

Dip in homeless numbers, with fewer sleeping on streets: Study

Nationwide street count finds most of them in city area, and more at temporary shelters

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The number of homeless people in Singapore fell slightly last year, at a time when homelessness was on the rise in many countries amid the Covid-19 pandemic.

But the issue of homelessness also became less visible, as more people who would have slept on the streets went to stay at temporary shelters.

The second nationwide street count of the homeless here found 1,036 people last year – 7 per cent less than the 1,115 people during

the first such count in 2019. That first nationwide street count had been described as a landmark study of an issue that was hidden from public discourse until recent years.

While the overall number had fallen slightly, where the homeless made their bed for the night had also changed. The second street count found that those sleeping on the streets fell by 41 per cent from 1,050 in 2019 to 616 last year, while those staying at a temporary shelter for the homeless shot up from 65 to 420 in the same time period.

Dr Ng Kok Hoe, a senior research fellow at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, led a team of researchers at the school's Social In-

clusion Project to do the street count. They were aided by over 200 volunteers who pounded the streets, including combing 12,000 blocks of flats, late at night between February and April last year to count the number of people sleeping in public spaces.

The 78-page report was released yesterday. The project was not commissioned by the Government and was funded by the Community Foundation of Singapore, said Dr Ng.

He said government agencies and volunteers reached out to those sleeping rough during the circuit breaker in 2020 to refer them to shelters, and many of the homeless, who were also concerned about their health and safety, decided to go to one.

More shelters had also opened in response to the higher demand. These factors led to more staying at shelters and fewer on the streets, said Dr Ng.

In the second street count, the homeless were found sleeping in most parts of Singapore, but more of them were found in larger, older and poorer neighbourhoods.

Some 72 people were found sleeping in the city area, or downtown, which had the largest number of homeless people.

Most of the homeless were elderly men, and the report pointed out that few women slept on the streets due to safety concerns.

The report noted that while the pandemic triggered admission into a shelter, the homeless person's housing was started long before the pandemic struck.

Highly subsidised public rental housing will always be the last safety net for the most vulnerable, said Dr Ng.

But he singled out the design of the Joint Singles Scheme, which is under the public rental housing scheme, as a "significant contrib-

uting factor to homelessness".

This is because two singles, who are often strangers, share a tiny Housing Board rental flat which usually has no bedrooms, and the lack of privacy or personal space may lead to conflict, some would rather sleep on the streets instead, he said.

HDB and the Ministry of National Development (MND) recognise the challenges some have applying for or sharing a rental flat, and they have been reviewing and adjusting the Joint Singles Scheme in recent years, the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) said in a statement in response to the street count.

For example, last December, HDB and MND started a pilot scheme where social service agencies match tenants with similar preferences and habits for flat-sharing.

Under this pilot, singles can also apply for a public rental flat by themselves, without having to first find a flatmate. Flats under this pi-

lot come with partitions installed. HDB and MND are assessing the effectiveness of this pilot project to see whether to scale it up over time, the statement said.

MSF said there has been a steady and collective progress in whole-of-society efforts to reach out to and support rough sleepers, to help them off the streets and into shelters.

It cited the 57-member Partners Engaging and Empowering Rough Sleepers (Peers) Network, which comprises government agencies, religious groups and charities.

The network's partners have set up Safe Sound Sleeping Places. There are now about 20 such places, which shelter about 100 homeless individuals.

There are also currently six transitional shelters serving families and about 270 individuals. Since April this year, MSF has been working with partners from the Peers Network and academic advisers to plan regular street counts. The first such coordinated street count will take place by the end of the year.

MSF said: "The street count will help us collectively better understand the scale and geographical spread of rough sleeping in Singapore, and render coordinated support to rough sleepers in need."

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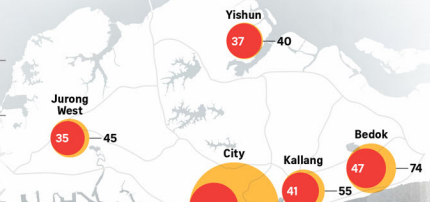
Homeless in Singapore

Although homeless rates fell from 2019 to 2021, two new groups of homeless people emerged during the Covid-19 pandemic. One comprises people who were not homeless before, but lost their homes during the pandemic. The other is made up of Singaporeans living in Malaysia or Indonesia who travelled here for work and were displaced by border closures.



