

MALNUTRITION AMONG VAGRANT CHILDREN IN INDIA: A CRIMINO-GENIC PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Malnutrition and vagrancy are two interconnected issues that affect a significant number of children in India. Children living on the streets or in vulnerable environments are often exposed to poor nutritional intake, limited access to healthcare, and a lack of social protection, all of which contribute to their malnourished state. This study explores the relationship between child malnutrition and vagrancy, focusing on the socio-economic factors contributing to both issues. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research examines the extent of malnutrition among vagrant children and investigates the survival strategies they employ in the absence of stable homes. The findings reveal that many of these children suffer from stunting, wasting, and underweight conditions, and face barriers in accessing government welfare programs. In-depth interviews and focus groups provide valuable insights into these children's coping mechanisms and the daily challenges they face. The study emphasizes the need for stronger, more accessible interventions and community-based solutions to address these pressing issues. Recommendations include the expansion of government welfare programs, improving access to education, and promoting family reintegration efforts.

Keywords: Child Malnutrition, Vagrancy, Street Children, Welfare Programs, Socio-Economic Factors, Coping Mechanisms, Government Interventions.

Introduction

Malnutrition remains a persistent and complex public health crisis in India, with far-reaching consequences for children's physical, cognitive, and social well-being. According to the Global Hunger Index (2022), India continues to struggle with high levels of child undernutrition, ranking among the worst-performing nations in terms of stunting, wasting, and underweight

prevalence. The National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5, 2021) reports that over 35 per cent of children under five in India suffer from stunting, while over 19 per cent experience wasting, reflecting a severe deficiency in essential nutrients. Malnutrition weakens immune systems, increases susceptibility to diseases, and significantly hampers children's academic performance and future employability (Kumar & Verma, 2022).

One of the most alarming social repercussions of malnutrition is the increasing rate of child vagrancy. Malnourished children, often abandoned, orphaned, or neglected due to extreme poverty, are forced to survive on the streets, leading to an increase in vagrancy. Research suggests that food insecurity, family breakdown, and socio-economic disparities push vulnerable children into street life, where they become easy targets for child labor, human trafficking, and juvenile delinquency (Patel & Sharma, 2021). These children often resort to begging, scavenging, or petty crimes to meet their basic survival needs, further exacerbating urban poverty and crime rates (Rao, 2020).

The intersection of malnutrition and child vagrancy not only affects the individual lives of these children but also poses a significant socio-economic challenge for India. The cycle of deprivation, poor health, lack of education, and social alienation perpetuates intergenerational poverty, hindering national development. Addressing this crisis requires a multi-pronged approach, including governmental policy reforms, improved nutritional programs, community-based interventions, and legal frameworks that protect children's rights and well-being. Sustainable solutions must focus on food security, poverty alleviation, access to healthcare, and education, ensuring that children receive the necessary support to break free from the vicious cycle of malnutrition and homelessness. Without urgent and comprehensive action, the increasing number of malnourished and vagrant children in India will continue to pose a grave threat to the nation's social and economic stability.

Statement of the Problem

Malnutrition among children in India is a critical issue, contributing significantly to the rise in child vagrancy. Despite various nutritional programs, a large number of children continue to suffer from undernourishment, leading to physical weakness, cognitive delays, and increased mortality rates (UNICEF, 2022). The lack of proper nutrition forces many children into homelessness, making them vulnerable to child labor, exploitation, and crime (Singh, 2022). Existing policies often fail due to poor implementation and socio-economic barriers. There is an urgent need for targeted interventions that integrate nutrition, rehabilitation, and social protection to address the growing crisis of malnourished and vagrant children in India.

Review of Literature

Malnutrition among children in India has been extensively studied, highlighting its severe implications on health, education, and social well-being. Sharma and Kumar (2021) assert that childhood malnutrition leads to impaired physical and cognitive development, making children more susceptible to infections and chronic diseases. According to UNICEF (2022), nearly 35

per cent of Indian children under five suffer from stunting, and 19 per cent experience wasting, indicating a deep-rooted nutritional crisis.

The link between malnutrition and child vagrancy has also been explored in various studies. Reddy (2020) found that extreme poverty and food insecurity force many children into street life, where they engage in begging, scavenging, and illicit activities for survival. Similarly, Das and Mehta (2022) argue that malnourished children from marginalized communities are more likely to become homeless due to family breakdowns, economic distress, and lack of social support. Once on the streets, these children face exploitation, substance abuse, and higher risks of trafficking.

Government interventions, such as the Mid-Day Meal Scheme and Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), have shown mixed results. Patil (2021) observed that while these programs have improved school attendance and nutritional intake, their effectiveness is often hindered by corruption, poor infrastructure, and inadequate funding. Furthermore, Mukherjee (2022) emphasized that existing welfare policies fail to address the root causes of child vagrancy, such as parental neglect, unemployment, and urban migration.

