need to embrace the heterogeneity in homelessness and by challenging the assumption that homelessness can be addressed through universal or one-size-fits-all approaches, it necessitates the adoption of nuanced, evidence based approaches that shape contextually sensitive, inclusive and sustainable solutions.

Subtheme 1.3: conceptualization and operationalization of homelessness

Defining homelessness remains one of the most prominent challenges in the homeless arena, as there is little consistency and universality in how it is understood, interpreted and applied in practice (Frazer & Kroll, 2022; Obioha, 2022). Without a universal definition, various stakeholders use different understandings that tend to impact the accuracy, type and quality of interventions, as well as who is counted and considered eligible for support (Obioha, 2022; Weng & Clark, 2018). As Participant 34 notes *'...the definitions that are provided are useful, but it's not always uniform, in the way that we operationalize what we will do'*. The importance of a working definition remains relevant as it will ensure that clear policy directives are created in terms of what homelessness is and, most importantly, what it is not (Groenewald et al., 2023), to avoid wasting already scarce resources. Building on the findings presented thus far, it is important to emphasize that a working definition, due to diverse contexts and experiences, should defy the singularity of reducing homelessness to the lack of shelter and basic needs, proposing that it comprises a range of definitions to underpin interventions and policy development (Kriel, 2017; Mahlangu & Kgadima, 2021; Muleya & Mlilo, 2023; Tenai & Mbewu, 2020). Accordingly, the creation of a constructive definition requires constant consideration as Participant 33 highlighted *'...in the past, we just used to define it as someone without a place to go... just using the term family, 10years ago, we had a very short definition, and now it's grown to the point where we include friends, lifelong partners and I think the same development and growth needs to happen with homelessness, where we do a brainstorm to say what are all the things linking back and I think once we do that, we will have a good definition, to be able to give us a definition that is inclusive of everyone and not marginalizing anyone'*.

Based on an engagement with people experiencing homelessness, building policy interventions around an experiential definition could prove useful, as it allows for the realistic grounding of perceptions and supports a contextualized understanding of the problem and what needs to be addressed, both directly and indirectly. Through this process, stakeholders can obtain client-specific information and formulate their own working definitions on a case-to-case basis, which reflects the nuanced experience of the client linked to their professional orientation of identifying and solving the problem at hand. Through a more specific contextualization, stakeholders may be able to generate a higher buy-in from government, in terms of funding and support, as their requests will now be more specific and targeted in terms of what resources are needed and how they will be distributed more efficiently.

Some conceptual gaps perpetuate the use of inadequate interventions, as they are primarily formulated based on poor understandings that view homelessness almost exclusively as an issue of individual failure and not considering systemic and institutional failures, alongside other contextual factors. Narrowed views of homelessness also categorize issues inappropriately, which aids in misinterpretation, misalignment and general inaction from stakeholders, which can be observed in Participant 35's response

...if we sort out the definition in terms of how we gear our services, in terms of street people versus homelessness. It's a fine line in terms of how you articulate it and how you position it, in terms of the definition, if it's clearly stipulated in the definition and legislation, it makes it easier for the partners to kind, of fall into line and provide services. So now, everybody is saying no it's not my responsibility.

The participants duly acknowledged the difficulty in defining homelessness; however, many were able to construct detailed definitions, reflective of their expertise and experiences, providing further evidence that it is indeed a complex term that defies singular definitions (De Beer & Vally, 2021a; Mahlangu & Kgadima, 2021; Tenai & Mbewu, 2020). Although there were many, the following interpretations insightfully capture the intricacies of defining homelessness. It is important to note *'that it's just someone, not just without a home, but someone needing more, something else is happening, there is a bigger problem at play'* (Participant

21) and *'homelessness is an experience. I think it's when life happens at people, and they are forced to make decisions about their lives... it is someone without safety and security of either physical or social structure that allows them to navigate the world in a good way'* (Participant 34). With these sentiments in mind, perhaps a working definition is not one that is broadly focused, but rather one that is informed and collaboratively created by the person experiencing homelessness and the engaged stakeholder. Such an approach will ensure that a flexible definition is used for a dynamic population, promoting inclusion and ensuring that no one is excluded based on characteristics that do not align with narrowly standardized definitions.

Summative note and implications

The subtheme expands on the long-standing challenges associated with defining homelessness and how the lack of a universal definition has led to limiting and varied interpretation by stakeholders. The findings make a significant conceptual contribution, by exposing the limitations of rigid, prescriptive definitions and provide further justification for the use of flexible, experience-based and contextually sensitive understandings of homelessness. The findings reveal a critical gap that stems from the fragmented understanding of homelessness among stakeholders which leads to the inconsistent operationalization across sectors, that significantly impacts eligibility for services, the allocation of resources and the ability of stakeholders to collaborate effectively. It highlights that when definitions are overly narrow, the risk of reproducing exclusionary practices becomes greater, particularly toward vulnerable and marginal individuals who do not align with dominant or mainstream and prioritized groups in society. The findings promote the need for trained stakeholders to be involved in the interpretation and development of flexible and context specific definitions that advance the creation of targeted, inclusive and holistic policies and interventions.

Theme 2: challenges related to addressing homelessness

People experiencing homelessness face a considerable number of challenges as they navigate a life characterized by vulnerability, marginalization, and strife. The following discussion outlines the most prominent challenges acknowledged by stakeholders regarding service delivery.

Subtheme 2.1: meeting the rights and needs of people experiencing homelessness

Despite the presence of limited and to an extent forced resilience, autonomy and independence among people experiencing homelessness, there are still multiple individuals who have no choice but to rely on the assistance of stakeholders (De Beer & Vally, 2021a). International obligations embedded in Article 25(1) of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR) caters for the provision to ensure that *'everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family...'* (Mahlangu & Kgadima, 2021). South Africa is a democratic, constitutionally driven society that outlines several duties around the fundamental values of human dignity, the achievement of equality and advancement of human rights and freedoms, non-racialism and non-sexism, supremacy of the Constitution and the rule of law, democracy and social justice, equity and respect (Fredman, 2024). Participant 32 shared the importance of ensuring that all citizens live a dignified life, with full access to their constitutional rights *'in terms of the constitution, section 7(2), it's quite clear, in terms of the obligation of the state to promote, respect and fulfil human rights. ...we all have the Bill of Rights, chapter 2, which guarantees a number of rights including dignity, life and those socioeconomic rights, which for example, includes housing in the context of homeless persons.'*

Moreover, emanating from the Republic of South Africa (RSA) (1996), the guiding principles of *Ubuntu* and *Batho Pele* provides for the promotion of equitable and humane service delivery and based on diverse stakeholder feedback, are seldom the case. In terms of an optimistic account regarding upholding the rights and needs of people experiencing homelessness, participant 15 shared

I think the government, or the service providers do a lot, I think about a lot especially here in Cape Town, how many safe spaces are open. So, there is access to services and access to social workers and mental health.

and similarly, *'I see the Western Cape government is probably making the most progress when it comes to homelessness, they are doing what they can, but obviously, certain people will say we could be doing more'*

(Participant 22). Participant 21 provided an insightful response, while raising some valid concerns, which reflects the orientation of having both good and bad scenarios '*...there's obviously people in the know, who are working with homelessness, there are policies that govern homelessness, there is funding that is made available, but often the sustainability of that...is it working as effectively as we would hope? Are there services there? Are there social work services? Cause just giving someone a bed is only one part of a very big problem... So, I think that is just a big struggle, we often just treat the immediate problem in the city and that's what they have in place at the moment. But they don't have a bigger strategy as to how to get people out of homelessness*'.

Conversely, the government remains absent, with recurrent issues related to the level of uncertainty around the rightful custodian of homelessness, funding, absent and often poorly implemented and ineffective policies at the national, provincial and municipal level (Waters 2020). As mentioned previously, very few government departments allocate funding for homelessness and because of the limited extent of contextualization, this is regarded as especially problematic for the Human Settlement Housing and Health or Economic Development Department. However, if the scope were broadened, the reality would likely reveal that many more service sectors are affected by restricted capacity, lack of support and constrained funding, which essentially infringes on their ability to adequately respond to homelessness (De Beer & Vally, 2021b). These challenges are further compounded by concerns related to the lack of political will in government, which is often characterized by limited support and follow-through on interventions aimed at addressing homelessness (Batchelor-Hunt, 2023; Powell et al., 2021). Participant 37 shared that '*the biggest problem that homeless people have is the government, so either because government actively does things that harms people, or because it sets things up that make it hard for homeless people to access*'.

