




## Original Article

# Elderly's Poverty in Interaction with Social Security Systems in Iran: A Grounded Theory Study in Tehran

Saeede Ebrahimi Nia<sup>1</sup>, Seyed Alireza Afshani<sup>1\*</sup> , Ali Ruhani<sup>1</sup>, Mohammad Torkashvand Moradabadi<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences, Yazd University, Yazd, Iran

<sup>2</sup> Department of Anthropology and Demography, Faculty of Social Sciences, Yazd University, Yazd, Iran

\* **Corresponding Author:** Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences, Yazd University, Yazd, Iran. Tel: +98 35312330497, Email address: [afshanalireza@yazd.ac.ir](mailto:afshanalireza@yazd.ac.ir)

## ABSTRACT

### Article history

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**Introduction:** Begging, as a deeply rooted social issue, has been experienced by human societies since ancient times. Over different historical periods, it has altered along the economic, social, and cultural conditions of its time, taking on various forms and dimensions. In recent years, with the significant increase in the elderly population in Iran, particularly in metropolitan Tehran, the phenomenon of begging among this age group has also witnessed a notable rise. Beyond its human and ethical dimensions, this issue has critical economic and social consequences that demand serious attention.

**Methods:** This study focuses on the economic dimensions of elderly begging in Tehran. Employing a grounded theory approach, the research aims to identify and explain the economic factors contributing to elderly begging. A theoretical and purposive sampling method was employed to collect data from 16 elderly beggars via in-depth semi-structured interviews.

**Results:** The results led to 15 primary categories and one core category titled "Poverty and Distrust in Support Systems", which were thoroughly presented along with a paradigmatic model. According to the findings, economic damages resulting from blood money (diyah) and dowry payments, economic shocks caused by bereavement, lack of financial resources, deprivation of inheritance support, experiences of financial failure, and fraud have significantly weakened the economic capital of elderly beggars.

**Conclusion:** Economic insecurity among the elderly has led to their dependence on government and charitable support. However, due to inappropriate treatment and stringent conditions imposed by these institutions, some elderly are deprived of the aids they need. Consequently, begging has emerged as an adaptive behavior in response to unfavorable economic and social conditions.

**Keywords:** Aged, Deprivation, Poverty, Support Systems

## Introduction

Begging, as a deeply rooted social issue, has been experienced by human societies in various forms and dimensions since ancient times, and shaped by the specific economic, social, and cultural conditions of each era. In recent years, with the significant increase in the elderly population in Iran, particularly in the metropolitan city of Tehran, begging among this age

group has risen notably (1). Begging is defined as the act of earning livings by "extending one's hand" in such a way that the beggar benefits from the labor of others without making any effort to sustain their own livelihood (2).

The increase of begging among the elderly has turned into a key social issue today. It is aggravated by

shifts in family dynamics and social structures, diminishing the ability of society to provide the financial and welfare support that the elderly once received. Moreover, the unstable economic conditions have forced the elderly with no social and welfare support to resort to begging as a means of subsistence (3). Tehran, the capital of Iran, as the political, economic, and administrative center of the country, has turned into a focal area for attracting beggars from across the country due to its large population and concentration of employment opportunities (2).

A review of the existing literature on elderly begging reveals that, despite its significance, this phenomenon has rarely been the focus of independent research. Most studies (3, 7, 10-12) have often concentrated on begging among children and young adults, while the elderly, as a vulnerable group, have been largely overlooked. Below, we introduce some of the studies conducted on aging and begging. (Table 1)

Research findings on elderly begging indicate that the old people turn to begging for various reasons such as the loss of family members, unemployment, poverty, disability, physical and health problems, and adverse social and environmental conditions. The migration of children to other cities for education or work, coupled with the disintegration of family structures, deprives the elderly of necessary support and may push them toward begging.

