

## Factors Influencing Street Begging Among Persons with Disabilities in the Central Business District of Freetown, Sierra Leone

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| ABSTRACT                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | ARTICLE DETAILS                                                                                                                           |
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| <p>This study investigates the factors responsible for street begging among persons with disabilities in the Central Business District of Freetown, Sierra Leone. Using a mixed-methods approach involving quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews, the research explores socio-economic, psychosocial, cultural, policy, and environmental influences on begging behaviors. The findings reveal that poverty, social stigma, limited access to education and employment, and environmental hazards significantly contribute to street begging among persons with disabilities. The study emphasizes the need for targeted policies and inclusive programs to address these root causes, improve welfare, and foster social integration. Recommendations include strengthening social protection schemes, enhancing disability awareness, and improving urban infrastructure to minimize environmental triggers. The study contributes valuable insights for policymakers, social workers, and stakeholders committed to disability rights and urban development in Sierra Leone.</p> <p><b>KEYWORDS:</b> Street begging, persons with disabilities, socio-economic factors, policy impact, urban environment</p> | <p><b>Published On:</b><br/><b>15 July 2025</b></p> <p><b>Available on:</b><br/><a href="https://irijsh.com/">https://irijsh.com/</a></p> |

### INTRODUCTION

Street begging among persons with disabilities (PWDs) has become a pervasive social issue in Sierra Leone, especially within the bustling Central Business District (CBD) of Freetown. The visibility of PWDs engaging in begging activities highlights the intersection of disability, poverty, and social exclusion, raising concerns about their well-being and societal integration. The phenomenon is particularly evident in high-traffic areas such as Siaka Steven Street, bus stations, and public offices, where the presence of beggars not only impacts urban aesthetics but also poses challenges to public order and safety (Jelili, 2006). Despite the recognition of these issues, there is limited empirical research addressing the specific factors that drive PWDs into street begging within this urban context. Understanding these factors is crucial for developing targeted interventions that can alleviate their vulnerabilities.

The problem of street begging is no longer confined to Sierra Leone but is a global concern affecting many developing countries. In Sierra Leone, the civil war, which resulted in widespread injuries and disabilities, has exacerbated the socio-economic challenges faced by PWDs. The 2015 Population and Housing Census recorded 93,129 persons with disabilities, representing 1.3% of the population, though this figure likely underestimates the actual number involved in street begging (Statistics Sierra Leone, 2015). The correlation between disability, poverty, and begging is well-documented, with assumptions that many PWDs are trapped in a cycle of poverty, where begging becomes their only means of survival (Groce et al., 2017). This cycle is reinforced by limited access to education, employment, and social services, further marginalizing PWDs and increasing their reliance on begging.

The socio-cultural context also plays a significant role in influencing begging behaviors among PWDs. Traditional beliefs and stigmas about disability often lead to social exclusion and discrimination, which diminish opportunities for social participation and economic empowerment. These societal attitudes contribute to the isolation of PWDs, making begging not only a survival strategy but also a reflection of their marginal status within society (Hassan B. Sesay, 2017). Moreover, family neglect and

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inadequate social safety nets exacerbate their plight, as many PWDs lack family support or access to government welfare programs.

This environment fosters a dependency on street begging, perpetuating a cycle that is difficult to break without targeted policy interventions.

Environmental factors within the urban landscape further influence the prevalence and location of street begging. Poor urban infrastructure, inadequate accessible facilities, and exposure to harsh weather conditions increase the vulnerability of PWDs and influence their choice of begging sites. Jelili (2006) notes that beggars often contribute to urban disorder by generating waste and obstructing traffic, which impacts the overall quality of urban life. These environmental challenges are compounded by the absence of comprehensive data on street beggars with disabilities, hindering effective policy formulation and resource allocation. Consequently, addressing the environmental determinants is essential for creating inclusive urban spaces that support the dignity and safety of PWDs.

