

The Unwritten Future of the Homeless Child

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Abstract The increasing number of homeless children in Kuala Lumpur presents a growing concern, particularly due to their exclusion from the formal education system. Limited access to education has deprived these children of the opportunity to acquire essential knowledge and skills, perpetuating a cycle of poverty and marginalization. This study seeks to examine the underlying factors that hinder access to formal, non-formal, and informal education among homeless children in the city, while also exploring practical interventions to address these barriers. A total of 27 homeless children not enrolled in any form of education were identified in the Chow Kit area of Kuala Lumpur. In response, the Federal Territory Education Department of Kuala Lumpur (JPWPKL) initiated efforts to provide basic educational support and assist in acquiring legal documentation to facilitate school enrolment. Significant challenges were encountered, primarily due to incomplete or missing documents linked to the complex circumstances of their parents. Between August 2024 and March 2025, continuous intervention efforts by researchers and supporting agencies successfully enabled four (4) homeless children to enrol in formal education. The remaining 23 children continue to receive non-formal educational support through collaboration with JPWPKL, the JPWPKL Welfare and Recreation Club, the National Council of Secondary School Principals (MPSM), the Malaysian National Union of Headmasters (PGBM), Kuala Lumpur City Hall (DBKL), and various non-governmental organizations (NGOs). This study emphasizes the importance of sustained, multi-stakeholder initiatives aimed at expanding educational access for homeless children. Moving forward, it is hoped that increased parental awareness and institutional support will lead to a greater number of these children entering formal education. Ultimately, every homeless child residing in Malaysia is entitled to equitable access to education as a fundamental human right.

Keywords: *Children, Dropout, Education, Homelessness, Socioeconomics*

I. INTRODUCTION

The 21st century is shaping various types of success and global civilization. From the expansion of digital skills to exploring the wonders of Artificial Intelligence (AI), these advancements have become the focal point of society, with individuals racing to achieve such milestones. However, while humanity enjoys the comforts surrounding them, many young children still lack access to necessities, including education. Education is a fundamental need that should be accessible to everyone, regardless of their circumstances. The issue of homeless children not only highlights fragile socio-economic conditions but also reflects the weaknesses in social support systems to protect the most vulnerable groups in society.

Homeless children refer to those living on the streets or

in temporary shelters, often exposed to a lack of proper protection, care, and education. Their lives are fraught with uncertainty, leaving them vulnerable to physical, mental, and emotional instability due to unfit environments.

Globally, homeless children are often trapped in a cycle of poverty as their access to quality education and healthcare support is extremely limited. The absence of stable housing adds further challenges, making it difficult for them to lead a secure life and complicating efforts to build a better future. Various factors, including extreme poverty, family neglect, and domestic violence, contribute to this situation, leaving these children even more susceptible to larger social issues such as child exploitation and crime.

In addition, homeless children face significant social stigma. They are often looked down upon or viewed as burdens by society, seen as problems that need to be eradicated without recognizing that they are victims of circumstance. This issue demands a comprehensive approach from various parties, including the government, NGOs, and the community, to ensure that these children are given a fair chance to access their basic rights - particularly education, protection and healthcare.

II. PROBLEM STATEMENT

In Malaysia, the issue of homeless children is gaining increasing attention, particularly in major urban areas like Kuala Lumpur. These innocent children are often seen roaming city centers, seeking shelter under bridges, in abandoned buildings, or in temporary spaces unfit for their physical and mental development. Data collected by Kuala Lumpur City Hall (DBKL) (2023) indicates that homeless children in Malaysia face similar challenges to those in other countries, such as limited access to education, nutritious food, and basic healthcare services.

Furthermore, the failure of family institutions contributes significantly to the persistent educational issues among homeless children. Domestic violence, often stemming from a lack of foundational knowledge on family well-being (Aratani, 2009), is one of the leading causes of neglect. The instability of family structures can lead to a lack of focus on children's education, particularly when parents fail to prioritize their children's schooling. For homeless children, this neglect translates into an absence of both physical and emotional support, as families are supposed to provide a secure and fulfilling environmental reality far removed for these vulnerable children.

Additionally, some children are born without either parent due to circumstances such as unmarried relationships or lifestyles that result in the birth of children without the foundation of marriage. When family structures break down, children are neglected, not only in terms of physical needs but also emotional and spiritual development. This lack of support often leads children to become homeless at a young age, a stage in life when they

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should be gaining knowledge and skills to build their future (Roche & Barker, 2017). The inability to meet even the most basic needs, such as stable housing, relegates education to a secondary priority. The pressures of survival, such as finding jobs to earn income, securing shelter, and acquiring food, often take precedence, making education an afterthought.