A review of relevant theoretical frameworks suggests that Durkheim's theory of anomie explains begging as a consequence of inequality in the division of labor and its resulting social effects (15). According to Cloward and Ohlin, begging is the outcome of insufficient opportunities and the failure to achieve legitimate success in society, leading to the formation of a subcultural ideology that allows beggars to violate social norms (16). Sutherland's differential association theory implies that beggars learn both the methods of achieving success through begging and the justifications for their actions. Furthermore, the theory of social exclusion suggests that individuals resort to begging due to a lack of social capabilities (17).

This research aims to provide a deeper understanding of the factors that contribute to elderly begging, evaluate existing policies and programs to support the elderly, and propose effective strategies to address this phenomenon. Employing a grounded theory approach, the present study focuses on the economic dimensions of elderly begging in Tehran to identify and explain the process by which some elderly turn to begging.

## Methods

### Design

This study adopted an interpretive approach, employing qualitative methodology to explore the lived experiences of elderly beggars in Tehran, Iran. The grounded theory method was utilized to deeply analyze elderly begging as a complex social phenomenon.

### Participants

According to the table 2, the participants were 16 elderly beggars (10 male and 6 female), aged 60 to 76, who were selected via theoretical and purposive sampling techniques in Tehran. Among the participants, 6 were married, 3 were divorced, 2 were single, and 5 were widows.

The number of children ranged from zero to six. Educational levels were remarkably low, with 9 participants being illiterate and only 4 holding a high school diploma. Interviews were conducted in various locations across Tehran, from the city center to its outskirts, reflecting the widespread nature of this phenomenon throughout the city.

### Data collection and analysis

Drawn upon guided by theoretical sampling, data collection continued using in-depth semi-structured interviews until theoretical saturation was achieved. On average, each interview lasted approximately 50 minutes, resulting in a cumulative total of 765 minutes of interview data. For data analysis, line-by-line coding was used for open coding, followed by axial and selective coding as concepts and categories were developed.

### Trustworthiness and dependability

Confidence and trust in observations, interpretations, and analyses essentially constitute the assessment of research validity, a process also recognized as the social construction of knowledge (18). However, the evaluation of validity or validation of data and results in qualitative research follows a different approach compared to quantitative research. Various researchers propose different methods and procedures for validating data, and some attempt to use more qualitative and distinct terms compared to the conventional terminology in quantitative research.

In this regard, Creswell and Miller (19) attempted to categorize these procedures into eight groups. They suggest that a qualitative researcher should adhere to at least two of these eight criteria to ensure the trustworthiness of their research. These strategies include:

1. Prolonged engagement and continuous observation in the research field
2. Triangulation
3. Peer review
4. Negative case analysis
5. Clarifying researcher bias and preconceptions
6. Member checking (participant validation)
7. Rich, thick description
8. External auditing

In this study, The trustworthiness of the findings was ensured through the following methods:

- Prolonged engagement and continuous observation in the research field
- Peer review
- Member checking (participant validation)
- Rich thick description

Moreover, the dependability of the research was confirmed by adhering to interview principles,

thoroughly documenting events, and ensuring accurate transcription.

#### *Ethical considerations*

After obtaining approval from the ethics committee of Yazd University (IR.YAZD.REC.1403.081), the interview process commenced. Prior to each interview, informed consent was obtained from all participants. At this stage, the purpose of the study, the manner in which

the information would be used, and the participants' rights — including the right to withdraw at any time without any consequences — were fully explained to them, and written consent was then collected. Efforts were made to ensure the comfort and well-being of participants. Interviews were scheduled and coordinated based on the researcher's time constraints and the participants' availability. Furthermore, the confidentiality was maintained through avoiding any reference to participants' names.

