Homelessness, Hazards and Disasters

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Shifting the Focus to Small Scale Hazards

Hazards are diverse in form and variously experienced within and between different groups and communities. There has been a tendency among disaster specialists to concentrate on large scale natural hazards and disasters. Despite their lethal reputation, large scale natural hazards such as earthquakes and tsunami, are not the greatest threat to human life (Wisner *et al.*, 1994). A much larger proportion of people are affected by hazards that appear to go unnoticed including conflict, illness and hunger (Walters and Gaillard, 2014). Although it may seem logical to separate large and small scale hazards, there is a connection between the risks people face to all hazards and the reasons for their vulnerability to them. Understanding how these diverse hazards impact individuals can therefore help us to better understand the boarder context and processes that underpin them.

Home and Homelessness

A home is not only a physical house but a place of emotional, social and cultural meaning (Blunt and Dowling, 2006). Severe housing deprivation refers individuals living in severely inadequate housing due to a lack of habitability, privacy and control and security of tenure due to exclusion from the physical, social and legal/political domains. (Amore, *et al.*, 2013). Severe housing deprivation is therefore an umbrella term encompassing many forms of inadequate shelter. This study differentiates absolute homelessness from other forms of severe housing deprivation, who will have their own unique exposure and vulnerability to hazards.
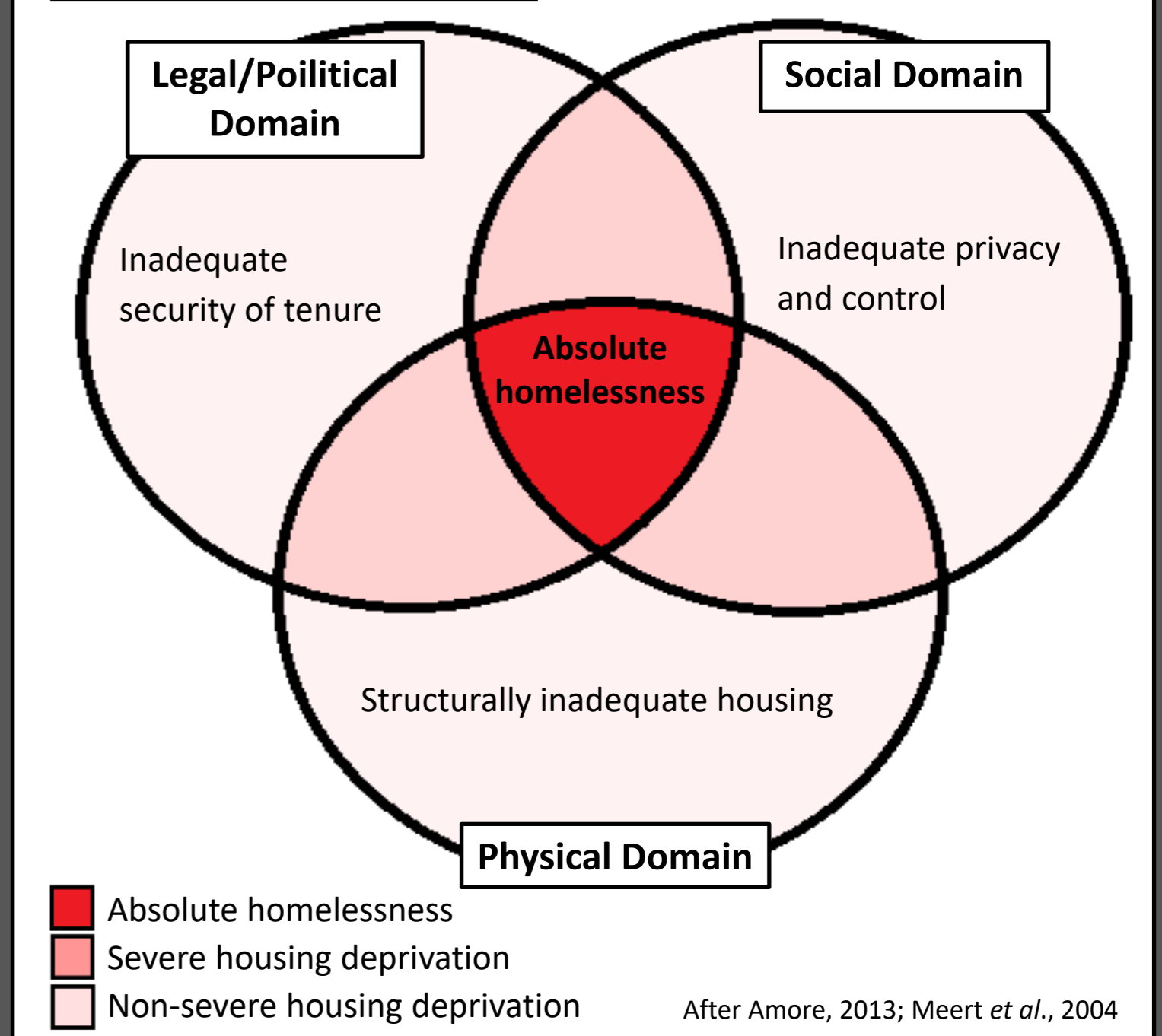