Of the twenty-seven rights listed in the Bill of Rights, only four are enjoyed by the homeless. Thirteen of these rights are infringed upon based on their socioeconomic circumstances, 12 due to government inaction, and 11 due to government action (Perrier, 2021). With this comes an even greater concern that would likely render any policy or intervention obsolete, that is, people experiencing homelessness often do not have sufficient knowledge regarding their own rights and what they are entitled to. This concern was confirmed with findings from engagements with people experiencing homelessness and with stakeholders, observed in Participant 34's response

...people who are experiencing homelessness and people who experience vulnerabilities and marginalization in general are neglected but seen and it's weird because you know, we know that all of these challenges exist, we try and address what is happening but people are still neglected in terms of what their rights are. I don't think that people who are living on the streets or people who live in severe poverty always know that they have rights and so I think that there's that element and besides that particularly vulnerable group, I don't think as a society we really know what our rights are.

In the absence of government action, Participant 30 highlights the importance of NGO's

people don't really know their rights at all, that is the first issue that I saw and they don't know how to stand up for themselves, and I think that is where we play the vital role, is because we advocate for them....we always say every human has a right, but there is certain things that they don't know that is actually also applicable to them, because they are still a human being. Because of the way they are treated on the streets and being homeless, they lose that of being a human being, because they are constantly in survival mode... if there were no NGOs, because the NGO is the body that actually helps the homeless people and there is a lot of NGOs that run without government money.

This statement coincides with the existing literature (De Beer & Vally, 2021b; Muleya & Mlilo, 2023), as issues related to homelessness are usually led by municipalities, religious organizations and NP/GOs in their limited capacity. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the fault lines and forced government to re-evaluate their position in addressing homelessness, but as Participant 38 mentioned '*...at the end of the hard lockdown, people said the disaster is over*' and action against homelessness seemingly regressed and returned to its intermittent state.

Summative note and implications

The subtheme illuminates the often-overlooked human rights dimensions associated with homelessness and its resolution. It makes a significant conceptual contribution by exposing the disjuncture between the lived realities of people experiencing homelessness and the various international human rights obligations and the local constitutional values of South Africa. The findings illustrate how these challenges

are exacerbated by state inaction, neglect and social exclusion, thereby reinforcing the evidence of a substantial design-reality gap that exists between the formulation and implementation of policies and practices, directly or indirectly, linked to the resolution of homelessness. An important contribution lies in the fact that the findings confirm that despite formal obligations and guarantees of human rights, dignity and equality, these elements remain largely unrealized in practice and practically inaccessible to people experiencing homelessness.

Theoretically, this reinforces critiques on the poor implementation of policies and intervention, which demands for the urgent development of measures to counteract individualized challenges, bureaucratic barriers, the lack of political will and the narrowly defined eligibility criteria—all of which continue to impede the rights and needs of people experiencing homelessness. Importantly, the findings also contribute to the growing body of knowledge, by affirming the crucial role of NGOs, who, despite operating with limited resources, continue to provide essential advocacy and service delivery where the state falls short. However, their efforts –while commendable–cannot substitute for a coordinated, adequately resourced and much needed government response. These limitations highlight the unsustainability of relying on fragmented, non-state actors to fulfil what should be constitutionally mandated responsibilities of governmental departments. Collectively, these insights advocate for the development of a mechanism that promotes inclusivity and rights-based policy frameworks, that not only bridges the gap between policy and practice, but also fosters a more coherent, collaborative and accountable response at all stakeholder levels.

Subtheme 2.2: practical challenges confronting individuals experiencing homelessness

Apart from the broader systemic challenges, people experiencing homelessness are confronted by a myriad of personal challenges that perpetuate and exacerbate their homelessness episode. As expressed by Participant 17

...it would depend on whether they want to access it, but I suppose isolation in that sense, their well-being is at risk, so they tend to get really sick or they in danger, so whether that's gang related or just the culture of the homeless community.

The homeless are susceptible to a variety of chronic mental and physical health challenges, including addiction which can act as a precursor to and by-product of homelessness (Heese et al., 2021; Hodwitz et al., 2022). The diverse service needs also tend to complicate matters as reported by Participant 15 '*I am thinking of a heroin client; it is very difficult. You first need to start the whole process; you know putting the client first on medication and all those kind of stuff.... the withdrawals can be a challenge and gangsterism as well*'.

The issues around perception and stigma mentioned previously significantly impact the ability to access services as Participant 19 reported '*...because of them being untidy, they are not taken into consideration and not having a home address*' and Participant 34 '*...a few of our participants was just talking about that othering and I know that I am stinky, I know that I don't look good, I know all of these things and I know when I go there no one is going to want to sit next to me in line, people are going to throw me out, they going to ask me why am I there*'. This level of treatment also reinforces resistance to accessing services and is not always considered when evaluating and establishing networks of assistance for people experiencing homelessness. Securing employment is another challenge, with some variability between educated and uneducated persons, and the ability to secure temporary employment. Many fail to secure permanent employment due to practical constraints, such as the lack of education, identity documents, qualifications, criminal records and other physical challenges (Tenai & Mbewu, 2020), confirmed Participant 21, to some extent '*...some of the challenges accessing employment opportunities, one, because sometimes with homelessness it's also criminal activity that they resort to*'.

Without steady income, people experiencing homelessness usually do not have the required funds to procure their basic needs, apart from those frequent service centers or resort to begging for bare essentials. As Participant 22 confirmed

Ja,⁶ definitely, access to basic services, obviously shelter and accommodation, obviously facilities such as toilets, you know the basic needs, running water, clothing, pretty much all of those is a challenge, living on the

streets is definitely not easy, but it's a survival. You know, there is a lot of challenges, and obviously a lot of it is, if I have to sum it up, basic needs.

Some participants also mentioned that many homeless people are rather resourceful and might not struggle to secure their basic needs. However, Participant 34 raises an important concern, which highlights the simple lack of humaneness when engaging with people experiencing homelessness '*...I think people who are experiencing homelessness, probably have more access to food, than people tend to think, it is much easier for them to get a place where someone is going to give them food and that sort of thing. But still we had people speak about the quality of the food they would receive; it's almost like you're giving the leftovers to the dogs in many ways and that was horrible for them to experience*'. It is therefore expected that access to cost-based services remain a challenge, compounded by the limited availability of public transportation in South Africa and the stigma surrounding the use of these services for those who are othered, perceived as dirty, criminal, or drug addicts. Traveling is another practical challenge experienced by the homeless (Perrier, 2021). The inability to travel due to associated costs or other practical barriers, usually means that the homeless are relegated and restricted to certain areas and usually have to walk everywhere. Given this practical obstacle, their ability to access a variety of networks, including employment and other public services is extremely restricted (Perrier, 2021). The example provided by Participant 21 captures this experience '*...services are available to them. They don't access services, one, because sometimes it's the distance that they need to travel to get to these places, it costs money to travel and the long waiting there and then getting back to where they need to sleep at the end of the day, so that commuting back and forth, often it doesn't happen, because you need to secure your place to where you are sleeping, so you can't afford to be away from your space the whole day, to go sit at the clinic for example*'. The participant shared a similar example '*...Home affairs is a big struggle, a big challenge in our community, I think now it's getting a little bit better with the systems that they are putting in place, but in the past it used you used to wait extremely long and I mean you had to be at home affairs very early in the morning, to even be helped because they help the first 50 people, so I mean if you come even at 8, you may not be helped for that day, and you have to return and like I said it's again about traveling to these facilities*'.

The geographic positioning of people experiencing homelessness can be another significant burden with reference to access to services. As an indicator of poorer quality of life in rural areas, pathway research notes the movement of people from rural to urban spaces to seek employment to escape poverty; consequently, due to limited and even the lack of opportunities, many of them end up being displaced and street bound (Tenai & Mbewu, 2020). The challenge of service delivery within rural communities is largely attributed to broader systemic issues that consistently result in tainted and ineffective delivery of basic and quality services (Shongwe & Meyer, 2023). The reality is that not everyone leaves these areas and therefore continue to be confronted by egregious living conditions and limited, or no access to essential services. As Participant 38 reported

...there are areas of concentration for homeless people, that even the conventional services, I am now talking about health, banking and all of that and even conventional services, we all give to homeless people, psycho-social support, outreach program, shelters, don't exist in those places and so there are also these areas of concentration where there are no services or shelter facilities.