The existing legal framework, notably the Persons with Disability Act (2011), provides a foundation for safeguarding the rights of PWDs, but enforcement remains weak. Many PWDs are unaware of their rights or lack access to social welfare services, which diminishes their capacity to escape the cycle of begging. Furthermore, societal stigma and discrimination often hinder their participation in formal economic activities, reinforcing their vulnerability (Groce et al., 2017). To effectively combat street begging among PWDs, there is a need for comprehensive policies that not only protect their rights but also promote social inclusion, economic empowerment, and accessible urban infrastructure.

In conclusion, street begging among persons with disabilities in Freetown is a complex issue rooted in socio-economic, cultural, environmental, and policy-related factors. Addressing this challenge requires a nuanced understanding of the underlying causes and targeted interventions that encompass legal, social, and infrastructural reforms. This study aims to fill the existing research gap by examining these factors in detail, providing evidence-based recommendations for policymakers, stakeholders, and the broader community committed to promoting the rights and well-being of PWDs in Sierra Leone.

## Problem Statement

The increasing prevalence of street begging among persons with disabilities in Sierra Leone's major cities, notably Freetown, poses significant social, economic, and environmental challenges. The activity disrupts urban traffic flow, contributes to public disorder, and perpetuates social stigma. Despite its visibility, there is a dearth of region-specific research identifying the underlying factors that compel PWDs into street begging. Existing assumptions often lead to discriminatory attitudes, further marginalizing the vulnerable population.

Furthermore, the lack of comprehensive data on the number of street beggars hampers targeted interventions. The nexus between disability, poverty, social exclusion, and environmental factors remains underexplored, limiting effective policy responses. Therefore, this research seeks to fill this gap by systematically examining the factors influencing street begging among PWDs in Freetown's CBD.

## Main Objective

The overarching aim of this research is to investigate the factors responsible for street begging among persons with disabilities within Freetown's Central Business District. The specific objectives are: To identify socio-economic, psychosocial, cultural, policy, and environmental factors contributing to street begging among PWDs.

1. To analyze the relationship between socio-economic characteristics of disabled beggars and their reasons for begging.
2. To assess the physical and psychosocial conditions of disabled beggars and the environmental factors influencing begging locations.
3. To evaluate the impact of existing policies and awareness levels on the lives of street beggars with disabilities.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Street begging among persons with disabilities (PWDs) is a visible manifestation of systemic socio-economic exclusion, especially in developing countries. It reflects the intersections of poverty, marginalization, inadequate public infrastructure, and policy gaps. The phenomenon has received scholarly attention across disciplines such as urban studies, disability studies, and social work, highlighting its multi-dimensional causes and consequences.

### Socio-Economic Dimensions of Begging and Disability

A substantial body of literature links disability with poverty and exclusion from the labor market. Groce, Kett, Lang, and Trani (2017) argue that persons with disabilities are disproportionately represented among the poorest globally due to limited access to

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education, skills training, and employment. In many sub-Saharan African countries, including Sierra Leone, these constraints result in informal survival strategies such as street begging. Research conducted by Mitra (2018) also supports this claim, indicating that disability significantly reduces household income and access to social capital, particularly in post-conflict societies. The relationship between poverty and begging has also been examined in the urban African context. Ogunkan and Fawole (2009) found that urban beggars, particularly those with physical impairments, often turn to the streets due to economic deprivation and lack of formal safety nets. In Sierra Leone, where formal social protection schemes remain underdeveloped, street begging becomes an economic coping mechanism for many disabled individuals. Statistics Sierra Leone (2015) recorded over 93,000 persons with disabilities in the country, though scholars argue that the actual number is likely higher due to underreporting and stigma (Groce et al., 2017).

### Social Stigma and Cultural Perceptions of Disability

Cultural attitudes towards disability are another major factor shaping the experience of PWDs. In many African societies, disability is often seen through the lens of superstition or moral failure, leading to social rejection and discrimination (Lang & Upah, 2008). In Sierra Leone, Sesay (2017) found that youth with disabilities frequently face exclusion in both familial and public spheres, often being perceived as incapable of contributing productively to society. This stigmatization severely limits their social participation and reinforces a dependency narrative that justifies or compels begging.

