

# Vagrancy in the Midst of COVID-19 Pandemic: A Transcendental Phenomenological Study

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## ABSTRACT

The coronavirus outbreak has crippled the Philippine economy, resulting in losses in employment and livelihood. This economic havoc had a detrimental impact on the country's poor and vulnerable sectors, driving them to engage in vagrancy to survive the health crisis. Hence, this study explored the lived experiences of vagrants and the reasons for vagrancy. The transcendental phenomenological research design of Moustakas (1994) through in-depth open-ended and semi-structured interviews was conducted to comprehend vagrants' experiences during the pandemic. Qualitative data findings were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2020) thematic analysis. This study showed participants shared feelings about their experiences, which depicted a difficult life, challenging vagrancy conditions, increased vulnerability to health risks, and lack of government assistance. Further, the study revealed that the primary causes of vagrancy are economic hardship and societal influence. The multi-dimensional issues concerning the economy, public health, and the government's response to COVID-19 had a detrimental impact on the poor and the vulnerable in the Philippines.

*Keywords:* Begging, COVID-19, pandemic, transcendental phenomenology, vagrancy

## INTRODUCTION

The global health crisis caused by the Coronavirus has devastated lives and economies worldwide. In developing

countries like the Philippines, the economic impact has been particularly severe, revealing deep disparities as the poor and vulnerable suffer the most. President Rodrigo Duterte declared a public health emergency to address this, leading to lockdowns, quarantines, and travel restrictions (Luna, 2020; Parrocha, 2020). These measures resulted in business closures, curfews, and limited access to essentials, disproportionately affecting the poor (Chiu, 2021). The pandemic's

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economic downturn has worsened vagrancy, resulting in around 4.5 million homeless people nationwide, including three million in Manila (Perez-Rubio, 2021).

Recent articles have highlighted how the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified the vulnerabilities of the poor. Mendiola (2020) and Cordero (2020) reported that the pandemic exacerbates poverty, with data from Brookings and the World Bank showing that low-income families struggle to manage crisis risks. Beltran (2020) noted that increased evictions of slum communities during the pandemic have sharply caused homelessness and vagrancy among already struggling low-income families. Using local government reports and interviews, Beltran revealed that the economic downturn has led to greater housing and economic insecurity, worsening vagrancy.

The response of government agencies to rising vagrancy during the pandemic has faced criticism. Pacaol (2021) noted that strict lockdown enforcement led to the arrest of homeless individuals for curfew violations, arguing that they should be treated with more consideration and that there was a significant lack of access to basic services and healthcare. Bacchi and Chandran (2020) reported that authorities also shut down homeless shelters for violating quarantine protocols, forcing many to seek refuge in empty churches and schools. While the measures were necessary, the proponents argued that the needs of vagrants should have been better addressed.

The inability of vagrants to follow government protective measures and access

healthcare has increased their vulnerability to COVID-19, presenting another critical area of concern. Perri et al. (2020) highlighted that shared homeless accommodations hindered social distancing, exacerbating the risk of infection. The study emphasized the need for safe housing and health services. Similarly, Culhane et al. (2020) noted that poor access to hygiene, sanitation, and early detection raised concerns about widespread virus transmission among the homeless. The study argues that immediate action, including humane accommodation, is needed to address these issues.

While existing studies provide valuable insights, a notable gap exists in understanding the personal experiences of those who turned to vagrancy due to the pandemic. Current research often focuses on economic impacts and government responses, neglecting the intersection with individual experiences. This study aims to address this by exploring the factors leading to vagrancy, using transcendental phenomenology to examine how loss of employment, socioeconomic vulnerability, and health issues influenced these decisions. Additionally, it will investigate the hardships faced by vagrants, including their survival strategies, street conditions, interactions with the public and authorities, and access to healthcare and government assistance. By exploring these experiences, the research will provide crucial insights to guide policymakers, NGOs, and social services in developing targeted interventions to address socioeconomic inequalities and improve support systems during public health crises.

## Theoretical Framework

This research is anchored on Merton's Strain and Marx's Conflict theories. Merton (1938) posited that deviance and non-conformity arise when individuals are unable to meet basic needs through legitimate means. In this context, the COVID-19 pandemic created significant societal pressure on the poor, forcing them to deviate and engage in unlawful economic activities such as vagrancy for survival. Such acts violate Philippine legal norms, specifically Article 202 of the Revised Penal Code (Republic Act No. 10158, 2012) of the Philippine Vagrancy Law.

Moreover, Karl Marx's social-conflict theory (as discussed in Ring, 2012) rationalized vagrancy to structural inequalities in the labor market. Marx argued that capitalism perpetuates inequality, where the rich grow richer, and the poor become poorer due to unequal access to resources and opportunities. During the pandemic, the loss of jobs and livelihoods among the underprivileged in Malaybalay City highlighted these disparities, pushing more people into poverty and vagrancy.