**Table 1. Literature review**

Source	Findings
<b>Mehrabani (2017)</b>	Poverty, illness, and unemployment are the most significant factors contributing to begging. As education levels increase, the proportion of beggars decreases (3).
<b>Afra et al. (2021)</b>	Cultural capital (47.7%) and economic capital (39.7%) independently influence successful aging. Higher levels of economic and cultural capital among the elderly enhance mental health, happiness, and life satisfaction (4).
<b>Shokouhi &amp; Moatamedi (2012)</b>	Key factors such as religiosity, migration, and characteristics of beggars such as low education, poor physical health, lack of basic skills, family instability, poverty, and unemployment, determine the emergence of begging (5).
<b>Adabayo et al. (2014)</b>	To eradicate begging among the elderly, the root causes must be thoroughly examined and addressed in policymaking processes (6).
<b>Onagun (2016)</b>	The most critical economic and psychological needs of respondents include money (88.5%), learning trades (80.8%), healthcare (71.2%), and housing (55.7%) (7).
<b>Parvayi &amp; mousavi (2019)</b>	The absence of elderly care policies, the marginalization of gender perspectives in social policies for the elderly, the absence of active and elderly-friendly policies, and the neglect of rural elderly issues are significant policy gaps (8).
<b>Zanjari &amp; Sadeghi (2020)</b>	Expanding universal pension coverage, reducing poverty, and enhancing capacity-building such as creating self-employment opportunities for the elderly and improving their education should be prioritized in policymaking (9).
<b>Mahmoudiani (2016)</b>	Beggars often operate in organized groups. Most beggars are migrants and are not necessarily considered incapable in their hometowns. High population density, fluidity, and heterogeneity in Tehran are key factors attracting beggars to the city (10).
<b>Ghanatpisheh et al. (2016)</b>	Public awareness campaigns, material and social support, avoiding direct financial aid, organizational structuring of institutions, job creation, a multidimensional approach to begging, and the revival of cultural and religious activities are key strategies. These approaches have been instrumental in eradicating begging in Tabriz and establishing it as a metropolis without beggars (11).
<b>Baltazar (2012)</b>	Begging is the result of various factors, including physical disabilities, poverty, parental death, family breakdown, unemployment, and similar issues (12).
<b>Qandeel &amp; Jehom (2020)</b>	This study recommends establishing temporary shelters for elderly street dwellers to improve their health, hygiene, safety, and access to housing facilities while providing privacy and dignity (13).
<b>Wendosen (2017)</b>	Elderly beggars face challenges in accessing food, clothing, housing, and healthcare, as well as physical and mental health issues. They cope by skipping meals, buying the cheapest food, self-medicating, adapting to their circumstances, and relying on religious practices (14).

Table 2. Demographic information of research participants

	Age	Gender	Marital status	Education	Location
1	75	male	Single	Illiterate	Lalezar
2	70	male	divorced	Diploma	Taatre -shahr
3	71	male	divorced	Illiterate	Saai park
4	60	male	married	Diploma	Enghlab Sq.
5	76	male	married	Illiterate	Darvazedolat Subway
6	60	male	married	Diploma	Vali-asr Sq
7	65	male	married	Expelled university student	Collage Bridge
8	65	male	divorced	Illiterate	parkway
9	65	female	widow	Illiterate	Ghaem magham Ave.
10	66	female	widow	Illiterate	Tajrish Sq.
11	60	female	divorced	Primary high-school	Ferdousi Sq.
12	65	female	widow	Illiterate	tehransar
13	62	male	married	Primary high-school	Tajrish Sq.
14	60	female	widow	Illiterate	Tajrish Sq.
15	66	female	widow	Illiterate	Tehransar
16	67	male	married	Illiterate	Afsariye

Table 3. Research findings (main and core categories)

Core category	Main categories
<b>High costs and mistrust of ineffective support systems</b>	Compensation for blood money and dowry Loan and debt repayment Economic shock due to bereavement The pressure of economic role Financial burden of children Deprivation of inheritance support Decline in economic capital Natural disasters Insufficiency of retirement pensions Sale of assets and properties Need for family financial support Distrust in informal support structures Dependence on government support Inability to secure adequate housing Tehran as a fertile ground for the growth of begging Begging Normalization