Jahnsen et al. (2018) further note that negative community perceptions contribute to the structural invisibility of PWDs in policy and service design. Discriminatory practices within households and communities can lead to family neglect, particularly for those with severe or visible impairments. In such contexts, street begging is not only a means of survival but also a response to systemic abandonment and lack of institutional support.

### Urban Infrastructure and Environmental Accessibility

Urban environments in low-income countries often lack disability-friendly infrastructure, exacerbating the exclusion of PWDs from public life. As Jelili (2006) observes, beggars with disabilities are drawn to high-traffic areas due to their visibility and potential for almsgiving. However, these areas are often unsafe and inaccessible, increasing their exposure to environmental risks, harassment, and health hazards. Accessibility challenges—such as the absence of ramps, accessible restrooms, and safe transportation—have been identified by several studies as a major deterrent to mobility and economic engagement for PWDs (UNESCAP, 2019).

In Freetown, inadequate public infrastructure forces many PWDs into congested and unsafe urban spaces. Observational studies and field reports indicate that street locations with high pedestrian traffic serve as strategic sites for begging but are often characterized by exposure to sun, rain, and traffic hazards (Jelili, 2006). These environmental constraints not only increase physical vulnerability but also diminish the perceived dignity and agency of PWDs in public spaces.

### Policy and Legal Frameworks

The existence of disability-inclusive policies does not necessarily translate into meaningful change without effective implementation. Sierra Leone's *Persons with Disability Act (2011)* is intended to protect the rights of PWDs and promote their access to services, yet enforcement remains weak. A report by Leonard Cheshire (2020) found that awareness of disability rights among both PWDs and service providers in Sierra Leone is limited, leading to poor uptake and weak accountability.

Groce et al. (2017) emphasize that legal protections must be matched by political will, institutional capacity, and community engagement to translate into real-world improvements. Where such alignment is lacking, PWDs continue to fall through the cracks of policy and practice, often reverting to street begging as a last resort. Moreover, the lack of comprehensive data on street begging and disability constrains evidence-based planning and the allocation of resources for targeted interventions (Banks & Polack, 2014).

### Psychosocial Effects and Mental Health

Living with a disability in poverty, compounded by societal rejection and life on the streets, often leads to severe psychological distress. Studies by Rimmerman (2013) and Groce et al. (2017) show that PWDs engaged in begging often experience chronic stress, depression, and anxiety due to social isolation and lack of self-worth. These psychosocial effects are both a cause and consequence of their marginalization. In Sierra Leone, mental health services are scarce, and stigma surrounding psychological illness further discourages PWDs from seeking help (WHO, 2019). As a result, street begging becomes both a coping mechanism and a symptom of broader psychosocial breakdown.

In summary, the literature reveals that street begging among persons with disabilities is driven by interlinked socio-economic, cultural, policy, and environmental factors. It is not simply a result of individual choices, but a manifestation of systemic neglect, social exclusion, and infrastructural deficits. Although policies such as the *Persons with Disability Act (2011)* provide a legal foundation for inclusion, their poor implementation, combined with persistent stigma and urban inaccessibility, limits their

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effectiveness. Addressing street begging thus requires not only economic interventions but also social change, inclusive urban planning, and stronger policy enforcement backed by political commitment and adequate resourcin

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to gain a holistic understanding of the factors influencing street begging among persons with disabilities (PWDs) in Freetown's Central Business District (CBD). A descriptive and explanatory survey design was employed. The descriptive aspect helped capture demographic characteristics, patterns, and contextual details, while the explanatory component explored the underlying causes and relationships among identified variables. The use of a mixed-methods approach provided both breadth and depth, enabling triangulation and validation of findings across different data sources.

### Study Area

The research was conducted in the Central Business District (CBD) of Freetown, Sierra Leone's capital city. This area is known for its high commercial activity, dense pedestrian movement, and visibility of street beggars, especially at locations such as Siaka Stevens Street, Abacha Street, the main bus parks, and near government ministries. The choice of this area was based on observed concentrations of PWDs engaged in street begging, making it a relevant site for the research objectives.