## METHODOLOGY

This research employed a transcendental phenomenological design conducted among the four (4) vagrants in Malaybalay City, Mindanao, Philippines, in October 2021. Transcendental phenomenology, as articulated by Moustakas (1994), is centered on the participants' lived experiences. Given the significant changes brought about by the pandemic, such as shifts in

social dynamics, economic instability, and limited access to resources, this approach enables researchers to explore the unique challenges faced by those experiencing vagrancy without imposing preconceived notions. By focusing on participants' narratives, researchers can uncover these individuals' rich and nuanced realities, highlighting their struggles and resilience during such a tumultuous time. A defining aspect of transcendental phenomenology is its emphasis on bracketing, which involves setting aside researchers' biases to fully understand participants' perspectives. This is crucial when studying vagrancy, as individuals may encounter stigma, isolation, and systemic barriers that shape their experiences. Through systematic methods like in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, researchers can identify common themes and patterns that emerge from diverse experiences.

Purposive sampling was used to select participants with firsthand experience of vagrancy during the COVID-19 pandemic, ensuring they could provide relevant and insightful information. The primary criterion for selecting participants for the in-depth interviews was identifying individuals who began begging during this period. Additionally, participants had to meet at least one of the following conditions: (1) individuals affected by the pandemic who resorted to begging to support themselves and their families, (2) individuals who turned to vagrancy due to losing their jobs and livelihood during the pandemic, or (3) individuals who were unable to

support themselves during the pandemic and engaged in vagrancy as a result. The profile of the participants is presented in Table 1.

The selection of only four participants may seem limited, but it reflects a deliberate approach to capturing the depth of complex human experiences. The participants were chosen because they aptly represent the study's key criteria, the most important being that they became vagrants only during the pandemic. While many individuals met this criterion, the researchers selected only four to avoid unnecessary data duplication. During the pre-test phase of the research instrument, it was found that potential participants shared similar stories and experiences, reinforcing the decision to limit the sample size.

According to Morse (2016), phenomenological studies can achieve saturation and validity with as few as 3 to 6 participants, as the goal is to provide rich, detailed descriptions of the phenomenon rather than broad generalizability. As delineated in the qualitative research literature, the sample size is determined by data saturation, where no new themes or insights emerge from additional interviews. This principle guided the decision to work with a smaller, carefully selected group. Focusing on fewer participants allows a deeper exploration of each individual's unique insights and perspectives. This approach fosters meaningful conversations, revealing the nuances of their experiences, particularly when participants are specifically chosen for their relevance to the research question. Ultimately, the decision

to limit the sample size enhances the validity of the study, ensuring that the voices of the participants are understood and heard in a profound and insightful way.

Data was collected through in-depth interviews, utilizing both open-ended and semi-structured questions designed to explore the study's core themes. The interview guide, carefully developed by the researchers, underwent a thorough review and validation by an expert in the field to ensure the questions were well-aligned with the research objectives. The validation process aimed to refine the questions, ensuring they were clear, unbiased, and capable of eliciting meaningful responses related to the topic under investigation. A sample of the in-depth interview questions is presented in Table 2.

Before the interviews, participants were thoroughly briefed on the study's objectives and their rights. After a detailed explanation of the research process, informed voluntary consent was obtained. The interviews were audio-recorded with participants' permission, each lasting between forty-five minutes and one hour, depending on the depth of the conversation. The interviews were designed to explore participants' experiences with vagrancy and the reasons behind begging, and each session was divided into two parts with breaks in between.

Throughout the data collection process, the researchers adhered to strict ethical guidelines, ensuring the protection and well-being of participants. Health and safety measures were observed before, during,

Table 1  
Profile of the participants

Participants Pseudonym	Age	Gender (M/F)	Civil Status	Number of Children	Highest Educational Level	Previous Work	Amount of Money Received in Begging per day	Location of Begging Activities	Reasons for Vagrancy
Ayda	74	F	Widow	0	Grade 5	Farm laborer and street vending	Php 100.00–200.00	Bakery near the city plaza	Unemployment due to old age, hampered livelihood, widowhood, and food insecurity
Berta	73	F	Widowed partner	3	Grade 3	Farm laborer	Php 50.00–100.00	Bakery near the city plaza	Unemployment due to old age, health issues, food insecurity, and influenced by friends
Carla	23	F	Cohabitant	3	Grade 3	Farm laborer	Php 600.00–700.00	Fast-food chain and convenience store	Loss of employment due to the pandemic and food insecurity
Diday	34	F	Cohabitant	0	Grade 2	Farm laborer	Php 50.00–100.00	Church	Partner met with an accident

Note: Gender (M/F): Male/Female

Table 2  
Sample in-depth interview questions

Questions
a. Can you share your lived experiences as a vagrant during the COVID-19 pandemic? How has your daily life been impacted?
b. Reflecting on your experiences during the pandemic, what has been the most challenging situation you have faced as a vagrant?
c. How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected your ability to make a living and sustain yourself as a vagrant?
d. Can you describe how your daily earnings have changed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic? What does this mean for your day-to-day survival?
e. What health challenges have you encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic, and how have they affected you?
f. How do you perceive the threat posed by the COVID-19 pandemic to your life and well-being?
g. Can you tell me how you came to live as a vagrant in Malaybalay City?
h. In your view, what factors have contributed to your current situation as a vagrant?

and after the interviews. Moreover, to maintain ethical rigor, a social worker was present during the interviews to ensure that participants felt comfortable and were not subject to any form of coercion. Recognizing that participants might feel uncomfortable or embarrassed during the in-depth interviews, the researcher took measures to ensure a comfortable and respectful interview process. Confidentiality and anonymity were also strictly maintained. After the interviews, participants were debriefed, informed of their right to withdraw their data, and assured that they would still receive compensation.