## Results

According to the Table 3, through a detailed examination of the interview transcripts, one core category, 15 main categories, 21 subcategories, and 44 constructed concepts were identified. The qualitative data analysis revealed the following themes:

### *Compensation for blood money and dowry*

The elderly beggars studied in this study faced economic insecurity for various reasons. A significant portion of their assets, properties, and savings may be lost due to payments for dowry and blood money resulting from accidents and lack of insurance. Some individuals, who previously owned substantial properties and assets, were forced to sell their homes, shops, and other possessions due to the financial pressure of these expenses. One male beggar said:

*I paid for my wife's dowry; I gave away two houses just to get a divorce because she didn't easily agree to the divorce. I gave up everything.*

### *Loan and debt repayment*

Some elderly, due to their unstable financial situation and limited income, faced serious challenges in repaying loans and debts, particularly those related to housing rent. One beggar said:

*I'm in debt. I owe my landlord. The washing machine and refrigerator broke down, and I bought them on installments. I'm struggling to pay them off.*

### *Economic shock due to bereavement*

Some participants reported loss of one or both parents or guardians during their childhood. The early loss of a guardian led to financial and economic difficulties from an early age, resulting in an inability to meet basic needs, including proper education. This, in turn, affects their job opportunities and income-generating potential in adulthood. Some elderly women were forced to take on the responsibility of raising their children after the early death of their spouses, which added to their financial burden. One female participant said:

*My husband fell ill, and after his death, my life completely changed. I had young children when he died. I have five children at home that I have to feed.*

#### *The pressure of economic role*

Some elderly individuals, in addition to covering the expenses of their own families, were also burdened with the financial responsibilities of their spouse's family or their paternal family at certain points in their lives. This situation placed a heavy financial load on them. One participant said:

*I had six children, and I was responsible for my parents' expenses. I also had to support my wife's siblings - five sisters-in-law. My in-laws were in worse financial condition than me, but now that my situation has improved through begging, I help them.*

#### *Financial burden of children*

Another reason for the economic insecurity faced by the elderly is the financial burden of supporting their children. Some participants mentioned that having several unemployed or studying children has made it difficult for them to meet living expenses. One participant remarked:

*I have so many children and the cost of living is too high. I couldn't save anything. The expenses for the children are high. They're not used to working, and I'm even paying for my child's university fees.*

#### *Deprivation of inheritance support*

Some elderly reported that they did not receive any inheritance from their parents or were deprived of it for various reasons. In their old age, the insufficient savings left them struggling to meet their daily needs. As one participant mentioned:

*After my father's death, we went to court for the inheritance. My brother told the judge, 'Sir, my father sold two houses, one in Hamedan and the other in Tehran, which he transferred to his wife and then sold. I didn't receive any inheritance.'*

#### *Decline in economic capital*

The decline in economic capital is a significant reduction in financial resources and the elderly's inability to meet their basic living needs. Falling in the trap of frauds has a profound negative impact on the financial status of some elderly. One participant said:

*I trusted my friend and bought a pre-constructed apartment from him, but unfortunately, we didn't formalize the contract at the real estate office. I gave him all my savings for the house, but when it was completed, I couldn't claim the apartment because I didn't have a valid purchase agreement, and it wasn't registered at the real estate office. He cheated me.*

#### *Natural disasters*

Natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods, or other similar events significantly damage the financial and physical assets of some elderly individuals. One participant remarked:

*I used to live in the city of Rudbar. The earthquake came, and I became a victim. When the Rudbar earthquake happened, I lost everything, my home and my livelihood. Then, I decided to come to Tehran to work.*

#### *Insufficient retirement pensions*

Due to the rising cost of living and challenges such as covering children's education expenses, daily living costs, and rent, the retirement pensions alone are insufficient to meet the financial needs of some elderly. One participant said:

*I'm retired, and my pension is 10 million tomans per month. This income isn't enough to cover my living expenses. It is spent on rent, my children's expenses, and household costs. I currently have a daughter in university, and her expenses are around 7 to 8 million tomans per month.*