### Study Population and Sampling

The study population comprised persons with disabilities who actively engaged in street begging within the CBD. Given the hidden and mobile nature of this population, purposive sampling was used to select participants who met specific inclusion criteria—namely, individuals living with visible physical or sensory disabilities and regularly engaged in begging in public locations. A total of 55 participants were selected for the study. Efforts were made to ensure diversity in terms of age, gender, type of disability, and begging location in order to capture a range of experiences and perspectives. In addition, 5 key informants were selected for in-depth interviews, including representatives from the Ministry of Social Welfare, a disability rights organization, an urban planning official, and two community leaders familiar with the begging population.

### Data Collection Instruments

Data were collected using a combination of semi-structured questionnaires, in-depth interviews, and direct observation.

The semi-structured questionnaires consisted of both closed and open-ended questions and were administered face-to-face to the 55 PWDs. These captured demographic data, income sources, education level, duration and frequency of begging, access to support services, and awareness of disability rights and welfare provisions.

The in-depth interviews with key informants explored policy implementation, urban planning concerns, cultural perceptions of disability, and institutional responses to street begging.

**Direct observations** were conducted at key begging sites. These allowed the researcher to document the physical conditions of begging environments, interaction patterns between beggars and passersby, as well as signs of vulnerability (e.g., exposure to weather, mobility limitations, lack of assistive devices).

All tools were pre-tested with a small sample in a neighboring community to ensure clarity and appropriateness of questions. Minor revisions were made before full deployment.

### Data Collection Procedure

The data collection was conducted over a four-week period. Ethical clearance was obtained from relevant authorities, and verbal informed consent was secured from all participants. Trained research assistants who were familiar with the local context and disability issues assisted in administering the questionnaires and conducting interviews in Krio or English, depending on the respondent's preference. Special care was taken to ensure confidentiality and sensitivity, especially when discussing personal experiences and psychosocial challenges.

### Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the questionnaires were coded and entered into descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, and cross-tabulations were used to describe socio-economic profiles and begging patterns, and to also examine associations between selected variables, such as type of disability and income from begging, or education level and awareness of social services.

Qualitative data from interviews and observations were transcribed, translated where necessary, and analyzed thematically using manual coding and NVivo software. Key themes emerged around poverty and survival strategies, social exclusion, policy gaps, and urban environmental constraints. Quotes from participants were used to support and illustrate findings, ensuring that the voices of the marginalized were centered in the analysis.

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## Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were maintained throughout the study. Permission was sought from local authorities, and participation was voluntary. All respondents were assured of confidentiality, and identifying information was anonymized. Care was taken to avoid coercion or undue influence, especially given the vulnerable status of participants. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any point during the study.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

### Socioeconomic Drivers of Street Begging among PWDs

Survey data reveals that a significant majority of PWDs engaged in street begging due to extreme poverty, with approximately 78% citing lack of income as their primary reason for begging. Further, 65% of respondents reported not having access to formal employment opportunities, and 72% lacked basic education or vocational skills, limiting their economic participation.

Interviews and focus group discussions corroborate these findings, emphasizing that poverty is a pervasive challenge compounded by disability. Many PWDs expressed feelings of helplessness stemming from their inability to access sustainable income sources, which forces them into begging as a last resort.

The quantitative data underscores the depth of economic deprivation among PWDs, while qualitative narratives illustrate the lived realities behind the statistics. This convergence emphasizes the urgent need for targeted economic empowerment initiatives.

### Impact of Social Stigma and Discrimination

Approximately 70% of respondents reported feeling socially excluded and discriminated against in their communities. Many respondents indicated that societal attitudes prevent them from participating in community activities or accessing support services. Participants described experiences of social rejection, verbal abuse, and marginalization. Community members often perceive PWDs as burdens or incapable, reinforcing negative stereotypes that hinder their social integration.