For the analysis process, thematic analysis, as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2020), was employed to systematically identify, analyze, and report patterns (themes) within the data. Initially, the audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. The researchers then familiarized themselves with the transcripts by reading and re-reading the data, noting initial impressions. During the first cycle of coding, an inductive approach was used to generate and categorize codes from the data. This involved breaking down the data into smaller segments and labeling these segments with codes that captured the essence of key concepts relevant to the research questions. By identifying keywords or phrases, the researchers were able to categorize and organize the data effectively. In the second cycle, pattern coding was employed to group related codes and uncover patterns or similarities. This process involved organizing the

initial codes into broader categories. The researchers then analyzed these categories to identify overarching themes that reflected the main ideas in the data. Categories and themes were reviewed and revised to ensure they accurately represented the data.

The researchers then examined the relationships between different codes and themes, allowing for a nuanced interpretation of participants' responses. This approach facilitated the identification of recurring patterns and insights related to the study's objectives. The study's findings were then organized around the identified themes, with detailed descriptions and analyses supported by participant quotes to convey the overall meaning of their lived experiences (Abrazado et al., 2021). Moreover, to enhance trustworthiness and data validity, the researchers employed member-checking with the assistance of a social worker. They presented and read the study's findings to selected participants, allowing them to react and validate the results.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

Based on the data analysis, the experiences of vagrants during the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the shared challenges they faced. These included difficult life during the pandemic, challenging begging conditions, increased vulnerability to health risks, and lack of government assistance. Furthermore, the analysis revealed that the primary causes of vagrancy are economic insecurities and societal influence.

### **Difficult Life During the Pandemic**

Vagrants, already grappling with precarious living conditions, faced significant challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, Ayda, who used to earn a living as a street vendor, faced financial difficulties and struggled to find food due to lockdown restrictions. “It is hard because of the lockdown. We cannot stroll around and find food to eat,” she explained, noting that the lockdown severely impacted her livelihood as she could no longer sell her goods. To survive the lockdown, she sometimes cooked root crops for food. She recalled, “I hadn’t left the house in a month, so I decided to dig up taro, cassava, and sweet potatoes.” Similarly, Berta, an elderly woman in her 70s, found it difficult to obtain food due to the restrictions. To get by, she relied on her previous earnings from selling rags and penny banks and had to save leftover rice for supper to stave off hunger at night. “Life was better before; now it’s tough, especially when you can’t buy rice to cook,” she remarked.

Meanwhile, Carla, a frail young mother in her early 20s, recounted that life was better before the pandemic. Her partner had a job, and they could provide enough food for the family. “We could eat back then before COVID-19 began. We can provide enough food for the family,” she said. However, during the pandemic, they struggled to find food due to the lockdown. Carla also faced difficulty finding a job because of health requirements. When asked how they managed during the lockdown, Carla responded that she had saved some

money received from the provincial office prior to the lockdown, which helped provide food for her family. Also, Diday, a carefree and talkative vagrant, recalled how she starved during the lockdown due to the lack of assistance, saying, “I’m always starving because I don’t get any assistance.” She prepared rice porridge using a recycled milk can to address her hunger. She was also frustrated by lockdown restrictions, as she didn’t understand the concept of a “quarantine pass.”

The experiences of Ayda, Berta, Carla, and Diday highlight the severe challenges faced by vagrants during the COVID-19 pandemic. Government lockdowns, while essential for public health, disproportionately impacted impoverished populations by disrupting livelihoods and causing shortages of jobs and food. Merton’s strain theory shows how these constraints increase stress on vulnerable individuals, hindering their access to survival resources. Marx’s conflict theory complements this by illustrating how the pandemic deepened structural inequalities, with lockdowns reinforcing social control and neglecting marginalized needs. These theories demonstrate the interaction between individual strain and systemic inequality, supporting Macionis’ (2012) view that the economic hardship faced by the poor is a result of increasing global social inequality.

### **Challenging Begging Condition**

Engaging in vagrancy during the pandemic became more difficult for vagrants as they faced several challenges in their begging

condition, including uncertainty of earnings, security, and societal risks.

### ***Uncertainty of Earnings***

Vagrants never knew how much money they made from begging due to the various restrictions that prevented them from wandering and seeking alms. For instance, Ayda mentioned she could occasionally earn Php100.00 or Php 200.00 per day, which she believed was sufficient to meet her necessities since she was living alone. She chose the city for begging because of the residents' compassion and would specifically appeal to those who appeared well-off. Despite her efforts, she couldn't save money because of high living costs, noting, "A hundred pesos isn't enough; everything is so expensive."