In Kuala Lumpur, the situation becomes even more challenging due to rapid urbanization and a significant income gap between the wealthy and the poor. According to DBKL reports, the number of homeless people in Kuala Lumpur was estimated at around 1,200 to 2,000 in 2023, a significant portion of whom are children. Children from homeless families are often excluded from the national education system due to various factors, especially the lack of valid identification documents or the inability to consistently attend school. This exclusion severely limits their opportunities to access quality education and perpetuates the cycle of poverty within their families. Without education, these children have minimal chances to improve their economic status in the future. Even more concerning is the absence of guidance and direction for these children, leaving them trapped in a vicious cycle with no pathway to break free.

Moreover, the high cost of living in major cities exacerbates the struggles faced by homeless families trying to make ends meet. Kuala Lumpur, as the nation's capital, is a primary destination for those seeking job opportunities; however, many fail to succeed and end up falling into homelessness despite having qualifications. The lack of stable housing exposes their children to various threats, including the risk of exploitation and involvement in criminal activities. This situation not only hampers their personal development but also contributes to larger social issues in urban areas.

Addressing the issue of homeless children in Malaysia, particularly in Kuala Lumpur, requires more aggressive measures from the government and the broader community. Inclusive intervention programs need to be implemented, such as providing temporary shelters, alternative education, and psychosocial support. These efforts are critical to ensure that these children are not further marginalized and are given better opportunities for a secure future, ultimately improving the overall quality of life for the nation.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on homeless children has become an increasingly important area of study due to its connection with complex social, economic, and educational issues. In Malaysia, although efforts have been made to address this issue, several past studies reveal ongoing challenges that have yet to be fully resolved. Other countries face similar problems but approach them with different strategies.

A study by the Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development (2019) focused on the welfare of homeless children in Kuala Lumpur. One of the key findings highlighted that the absence of identification documents, such as birth certificates, prevents homeless children from registering in schools. The study also showed that many homeless children engage in daily work to support their families, leading to inconsistent school

attendance. It recommended the establishment of cooperative mechanisms between the Ministry of Education and NGOs to help provide these children with access to education through more flexible programs.

The Yayasan Chow Kit (2018), an NGO focusing on the welfare of homeless children, conducted a field study on homeless children in Kuala Lumpur. Their research revealed that these children often experience issues such as trauma, family drug abuse, and limited access to proper healthcare. This affects their motivation and ability to continue learning. The study also found that many homeless children face emotional and behavioural issues, requiring stronger psychosocial support to help them break free from this cycle.

The Malaysian Homelessness Research Centre (2021) conducted an in-depth study on homeless families in major cities such as Kuala Lumpur, Penang, and Johor Bahru. This research found that homeless children have limited access to formal education and are often not exposed to conducive learning environments. It identified a lack of support systems, such as financial aid, transportation, and healthcare, as the primary factors contributing to their inability to attend school. Similarly, a study by University of Malaya researchers (2020) revealed a lack of coordination between government agencies and NGOs in providing education to homeless children. Both studies emphasized the need for structured approaches and continuous intervention, such as establishing more alternative schools that offer modular or flexible education programs.

Globally, similar challenges persist, as demonstrated by various studies. In the United States, research by the National Center on Family Homelessness (2019) found that millions of children experience homelessness annually. The study revealed that one in 30 children in the U.S. faces homelessness, encountering barriers to education due to the lack of permanent housing, social stigma, and emotional and mental health problems. Programs such as the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act have been introduced to provide education for homeless children by requiring schools to accept them regardless of location or identification documents. The study found that such programs have helped increase school participation among homeless children.

In the United Kingdom, the Child Poverty Action Group (2020) focused on the issue of homeless children, finding that they are often placed in temporary accommodations or government-provided hotels. This instability negatively affects their education, causing inconsistent school attendance. The study also highlighted that homeless children in the UK frequently fall behind academically due to the lack of conducive learning environments.

A study by the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI) (2021) examined the effects of homelessness on children's education in Australia. The findings showed that homelessness often leads children to drop out of school, with some losing confidence to return after prolonged absences. Support systems like the Reconnect Program assist homeless children and youth in re-entering education through counseling and housing support. The study recommended providing more

personalized support, such as counseling and housing assistance, to address the social and psychological challenges faced by homeless children.