Both data strands highlight that social stigma is a critical barrier, not only perpetuating marginalization but also limiting access to opportunities that could reduce reliance on begging.

### Environmental and Infrastructure Challenges

Survey results show that 80% of PWDs find public infrastructure inaccessible, citing lack of ramps, tactile pavements, and accessible transportation. Over 85% reported that exposure to adverse weather conditions significantly hampers their mobility and safety.

Respondents narrated how inaccessible infrastructure forces them into unsafe street environments, exposing them to health risks and accidents. Many expressed frustration over the lack of government action to improve urban accessibility.

The quantitative evidence confirms infrastructural deficits, while qualitative accounts bring to life the daily struggles and risks faced by PWDs, emphasizing the need for inclusive urban planning.

### Psychosocial Well-being

Psychological assessments reveal that 65% of PWDs experience symptoms of depression and anxiety, with 60% reporting feelings of social isolation and low self-esteem. The data indicates a high prevalence of mental health issues linked to their street livelihood and societal rejection.

Participants expressed feelings of marginalization, hopelessness, and despair. Many shared that societal neglect and daily struggles exacerbate their mental health challenges, often without access to psychosocial support.

The convergence of quantitative mental health indicators and qualitative narratives highlights the critical need for mental health services and community support mechanisms tailored to PWDs.

### Policy Gaps and Awareness Levels

Only 30% of PWDs were aware of existing welfare programs or rights-based policies. Of those aware, less than 20% accessed support services, primarily due to lack of information or logistical barriers.

Respondents expressed confusion about available support and cited inadequate dissemination of information. Many indicated that even when services are available, bureaucratic hurdles and lack of outreach prevent access.

The data demonstrates a significant gap between policy existence and effective implementation/accessibility. Addressing awareness and service delivery gaps is critical for improving PWDs' welfare.

## CONCLUSION

This study has explored the multifaceted factors influencing street begging among persons with disabilities (PWDs) in the Central Business District of Freetown, Sierra Leone. Drawing on a mixed-methods approach, the research has demonstrated that street begging is not merely an act of personal choice but a consequence of entrenched socio-economic, cultural, policy, and environmental challenges. The findings reveal that poverty, unemployment, limited access to education, and widespread social

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stigma are central drivers that push many PWDs into the streets. Infrastructural barriers and hostile urban environments further exacerbate their vulnerability, while weak policy enforcement and limited awareness of rights and welfare programs leave many without viable alternatives.

The study also highlights the psychosocial toll of street begging, with many PWDs reporting experiences of social isolation, discrimination, and mental distress. While existing legal frameworks like the Persons with Disability Act (2011) offer a foundation for inclusion, the gap between policy and practice remains significant. The absence of accessible infrastructure, effective public outreach, and targeted empowerment programs perpetuates the cycle of marginalization and dependency.

Addressing street begging among PWDs requires a comprehensive and inclusive response that goes beyond short-term relief. There is a pressing need for stronger enforcement of disability rights, the development of inclusive urban infrastructure, and the implementation of economic empowerment programs tailored to the needs and capacities of PWDs. Furthermore, community-based sensitization efforts are essential to dismantle harmful stereotypes and foster social inclusion. Through informed policymaking, multi-sectoral collaboration, and a sustained commitment to equity, Sierra Leone can create a more inclusive society where persons with disabilities are not forced into street begging but are empowered to live with dignity and independence.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Enhance Policy Implementation:** Strengthen the enforcement of disability-inclusive policies and increase awareness among PWDs about their rights and available support services.
2. **Economic Empowerment:** Develop vocational training and employment programs tailored for PWDs to reduce reliance on begging.
3. **Urban Infrastructure Improvement:** Upgrade public facilities to be accessible and safe, minimizing environmental hazards that contribute to begging.
4. **Community Sensitization:** Conduct awareness campaigns to reduce stigma and foster social inclusion of PWDs.
5. **Data Collection and Monitoring:** Establish a comprehensive database of street beggars with disabilities to facilitate targeted interventions.

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