Similarly, Berta found it difficult to earn money through begging, sometimes making only Php100.00 and Php 50.00 a day. She used this money to buy rice and various food items. She mentioned she couldn't save money from begging because her earnings are just enough to cover her daily expenses, "I can't save money because it's just enough to cover my daily expenses for food.» Berta expressed gratitude to those who gave her alms, which helped her buy rice when she could not sell rags or penny banks. Diday also struggled with meager earnings from begging, barely making 20-100 pesos a day and unable to save due to high living costs, "It's hard to save money because things are expensive, and it's also tough not to spend on food.» She occasionally begs outside the church, where people often give her money

and food. On the contrary, Carla persistently begs to provide food for her family, earning around 600-700 pesos a day. She moves between a fast-food chain and a convenience store during her begging. Unlike other participants, Carla earns more from begging because people are more sympathetic to her situation, given that she has a child to support. However, she struggles to save money from her earnings, using it just to buy food and her child's needs.

The participants' experiences reveal the long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly the negative impact on the poor. Vagrants, who rely on minimal earnings from begging, faced increased difficulty meeting their needs due to rising costs. Strain Theory shows how inflation heightened stress and uncertainty for vagrants, while Conflict Theory illustrates how the capitalist system deepened inequalities, further marginalizing them. Both theories provide crucial insights: Strain Theory underscores the financial strain and reliance on societal aid for survival, whereas Conflict Theory highlights the need for systemic support to address structural inequalities. Nuguer and Parrado (2021) note that the poor are especially vulnerable to inflation due to limited resources and reliance on informal debt to meet basic needs.

### ***Security and Societal Risks***

The lives of vagrants on the street have also been constantly confronted with a number of difficulties; participants faced various threats to their security and expressed



frustrations about how some people treated them on the street. Despite having a place to live, Ayda chose to sleep in the city's bus terminal due to her fear of thugs lurking around her house. She also avoided walking around the streets to avoid arrest, saying, "I don't stroll; others were arrested for straying around. I'm afraid they'll arrest me and force me to pay fines I can't afford." She also shared her experience of encountering harsh criticism from others when asking for alms. She recounted, "Some people get angry, claiming that we have able bodies but do not work."

As for Berta, she recalled that during the Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) lockdown, she stayed home out of fear of being arrested. She said, "I didn't leave the house then because I was afraid of being arrested and fined 1,500 pesos. I can't even afford to buy rice, let alone pay such fines; I'd end up in prison." When the lockdown transitioned to General Community Quarantine (GCQ), which allowed for less restricted movement, Berta could go out and beg for alms. However, she remained apprehensive about the potential dangers and conflicts on the streets, saying, "I feel frightened during street conflicts, where people act hostile, and fights may break out." Despite this, she continued to beg, taking precautions to avoid confrontational situations. She also shared similar sentiments with Ayda, describing her experience of receiving derogatory comments from the public. She said, "People get angry and ask, 'You're asking for alms? Why don't you find work?'"

I simply respond that we can't work because no one will hire us due to our age."

While begging on the street, Carla worries about her children's safety and fears they might be arrested while they are begging on the street. She expresses concern about being apprehended by the police, especially since she cannot leave her breastfeeding child at home. Carla also faces criticism from others for bringing her baby while begging, "It's tough because people scold me for bringing my child along, accusing me of involving my child in the situation. Others also warn that the police could arrest us, as children are not permitted to be outside." Meanwhile, Diday admitted feeling helpless in the face of street threats, admitting, "I'm easily frightened by what others say." She revealed that she was repeatedly harassed by a friend who demanded payment for caring for her dog while she was begging. This constant harassment caused her considerable distress and interfered with her sleep. She said, "She keeps threatening me to pay her, and I'm afraid I won't be able to afford it."

The fear of arrest and harsh public treatment experienced by Ayda, Berta, and Carla highlights the stress and strain from their inability to meet basic needs. This societal disdain for vagrants stems from norms that prioritize productivity and employment, stigmatizing those without work as undignified. Participants struggle to meet expectations of employment and financial independence, aligning with Fuseini's (2016) view of vagrancy as a degrading condition. According to the

Strain Theory, such pressures heighten anxiety and stress, leading individuals to resort to alternative coping mechanisms. For vagrants, begging becomes a critical survival strategy in response to the strain they experience despite derogatory comments and harsh treatment.

The pandemic exacerbated challenges for vagrants, with government ordinances guided by the Local Government Code of 1991 (Republic Act No. 7160, 1991) criminalizing vagrancy under the pretense of public order. Marx's Conflict Theory helps explain the impact of these ordinances, arguing that they disproportionately targeted vagrants who already lacked resources and political power. The arrest and punishment of vagrants, as noted by Beier and Ocobock (2008), serve as a form of social control that reinforces their marginalization. Strain Theory highlights the personal stress and adaptive behaviors of vagrants facing barriers to societal goals. At the same time, Conflict Theory reveals the structural inequalities and power dynamics that have exacerbated their disadvantaged status.