This was also evident during the pandemic, where smaller regions did not present clear or sustainable solutions to address homelessness, and many smaller cities do not have formal policies, strategies or budgets allocated to address homelessness, which is of great concern to those who are even more isolated and marginalized due to their geographic location (De Beer & Mashayamombe, 2021).

Summative note and implications

The subtheme outlines the level of awareness demonstrated by various stakeholders involved in service delivery and policy, regarding the practical barriers and daily survival challenges confronting people experiencing homelessness and the cognizance of how deeply entangled it is with broader systems of marginalization and exclusion. Theoretically, the findings highlight how challenges such as accessing basic needs, health services, lack of documentation and employment are not merely personal deficits but

are shaped and entrenched by structural conditions. The findings essentially expose the overly systemic and structural approaches to policy formulation and implementation, which continues to be detrimental in instances of vulnerable and marginal populations.

These perspectives affirm that access to services, space, infrastructure, mobility are not equitably distributed, but governed by systemic forces, that do not consider factors associated with geographic positioning, transport constraints and inadequate rural infrastructure which create literal distance between people experiencing homelessness and essential services. The lack of consideration often results in the exacerbated reproduction of inequality and reinforcement of marginalization among people experiencing homelessness, which does not only reflect institutional neglect but social devaluation. The findings therefore provide further justification for the need to reevaluate and reframe current policies and practices that are more socially aware and conscious of the entirety of their homelessness experiences.

Subtheme 2.3: the criminalization and victimization vulnerability of people experiencing homelessness

The homelessness paradigm is fraught with uncertainties and controversial decision-making practices, particularly those related to the criminalization of homelessness, which often stems from a very rigid, top-down systemic approach. Driven by the negative connotations discussed previously, societal support from the criminalization of homelessness stems from the belief that people experiencing homelessness threaten public safety (Owadally & Grundy, 2023). As Participant 34 explains

I think we have to understand this within the context of our crime space in South Africa, we have a very big issue with trust of people, because what is placed on us. I think the intention of the by-laws were to protect people, it's about protecting the citizens, that's fair enough but it's not as simple as what the by-laws are making life out to be.

There was a general consensus and Participant 21 eloquently explained this point *'I am pretty sure it's not always ideal places that people tend to set up the makeshift housing and stuff like that...I mean that's not a good place to be, it doesn't attract our tourists, it impacts things on a bigger scale, but I think it just needs to be more humane...we need to figure out how we move people out of spaces, how do we restrict them, where do they go, give them options, then as to where they can go....Often times [these places], it's outlying areas, again this is going to impact how they access services, because if you are going to put me far out of the city, how am I going to keep my clinic appointment, how am I actually going to come into the city to do what I want. I think the main concern would be, if you are moving them to outlying areas, they actually can't access the healthcare system because it's in the city centers.'*

Punitive approaches do not solve the problem instead, they further ostracize the homeless, reinforcing marginalization and exacerbating their vulnerability in spaces of extreme poverty on the street, creating further distance between the homeless and the networks of support within society. Due to negative treatment, their experiences are often worsened by victimization and the perception that they have less access to police protection due to their fractured relationship with the enforcers of these criminalization practices (SAPS and other law enforcement agencies) (Hopkins et al., 2024). Although these practices are concerning, it is not uniform, as Participant 7 explained

...most of the time when we come across complaints like that we explain to the complainant, also the complainant lacks knowledge, let's say this person, for example, is urinating against somebody's wall, that is illegal, you cannot do that, but as a police official, dealing with this kind of complaint, you need to make the complainant understand that this person is homeless, number one, this person also lacks knowledge, he is just doing what he needs to, knowing nothing, make them aware that this one has a problem.

Therefore, with adequate insight and initiative, stakeholders and service providers can integrate a humane approach in cases where their duties and homelessness intersect. Adopting this level of understanding would go a long way toward bridging the access gap and promoting help seeking behavior among people experiencing homelessness. As Participant 34 shared, humanity goes a long way *'...Oh, I saw you last week, how are you doing, have you come here and this and that...then they would start going to the services, okay this guy is nice to me, then they'll go and then they'll get support.'*

The prevalence of victimization and its debilitating and marginalizing impact, although significantly under- explored and prioritized, has been identified as a pertinent risk factor regarding the well-being and help-seeking behavior of people experiencing homelessness (Turner et al, 2018). Susceptibility to victimization is considerable as Participant 16 shared

...I think it comes back from the environment they grew up with, it comes from how they have been marginalized, it comes from where and how they have been labelled and it all stems from there. So, it's easy to be bullied, it's easy to victimize, it's easy being downtrodden upon and it's all down there, because their value and worth as a human being have been stripped in a sense.

Accordingly, an increase in awareness of victimization is required amongst support and care providers when working within the homelessness sector. Therefore, awareness should translate to a better understanding that *'...there are different layers to victimization, kind of components of it. I mean, I think that I would agree that homelessness is, in itself a form of victimization'* (Participant 34) and the ability to accurately contextualize these experiences of victimization. Furthermore, the complex relationship between homelessness and mental health features strongly in victimization literature, as those with mental health challenges are more likely to be victimized and at the same time, experience more difficulties in asking for help from support services (Boyle, 2023; Turner et al, 2018). Based on the prevalence of victimization and the high risk of exposure, Participant 21 shared *'...if you on the streets long enough, like they say if you go to the barber long enough, you'll eventually get a haircut'*. It is imperative to increase the local knowledge base regarding the experiences and impact of victimization on people experiencing homelessness to contextualize these challenges holistically and produce informed and effective policies and interventions.

Summative note and implications

The subtheme deepens theoretical understandings of how the criminalization of homelessness and experiences of victimization intersect, reinforcing the social exclusion and structural marginalization of people experiencing homelessness. The findings illuminate how punitive by-laws, forced removals and displacement to city margins—that are often justified under the guise of public safety—inadvertently exacerbate already limited access to essential services and intensify existing vulnerabilities among people experiencing homelessness. The findings advance current insights into an underexplored area and provide much needed insights into how these criminalization practices place strain on relationships between people experiencing homelessness and service providers.

The findings further contribute to the development of the much-needed formal acknowledgement regarding the victimization vulnerability of people experiencing homelessness by key stakeholders involved in service delivery and policy. The findings offer crucial insights to guide policy reform, demonstrating and confirming that exclusionary practices often stem from public misconception and a rigid, top-down approach that prioritizes public and social order over human dignity, thereby failing to filter the realities at grassroots level to the development of policies and interventions. Conceptually, the findings position victimization as both a driver and a consequence of homelessness, highlighting the importance of considering its far-reaching impact and consideration in policy and practice. The findings encourage policy and interventions that promote humane and empathetic engagements, where trust can be rebuilt and service uptake can be improved. This can be achieved by recognizing the challenges and barriers outlined in this section, instead of framing it as perceived resistance or the generalized unwillingness of people experiencing homelessness to engage with service providers. These important contextual findings will go a long way to facilitate the shift toward more informed, humane and contextually sensitive responses that prioritize the inclusion and protection of people experiencing homelessness.

Theme 3: current directions and advancing inclusive policy reform

Obtaining the perspectives of stakeholders regarding the current legislative, policy and service landscape is an important area of consideration prior to the development of a victim inclusive policy framework for people experiencing homelessness. Building a holistic evidence base to remain contextually sensitive within policy and practice, remains a guiding principle (Desmond et al., 2017). Considering the dearth of

research on homelessness in general, compounded by the limited literature on more specific areas such as the services provided to the homeless, these perspectives are expected to provide invaluable guidance (Muleya & Mlilo, 2023).

