

POVERTY AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE IN URBAN POOR HABITAT – SOCIAL WORK PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The Concept of Poverty existing in all forms in Urban and Rural Poor Habitats in India, the ratio of urban poverty is higher than the rural poverty due to the Criminogenic Risk Factors and the Environment they live in. As rural people migrate to urban for various reasons, the Global Hunger Index (GHI) listed India in 105th Rank out of 127 countries. The pandemic situation leads to health issues and various other issues like Hunger, Poverty, Migration, and Crimes in Urban Poor Habitat. There was a continuous Case of Violence, Theft, Suicide, and Abuse and so on. The need of the Criminal Justice becomes the necessity of the hour for the urban poor. Based on the previous studies reviewed, there is an association between Urban Poverty and Crime Activities. The methodology of the study was qualitative analysis based on literature and conceptual analysis, comprised of the Concept of Urban Poverty and Criminal Justice, and its relation to Socio – Economic, Political and cultural conditions and its various theories and models, Constitutional Remedies and Indian Legislations, Rights Based Social Justice of the Urban Poor Habitats and the Role of Social Workers in Advocating and Lobbying the issues of Urban Poor in relation to Criminal Justice. Based on the intense reviews and thematic analysis the theory was developed on the “Cycle of Poverty Culture” was proposed to understand the crime activities in the Urban Poor Habitat and why Criminal Justice need to be coarticulated at Macro level interventions are needed through Social Policy and Legislation for the betterment of the Urban Poor Habitat. this can bring in a specialization of “Criminal Justice & Social Work” in the social work curriculum especially in south India. It can comprise of the courses like Poverty and Criminal Justice, children in Conflict with law, Criminal Justice Research and Advocacy, Criminal Justice Administration.

Keywords

Urban Poverty, Urban Poor Habitat, Criminal Justice, Urban Issues, Hunger, Criminal Justice, Social Work

1. Introduction

The term "urban poverty" describes a group of social and economic challenges that are present in industrialized cities and stem from a number of factors, including the development of comfortable living standards, the rise in individualism, social fragmentation, and the idealization of the labor market, which leads to social dualization. Urban poverty

must be viewed as a multifaceted, diverse, and long-term reality in order for contemporary assessments to pay attention to the mechanisms that lead to it. According to Global Statistics, 0.6% of Indians are facing poverty in every minute, and 7% of the country's population lives in extreme poverty.

Global Perspectives of Urban Poverty:

Rapid urbanization is resulting in a growing number of slum dwellers, inadequate and overburdened infrastructure and services (such as waste collection and water and sanitation systems, roads and transport), worsening air pollution and unplanned urban sprawl. The impact of COVID-19 was most devastating in poor and densely populated urban areas, especially for the one billion people living in informal settlements and slums worldwide, where overcrowding also makes it difficult to follow recommended measures such as social distancing and self-isolation.

According to International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) a billion urban dwellers live in informal settlements, most of which are affected by poor quality, overcrowded housing, Risk of forceful eviction, Lack of safe, readily available, water supplies, Poor provision for sanitation, drainage and solid waste collection, Lack of access to healthcare, emergency services and policing, Difficulty accessing government schools, and Locations at high risk of disasters and with risk levels increasing because of climate change.

The various Developmental Studies focus on the causes and problems of the people living in slum areas only few studies which are talking about their behavioral issues, the environment and the atmosphere where they live deciding their behavior patterns which is mostly crime related activities. That need to be addressed through Social, Criminal and Economic Justice.

Urbanization and Rural Change: Causes of Urban Poverty in India

Urban poverty in India is closely linked to patterns of migration, urban growth, and socio-economic structures. The phenomenon can be understood by looking at both the push-pull factors of migration and the dynamics within urban poor settlements .

Migration and the Push-Pull Factors

Push factors: Rural distress caused by lack of agricultural productivity, landlessness, frequent droughts, caste discrimination, and the absence of

adequate health and educational facilities push rural households to leave their villages.

Pull factors: The lure of better job opportunities, higher wages, access to healthcare and education, and the glamour of urban life pull people towards towns and cities.

This large-scale rural-to-urban migration increases the demand for jobs and housing in cities. However, most migrants lack formal education, technical skills, or access to networks that could place them in stable employment.

Generational Poverty and the “Culture of Poverty”

For those born and raised in urban poor habitats, poverty is not just an economic condition but also a socially inherited reality. This leads to what sociologists called “poverty culture”, which includes:

Hopelessness & Fatalism: A belief that nothing will change regardless of effort.

Living for the Moment: Prioritizing immediate survival over long-term planning.