#### *Sale of assets and properties*

Faced with economic insecurity and financial challenges, some elderly may be forced to sell their assets and properties, such as homes, shops, cars, and other real estate, which previously served as sources of income or financial security. As one participant mentioned:

*In the past, my financial situation was good, and I owned some property. Unfortunately, I've now become a tenant. I used to own a slaughterhouse and worked there, but I had debts and was forced to sell it.*

#### *Need for family financial support*

When the financial support from family members is not met, it can even lead to strained family relationships. One participant mentioned:

*My children rarely help with household expenses. I rarely visit their homes, and they don't seem to like it. Their spouses don't allow me to live with them, even though I'd prefer to live with them to make things easier for myself.*

#### *Distrust in informal support structures*

Unpleasant experiences, such as long waiting times, inadequate responses, and inappropriate treatment, and the stringent conditions set by charitable organizations and support institutions like the Welfare Organization and the Relief Committee for covering the elderly lead many to distrust these institutions. One participant remarked;

*I used to go to charity houses, but their conditions were too strict pointlessly. They said they wouldn't give anything and would send me to a camp. Their treatment was poor, and they always assumed I was lying as they were very suspicious.*

#### *Dependence on government support*

As a vulnerable group in society, the elderly in difficult economic and social conditions rely on government support such as subsidies and food baskets. When they feel they cannot rely on

government organizations and institutions anymore, they may turn to the streets and live in unfavorable conditions, gradually turning to begging. Another participant said:

*I'm not protected by any organization, and I haven't gone to a charity, as I don't want to. I only receive subsidies. The truth is that whatever resources the Relief Committee and the Welfare Organization have, they distribute among themselves.*

#### *Inability to secure adequate housing*

The inability to secure suitable housing for themselves and their families, coupled with living in small rooms, has led to increased financial and social challenges for the elderly. One participant said:

*When I was young, I didn't own a home. Life was full of challenges, and I couldn't afford to buy a house. Every time I saved money, housing prices went up, and I couldn't make the purchase. Now I'm a tenant, living in a 6-square-meter room with five other people. I've been a tenant all my life.*

#### *Tehran as a place for the growth of begging*

Tehran, as a metropolis with a large and economically diverse population, provides beggars with the opportunity to easily engage in begging in crowded and high-traffic areas. Furthermore, begging, compared to other illegal activities such as theft, offers a greater sense of security. As one participant said:

*I came to Tehran from a smaller town because begging wasn't feasible there. There's no place like Tehran for this. The income from begging in Tehran is unmatched anywhere else. Alhamdulillah, the income from begging surpasses other jobs. Unemployment is so rampant that you either have to choose theft or begging. I realized that begging is far safer than theft.*

#### *Begging normalization*

Over time, begging becomes a normalized and accepted means of earning income, particularly for the elderly. This is especially significant for older people who, due to various reasons such as financial shortages, inability to work, or lack of access to social support, turn to this activity. One participant remarked:

*Now that I earn money, I find it satisfying. At first, it was difficult but I wasn't used to it and felt ashamed. But over time, it became normal for me.*

#### *Paradigmatic Model*

As mentioned at the beginning of the discussion on the research findings, after explaining the findings, we will present the available data in the form of a paradigmatic model. The paradigmatic model of the present study explains the process leading to begging among the elderly with the central phenomenon of economic insecurity (Figure 1). This model consists of five dimensions: causal conditions, contextual conditions, intervening conditions, strategies, and

outcomes, which are shaped around the central phenomenon. It illustrates how economic insecurity, resulting from causal, contextual, and intervening factors, compels the elderly to adopt the strategy of begging and leads to specific consequences.