In India, a study by Save the Children (2019) on homeless children in major cities like Delhi and Mumbai found that most homeless children are not in school. Many are involved in child labor to support their families, making them vulnerable to exploitation and violence. The study suggested mobile education programs and classes in homeless areas to provide educational opportunities for these children.

In conclusion, numerous past studies, both in Malaysia and abroad, have demonstrated that the issue of education for homeless children is a global challenge requiring specific approaches. In Malaysia, key barriers such as the lack of identification documents, high mobility, insufficient financial resources, and limited social support hinder homeless children from attending school. Other countries face similar challenges but have implemented approaches like alternative education programs, psychosocial support, and financial aid that could serve as valuable models for Malaysia. A more holistic and comprehensive policy implementation will provide homeless children with the opportunity to escape the cycle of poverty and improve their future for themselves, their families, society, and the nation.

Research Objectives

This study aims to identify the key barriers faced by homeless children in Kuala Lumpur in accessing education, particularly issues related to the lack of identification documents, financial difficulties, and housing instability. By identifying these root causes, more targeted solutions can be proposed. The main objectives of this research are:

1. To identify the primary factors preventing homeless children from accessing formal education.
2. To explore strategic collaborations between government, private sectors, and NGOs in providing educational support for homeless children.
3. To analyze the effectiveness of support programs implemented for homeless children in Kuala Lumpur.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach, using semi-structured interviews conducted with homeless children, their parents or guardians, teachers, social workers, and NGO representatives involved in addressing this issue. The aim of this method is to gain in-depth insights into the lived experiences of homeless children, the challenges they face, and the perceptions of the stakeholders involved. The interview questions are designed to be flexible yet focused on the research objectives, such as access to education, barriers faced, and social impact.

A total of 35 homeless children were identified and gathered at the Temporary Learning Center in Jalan Chow Kit. These children were interviewed indirectly while researchers and NGO teams provided them with food aid. Parents who were present were also engaged in informal

conversations and asked questions relevant. The interview sessions were conducted spontaneously and over multiple encounters to ensure the children did not feel intimidated. Building trust and comfort with the research team requires time, allowing the children to open and share their experiences more honestly.

In addition to interviews, direct observations were conducted to study the lives of homeless children in specific locations, such as temporary shelters and areas frequented by the homeless around Chow Kit. This method helped researchers gain a better understanding of the daily realities faced by these children, including their interactions with the surrounding community, access to education, and other basic needs. The advantage of this observation technique is that it allows for the collection of realistic data, providing valuable insights into the social dynamics and environment influencing the lives of homeless children.

The researchers also collaborated with the homeless community and NGOs in planning and implementing educational intervention programs. These programs were continuously evaluated through data collection before, during, and after their execution. This approach not only helps in understanding the issues but also in identifying more practical and sustainable solutions.

V. FINDING

Based on data gathered by the researchers together with the homeless children, it was found that the number of homeless children around Jalan Chow Kit varies during each teaching session conducted. Nevertheless, on average, we were able to gather at least 27 children during each encounter. These individuals form the baseline data for this study. Out of this number, there were 18 boys and 9 girls. They are of various age groups, with the majority aged between 10 and 14 years old (14 children). Meanwhile, 9 children were between the ages of 5 and 9 years (Table 1). From the total number, 92.6 percent (25 children) were identified as Malay, and these are the children who are most in need of attention and educational support, as they are not enrolled in formal schooling.

TABLE 1: SUMMARY OF RESPONDENTS' DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

Demographic	Respondent	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	18	66.7
	Female	9	33.3
	Total	27	100.0
Race	Malay	25	92.6
	Chinese	0	0.00
	Indian	0	0.00
	Others	02	7.4
	Total	27	100.0
Age	5-9 years	9	33.3
	10-14 years	14	51.9
	15-19 years	4	14.8
	Total	27	100.0

Finding shows that several significant constraints and challenges were faced by the researchers from the Federal Territory Education Department of Kuala Lumpur (JPWPKL), and NGO partners in addressing the education of homeless children in Kuala Lumpur. Among the key challenges faced are:

Lack of Identification Documents

The government is deeply concerned about disadvantaged groups; however, the lack of essential personal documents such as identity cards or birth certificates for homeless children prevents these families from accessing formal education. Without these documents, homeless children are unable to register for public schools, including those in Kuala Lumpur, thus hindering their ability to access education, even though they are entitled to it.