Subtheme 3.1: stakeholder perspectives on the current policy and legislative environment

At the forefront of legislative and policy challenges, is the absence of a national framework for homelessness, which has left an undeniable policy vacuum in which a large portion of the country continues to function (De Beer & Vally, 2021b). Participant 33 explains

the biggest gap, is there's no legislation governing homelessness and I think that we find that NGOs are not following the norms and standards that were set out by the department and the main reason for that is that there is no enforcement of it because there is no legislation.

In the absence of a national policy, local governments are expected to craft their own policies and guidelines, which results in little to no coordination in addressing homelessness, as Participant 34 highlights '*...national policies are supposed to drive how we do things, that's why we were doing the work now, because we are trying to understand what would that look like and how can do we do that.*'

In the absence of national policy, many cities that do not have their own policies on homelessness are likely to consult existing legislation and policies for guidance, which presents its own set of challenges. Although slightly dated, the appraisal on current statutory responses to homelessness was found to be inadequate in addressing the associated complexities, with the suggestion that national legislation such as the Constitution or the Social Assistance Act (13 of 2004), while not dealing directly with homelessness, should respond to the overlapping conditions or circumstances associated with homelessness (Naidoo, 2010). Participant 35 reports that

...a lot of policies are silent on homelessness, what further limits us is the absence of legislation, that kind of binds and commits and mandates certain departments to step up and come to the forefront and make these services available.

In support of this, it is evident that most existing frameworks are not adequately implemented and as a result often fail to meet the needs of people experiencing homelessness (Pophaim & Peacock, 2021). As Participant 34 confirmed '*...we did a policy analysis, considering a framework around the pathways and how people's experiences are currently and so on the pathways out, to identify which policies should have an impact around homelessness, should mention it in some way, and the vast majority of the policies don't. Even the housing policies doesn't speak about homelessness and it's because I don't think that it as prioritized as we think it should be.*'

Mindful of the above, the Republic of South Africa (RSA) (2021) recently included homelessness. However, rather than offering in-depth engagement, it highlights the well-known lack and inaccuracy of available data on homelessness, overlooking the critical role of families as a social institution—both as a pathway into and out of homelessness. Participant 38 elucidates at length

...there are very good policies, but in the implementation it often falls through... there seems to be a need for people to make deliberate connections, so sometimes it's the guys in non-profits doing the work, most of them haven't read the policies, so there might be amazing policies and resources out there that can be brought to bear, and it's not done because we don't know what the policies say. It's also the way in which policies speak to each other. If your homelessness policy doesn't deliberately connect to special needs housing and say we can actually, through that mechanism fund physical facilities or housing interventions, it won't happen. It's both, some policies might not accommodate homeless people well enough, some might have everything, but we have not translated it to the homeless community and sometimes collaborations between policies don't exist.

Homelessness is inextricably linked to South Africa's socio-political history and the way in which it is addressed is severely impacted by the tendency to minimize the problem and only focus on the publicly visible segment of the population. As Participant 34 reported '*...when you read those policies, you notice how it is coming from a very particular perspective and a particular way of thinking around homelessness.*' Moreover, it is seen as a politically sensitive subject and how it is addressed ultimately depends on how

it is interpreted (Sadiki & Steyn, 2021). As Participant 35 explains *'...most of the time, these policies are influenced by our political sphere, if you say national policy, you're already saying it's not something I need to do, but if its legislation, it's something else, because then I can be held accountable if I don't fall in line.'* This perspective helps explain the general lack of urgency that is spurred by the fact that officials are not held accountable, which is visible in how frameworks are created, implemented, monitored and reviewed. Many frameworks have become outdated and eventually superseded by the contemporaneity of the issue. The matter is reaffirmed by Participant 33 *'...we still have a norms and standards of 2015, in the Western Cape, and we are currently reviewing it, to update it and do a full overhaul, because we found that, yes, even though the 2015 one was a big improvement of the previous one, a lot changed in the last 9 years, I mean the LGBTQ+, GBV, all those things were never included in the previous one.'* Essentially, the factors discussed have a detrimental impact on the delivery of services, but ultimately on the well-being of the intended beneficiaries, as Participant 33 further explained *'...we found things prior to 2010 that's never been updated... where stuff is not actually capturing what needs to be captured and it's not due to them, actively excluding, but just never updating to include all the new things....But as a government, we should be speaking to one another, within the documents, there should be referral pathways. Currently, what health and social development documents are saying, if you read both of them, it will sound like you are speaking the same language, however, just to get a referral to them, is the biggest headache.'*

The origin of the concerns highlighted above goes back to the development process. Without a comprehensive knowledge base, policies cannot be contextually sensitive and stakeholders will default on generic interventions, which will not reach the spectrum of needs confronting people experiencing homelessness. As explained by Participant 38

...these policy outcomes are usually unrealistic and unattainable to the homeless. Often, the process of policymaking is something one should be interested in, in terms of who makes the policies and who writes it and who is at the table. If it is only officials in a room who has never dealt with homelessness and never experienced it, it is one thing, it gets better maybe if you have researchers who have worked with homelessness, non-profits who have worked with it and you have people who have lived experiences, who have come through it, so the more inclusive, participatory and critical.

The policy vacuum significantly hampers concerted efforts and collaboration between government agencies, which are often required to adequately address homelessness (Sadiki & Steyn, 2021). As participant 36 reported *'...with regards to working in silos as government, I don't know how we going to break that, but that thing needs to be broken'*, these silos further constrain interdepartmental collaboration, as participant 33 indicated *'...I can't give too much detail on all the policies, because we work in very isolated silos in the department, everyone has their own program, so I have my own and GBV will have their own.'* The void left by the policy gap has a knock-on effect on service delivery, which is compounded by concerns related to the lack of political will and support from the South African government (Batchelor-Hunt, 2023; Powell et al., 2021). Correspondingly, societal values are often revealed, not through stated ideas, but through the actual allocation and distribution of funds (Hopkins et al., 2021). Lastly, the costing of policies and how it impedes the reach of subsequent interventions is another concern, as Participant 38 shared *'...the Tshwane policy took four years to be adopted and it was adopted without any budget, that makes no sense, because you need the budget...there are protocols that are almost killing the intention of the policy.'*

There remains a considerable amount of work to be done at the policy level, as Participant 34 explains *'...now with the national policy, how do we make them align, because they are established already, the ones that are there'*, referring to establishing the required connections between new and existing frameworks. Furthermore, grassroots stakeholders have expressed how the policy gap has hindered sustainable and effective service delivery, which fails to embrace the local guiding principles of *Ubuntu* and *Batho Pele* that promote humanistic values and inclusiveness in service delivery. To echo Participant 35's concerns *'...a national policy, won't cut it in my opinion, yes it will be a nice framework to have, but it won't cut it for where we find ourselves now, the problem of homelessness becoming a pandemic at the end of the day and the country doesn't know how to deal with it.'* Therefore, there is an urgent need to introduce a policy intervention to streamline services and communication between departments, which addresses the lack of understanding some government departments (outside of social development), which presents a

challenge, especially in those cases where the homeless require interventions beyond the scope of work and capacity of social workers (Muleya & Mlilo, 2023).

Summative note and implications

The subtheme captures stakeholders' perspectives on the current policy and legislative environment, highlighting the profound impact of the absence of a national policy framework for homelessness in South Africa. The resulting and ensuing policy vacuum has fostered fragmented, uncoordinated and siloed approaches, leaving organizations, municipalities and cities to device their own guidelines—often without adequate alignment, enforcement or resources.

The findings demonstrate a problematic misalignment between policy and practice at grassroots levels. In some cases, existing frameworks are outdated and often fail to explicitly address homelessness with a lack of integration with related policy areas such as housing, health and social development. In other cases where strong policies exist, poor implementation and weak interdepartmental collaboration and limited accountability undermine their effectiveness. In the more dire cases, there is a complete lack of consultation and alignment with any of the existing frameworks in practice and service delivery. The findings notably contribute to the existing body of knowledge as the nature and extent of policy alignment and engagement among stakeholders is not commonly or widely documented in academic discourse. The findings importantly emphasize that most policy development processes are often detached from lived realities, lacking meaningful participation from those with direct experiences of homelessness.