## **Discussion**

From the perspective of Parsons' theory, begging can be examined as a sign of insufficient integration of individuals into society and a misalignment with cultural values (10). With a large population in Tehran, beggars can easily turn to begging as they cannot be recognized. This allows them to earn income without the social and cultural scrutiny that would be present in smaller towns. Begging, particularly old age, is the result of inefficiencies in formal and informal support systems, as well as economic pressures. In this study, elderly beggars are identified as members of helpless groups in society who, due to unfavorable economic conditions and an inability to meet their basic needs, resort to begging. They are especially exposed to social vulnerabilities and, due to physical limitations and the inadequacy of support systems, are led to begging.

According to 'labeling theory', elderly beggars initially engage in begging temporarily to meet their needs (20), however, over time, and due to being labeled as beggars, they pursue this income-generating activity more seriously. Moreover, 'Merton's theory' holds that begging is recognized as a form of social isolation and detachment (21) where individuals not only reject social values such as wealth but also distance themselves from legal means of meeting their needs, turning instead to begging (20). In this regard, elderly beggars distrust informal support structures such as charities and relief committees, a distrust stemming from negative experiences and stringent conditions imposed by these institutions. Sutherland's 'differential association theory' also suggests that beggars learn and adapt to begging as a profession (22). This process of socialization can perpetuate the cycle of begging among the elderly. moreover, 'social control theory' posits that deviant behaviors such as begging occur due to a lack of social control. When social oversight and control diminish, individuals are more likely to engage in deviant behavior.

## **Key findings from related research**

The experiences of aging are different for different social groups due to various factors affecting the health status of the elderly. Research on begging and aging indicates that poverty and unemployment, the loss of family members, disabilities, physical and mental health problems, and low levels of education are among the most significant reasons that drive people towards begging. The lack of social support, physical and mental disabilities, low educational

attainment, and the disintegration of families due to the migration of children are also contributing factors (23). Furthermore, Iran's population is aging, with an expected rise in the number and proportion of the elderly. Tehran, with its large, fluid, and heterogeneous population, has become a destination for migrants, some of whom resort to begging due to their inability to secure a livelihood. Given the significance of this social phenomenon, it is essential to implement effective measures to address elderly begging. Enacting appropriate laws to reduce this phenomenon and identifying elderly beggars who have turned to this activity out of necessity are among the steps that can help improve the situation for this

group. Furthermore, there will be a need for special services such as social security, geriatric medicine, suitable recreation, appropriate housing, and overall, an elderly-friendly city (24)

**Conclusion**

According to Figure 2, In the theoretical framework, one-way arrows indicate causal influences, while two-way arrows represent reciprocal and nonlinear influences. Dotted arrows signify the context and background in which the research was conducted.