Mobility and Instability of Housing

Many homeless families in Kuala Lumpur live in unstable conditions and frequently move from one location to another. Their mobility is due to the lack of permanent housing. This means the children will follow their parents' movements, making it difficult for JPWPKL and the Ministry of Education to ensure continuity in their education. As a result, homeless children often cannot attend school consistently. To further support this situation, the study's findings indicate that all 35 of these homeless children do not have proper or stable housing. Some of them live with a single mother or father who rent only a small room around the Jalan Chow Kit area. Others are merely staying with their grandparents. They live like nomads, constantly moving from one place to another (Table 2).

TABLE 2: SUMMARY OF RESPONDENTS' LIVING CONDITIONS

	Frequency	Percentage
Living with mother only:	17	63.0
Living with grandparents:	3	11.0
Living with both parents:	7	26.0
Total	27	100

Social Stigma and Discrimination

Homeless children often face strong social stigma, both from school authorities and their peers. This discrimination can undermine their motivation to continue attending school, and some even lose interest in education because they feel marginalized, and fear being ridiculed by classmates. These social issues are difficult to address due to societal perceptions that still do not fully support removing children from the homeless population.

Financial Issues and Educational Resources

Although Malaysia is provided free education at the primary and secondary school levels, many homeless families cannot afford the hidden costs such as uniforms, books, and stationery. In addition, the lack of sufficient funding for specialized intervention programs further complicates the efforts of JPWPKL in implementing educational initiatives for this group. Despite these financial challenges, JPWPKL continues to look for ways to help these children, at least through alternative educational programs.

Lack of Trained Teachers

Providing education for homeless children requires a specialized pedagogical approach, given the varied age ranges of these children. The shortage of trained teachers capable of working with children from marginalized backgrounds is another significant challenge. Teachers require specialized training to address trauma, psychological issues, and the unique learning difficulties faced by these children. However, few teachers are willing to engage directly with this group. While schools providing such programs are still limited, the Ministry of Education's establishment of the Sekolah Bimbingan Jalanan Kasih (SBJK) in Kuala Lumpur at least demonstrates the government's deep concern for these marginalized groups.

VI. DISCUSSION

The Federal Territory Education Department of Kuala Lumpur (JPWP) has taken several steps to address the education issues faced by homeless children. Various measures have been taken to ensure that homeless children are able to access formal education. From August 2024 to January 2025, efforts to obtain the necessary documentation successfully enabled 4 out of 27 children to begin formal schooling (Table 3).

TABLE 3: NUMBER OF SUCCESSFULLY ACCESS TO SCHOOL

	Frequency	Percentage
5-9 years:	2	7.4
10-14 years:	2	7.4
Total	4	14.8

Following this small success, various other initiatives were implemented with the aim of increasing the number of these children attending school. Among these initiatives are:

Outreach Education Program

JPWPKL has implemented several outreach programs specifically aimed at identifying and registering homeless children who are outside the formal education system. This action is carried out in collaboration with welfare organizations, NGOs, and government agencies such as Yayasan Chow Kit and the Homeless Transit Center. The outreach program works to bring homeless children into the formal education system or into alternative educational programs that are suitable for their circumstances. Through continuous efforts and the support provided, a total of six (6) homeless children have now successfully been enrolled in school to pursue formal education.

Establishment of Alternative Education Classes

JPWP has also partnered with NGOs to establish alternative education classes focusing on children who are unable to attend formal schools due to barriers such as lack of identification documents or high mobility. These classes are designed to be more flexible to meet the needs of

homeless children and help them acquire basic education such as literacy and numeracy. Since August 2024, these educational classes have been implemented by volunteer educators from JPWPKL. The children are taught Iqra' (basic Quranic reading), literacy, and numeracy every Tuesday night. The methodology involves dividing the children into small groups, with volunteers guiding them. At the same time, efforts are made to motivate the children to build self-confidence. Some self-care and health programs are also held to teach the children proper self-management techniques.

In addition to providing alternative education at the Homeless Transit Center, JPWP introduced an innovative initiative known as "School on the Street." Teachers and volunteers go directly to the areas where homeless children frequently gather, such as narrow alleys in the Chow Kit area. This program offers access to non-formal education, hoping to attract the children to schools or, at the very least, provide them with basic education.