### **Increased Vulnerability to Health Risks**

Vagrants may face heightened vulnerability to contracting and suffering from severe illness due to COVID-19. This vulnerability to health risk is worsened by skepticism towards the virus and hesitancy to receive vaccinations.

### ***Possible COVID-19 Symptoms***

The participants claimed to have various illnesses during the COVID-19 pandemic.

For instance, Ayda experienced persistent fevers and occasional fatigue, but she was unsure if these symptoms were COVID-related since her symptoms were relieved by medicine. Berta, on the other hand, had a three-day fever accompanied by severe coughing, sore throat, nausea, vomiting, and blurred vision. Despite her symptoms, she believed that they were unrelated to COVID-19, as she found relief after taking medication. As for Carla, she experienced fatigue, body pain, headache, loss of taste, sore throat, stuffy/runny nose, nausea, and vomiting. She considered these symptoms normal before COVID-19 and doubted they were related to it, "Coughing and colds are completely normal; they existed before COVID-19." Meanwhile, Diday suffered from fever, coughing, difficulty breathing, fatigue, sore throat, nausea, and diarrhea. She feared these symptoms were indicative of COVID-19 and was deeply concerned about the potential threat it posed.

Participants struggled with government protective measures like social distancing and handwashing due to limited access to healthcare, unstable housing, inadequate sanitation, and lack of clean water. These factors made them highly vulnerable to COVID-19 and other illnesses, increasing their strain. Strain Theory highlights how these systemic barriers prevent vagrants from effectively managing their health, leading to heightened stress and health risks. Fertel (2020) emphasizes that the inability to meet basic health needs, including food insecurity, malnutrition, insufficient rest, and hygiene challenges, worsens their vulnerability to COVID-19.

Conflict Theory complements this by highlighting how these systemic issues are rooted in class disparities, leading to unequal health outcomes. The marginalization and limited resources of vagrants reflect broader power dynamics that perpetuate inequality. Culhane et al. (2020) express concerns about widespread transmission among vagrants due to insufficient hygiene facilities and difficulties in early detection—issues exacerbated by structural inequalities. Both Strain and Conflict Theories provide a comprehensive understanding of the intensified challenges faced by vagrants during the pandemic, addressing both personal stressors and broader societal forces.

### ***COVID-19 Skepticism and Vaccine Hesitancy***

Participants demonstrated a lack of awareness about COVID-19, expressing disbelief and skepticism regarding the pandemic while emphasizing their strong faith in God. They also showed reluctance to receive vaccination due to fears and constraints imposed by their families. Ayda firmly believed that COVID-19 was a government-created conspiracy, likening it to secret martial law imposed under the guise of a pandemic, “This COVID-19 is a martial law, a secret they enforce because they can’t openly declare it. So, they label it as COVID-19 instead,” she stated.

Despite her skepticism, Ayda displayed bravery, drawing strength from her religious faith. She objected to the vaccination, citing fear of adverse side effects and

that there had been deaths from them before. Berta expressed doubts about COVID-19, but she relied on her faith in God, believing prayer would protect her from COVID-19. Nevertheless, her decision to forgo immunization was impacted by her uncertainty and lack of knowledge of the virus. She was hesitant due to fear of pain during the procedure and was also influenced by her children’s concerns about potential side effects, “I am hesitant to get vaccinated because I’m afraid it will hurt. My children also don’t want me to get vaccinated.”

On the other hand, Carla acknowledged the risk posed by COVID-19 but insisted that she did not think of its existence, attributing her faith to God. Despite her awareness of the importance of vaccination, she was hesitant due to misinformation propagated by others. In addition, she was swayed by unfounded rumors that the vaccine would turn recipients into zombies, which made her fearful of receiving the shot, “I fear getting vaccinated because people told me it would turn us into zombies.” Despite initial uncertainty, she acknowledged the threat of COVID-19, stating, “I believe it because many people have died of it.” Diday, on the other hand, initially wanted to get vaccinated, but her fears and her partner’s disapproval held her back, “I would like to, but my live-in partner won’t allow it because we heard the vaccine has caused many deaths.”

The participants’ disbelief and uncertainties about COVID-19, shaped by their limited awareness, can be analyzed

through Strain Theory. This theory suggests that significant socioeconomic challenges, like poverty and limited education, lead individuals to adopt alternative coping mechanisms. In this case, vagrants' reluctance to receive the vaccine reflects an adaptive response to their environment, with misinformation and skepticism serving as ways to manage uncertainty and fear about potential side effects. Conflict Theory adds depth by highlighting how structural inequalities exacerbate these issues. Economic strain limits access to education and reliable health information, perpetuating misinformation and distrust. This creates a power imbalance where disadvantaged groups, such as vagrants, are systematically deprived of accurate health information. Research shows that lower socioeconomic status is associated with poorer understanding of COVID-19 and greater vaccine hesitancy (Dash et al., 2021; McCormack, 2021).