Substance Use: Alcohol or drug consumption becomes a coping mechanism.

Criminogenic Traits: Petty theft, gang involvement, and other antisocial behavior may emerge in environments of exclusion.

Weak Social Capital: Limited networks for upward mobility or access to formal systems.

This cycle of poverty tends to perpetuate across generations, as children growing up in slums face limited educational and economic opportunities, keeping them trapped in low-income, insecure work .

According to Individuals who are without income, home, health, or food twice a day. Also, people who are bedridden, no facility to make and eat food, having debts due to health ailments comes under the list of extreme poor category. According to National Multidimensional Poverty Index Baseline Report, 2021, India ranking in 66 out of 109 countries , India is a Developing Country and its need to be developed in various aspects. Still there is existence of Poverty and that leads to criminal activities.

Criminal Justice

The criminal justice system encompasses the framework, roles, and procedures of organizations involved in preventing crime, investigating offenses, prosecuting offenders, administering punishment, and facilitating corrections. Some argue that referring to a criminal justice system is not entirely precise. They contend that a system is a cohesive, interconnected, and interdependent collection of components executing related tasks that constitute a complex entirety .

Constitution and Criminal Justice in India

In India, the Constitution serves as the foundation of the criminal justice system, ensuring fundamental rights while empowering state institutions to maintain order. The four pillars—police, lawyers, courts, and correctional services—function together to safeguard rights and uphold justice. Parts III and IV, which outline Fundamental Rights and the Directive Principles of State Policy, envision social and economic transformation through legal and policy frameworks (Austin, 1999).

Several constitutional provisions directly shape criminal justice administration, including protection in conviction (Article 20), right to life and liberty (Article 21), safeguards against arbitrary arrest (Article 22), and the powers of pardon vested in the President and Governors (Articles 72 and 161). Articles 17 and 23 specifically criminalize untouchability and forced labor, placing direct responsibility on the justice system to enforce these rights (Basu, 2015).

Enforcement mechanisms were built into the Constitution: individuals may approach the Supreme Court (Article 32) or High Courts (Article 226) for protection of rights. While guaranteeing liberties, the framers also allowed reasonable restrictions to uphold public order, morality, and state security. Thus, the Constitution functions as the ultimate source of criminal law, guiding how rights are both protected and regulated in democratic India (Noorani, 2011).

2. Literature reviews

Theories and Approaches in Criminal Justice

Criminal justice theories provide different ways to understand and respond to crime.

Restorative Justice Theory emphasizes repairing harm caused by crime. It highlights reconciliation between victims, offenders, and the community, promoting healing and rehabilitation instead of punishment (Zehr, 2002). Retributive Justice Theory focuses on punishment as a proportionate response to crime. It argues that offenders deserve penalties equal to the harm caused, and that punishment serves as a deterrent to future crimes (Duff, 2001). Transformative Justice Theory goes beyond both restorative and retributive models. It examines the root social, political, and economic causes of crime and seeks structural change to create long-term peace, justice, and equality (Morris, 2000).

Together, these approaches highlight different ways societies can respond to crime—through healing, punishment, or systemic transformation.

Criminal Justice and its Socio-Political, Economic, and Cultural Dimensions

The criminal justice system does not operate in isolation; rather, it is deeply shaped by social, political, economic, and cultural conditions.

From a socio-political perspective, criminal justice reflects the power relations and governance structures of society. Studies show that law enforcement and judicial practices are influenced by political priorities, ideologies, and the distribution of power, often reinforcing or challenging social inequalities (Garland, 2001).

The economic context also plays a key role in shaping patterns of crime and responses to it. Research has established links between poverty, unemployment, and higher crime rates, while unequal access to resources and opportunities often leads to overrepresentation of marginalized groups in criminal justice processes (Wacquant, 2009).

In terms of cultural influences, criminal justice is shaped by norms, values, and beliefs that define what is considered “criminal” behavior. Cultural attitudes toward punishment, forgiveness, and rehabilitation shape policies and practices, while issues

such as race, ethnicity, and community identity influence how justice is perceived and delivered (Reichel, 2017).

Overall, the literature highlights that criminal justice cannot be understood solely as a legal framework but must be analyzed as a system embedded in broader social, political, economic, and cultural realities.