This detachment results in generic policy and interventions that overlook the complexity of homelessness, that stakeholders often unknowingly inherent from the top, down. The findings underscore the urgent need for a coordinated policy framework which aligns with existing frameworks and promotes interdepartmental collaboration. This framework should ensure budgeted implementation and capitalize on the integration of the local guiding principles of *Ubuntu* and *Batho Pele*. Through the consideration of these crucial stakeholder perspectives, these findings can facilitate the creation of contextually informed approaches that strengthen policy coherence and inclusivity. In doing so, the responsiveness of interventions will be enhanced, there will be improved stakeholder accountability which will ultimately advance protection measures and the overall well-being of people experiencing homelessness.

Subtheme 3.2: stakeholder perspectives on the quality, accessibility and delivery of services to people experiencing homelessness

Based on the foregoing sections, the multiple and complex challenges that exist within the South African homelessness sector, from a policy and practice perspective, significantly impact the quality, scope and delivery of essential services. With limited literature on the specific services provided to the homeless, those that cover this aspect report a need for improvement in services and support (Boyle, 2023). With people experiencing homelessness, the often overlooked, human element, should be emphasized as Participant 33 reports '*...they look at it from a business perspective, keeping the NGO afloat and I do think that the humanity, the victimization and the inclusiveness gets lost*'. Therefore, it is important to create environments in which all human beings are acknowledged and receive equal treatment and any barrier that prevents this, should be addressed accordingly (Powell et al., 2021). With the lack of guidance and governance, Participant 33 claims that '*...we try our best, from the constitution to govern and guide, to uphold those rights... Unfortunately we do find that a lot of rights of the clients are not being adhered to, a lot of them would say they are considered like being in jail because they've got time frames, they are advised what they can do and what they can't do, who they can see, who they can't see, education isn't freely available and they get the basics, food, water and shelter, that's it*'. Participant 38 also expressed concern regarding how faith-based organizations force their religious affiliation on clients, before any services can be accessed. As mentioned previously, the rights of people experienced are already severely constrained, and reports of this nature indicate that supportive structures could inadvertently infringe on the remaining rights of clients.

There is a tendency to focus primarily on the interactions of the homeless with health care institutions and police. With reference to health care services, it is known that people experiencing homelessness

face challenges in accessing adequate healthcare, and when they do, they might be subjected to poor treatment and have a negative experience (Wentzel & Voce, 2012). Furthermore, the tendency to blame the homeless individual for their ailments further perpetuates the negative experiences and sometimes amplifies resistance to seek assistance, as Participant 33 reports

...I would say health is definitely a big issue, once someone is in substance abuse, which is in majority of cases for homeless people, they don't get access to healthcare as they should, the clinics would say no because of your substance abuse, you aggravated this concern or that concern, or clashed with your medication and the default on a lot of things like on the ARVs and TB medications.

Typically driven by existing perceptions, stereotypes and stigma, as mentioned previously, the homeless often have to navigate rather complex environments and are sometimes unaware of the inherent traits that accompany them.

Given the diverse composition of South Africa's homeless population, access to services may become more constrained due to a phenomenon referred to as *stacked stigma*. This occurs when stigma associated with race, gender or sexual orientation is combined with that of homelessness, thereby intensifying the experience of stigma-induced barriers to equal access (Weng & Clark, 2018). Therefore, it is important to remain mindful of its impact, as Participant 38 confirmed

...I think because of the stigma of course, sometimes what people look like, and all of that, there's is just a lot of stigma, so healthcare, clinics, people sometimes experiences, it also depends, there are clinics and hospitals where the staff are better, but a lot of times we are just hearing the stories of how people are being treated in these spaces, with great stigma and prejudice.

While not over-emphasizing negative experiences, it is important to highlight that a policy that governs, and guides contextually sensitive and evidence-based initiatives should be implemented or enforced by stakeholders who are not influenced by stigma driven perceptions. The creation of inclusive health care systems is particularly evident in the existing literature; this initiative would ensure the facilitation of accessible services underpinned by respectful and dignified treatment (De Beer & Vally, 2021b). The police on the other hand, represent a critical and complex stakeholder in the lives of people experiencing homelessness. Owing to the intersectionality of their challenges and vulnerabilities with the activities and priorities of policing, this relationship is important for expanding within the context of contemporary urban dynamics as the nature of the interactions can have a profound impact on policy outcomes, service access and the subsequent well-being of people experiencing homelessness (Hopkins et al., 2024; Kyprianides & Bradford, 2024). As Participant 31 reported '*...then, due to their position or opinion about it, usually determines how they handle homelessness. So, the police and of the other guys are very punitive in the way they deal with them*'.

This concern was discussed previously, but with the police, as active enforcers of by-laws and other punitive measures aimed at managing and dealing with people experiencing homelessness, the other needs around services and vulnerabilities are often overlooked. This reinforces the need for interventions that address the problematic understanding of homelessness which affects the nature of services and ultimately impedes policy outcomes, rendering the proposed strategies obsolete. Additionally, some social workers are of the opinion that other departments lack understanding and that the police, specifically, do not have the required level of comprehension and often believe that homelessness is a social work issue (Muleya & Mlilo, 2023). Participant 7 provided insight into the value of training to assist with this role confusion

...training is needed, to back you up, at least it is better to do something with the knowledge than trying to do something without that knowledge... training will open up our minds, how to treat them, because sometimes we are careless, not careless because you want to be, but careless, lacking knowledge of how to act, you are confused, you don't know what to do with this person, must I take him and arrest him, why? Is it lawful, must I leave him here?.

Furthermore, intervening and establishing a better relationship between the police and people experiencing homelessness, by enhancing the level of understanding, could prove to be useful as many times the police are homeless people's first point of contact back into society. In terms of policy guidance, Participant 2 expressed '*...there are so many at the moment, so it's difficult to think of ways to accompany*

them, if I can put it that way' and the lack of government support 'with no kickback from the state it does make it difficult, what makes it even more difficult is the number, that's what makes it tough to find a way to work around it. But with the support the state is giving to those trying to help, it's not much'. This confirms the notion that with clearer policy guidance and adequate support from the government, stakeholders might have a better understanding of their roles and responsibilities, with the added value of being supported by resources and funding. However, despite the absence of policy, some stakeholders have taken the initiative and assist people experiencing homelessness. Participant 12 shared his experiences and constant struggles with working with members of the homeless population but believes '...the biggest thing is, treat them as any other citizen in South Africa, they have got all the rights, all the access to everything out there that everyone else has got. It's just that mindset that you want to treat them less because they tend to get false complaints from them and things don't always stick, but that's a challenge for the policeman, to say this still a human being, with all the rights afforded by the constitution, and you should treat them the same.*'*

Research on shelters is rather limited within the South African context; however, the prevalence of homelessness remains reflective of various stakeholders' inability to honor their constitutional commitment to protect, safeguard and provide necessary services to meet the most basic rights of all citizens (Manomano, 2023). Even so, shelters continue to assume a central role as one of the most active stakeholders in the journeys of people experiencing homelessness as they navigate life toward identifying pathways out of homelessness. Through the provision of temporary shelters, basic needs and limited upskilling, some shelters act as much-needed anchors for those who find themselves in this peculiar situation (Pophaim & Peacock, 2021). Within the scope of the roles they play, shelters can make or break an individual's road to recovery; therefore, it is important to determine the potential strengths and gaps that exist in the shelter space, which will aid in better informing the creation of an inclusive framework that aims to address various practical barriers. As Participant 35 stated '*...you can have all those spaces available, but you don't know if those people really want to stay there, so you can end up with empty spaces.*'

Most of the participants from the shelter space were social workers by profession, who represented grassroots stakeholders within the homelessness sector. Social workers report experiencing a void due to the absence of a national policy as several gaps have been identified which make it challenging for them to fulfil their respective duties (Muleya & Mlilo, 2023). In line with this, Participant 23 reported

...I think because there is no overarching legislation that actually dictates how and what, but I do feel and do believe that service providers are doing the best that they can, it is very difficult and especially if you are in a setting where you don't have the skill and the knowledge especially about substance abuse, because most of the population, that is their challenge...I think that service providers are trying their utmost best, in the capacity that they have to provide best practice basically, to their clients.