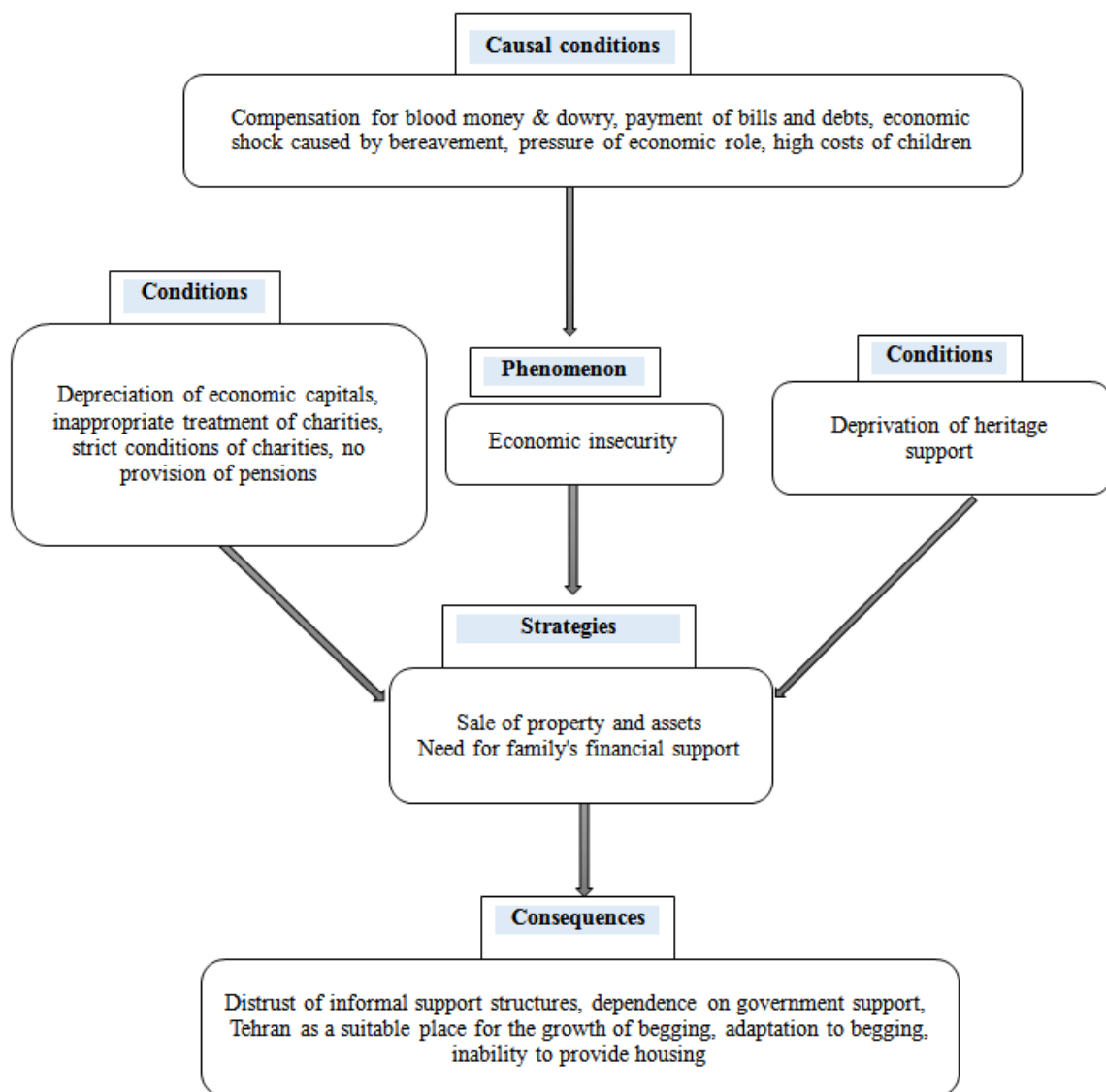


Figure 1 .Paradigmatic model

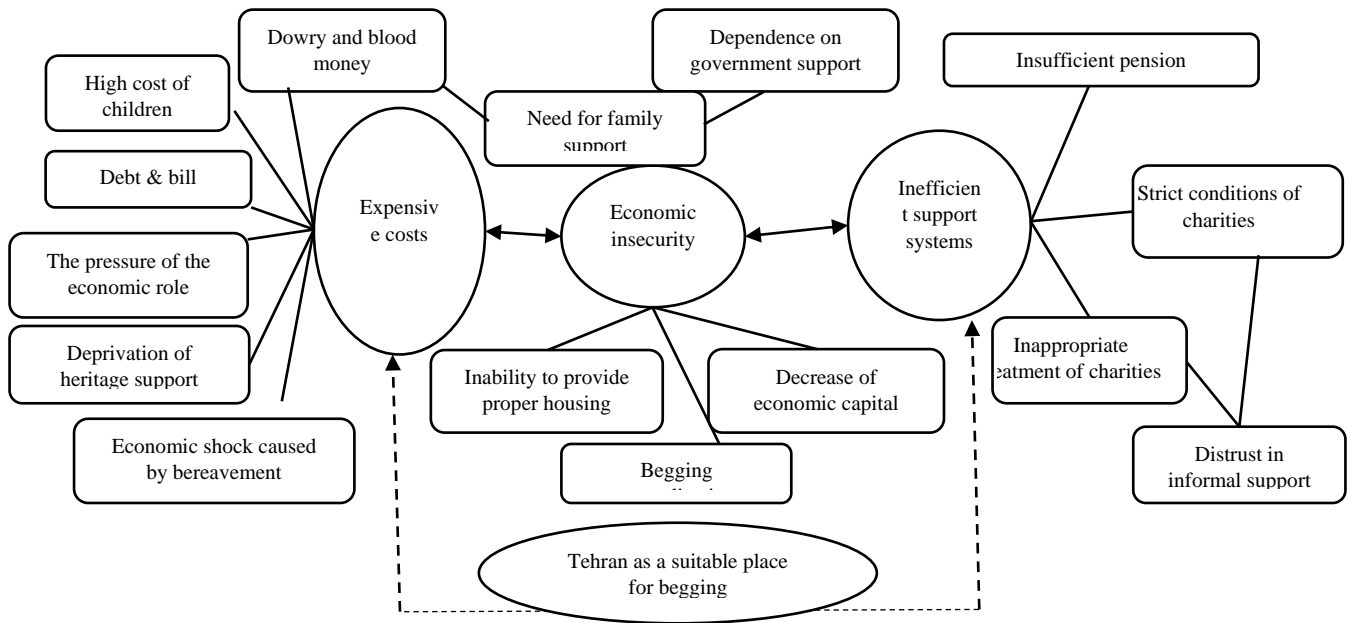


Figure 2. Theoretical research schema

### Theoretical research schema

Experts and policymakers believe that addressing elderly begging in Tehran requires a thorough inspection and a deep understanding of the various dimensions of this phenomenon. Through scientific and specialized investigations, it is necessary to identify who the elderly beggars in Tehran are and understand their living conditions. This will enable the development of appropriate solutions to assist them in subsequent stages. Such an approach can help reduce the prevalence of begging and improve the living conditions of the elderly in society.

One of the primary causes of economic insecurity is the compensation for damages related to blood money and dowry.

This means that the elderly lose a significant portion of their assets, properties, and savings due to payments for blood money and dowry resulting from accidents and lack of insurance. This not only leads to a reduction in their economic capital but also worsens feelings of insecurity and dependence on others. Consequently, the loss of assets has made it challenging for the elderly to repay loans and debts, including rent, leading to severe economic insecurity. This situation is particularly heavy for the elderly who have unemployed children or even those pursuing higher education, as the financial strain becomes overwhelming.

Economic shocks caused by bereavement and the loss of a family breadwinner are also significant factors contributing to the economic insecurity of the elderly. Due to the lack of financial resources and social support, these people become highly vulnerable at the time of financial crises and are often forced to turn to begging. The traumatic experience of losing a

spouse or parents, coupled with the pressure of assuming responsibility for their children, profoundly impacts the economic situation of these elderly individuals. Deprivation of inheritance and lack of access to inherited assets further aggravate the economic insecurity of the elderly. Some of these individuals face issues such as the absence of inheritance or losing it due to mismanagement or fraud, which weakens their economic capital. Finally, economic insecurity among the elderly has led to their dependence on government and charitable support. However, due to the inappropriate treatment and stringent conditions imposed by these institutions, some elderly are unable to access the assistance they need and turn to begging as a source of income. Thus, begging emerges as an adaptive behavior in response to unfavorable economic and social conditions.

In general, the findings of this study indicate that addressing the phenomenon of begging among the elderly requires the design and application of more comprehensive economic and social policies. These policies should include improving support systems, expanding insurance coverage, and providing suitable employment opportunities for the elderly. Otherwise, the cycle of poverty and begging among this vulnerable group will persist, leading to further social and economic consequences for society.

### Study limitations

The results can only be generalized to individuals with similar demographic and clinical characteristics as our study participants.

### Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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### Authors' contributions

All authors have contributed to the design, execution, and writing of all parts of the present research.

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