Rights-Based Social Justice of the Urban Poor Habitats

Urban poor habitats—slums, informal settlements, and marginalized urban communities—are often characterized by inadequate housing, lack of basic services, and social exclusion. The rights-based approach to social justice views these issues not simply as developmental shortcomings but as violations of fundamental human rights. A rights-based framework emphasizes that access to housing, water, sanitation, education, and healthcare are not privileges but entitlements guaranteed under international human rights law (UN-Habitat, 2016). This perspective reframes the urban poor not as passive beneficiaries of welfare but as rights-holders with legitimate claims against the state (Cornwall & Nyamu-Musembi, 2004).

Social justice in urban habitats also requires addressing structural inequalities. Research shows that poverty, exclusionary urban planning, and lack of political representation perpetuate vulnerability among slum dwellers (Davis, 2006). Policies focused only on relocation or eviction often deepen injustice, while rights-based strategies emphasize participation, empowerment, and accountability (Satterthwaite, 2011). Furthermore, scholars highlight that the intersection of economic, social, and cultural rights shapes the lived experiences of urban poor communities. Ensuring land tenure security, equitable access to urban infrastructure, and protection from forced evictions are central to advancing justice in urban spaces (Patel, 2013).

In sum, literature on rights-based social justice stresses that addressing urban poverty requires more than service provision—it requires recognition of the urban poor as active citizens with enforceable rights, and the creation of inclusive cities

that uphold dignity, equity, and justice.

Political Influence and Criminal Activities of Urban:

According to Alision E Post (2018) defines Urban Politics is Agglomerations. “Urban” or “city.” large, densely populated settlements characterized by social and economic heterogeneity. From this perspective, politics in urban areas is likely to differ in important ways from politics in rural settings in India, the Criminal Activities and Political influences are interrelated.

Nishith Prakash, Et. al (2021) Politics is intertwined with the politics of protest. History reveals that many of the protests that started peacefully took a violent turn, resulting in many politicians and activists facing criminal charges of violating public tranquility against them. Such violations of public tranquility, which are a routine medium of expression in Indian politics, are qualitatively different from serious charges like murder, rape, and physical assault. Urban Poor Habitat becomes the victims of Criminalized Politics. From the studies, it is clearly states that there is a strong correlation between the political influence and the criminal activities in the Urban Poor Habitat. More than the Urban Poverty, Urban Politics is also one of the influencing Factors.

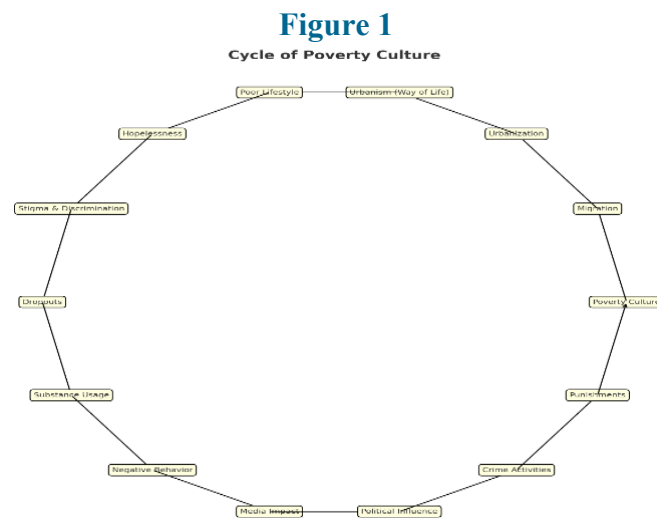
The literature shows that criminal justice is deeply connected to wider socio-political, economic, and cultural realities, and that the way societies respond to crime often reflects broader structures of power and inequality. Retributive justice emphasizes punishment, but this approach risks reinforcing marginalization, especially in urban poor habitats where poverty and exclusion already shape vulnerability. In contrast, restorative and transformative justice approaches highlight healing, reconciliation, and addressing root causes of crime, aligning closely with rights-based perspectives that view access to housing, services, and dignity as fundamental entitlements rather than charity. Studies on urban poor settlements reveal that denial of basic rights perpetuates social injustice, while rights-based strategies empower communities as active citizens and challenge structural inequalities. Together,

these perspectives suggest that a shift toward restorative, transformative, and rights-based models of justice is essential to create inclusive and equitable urban societies where dignity, participation, and social equity are central to both crime control and development.

Power, politics, poverty, and criminal activities are closely interlinked. Poverty often limits access to education, employment, and basic services, pushing marginalized groups into conditions where crime becomes a survival strategy. At the same time, political structures and power dynamics shape how laws are enforced, frequently targeting the poor while protecting the powerful. This creates a cycle where poverty fuels vulnerability to crime, and political manipulation of justice systems deepens inequality. As a result, criminal activities cannot be understood in isolation but must be seen as outcomes of structural poverty and unequal power relations.