Furthermore, social workers maintain that they are in a good position to provide consultation for the development of a national policy, as they are well versed in issues assisting the homeless and can assist in avoiding any gaps in the document (Muleya & Mlilo, 2023). In contrast, most participants mentioned not being fully in tune with the regulatory environment as Participant 27 shared '*...we are in crisis management and crisis mode, on the ground running, there is no time to read and be trained and all that, there is not enough time to equip yourself fully.*'

Concerningly, Participant 35 reported that '*...shelters don't have the means and the staff to deal with clients who have mental health challenges*', which is worrisome given the complex and synonymous relationship between homelessness and mental health; Participant 35 further explained '*...not social workers, definitely not social workers, obviously because of how we were trained, we definitely not equipped, if I look at my teaching, we weren't taught for this, I have approached the psychiatric unit at [redacted], to train some of our social workers, but that's just for screening, that helps a bit, but now when we refer to them, they tell us there is no space.*' Participant 33 acts in an oversight role and provided the following perspective '*...young social workers, we find that in the shelters we've got a, quite a quick turn over with social workers, they get burnt out very quickly. I don't think they always realize what type of intervention is needed and it's too much for them, or they not fully equipped because you are released from university, but you don't have all those skills that you will find in the field.*' Policies are not contextually sensitive in handling the intricate

nature of providing services to homelessness, which is also indicative of the lack of consultation and that policies have primarily been developed from a top-down approach, as they do not address the basic challenges experienced on the ground. Service providers have to manage the intersection of homeless and many other social and health related challenges, something that current policy responses do not cater for, as Participant 22 shared *'...I think everyone should have access to basic needs, but then again, with the homeless part and addiction, it becomes difficult to categorize those two things, I mean if you're just dealing with the homeless part it becomes a little bit easier, but now if substance abuse is involved, you need more environments, so that you can separate the two eventually.'*

Violence and crime are daily challenges for people experiencing homelessness (Tenai & Mbewu, 2020). Participant 15 shared how street connections can encroach on a client's life, within the shelter context

...the client was in the safe space and the boyfriend was still living on the streets and because the boyfriend is using his girlfriend for prostitution he jumped over the fence and took her by force out of the safe space and that's when we involved the police.

The challenges indicate the extent to which a policy is required to provide support and guidance, especially in terms of a healthy level of communication and collaboration between stakeholders. Participant 15 further explained the constrained environment in which he was expected to provide services *'...challenges include placements, shelter placements as well as doing referrals for in-patient referrals. Because you know, I am thinking of a heroin client, it is very difficult. You first need to start the whole process; you know putting the client first on medication and all those kinds of stuff. I also think that is a challenge, but then I also think another challenge is women and children's placements, when a mother comes with here with her children and there is not really a lot of [space] here in the shelter for them.'*

Another rather complex task, which has bearing on access, funding and resource distribution is the categorization of individuals based on their presenting characteristics and challenges. Participant 35 shared *'...there is a growing need for family shelters, where the whole family ends up on the street...and you find this generational homelessness'*. Many shelters are not equipped to accommodate an entire family, as the participant mentioned that his department was currently funding the first of its kind. Furthermore, Participant 36 shared an emergent finding, and it is worthwhile to quote her at length:

...Some of them are not in the right frame of mind, because of drugs, because in our shelters and this a very, very big gap...people come into the shelters and then they have Dementia or they have Alzheimer's or some of them, they come into the shelter but they are elderly people and they are actually supposed to be under older persons, where they are supposed to be in the home, but now they are sitting in the shelter....and the reason why I'm saying this to you, in one of the places, someone was killed, by another beneficiary because the beneficiary had a mental disability, but the person that was killed was an older person, so in the shelters, you have every person under the same umbrella, so the problem that we are sitting with is that, that thing of how do we then say to a person with a mental disability you can't stay here, how? We can't, we not allowed to do it, so now you're sitting with older person, mental disability and all that. So, if we can say, Department of Health, you need to come in here, you need to help us with this, now we also have this thing, the people with mental disabilities need medication and in some instances, it's like, we can't do this, only a registered sister[nurse] can do this, under this Act and that Act, so where does it leave the shelter, the management, so these are really the challenges that we have been identifying, it's that big gap, having everybody under the same umbrella but unfortunately people with different challenges, and then you have that constant fights and things.... you have the admission policy and processes in places, however, it's very difficult, we see it all the time.

The information shared in the quote above has myriad implications for both policy and practice. There is an urgent need to provide guidance regarding the categorization of people experiencing homelessness and the establishment of need-specific shelters and services, which will significantly reduce the looming dangers captured in Participant 36's response. Johannesburg's Policy on Homelessness (2024) proposes the prioritization of vulnerabilities, which is now proven to be even more problematic in light of the information presented above. Given the nature of homelessness and the challenges that confront the entire population, exclusionary criteria have no place in the service sector for vulnerable populations. Instead, categories need to be established for diverse groups to be separately housed and serviced in safer, more conducive environments. Guided by dominant perceptions and stereotypes, the mainstream notion is that people experiencing homelessness demonstrate active resistance when it comes to

accessing services, thereby justifying the punitive approaches taken to address homelessness. Regardless of the growing body of knowledge about homelessness and the barriers they experience in accessing essential services, mainstream ignorance prevails. Participant 34 provided an insightful perspective regarding the packaging and delivery of services to people experiencing homelessness

...a primary challenge is how services are provided. We often talk about accessibility and availability, that is fair, but we don't have enough services, diverse services around health, mental health and substance abuse, our services are restricted in the type of services we offer, but also how we offer those services.

One of the more contemporary issues regarding the availability of services relates to how evictions and subsequent shelter or safe space placements are managed, to meet the constitutional requirements of the process. Concerningly, Participant 17 reflected on this '*...I do think that we don't have enough facilities and services to assist them. Because realistically, no one should be living on the street*' which is further exacerbated by the concerns raised by Participant 25 '*...you can place them in a shelter, but if we are not able to help them phase back into society, which our program is trying to do, they then aren't able to earn an income... if they are not being phased in any program, how are they going to afford longer term shelter fees, and then at some point the shelter is going to ask them to leave, so they going to land up back on the street, so it stays that vicious cycle, because there is nothing really put in place to help them rehabilitate back into society or reintegrate*'.

As mentioned, shelters have a significantly constrained service reach and their ability to outsource services is just as compromised as a result of the lack of communication and collaboration, as Participant 21 explained

...there are many places that are rendering services, it's not always as accessible, it's about that referral pathway being created, because some do wonderful work with persons with mental health issues, but it's hard to gain access...We've been trying to get three of our clients services there, it's been a year and a half... I think there are services out there, but I mean, it just the referral pathways are not strong, the communication between facilities are not strong, and our public health system, it's just over populated, there's just too many people trying to access services....for psychiatrist you can wait three months, for an appointment, what do you do with a client in the three months that they are trying to wait to see someone, you know there's a problem, and you can't move them anywhere from there, you can't gain access to a grant, or anything until we see the psychiatrist.

Participant 35's input further intensified the gravity of the challenge '*...the availability of mental health care services, that is a big concern, I heard the day that we just have close to 20 or 30 health care services across South Africa, that's a concern as well, and the limited bed spaces that we have*'.

The challenges presented above are among the worst and more complex scenarios, however, some cities do not even have the most basic resources, as participant 20 reported '*it is rather difficult, especially shelters, there aren't many here in Bloemfontein, and those that are there, are already full*'. Based on the findings presented thus far, it is evident that a mechanism is required to bridge ideological, contextual and practical gaps to promote the level of accessibility and inclusivity within the service sector for people experiencing homelessness. The following section documents the participants' views on the necessity and content that would have to be included.

Summative note and implications

As a continuation of the previous subtheme, this section makes a significant contribution to advancing research in the homelessness domain, by enhancing the understanding of how policy gaps impact the quality, delivery and accessibility of people experiencing homelessness. The findings provide confirmation that without a comprehensive policy framework to guide action, services are likely to remain fragmented, inconsistently applied, inadequately coordinated and in some cases, continuously infringe on the rights of beneficiaries through restrictive rules, religious gatekeeping or punitive treatment.

Theoretically, the stakeholder perspectives confirm that healthcare access is often hindered by discrimination, substance-use stigma and long-waiting periods, while police interactions are often punitive and shaped by misconceptions about homelessness. This directly informs on the challenges confronting effective interventions, which will have to be addressed through dynamic and flexible policy guidelines.