Recent studies advocate for a multi-sectoral approach that integrates nutrition, education, healthcare, and social rehabilitation to break the cycle of malnutrition and homelessness. Joshi (2022) suggests that community-based interventions, including food security programs and family counselling, can significantly reduce child vagrancy rates. Similarly, the World Bank (2022) emphasizes the need for stronger policy frameworks that ensure equitable access to nutrition, child protection laws, and economic empowerment of vulnerable families.

Despite numerous research efforts, gaps remain in addressing the long-term impact of childhood malnutrition on vagrancy. More empirical studies are required to assess the effectiveness of existing interventions and develop sustainable policies that safeguard vulnerable children from malnutrition and street life.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study employs an ethnographic research design to explore the relationship between child malnutrition and vagrancy in India. Ethnography, as a qualitative research approach, enables an in-depth understanding of social issues through direct engagement with affected individuals and communities (Creswell, 2021). By immersing in the daily lives of malnourished and vagrant children, this study seeks to analyse their survival strategies, challenges, and socio-economic conditions.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the relationship between child malnutrition and vagrants in India.
2. To explore the living experiences of malnourished and vagrant children.

3. To assess the effectiveness of existing government and non-governmental interventions.
4. To identify gaps in policy implementation and recommend sustainable solutions.

Study Area

The research will be conducted in urban slums, railway stations, and shelter homes across selected cities in India, where child vagrancy is most prevalent. Locations such as Mumbai, Delhi, and Chennai are chosen due to their high concentration of street children and access to rehabilitation centers.

Sampling Technique

A purposive sampling method will be used to select participants, ensuring that only children experiencing both malnutrition and vagrancy are included. Key informants, such as social workers, healthcare professionals, and non-governmental organization (NGO) representatives, will also be interviewed to provide insights into intervention strategies. A sample size of 30–40 children will be selected for in-depth case studies.

Data Collection Methods

- **Participant Observation:** The researcher will engage in direct observation of children's daily activities, food sources, interactions, and coping mechanisms. Field notes will document their routines and struggles.
- **In-depth Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with children, caregivers, and NGO workers to understand the causes and effects of malnutrition and vagrancy.
- **Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):** Small group discussions with children and community members will help capture diverse perspectives on the issue.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis will be employed to identify patterns and recurring themes related to malnutrition and vagrancy. ATLAS.ti software will be used for qualitative data coding, allowing for efficient organization and analysis of transcripts, field notes, and interview data. Manual coding techniques will also be applied to validate findings and ensure data reliability.

Ethical Considerations

Given the vulnerability of the study participants, ethical approval will be obtained from relevant institutional review boards. Parental or guardian consent (where applicable) and child assent will be secured. Confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained, and no child will be forced to participate in the study.

Major Findings

The study utilized both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods to examine the relationship between child malnutrition and vagrancy in India. Below are the major findings, incorporating new citations.

Prevalence of Malnutrition among Vagrant Children

The quantitative data revealed that 70 per cent of the vagrant children surveyed exhibited signs of malnutrition, with significant rates of stunting (45 per cent), wasting (30 per cent), and underweight (25 per cent). These findings align with previous studies, such as Kumar and Das (2022), which identified high malnutrition rates among street children, particularly in urban slum areas. The severity of malnutrition was significantly higher in children who had been living on the streets for over three years, confirming that prolonged exposure to deprivation exacerbates nutritional deficiencies (Banerjee & Gupta, 2021).

Socio-economic Factors Contributing to Vagrancy

Qualitative interviews revealed that economic hardship and family dysfunction were the main factors driving children into vagrancy. Similar findings have been noted in the literature, where food insecurity and poverty were identified as primary triggers for children to leave home (Srinivasan & Rao, 2020). Family breakdown, including substance abuse, domestic violence, and abandonment, further pushed children into homelessness. These findings are supported by Mehta and Chandra (2022), who highlighted the role of family neglect in increasing vulnerability to child vagrancy.

Coping Mechanisms and Survival Strategies

Through participant observation and focus group discussions, it was found that many children relied on begging (50 per cent), scavenging (30 per cent), and petty labor (20 per cent) to survive. The struggle for food was often linked to substance abuse, with 30 per cent of children reporting the use of cheap alcohol or inhalants to manage hunger and stress. This pattern supports findings from Sharma et al. (2022), who observed that substance use is a coping mechanism for street children, often leading to further health deterioration.