Figure 1: Spheres of exclusion

Legal/Political Domain — Inadequate security of tenure
Social Domain — Inadequate privacy and control
Absolute homelessness
Structurally inadequate housing
Physical Domain

- Absolute homelessness
- Severe housing deprivation
- Non-severe housing deprivation

After Amore, 2013; Meert et al., 2004

Figure 2: On the Edge of Disaster: Homelessness and Hazards in Paris (Left) and San Francisco (right).

Source: Authors own, 2010

The Hazards of Being Homeless

Hazards	Impact on the Homeless
Weather Related Hazards	People experiencing homelessness are highly susceptible to weather related hazards and have little means to protect themselves (Walter and Gaillard, 2014). Without shelter, individuals are more exposed to the heat and cold as well as storms.
Personal Safety	The homeless are more at risk to physical attacks due to a greater level of exposure and lack of personal security (Meertz, 2004). Finding a safe place to sleep is often a major concern identified by homeless individuals.
Physical Health	A physical shelter is an integral part of physical health and homeless people are therefore more at risk to medical issues. The severity of disease tends to more pronounced due to factors such as extreme poverty, delays seeking care, cognitive impairment as well as the adverse effect of homelessness in itself (Hwang, 2001). Medical problems among adult homeless include seizures, arthritis, diabetes, hypertension, anemia and oral/ dental health problems which often go inadequately controlled or undetected.
Mental Health	The burden of being without a home and a physical shelter will undoubtedly impact on an individual's psychological health. Kearns *et al.*, (2007) described how the lack of comfort in inadequate housing in New Zealand, which included the inability to keep warm and the prevalence of pests, exerted a significant impact onto mental health. Mental illness can also be a possible contributing factor towards the state of homelessness itself. There is therefore a disproportionately high occurrence of mental illness among homeless (Gory *et al.*, 1990).

Without a Home, Without a Hope
Why are the homeless so vulnerable to hazards?

Lack of Socio-Cultural Resources

- The United Nations defines homelessness as the condition of detachment from society characterised by the lack of affiliated bonds that link people and their social structures.
- Disaffiliation of homeless people from family and the wider community has a strong impact on self-esteem and sense of identity.

→ **Socio-cultural Marginalisation**

Lack of Physical Resources

- Homeless individuals lack an adequate physical house.
- They are often forced to live in hazardous spaces and places, especially in cities, due to limited space and lack of economic and political resources.

→ **Physical Marginalisation**

Lack of Economic Resources

- Homelessness is the cause and consequence of economic marginalisation and poverty.
- They often lack access to resources and means of protection due to this.
- Many homeless are unemployed due to a lack of education, qualifications as well as issues regarding criminal history and addiction.

→ **Economic Marginalisation**

Lack of Political Resources

- Homelessness is often associated with a lack of recognition, political voice, representation and access to social security.
- The homeless are often statistically invisible as they do not living in permanent private dwellings.

→ **Political Marginalisation**

Source: Amore, *et al.*, 2013; Methodist Mission Northern, 2007; Walters and Gaillard, 2014; United Nations Centre for Human Settlements, 2000.

Future Research

Many marginalised groups have received specific attention in disaster literature and disaster risk reduction policy, whilst others such as the homeless have stirred much less academic and policy interest. There has also been limited consideration among disaster specialists, who tend to concentrate on large scale disaster risk, on the significance of everyday hazards and small scale disasters for those living on the margins. It is therefore important that we seek to better understand the complex relationship between homelessness, hazards and disasters, to better inform policies and practices in disaster research.

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