The findings further contribute to the lesser-known phenomenon of stacked stigma, where homelessness intersects with race, gender or sexual orientation, which further compounds barriers to equal access, through complexities related to eligibility, categorization and prioritization.

Many service providers lack the resources and capacity to meet the complex needs of people experiencing homelessness. The findings reinforce the need for a coordinated, rights based framework that sets minimum standards, promotes inclusivity and addresses the realities of service delivery at grassroots. The stakeholder insights advocate for stigma-free, contextually sensitive approaches which are essential for improving access to healthcare, policing practices and shelter-based services. The need for training and role clarification among stakeholders is emphasized, to reduce stakeholder bias, improve service quality and to ensure that interventions are contextually guided by a multidimensional understanding of homelessness.

More importantly, the findings assert that breaking the cycle of homelessness requires that interventions go beyond immediate shelter and have to include specialized facilities for vulnerable groups, strong referral pathways and reintegration programs that bridge the gap between individual and structural solutions for more inclusive and sustainable outcomes.

Subtheme 3.3: stakeholders' contribution toward a victim-inclusive policy framework for people experiencing homelessness

Homelessness is arguably one of modern South Africa's most shameful expressions of systemic failure due to the inability to provide sustainable support and viable pathways out of homelessness to those in need. The mere fact that street or informally housed populations exist disconnects us from the constitutional principles of the democratic vision, where public services were not meant to be seen as a privilege but as a legitimate expectation (RSA, 1997). Influenced by the proposed establishment of inclusive communities, the current study builds on the findings from stakeholder engagements to work toward the development of victim-inclusive policy framework. The framework essentially aims to bridge the gaps identified by the participants to facilitate the deliberate creation of equitable and accessible infrastructure and services for people experiencing homelessness (De Beer & Vally, 2021b). A similar initiative was introduced by the United Nations (UN), with other social and health-related issues, that aims to reduce stigma and discrimination, sensitize and train service providers, law and policymakers, and law enforcement and empower beneficiaries with the required information to promote access to services (United Nations (UN), 2019). Most of the participants were in favor of the contribution, as Participant 32 stated

...I don't even think it's an option not to do so, we are actually obligated, in terms of human rights obligations and the constitution, everyone is entitled to dignity and equality...in South Africa in particular it is something that is closely linked to our history of institutionalized racism, so dealing with this manifestation of homelessness is, quite critical...with the different policies we have, I have never come across a policy specifically dealing with homelessness and also this approach to dealing with victimization, concurrently there is the element of criminalization, because people are generally treated as less than human, all the by-laws and evictions, so definitely there is a need for it.

The framework, therefore, aims to address structural barriers that diminish the rights of people experiencing homelessness, restricting the acknowledgment of humanity and equality, by adopting the ideals of *Ubuntu* to introduce social justice elements that work against oppressive structures and the penalization of behavior caused by factors external to the individual (Mahlangu & Kgadima, 2021; Powell et al., 2021).

To realize the outcomes outlined by Participant 30

...give them the same service as you would give the other civilians. Especially when they walk into a clinic or a police station or where they need help. Just be available and give them the service, without judgment.

The inclusion of *Ubuntu* principles stems from the insightful discussion with Participant 18 '*...I would say, maybe it is because we let the spirit of Ubuntu die. Cause in the olden days, I didn't even know of anyone that was homeless, because you would find that in your family, someone would have been adopted, a whole village would be responsible for raising the child, nowadays it's just people doing their own thing and catering*

to their own families, what happens next door, is now none of your business. The adoption of this principle could lead to the mobilization of community-based resources, to help drive the establishment of inclusive communities. Furthermore, stakeholders should center their service delivery projections around the eight constitutionally founded principles of *Batho Pele*, to promote the acknowledgment of the human element that is frequently disassociated with homelessness and encourage the inclusion of the homeless as a vulnerable priority group on all institutional budgets and agendas (De Beer & Vally, 2021b). By emphasizing a human rights-based approach, the projected outcome of integrating these principles will reduce the impact of negative perceptions and enhance the promotion of inclusive and stigma free services for people experiencing homelessness.

As part of the developmental process to promote inclusivity in people experiencing homelessness, it is important to establish a basis for what constitutes a conducive context for its implementation. Government buy-in is an essential component to ensure the success of any framework, as Participant 37 said *'...part of the solution is to help government see, that with the things they do, with a small tweak, could be accessible to the homeless'*. The government contributes to the political will and determination required to root out stigmatization in all social, economic and service spaces, to ensure serious repercussions for those who treat the vulnerable with less than the entitled dignity and respect (De Beer & Vally, 2021). With sufficient support the same success reported during the pandemic can be achieved, as outlined by Participant 38 *'...we had 27 shelters opened in 10 days, temporary shelters that didn't exist before, resources were provided based on your data, so all these places had to provide on a daily basis, into a central system, data on the names and the number of people, which they religiously did...It worked so well and there's no reason it can't work every day, after lockdown most of the places closed down, it couldn't be sustained without government'*.

The framework intends to

...tie the pieces together, to see how a lack of an ID and lack of training connects to the lack of health care [that way], you're not only addressing individual symptoms but some of the underlying connects. Hopefully what it does is remind us that this is not an easy problem, this is a very complex and multi-layered problem (Participant 37).

The policy must *'...give you a framework within which you can work, but it must not be so prescriptive that the nuances and contextual realities, between places [are lost], it can't be overregulated'* (Participant 38). Adhering to the recommendations made by participants, the framework incorporates mechanisms in which a flexible and contextually sensitive environment is prioritized. Guided by an evidence-based approach, Participant 35 suggested that the integration of the Individual Development Plan (IDP) be considered, *'...the idea is always individualistic, with the development of an IDP, having certain goals with the social worker to get you to a certain point of reintegration or reunification'*. With this mechanism in place, stakeholders that act as the first point of contact can formulate an experiential definition supplemented by their expertise in identifying challenges, mobilizing external stakeholders/services, and proposing potential solutions.

The concern around collaboration remains a reality

...I think a lot of work needs to happen on the stakeholder level, to make all those other resources available that is outside the scope and reach of our mandate...without legislation...you can do this by starting a memorandum of understanding or agreement with partners, to make those other services available (Participant 35).

Another challenge identified by Participant 35 is related to *'...when a client comes in there's other challenges that the client is presenting, for example, there is mental health, there is disability, then there is the criminal element, and the majority of the programs don't cover all of those specialized needs that the client presents as well, which is also a gap'*. The gap identified here and many of the other factors presented throughout the paper call for not only well-trained stakeholders, but also stakeholders who are able to demonstrate ingenuity in the way they think and solve problems.

Participant 38 stated

...there is no formal course in South Africa to focus on this point [homelessness], there is a need for that, that can just help think people think through, theoretically, how do we contribute to stigmatization, how do we contribute to keep people independent and unfree, what are the policies saying, are there policies we don't use well, what are the things that we shouldn't do.

However, as with many ideas, this would work well on paper, but contrary to Participant 38's perspective, Participant 21 shared her views '*...I learnt more of it, just working in the field, I think your training will only get you so far, but it's actually working in the field, hearing from homeless persons, you know, seeing how they live...I think that broadened my way of thinking around homelessness.*' Common ground can be reached in this regard, as Participant 17 shared '*...I have got theological training...we can have only so much theory, which is great, because that comes from the research of somebody else, but the practical elements you will need in the space.*'

The final consideration for the development of the victim inclusive policy framework includes the involvement of appropriately skilled and trained stakeholders, who are able to demonstrate the required level of ingenuity to develop and utilize a sustainable network of referral pathways. The introduction of this mechanism, as part of the broader framework, is intended to facilitate inclusive and accessible service delivery to people experiencing homelessness. Participant 35 shared

...some shelters do have a kind of a flow chart in terms of what is happening, the client comes in, in terms of assessment. If they present themselves like that, then how do you properly screen and do proper referrals, their policies may be silent around screening and victimization...additional resources can always be useful, services will need to be broad for clients, when you talk about victimization, because victimization can mean different kinds of things.