Cycle of Poverty Culture:

The cycle of poverty and culture illustrates how deprivation, limited opportunities, and social exclusion are passed from one generation to the next, shaping people's lives and behaviors. Within this cycle, the intersection of power, politics, poverty, and criminal activities becomes evident. Poverty often limits access to education, employment, and basic services, pushing marginalized groups into conditions where crime becomes a survival strategy. At the same time, political structures and power dynamics shape how laws are enforced, frequently targeting the poor while protecting the powerful. This creates a cycle where poverty fuels vulnerability to crime, and political manipulation of justice systems deepens inequality. As a result, criminal activities cannot be understood in isolation but must be seen as outcomes of structural poverty and unequal power relations.



The cycle of Poverty Culture

The Cycle of Poverty Culture begins with poverty culture, which often pushes people towards migration in search of better opportunities. Migration leads to urbanization, and eventually to urbanism, where a new way of life develops. However, this shift is frequently marked by a poor lifestyle and increasing hopelessness. As individuals face these struggles, they encounter stigma and discrimination, which further limits opportunities. This exclusion

often results in school dropouts, pushing many towards substance usage as a coping mechanism. Such circumstances nurture negative behavior, which is reinforced by the impact of media and societal labeling. Over time, political influence shapes and manipulates these issues, often leaving vulnerable groups at greater risk. Many then get involved in criminal activities, which ultimately lead to punishments within the justice system. These punishments, rather than breaking the cycle, feed back into poverty culture, thereby continuing the cycle of

disadvantage.

The Cycle of Poverty Culture illustrates how poverty is not only an economic condition but also a social phenomenon that perpetuates itself through various interconnected factors. It begins with poverty culture, which often drives individuals and families to engage in migration in pursuit of better living conditions. This process contributes to urbanization and, eventually, the development of urbanism, or a distinct urban way of life. However, such transitions frequently result in a poor lifestyle, characterized by inadequate housing, low income, and limited access to resources, which in turn fosters a sense of hopelessness.

Amid these conditions, individuals are subjected to stigma and discrimination, further marginalizing them within society. This exclusion increases the likelihood of educational dropouts, leaving many without essential skills or opportunities for upward mobility. As a coping mechanism, some may turn to substance usage, which fosters negative behaviors and social deviance. The media often amplifies these issues by shaping public perceptions, reinforcing stereotypes, and normalizing marginalization.

At a structural level, political influences often exacerbate these conditions through neglect, manipulation, or policies that fail to address root causes. Consequently, many individuals become involved in criminal activities as a means of survival or resistance. This leads to punishments under the criminal justice system, which seldom rehabilitate but instead reinforce cycles of exclusion, stigma, and poverty. Ultimately, the system sustains itself, making it difficult for individuals and communities to break free from the entrenched cycle of poverty culture.

3. Role of Social Workers

- The roles of social workers are wider when it comes to Urban Poverty and Criminal Justice. It needs to be reworked from the system of community.
- Educating the Urban Poor Population in holistic perspective includes providing good

and safe environment, housing, easy access to health, education, and employment opportunities.

- Creating the environment for them to educate, participate and take Positive leadership in their own community matters.
- Preventing & reducing the usage of substance and alcohol from the schools
- Striving to Breaking the stigma by overcoming the stereotypes
- Breaking the culture of Oppression and Depression. “Reducing the color of brown and making it green”,
- Brown = poverty, deprivation, neglect → representing the struggles and harshness of slum life.
- Green = prosperity, growth, hope → representing opportunities, education, dignity, and a safer environment.

So the suggestion means: reduce the conditions that breed poverty and crime, and instead nurture the conditions that bring prosperity, development, and peace. “Transforming slums from zones of deprivation into zones of opportunity.”

4. Conclusion

The “Cycle of Poverty Culture” highlights how deprivation and structural inequality contribute to crime in urban poor habitats, underscoring the need for criminal justice to be coarticulated with broader social policies and legislative reforms. Addressing these challenges requires a macro-level approach that not only reduces poverty but also strengthens justice systems to ensure fairness and inclusivity. In this context, introducing a specialization in Criminal Justice and Social Work within the social work curriculum, particularly in South India, becomes crucial. Such a program would equip future professionals with the knowledge and skills to address the intersections of poverty, crime, and justice through courses on Poverty and Criminal Justice, Children in Conflict with Law, Criminal Justice Research and Advocacy, and Criminal Justice Administration. This specialization would create a cadre of social workers capable of engaging with policy, research,

and practice, ultimately contributing to more just and equitable urban societies.

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