Participants' strong religious beliefs and family-oriented culture further reinforce their skepticism about COVID-19. Their worldview, grounded in faith and family, provides a sense of control during uncertain times and influences their vaccination decisions. Bok et al. (2021) note a correlation between higher religiosity and COVID-19 disbelief, emphasizing the impact of cultural factors on health behaviors. The participants' reliance on religious and familial guidance highlights how deeply ingrained cultural values affect their acceptance or rejection of public health measures.

### **Lack of Government Assistance**

Three participants voiced their frustration with the government's response to COVID-19, highlighting the lack of assistance they received during the lockdown. For instance, Ayda expressed her dissatisfaction with the government's handling of the situation, noting that she had not received any support and was unhappy with the delay in their pension. She also criticized the local government for not addressing her concerns, citing budget constraints, "I went to the local government, but they would just tell you that there is still no budget." Ayda urged the government to resolve the pension issue promptly and called for an end to pandemic-related conspiracies to improve people's lives. Similarly, Carla expressed disappointment over the lack of assistance, "We have not received any assistance." She appealed to the government to provide food aid for her family and expressed hope of finding work once her children are older.

Additionally, Diday stressed the importance of government assistance in preventing hunger with daily food. She described the challenges of obtaining help from the local government due to a lack of documentation and her non-local status. Frustrated, she recounted, "I asked for help before, but they told me they couldn't assist me because I don't have the necessary documents and I'm not a local resident." Diday expressed a desire to stop begging and secure stable employment, hoping for opportunities like street sweeping once the pandemic ends. In contrast, Berta was the

only participant who expressed satisfaction with government assistance during the lockdown. She recalled receiving food packs and financial aid from the local government, “We received 2,000 pesos and food items like rice, canned goods, and instant noodles during the lockdown. We were grateful because it allowed us to cook food.” However, Berta was hesitant to make further appeals, citing her shyness. Her requests were to ease her financial needs, such as buying rice, and to receive assistance for her eye condition, as she could not afford eyeglasses. Berta believed that seeking God’s help was the only viable solution to end the COVID-19 pandemic.

The lack of government assistance during the pandemic significantly strained participants, leading to dissatisfaction and frustration due to inadequate support. Strain Theory suggests that such barriers heighten frustration and prompt increased reliance on personal coping mechanisms and criticism of the system. Conflict Theory adds that government actions often prioritize mainstream populations, leaving vulnerable groups at greater risk. Oxfam and Development Pathway report that 2.7 billion people globally did not receive public financial support during the pandemic (“2.7 billion people did not get state aid”, 2020), illustrating how systemic inequalities worsen the challenges faced by these groups.

### **Reasons and Causes of Vagrancy**

The results revealed that the participant’s decision to beg on the street was influenced

by two primary categories: economic insecurity and societal factors.

#### ***Begging as a Result of Economic Insecurity***

The data from the four participants highlighted economic insecurity as a primary cause for engaging in vagrancy. They cited navigating food insecurity for survival, socioeconomic vulnerability due to widowhood and old age, loss of employment due to lockdown restrictions, and health issues as significant factors contributing to their situation.

#### ***Navigating Food Insecurity for Survival.***

During the pandemic, the participants resorted to begging on the streets to meet their basic needs. This survival strategy emerged in response to the challenging circumstances brought by the pandemic, highlighting their resourcefulness and resilience during the crisis. For example, Ayda chose to stay in one spot while begging, appealing to well-off passersby for sympathy and help. She explained her dire need for food and to improve her situation, “My reason is to be able to have food to eat and escape my poor situation.” Similarly, Berta stayed in one place, selling penny banks and begging for alms to survive. She stressed that food insecurity drove her to this, saying, “I’m here begging for alms because I have nothing to eat. Sometimes, I tell people that I can’t even afford coffee, and they kindly give me alms, which I save to buy rice.” Carla also turned to begging to meet basic needs like food and support her

child during the pandemic; “I’m begging here to buy food and necessities for my child because the pandemic has made life difficult for us.” Additionally, Diday emphasized her determination to survive, noting that begging offered crucial relief by ensuring she had enough food to eat: “I just want to survive and have a food to eat, because it’s hard to let yourself starve in these difficult times.”

The COVID-19 pandemic has severely burdened the poor, making it hard for them to meet acceptable standards of survival and living conditions. As discussed by Merton (1938), the Strain Theory suggests that when traditional paths to success are blocked, individuals may turn to unconventional strategies like vagrancy for survival, particularly in the face of food insecurity. Concurrently, Conflict Theory, articulated by Marx, highlights the socioeconomic disparities driving such behaviors. The pandemic’s economic contraction has widened the wealth gap, exacerbated systemic inequalities and increased vagrancy among the disadvantaged (Pylas, 2021).