Moreover, Participant 23 shared the success of their established network '*...I think because we've built so many networks, with local clinics and the day hospitals and with law enforcement and the surrounding shelters, at this point, where we are, it is a bit easier, but only because of the network...if it had not been there it possibly wouldn't be easy to access services, because I don't have a referral letter and I don't have anything else...I think such a framework would assist the client out there that maybe is not ready for this type of service [shelters], to actually access other services out there.*' The findings presented provide a justification for the development of a victim-inclusive policy framework, which not only provides a guideline for inclusive practices but also calls to task all relevant stakeholders to help people experiencing homelessness navigate and access the service sector space in a more humane and dignified manner.

Summative note and implications

This section highlights how stakeholders emphasize that homelessness in South Africa is a profound reflection of systemic failure, undermining the constitutional promise of dignity, equality and equitable access to public services. The findings portray the absence of a dedicated national policy on homelessness as both a cause and a symptom of entrenched stigma, criminalization and fragmented responses. Building on this, participants strongly supported the creation of the *victim inclusive policy framework* to bridge existing service gaps, dismantle structural barriers and embed rights-based, human-centered approaches.

The stakeholder perspectives provided notably contribute to the theoretical and conceptual grounding of the *victim inclusive policy framework*. Grounding the framework in the principles of *Ubuntu* and *Batho Pele* allows for the promotion of inclusive, stigma-free services, the mobilization of community resources, and the assurance that people experiencing homelessness are recognized as a vulnerable priority group to ensure their inclusion in institutional budgets and planning. The input provided by stakeholders involved in policymaking and service delivery advocates flexible, contextually sensitive guidelines rather than rigid, one-size-fits-all regulations, recognizing and emphasizing the complexity and multi-layered nature of homelessness. The findings encourage the integration of mechanisms such as IDPs to set individualized and tailored goals, supported by well-trained and adaptable stakeholders who are capable of problem-solving beyond their formalized institutional mandates. These perspectives highlight that the effectiveness of interventions can be reinforced by the establishment of strong referral networks, memoranda of understanding between institutions to foster cross-sector collaboration to address the needs spanning physical health, mental health, disability, substance use and social justice.

The findings further support the evidence-based nature of the development of the *victim inclusive policy framework* as the findings encourage that its' practical implementation be preceded by government buy-in to secure political will, sustain resource allocation and institutionalize responses proven effective during the pandemic, such as rapid shelter mobilization and coordinated data systems. Capacity-building

emerged as a critical finding, which requires a blend of theoretical training on stigma, rights and policy with practical, field-based learning to foster both expertise and empathy. Integrating these perspectives into a coherent framework will facilitate the shift from reactive, punitive approaches toward a proactive system supported by inclusive interventions which acknowledge homelessness as a priority of social justice and public service delivery.

Limitations and future research

While the study provides important insights into stakeholder perspectives on homelessness, policy development and service delivery in South Africa, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations to enhance transparency and guide future research in this area. The purposive sample of 38 participants was drawn from four major South African metropolitan municipalities (Pretoria, Durban, Cape Town, and Bloemfontein) and, although some participants made mention of rural circumstances, the sample and the data obtained primarily reflect an urban perspective and therefore may not capture the experiences and institutional dynamics present in smaller towns or rural contexts. In addition to this, regrettably, representatives from the legislative branch (DoJ & CD) were not available at the time of data collection, which resulted in the inability to include questions related to the development of the Prevention and Combating of Hate Crimes and Hate Speech Act (16 of 2023) to expand on the proposed inclusion of homelessness under this provision (Pophaim, 2021). The researcher was referred to the Parliamentary Monitoring Group (PMG) website, but unfortunately, this avenue did not assist in the fulfilment of this dimension. Additionally, the paper primarily focuses on institutional and systemic factors shaping the responses to homelessness and does not explicitly include the political determinants of neglect. It would, however, be worthwhile to investigate the extent to which political marginalization potentially contributes to the limited prioritization of homelessness within government and policy agendas. To address these limitations and strengthen the validity of the findings, future research could establish an exhaustive and representative list of stakeholders and include participants from other interconnected sectors such as the Department of Home Affairs, the health sector, and those who were not available to participate from the DoJ & CD, to fully explore their expertise regarding policy development processes and service delivery, to ultimately strengthen the link between policy formulation and implementation that addresses homelessness more holistically and inclusively.

From a methodological standpoint, future research could employ longitudinal designs and mixed methods approaches, with larger and more representative samples, to help contextualize the cross-sectional findings and strengthen the understanding of homelessness and how responses and interventions should be framed on a national level. Within a series of manuscripts stemming from a broader project, this paper specifically focuses on the perspectives of stakeholders involved in service delivery and policymaking in the homelessness sector. It is therefore important to acknowledge that, at face value, the paper does represent an overreliance of service delivery and policymaking stakeholder accounts, which reflects an institutional and professional perspective, without the integral component of the lived realities of people experiencing homelessness. However, to address this limitation, the stakeholder perspectives were contextualized and complemented through triangulation with findings from a document analysis of local policies and results of a homelessness survey. Accordingly, the broader study ultimately culminated in the development of a victim-inclusive policy framework and practical service model for people experiencing homelessness.

Lastly, the study was qualitative and context-specific, and its findings were not intended to be generalizable; rather, they offer transferable insights that can inform future research, policy, and practice related to homelessness and victim-inclusive policymaking. As mentioned previously, the limited stakeholder participation constrained the study's ability to fully explore policy development processes at the national level. However, the outcomes generated from the broader study were favourable in the comprehensive nature in which it reported on homelessness and related aspects that have bearing on both policy and practice. It is, therefore, recommended that it be adapted and replicated on a national level to contribute to the broader knowledge base, which may prove useful with the impending introduction of the national policy framework on homelessness in South Africa.

Conclusion

Despite varying levels of uncertainty and siloed functioning reported by many stakeholders, the pockets of success shared by participants remain a source of hope for a more inclusive future in South Africa's homelessness domain. A key takeaway from the engagement with stakeholders is that South Africa has a diverse, skilled and committed group of professionals who are actively working to address homelessness. However, the findings indicate with concern that unless the challenges identified in the study are adequately addressed, bridging the gap between policy formulation and practice at grassroots level is likely to remain a persistent challenge. The findings demonstrate that how homelessness is conceptualized across sectors plays a critical role in shaping policy responses and service delivery. Inaccurate, inconsistent and fragmented conceptualization significantly contributes to misaligned interventions, while weak contextual grounding further exacerbates implementation challenges. Importantly, policies need to be grounded in the lived experiences and local realities of homelessness and interpreted by trained stakeholders who share an accurate and consistent understanding of these complex dynamics. This remains an essential component to ensure that interventions are comprehensive, inclusive, accessible and contextually responsive.

The study further examined the extent to which existing policies, legal frameworks and service provisions address the rights, needs and vulnerabilities of people experiencing homelessness. The findings confirm that these remain insufficiently met in practice, despite South Africa's constitutional obligations. A clear illustration of the cascading effects of poor conceptual alignment is evident in the fragmented and inconsistent implementation of policy at various levels, which continues to reinforce experiences of victimization, criminalization and marginalization among people experiencing homelessness. Collectively, these challenges and the evident policy and practice gaps led stakeholders to a clear consensus on the need for a coordinated, human-rights based and inclusive policy approach. While a comprehensive account of the broader study extends beyond the scope of this paper, its integrated phases culminated in the development of an evidence-based victim inclusive policy framework. This framework reflects a grounded, yet flexible conceptual and contextual foundation and embeds the core principles of empathy, humaneness, person-centeredness and inclusivity. The development of this framework seeks to provide a mechanism to support cross-sector collaboration, strengthen service delivery and inform more coherent policy and practice responses to homelessness in South Africa.

Notes

1. Translates to 'I am what I am because of who we all are' and emphasises respect, dignity, communitarianism and shared humanity.
2. Translates to 'People first' and is concerned with transforming service delivery to prioritise the needs and well-being of the public.
3. Pretoria, Durban, Bloemfontein and Cape Town are four major cities in South Africa.
4. Under POPIA, the protection of personal information includes not only names but also any data that could reasonably identify an individual (profession, workplace, sector or a combination of characteristics).
5. Ethical clearance number UFS-HSD2023/1848.
6. Afrikaans term which translates to yes.

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Authors contributions

CRedit: **Jean-Paul Pophaim**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Data availability statement

The study participants did not provide written consent for their data to be publicly shared; therefore, due to the sensitive nature of the research supporting data is not available.

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