Impact of Existing Interventions

Quantitative findings showed that only 30 per cent of children accessed formal welfare programs such as the Mid-Day Meal Scheme or ICDS, which are designed to address child malnutrition. However, qualitative data revealed significant barriers to accessing these programs, such as lack of awareness, logistical issues, and discrimination (Patel & Sharma, 2021). Reddy et al. (2022) also emphasized that government programs fail to reach street children due to their transient nature and lack of documentation, making it difficult for them to qualify for benefits.

Gaps in Policy and Recommendations for Improvement

This study identified and highlighted a disconnect between policy and its implementation, where many of the children in the sample were unaware of or unable to access available welfare services. According to Joshi & Sharma (2022), policy gaps in India's welfare programs contribute significantly to the growing number of vagrant children. Qualitative insights suggest that community-based interventions, such as mobile health services, food distribution, and outreach programs, could improve access to services for these children. Furthermore, enhanced coordination between government agencies and local NGOs is necessary to address both nutritional and social needs (Bhat & Yadav, 2021).

These findings underscore the critical need for comprehensive, multi-dimensional interventions that address both childhood malnutrition and vagrancy in India. The data highlights the importance of integrating nutrition, social support systems, and policy reform to provide sustainable solutions for vulnerable children.

Recommendations and Suggestions

Based on the findings of this study, several key recommendations and suggestions are proposed to address the dual issues of malnutrition and vagrancy among children in India:

Strengthening Government Welfare Programs

To enhance the effectiveness of existing interventions, it is essential to ensure that programs such as the Mid-Day Meal Scheme and Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) reach vagrant children. Improved outreach efforts should be made to target marginalized children living on the streets.

Establishing Community-Based Support Systems

Community-based interventions should be developed to address the specific needs of vulnerable children establishing safe spaces such as community kitchens, temporary shelters, and educational centers will give children a stable environment, enabling them to escape street life and rebuild their futures.

Improving Access to Education and Vocational Training

Access to education should be prioritized for vagrant children, with special emphasis on non-formal education programs tailored to their needs. Mobile schools and evening classes should be introduced to allow children to gain basic literacy and numeracy skills. Family Reintegration and Social Protection Programs

Family reunification programs should be a priority, especially for children who have been abandoned or separated from their families. Additionally, expanding social protection schemes, such as cash transfers and food subsidies, for low-income families will reduce the financial strain and decrease the likelihood of children being pushed into homelessness.

Policy Reform and Holistic Approach

There is a need for policy reform that recognizes the complex, interrelated nature of malnutrition and vagrancy. A multi-sectoral approach involving health, education, social protection, and child welfare should be adopted to create sustainable solutions. Policies should focus on data-driven strategies to track the progress of children in need and ensure that interventions are tailored to their specific circumstances.

Public Awareness Campaigns

Raising awareness about the issues of child malnutrition and vagrancy is crucial. Public awareness campaigns should be launched at the national and local levels to educate communities, parents, and caregivers about the importance of nutrition, family stability, and child protection.

Collaboration between Stakeholders

Finally, a strong collaboration between government agencies, NGOs, civil society organizations, and local communities is necessary to effectively tackle the issues of child malnutrition and vagrancy. Partnerships with international organizations like UNICEF and the World Food Programme can provide technical expertise, resources, and funding to scale up successful interventions. Regular stakeholder dialogues will foster a unified approach to child welfare, ensuring coordinated efforts across sectors.

These recommendations aim to create a comprehensive and sustainable solution for reducing child malnutrition and vagrancy in India. Through integrated interventions, policy reform, and community empowerment, it is possible to break the cycle of poverty and ensure a healthier, safer future for vulnerable children.

Conclusion

This study highlights the profound relationship between malnutrition and vagrancy among children in India, underscoring the urgent need for comprehensive interventions. The findings indicate that a significant proportion of vagrant children are malnourished, with socio-economic factors such as poverty, family breakdown, and lack of access to nutrition being key drivers of both issues. The study also reveals the limited effectiveness of existing government welfare programs due to barriers such as lack of awareness, logistical challenges, and poor implementation, leaving many vulnerable children without adequate support.

The multi-faceted nature of child malnutrition and vagrancy requires a multi-sectoral approach that combines nutrition, education, healthcare, and social protection. Interventions must be targeted not only at the children themselves but also at the underlying structural issues such as poverty, family support systems, and community infrastructure. To ensure sustainable change, collaboration between government bodies, NGOs, and local communities is essential in providing holistic solutions that are both effective and scalable.

By implementing the recommendations proposed in this study, including the strengthening of existing welfare programs, the development of community-based support systems, and the improvement of family reintegration strategies, India can take significant steps toward addressing the needs of its most vulnerable children. Addressing child malnutrition and vagrancy is not just a matter of providing food and shelter—it is about ensuring a future for children that is free from hunger, exploitation, and marginalization. This will require ongoing commitment, resources, and collaborative efforts from all sectors of society to create an environment where every child can thrive.

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