***Socioeconomic Vulnerability: Widowhood and Old Age.*** Ayda and Berta shared the loss of their husbands and difficulty finding work due to their age. This led them to resort to begging. Ayda, in particular, faces these challenges alone as a widowed elderly woman with no children, relying solely on herself to survive. The pandemic has been especially hard for Ayda; her economic vulnerability, including limited job opportunities due to age discrimination

and her status as a widow, has driven her to engage in vagrancy to survive the pandemic. She said, “Because of my age, no one will hire me if I apply for a job as a street sweeper or even a housemaid. Since my husband is gone, I’ve ended up like this, so I just ask for alms.” Berta shared similar sentiments. Due to her age, she was rejected as a street sweeper, leaving her no choice but to beg for alms. She emphasized that begging was essential for her survival. Berta recalled when her husband’s death forced her to beg on the street because she couldn’t support herself, “I asked for a job like street sweeping, but they refused because I’m old. So, I was left with no choice but to beg for alms. I also don’t have anyone, and my husband has already passed away.” Her daughter, who also lived in the city, could not support her due to her financial struggles.

Widowhood and age-related employment challenges highlight the increased socioeconomic vulnerability of Ayda and Berta as elderly widows and vagrants. In patriarchal societies like the Philippines, the loss of a male breadwinner puts additional pressure on family income and stability, leading individuals to adopt coping mechanisms such as vagrancy. Strain Theory explains that limited institutional means force these individuals to resort to unconventional methods for survival. Jimenez’s (2021) UN-DESA report confirms that spousal loss impacts economic stability, particularly for women and children. Conflict Theory further emphasizes how patriarchal structures

and economic inequalities exacerbate the vulnerability of elderly widows, weakening traditional familial support due to economic constraints (Carandang et al., 2019).

***Loss of Employment due to Lockdown Restrictions.*** The lockdown restrictions imposed to mitigate the spread of the Coronavirus have significantly impacted the economy, causing distress among workers who lost their jobs. Carla's partner was one of the unfortunate workers, rendered unemployed by the pandemic, leaving Carla to work hard at begging to support their family's daily needs. "The pandemic has made things difficult for us. My live-in partner lost his job and hasn't been able to return to work," Carla shared. Although her partner occasionally helps her with begging, he is often left at home with their other children. Carla mentioned that his partner struggles to find work despite actively seeking employment.

The pandemic-induced economic crisis has disproportionately affected low-income workers, worsening economic inequality. Marx's Conflict Theory highlights how widening income disparities reflect deeper systemic issues and class conflicts. Job losses and diminished livelihoods force some individuals into vagrancy as a survival strategy. Merton's Strain Theory supports this, suggesting that blocked opportunities, such as unemployment, lead individuals to unconventional methods like vagrancy. The combined impact of economic downturns and systemic inequalities pushes the poor to adopt such measures. This dual perspective

aligns with Sagbigal et al. (2019), illustrating how both theories explain the rise in vagrancy during economic crises.

***Health Issues.*** Two participants, Berta and Diday, identified health-related issues as key factors that drove them to beg for alms on the street. Berta highlighted her underlying health conditions, such as knee pain and arm numbness, which prevented her from working and forced her to beg. "I cannot work any longer because I have been struggling with my knees' condition and the numbness of my arm," she explained. Diday also began begging after her partner met with an accident, leaving her to fend for both. "A fast-food chain van hit my live-in partner, and I was the only one striving back then. It has been more than a year now," she recalled. For Diday, begging for alms provides crucial relief during the pandemic, with her 89-year-old partner assisting her in meeting their daily needs.

The underlying medical conditions and unforeseen accidents exacerbate financial anxieties among participants. Strain theory suggests that individuals facing additional financial strain due to health issues may resort to vagrancy as a means of coping. Conflict theory reinforces this view by highlighting how systemic inequalities in healthcare and social support exacerbate financial distress, leading to increased reliance on unconventional survival strategies such as begging. This aligns with the UN-DESA policy brief (Jimenez, 2021), which indicates that illness and lack of adequate health insurance further strain

livelihoods, contributing to the prevalence of vagrancy among the impoverished.

Underlying medical conditions and unforeseen accidents heighten financial anxieties among participants. Strain Theory suggests that added financial strain from health issues may drive individuals to vagrancy as a coping mechanism. Conflict Theory supports this by highlighting how systemic healthcare and social support inequalities exacerbate financial distress, increasing reliance on unconventional survival strategies like begging. This aligns with the UN-DESA policy brief (Jimenez, 2021), which notes that illness and inadequate health services have contributed to the prevalence of vagrancy among the impoverished.

***Begging as A Result of Societal Influence***

Societal influence can drive individuals to engage in vagrancy, as seen in Berta’s experience. She learned to beg from a friend who was also a widow, stating, “I tagged along with my friend and learned how to beg.” Berta also mentioned joining a group of beggars out of embarrassment, saying, “I joined them because I felt ashamed begging alone.” In collectivist countries like the Philippines, societal influence has fostered a culture of begging, shaping individuals’ decisions to engage in vagrancy. This aligns with Sagbigal et al. (2019), who found that societal factors contribute to this behavior. Table 3 presents the themes, categories, and code derived from this study’s data.

