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## Government Neglect Leaves Punjab's Homeless in Peril as Shelter Crisis Deepens

July 17, 2025

– Categories: General News



In recent years, most complaints about weather extremes or power cuts often come from behind closed doors, air-conditioned homes, and cushioned mattresses. But for Punjab's homeless, the daily fight for survival is more than just discomfort; it's a matter of life and death. As they dodge police raids and brave the elements without shelter, their struggles go largely unseen and unacknowledged.

During the previous elected administration, the **Panah Gah** (which means “shelter home” in Urdu) initiative was launched across Punjab to provide the homeless with safe, clean

spaces to sleep, eat, and recover overnight. These night shelters were a step toward dignity for those often invisible in society. However, under the current unelected, caretaker-style administration, many of these shelters have been quietly shut down, with deadly consequences. In Lahore alone, over 1,700 homeless individuals have reportedly died over the last three years, most during peak summer or winter months.

Inam and Asiya, a homeless couple currently sleeping near **Lal Pul**, shared how their lives changed after the closure of the shelter near the railway station. “We used to get a bed, a meal, and a safe night’s sleep. Now, we move every few days to avoid police harassment. During the day, we manage, but the nights are our enemy,” the couple told reporters.

The **Edhi Foundation**, one of the country’s largest social welfare organizations, has also sounded the alarm. Spokesperson Muhammad Younis Bhatti confirmed that fatalities among homeless individuals spike dramatically during extreme weather. “Before, shelters gave people 8 to 10 hours of rest. Now, they’re forced to sleep on hot sidewalks in summer or freezing pavements in winter,” said Bhatti.

Data gathered by *The Express Tribune* shows that the worst-hit areas in Lahore include **Data Darbar, Shahdara, Kot Lakhpat, and Lari Adda**, among others. While Punjab once had more than 170 functioning shelters, 13 of them in Lahore, only a handful remain. Today, just one shelter home operates in each of Multan, D.G. Khan, Taunsa Sharif, Rawalpindi, Faisalabad, Bahawalpur, and Sargodha. Lahore itself has only six operational shelters left.

**Muzammil Yaar**, Director of Social Welfare, disclosed that over half of the shelters were originally built with the support of private philanthropists. However, without consistent backing from the provincial government, most have been shuttered. “Even government-run facilities have closed. Staffing each shelter requires resources that the current administration hasn’t committed to. There’s been no meaningful budget increase to maintain, let alone expand, the network,” Yaar admitted.

The neglect hasn’t only led to exposure-related deaths. Experts warn of a surge in drug use among the homeless. **Syed Zulfiqar Hussain**, a drug rehabilitation consultant, notes that many homeless individuals turn to drugs to dull the pain or pass the time. “In the past three years, drug addiction among the homeless has increased by over 40 percent. Harsh weather and lack of shelter accelerate both addiction and mortality.”

When questioned, a spokesperson from the Punjab government responded by saying that earlier administrations made only “temporary arrangements” for the homeless, and that the current regime is “working toward a permanent solution.” However, no clear timeline or plan has been made public.

This crisis raises critical questions about government priorities. The closure of shelters, many of which were cost-effectively run in collaboration with private donors, signals a worrying trend of abandoning society’s most vulnerable. The stark difference between past efforts to offer dignity and today’s passive disregard cannot be ignored.

As Punjab’s streets become death traps for the poor, the government’s silence speaks volumes. While slogans about reform and progress echo from the halls of power, those left on the sidewalks continue to suffer and remain silent.