Clothing Assistance and Healthcare Support

As an additional effort, JPWP also provides uniform clothing assistance to homeless children who have successfully enrolled in public schools. This assistance aims to reduce the financial burden, which is often a major barrier to the participation of homeless children in the formal education system. In other cases, homeless children, along with their parents, are provided with second-hand clothing donations from the public. They are also given health care items, including toothbrushes, toothpaste, shampoo, and medications.

Awareness Programs and Teacher Training

JPWP also emphasizes inclusive teacher training to address the needs of homeless children. Teachers are trained to understand the socio-economic background of these children and to create a learning environment that is more empathetic and freer from discrimination. This program aims to minimize the social stigma often faced by homeless children in the school environment.

These actions demonstrate JPWP's ongoing efforts to address the challenges faced by homeless children. However, there is still much room for improvement in these efforts. A continued focus on more inclusive approaches and a stronger emphasis on the welfare of these children is essential to ensure they are not excluded, especially from the education system.

VII. SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

To ensure that homeless children in Kuala Lumpur have access to the education they deserve, several proactive measures can be taken by the government through the Ministry of Education and the community. Some of the actions that can be comprehensively implemented include:

Automatic Registration Without Complete Documents

The government could introduce a policy that allows the registration of homeless children in schools

without requiring complete documents such as identity cards or birth certificates. Focus would be given to children whose parents are Malaysian citizens. This would allow these children immediate access to education without bureaucratic barriers.

Establishment of Alternative Schools or Flexible Education Programs

JPWPKL, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education (KPM), could work with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to establish alternative schools or flexible education programs specifically for homeless children. These schools could adopt a more inclusive approach, sensitive to the special needs of these children, including flexible learning schedules and psychosocial support, like programs implemented in Western countries.

Specific Financial Assistance Program

A specific financial assistance program for homeless children could be created to cover costs such as uniforms, stationery, and other necessities that often act as barriers to continuing schooling. This program could be funded through cooperation between the government, private sector, and NGOs.

Psychosocial Support and Trauma Recovery

Homeless children often experience trauma due to their living conditions. Therefore, JPWPKL through KPM should provide sufficient psychosocial support to help these children overcome trauma and adjust to school life. Existing counselors or guidance teachers in schools could create more comprehensive and focused counseling schedules. Stakeholders could involve the appointment of counselors or the establishment of dedicated trauma recovery centers in relevant schools.

Community Engagement Programs

To reduce social stigma, community engagement programs can be organized to raise awareness about the plight of homeless children. These programs can be conducted in schools to educate students and staff about the importance of accepting and supporting children from different backgrounds. Collaboration among all parties can certainly improve the lives of homeless children and ensure a better chance for their future.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Education plays a crucial role in shaping the future of individuals and nations. For homeless children, education is not only important for acquiring knowledge, but also for providing them with an opportunity to break free from the cycle of poverty. By obtaining formal education, they have the chance to improve their families' lives and contribute positively to society. Education also equips them with foundational skills in literacy, numeracy, and interpersonal abilities, which are vital for succeeding in the workforce.

Therefore, education is the only pathway that can cover the cycle of poverty they face.

However, the challenges in ensuring homeless children have access to formal education are significant. Statistics from the Ministry of Education Malaysia (KPM) reveal that the number of homeless children not receiving formal education in Kuala Lumpur is difficult to determine accurately, as many of them are not officially registered. For instance, many homeless children are forced to work to support their families, which prevents them from attending school. It was a significant achievement for the researcher and the team when they successfully enrolled six (6) homeless children into school to receive formal education. The school where they are now pursuing their education is Sekolah Bimbingan Jalinan Kasih, Kuala Lumpur.

This issue, if left unaddressed, will worsen in the coming years. These homeless children are at risk of becoming homeless adults, perpetuating the cycle of poverty throughout their lives. Therefore, more comprehensive, integrated, and sustained efforts are needed to ensure that they receive their rightful access to education. This involves not only providing formal education but also offering social, financial, and psychosocial support that allows them to integrate into the educational system.

In conclusion, to change the future of homeless children, education must be a top priority. Initiatives such as registration without complete documents, alternative education programs, and psychosocial support should be strengthened to offer them equal opportunities. Collaboration between the government, NGOs, and society is key to ensuring they gain access to quality education, thus opening doors to a brighter and more competitive future.

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