Table 3  
*Themes, categories, and codes derived from the data*

Themes	Categories and Codes
Difficult Life During the Pandemic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difficulty accessing food due to lockdown restrictions</li> <li>• Livelihood has been affected, and finding work is challenging due to health requirements</li> <li>• Faced starvation as no aid has been provided</li> <li>• Frustration over lockdown restrictions and lack of knowledge about obtaining a quarantine pass</li> </ul>
Challenging Begging Condition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uncertainty of Earnings                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Inability to save money</li> <li>▪ Earnings from begging are insufficient</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Security and Societal Risks                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Feared for own safety while being alone in the house</li> <li>▪ Terrified of being arrested for vagrancy by the authorities and police</li> <li>▪ Anxious about potential dangers arising from hostile situations on the street</li> <li>▪ Felt helpless in the face of threats on the street</li> <li>▪ Was advised not to wander around due to the COVID-19 threat</li> <li>▪ Worried about the children's safety while they were out on the street asking for alms</li> <li>▪ Criticized for bringing her baby while begging on the street</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Increased Vulnerability to Health Risks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Possible COVID-19 Symptoms                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Trouble breathing due to a severe cough</li> <li>▪ Experienced sore throat, nausea, diarrhea, vomiting and blurred vision</li> <li>▪ Experienced fatigue, tiredness, muscle and body pain and headache</li> <li>▪ Lost sense of taste, experienced fever, as well as chills</li> </ul> </li> </ul>



Table 3 (continue)

Themes	Categories and Codes
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• COVID-19 Skepticism and Vaccine Hesitancy               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Belief in the COVID-19 pandemic being a hoax and a government-created conspiracy</li> <li>▪ Not believing in the existence of COVID-19 and displaying confidence in a Supreme Being instead of fearing the pandemic</li> <li>▪ Fear and hesitation about getting vaccinated due to misinformation, such as the belief that it could cause death or turn people into zombies</li> <li>▪ Feeling anxious about getting vaccinated and claiming that the procedure would be painful</li> <li>▪ Reluctance to receive the vaccination due to familial factors</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Lack of Government Assistance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unable to receive government assistance during lockdown</li> <li>• Disappointment with the way the local government handled concerns</li> <li>• Help was denied because they were not residents of the city</li> </ul>
Reasons and Causes of Vagrancy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Begging as a Result of Economic Insecurity               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Navigating Food Insecurity for Survival</li> <li>▪ Socioeconomic Vulnerability: Widowhood and Old Age (loss of husband and unemployment due to age)</li> <li>▪ Loss of Employment due to lockdown</li> <li>▪ Health Related Issues (underlying health conditions and partner met with an accident)</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Begging as a Result of Societal Influence</li> </ul>

## CONCLUSION

The research highlights the relevance of Karl Marx's Social Conflict Theory to the current situation in the Philippines, revealing significant social inequalities exacerbated by the pandemic. Economic insecurities, such as unemployment and job loss, have contributed to the rise of vagrancy. The pandemic has further exposed the severe financial difficulties and food insecurity faced by vagrants due to lockdown restrictions. These challenges are compounded by societal issues like derogatory comments, threats, and limited access to healthcare and government support, worsening their physical and mental health. The commercialization of healthcare has further marginalized impoverished families, turning it into a privilege rather than a right. Addressing

these issues requires a multi-faceted approach, including community engagement and government intervention to address the root causes of vagrancy and empower individuals to rebuild their lives.

The findings highlight significant implications for local and national governments, particularly agencies like the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) and City Social Welfare and Development (CSWD). Although laws addressing health, poverty, and the elderly have been enacted, their implementation lacks the effectiveness needed to address the socioeconomic and political challenges faced by low-income families and the elderly. Legislative bodies must re-evaluate and revise these laws and policies to improve government services for citizens.

Valuable lessons can be learned for improving future government programs: (1) providing immediate economic relief through unemployment insurance and financial aid; (2) implementing job opportunities and livelihood programs for vulnerable groups like the homeless; (3) enhancing management of financial assistance to prioritize the poor and vulnerable; and (4) improving healthcare services by offering free check-ups, medications, hygiene products, and emergency kits to those with limited access. Local organizations and communities can significantly enhance national government programs by facilitating aid distribution during emergencies like pandemics, typhoons, and earthquakes. Their proximity ensures immediate support. Additionally, local governments can align their resolutions, ordinances, and policies with national programs to effectively extend basic services. Barangay units, being the most accessible, can provide essential services such as healthcare, social welfare, and other crucial support.

This study has limitations, including a small sample size of four participants, which may not fully represent the experiences of all vagrants in Malaybalay City, affecting the richness and generalizability of the data. Conducting street interviews posed challenges like environmental distractions, potentially disrupting the process and impacting data quality. Participants' reluctance to share personal information due to fear or mistrust may also affect the accuracy of their responses. Additionally, the study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, with strict health

protocols that may have influenced the study's outcomes. Despite the study's limitations, steps were taken to minimize potential biases, including non-participant observation and member checking to ensure alignment with participants' experiences. Although the small sample size may limit the generalizability of the findings, the study significantly contributes to the literature on *Vulnerabilities and Social Marginalization* by examining vagrancy during the COVID-19 pandemic. Future research should consider using multiple qualitative approaches or triangulation methods to more fully capture the experiences of vagrants in the post-pandemic context.

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