Top 5 districts with the most homeless people

City	Percentage of the homeless	
	2019 (Total: 1,050)	2021 (Total: 616)
Bedok	23%	12%
Kallang	7%	8%
Yishun	5%	7%
Jurong West	4%	6%
Jurong West	4%	6%



Top 3 places most homeless people were found

	2019	2021
Void decks	32%	35%
Commercial buildings	29%	12%
Pavilions, playgrounds	10%	14%



Homeless during the pandemic

	Long-term homeless (those who were homeless before the pandemic)	Newly homeless (those who had not slept rough before the pandemic)	Transnational homeless (Singaporeans who live in Indonesia and Malaysia but travel to Singapore for work)
Sex	• More men than women	• Mix of men and women	• Almost all men
Age	• From 30s to 70s	• From 30s to 70s	• Mostly in their 50s
Family relationships	• Almost all divorced, separated or never married • Having past conflict and estrangement, with many having lost contact with their family	• Almost all divorced, separated or never married • Family relationships distant and strained, but connection remains	• Long-term drift and overseas travel • Some had a spouse and young children in their adoptive countries whom they are still connected to
Work and finances	• Low-wage and insecure jobs • Extreme poverty	• Low-wage and insecure jobs, with a few having had better paying jobs in the past • Difficulty meeting basic needs	• Regular border crossings for low-wage and insecure jobs in Singapore • A few did informal work outside Singapore • Low income
Housing histories	• Lost matrimonial home or never purchased housing • Encountered barriers in public rental system • Episodes of low-cost market rentals	• Lost matrimonial home or never purchased housing • Moved frequently between public housing • In low-cost market rental units	• Lived in Malaysia or Indonesia • Encountered difficulties obtaining public housing in Singapore for non-citizen family members
Rough sleeping	• From a few months to many years	• No more than a few days when displaced during the pandemic	• A mix of experiences, from rough sleeping to staying in homeless shelters
How they entered a shelter*	• Found by volunteers or field workers while rough sleeping during pandemic • Some self-referrals	• Self-referrals when pandemic disrupted housing arrangements	• Most were stopped at immigration checkpoints and directed to a shelter after border closures**

NOTES:
*Homelessness counts usually include both rough sleepers (primary homelessness) and those in homeless shelters (secondary homelessness).
**Those entering Singapore from Malaysia just before the borders were closed were identified as having no housing and referred for assistance so they could comply with Covid-19 rules on staying indoors.

Source: LEE KUAN YEW SCHOOL OF PUBLIC POLICY
ST PHOTOS: WANG HUI FEN
TEXT: SHERMAINE ANG
STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

New groups include those hit by job loss, border closure during pandemic

Two new groups of homeless people emerged during the Covid-19 pandemic, a study on the state of homelessness in Singapore has found.

Among those in the first group were those who never slept on the streets before the pandemic, but lost their jobs when Covid-19 struck and could not pay rent for a room on the open market.

Others in this group included those whose friends or relatives gave them shelter but who had to leave due to reasons such as fear that the homeless person's stay

would contravene the ban on social visits during the circuit breaker period.

This group comprised men and women aged in the 30s to 70s.

The second group was made up of mostly middle-aged Singaporean men who commuted from Malaysia or Indonesia as they lived there with their wives from those countries.

When the borders closed and a host of travel restrictions were imposed, they could not travel back to Johor Bahru or Batam, and had to sleep on the streets here.

The study by a research team led

by senior research fellow Ng Kok Hoe of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy conducted the second nationwide street count of the homeless here for the school's Social Inclusion Project. The study, which he said was the first of its kind here, also involved in-depth interviews with 51 homeless individuals staying at a temporary shelter.

There was a third group comprising those who had been homeless before the pandemic. They had been on the streets for as long as 25 years, and comprised more men than

women, with ages which ranged from the 30s to the 70s.

The report said of this group, whose members lived in "extreme poverty": "Participants (those interviewed) described being hungry and having to find protection from the rain and the cold."

"There were accounts of skipping meals for several days at a time, depending on generous passers-by to provide food, getting free meals from temples and mosques, and eating leftovers."

The three groups shared factors that contributed to their home-

ness, the report said.

Many worked in low-wage jobs, earning about \$1,000 a month. For some, their poor physical or mental health prevented them from being employed or working regularly.

Family conflict and estranged ties were another common problem, with some who sold their flats after their divorce having no family to turn to for refuge. For example, a 54-year-old woman who was separated from her husband was chased out of her room by her landlord. She was quoted in the report as saying: "I went back to talk to

my daughter about letting me stay till the pandemic is over. She told me to go kill myself!"

Many of those interviewed said they were indifferent to catching the coronavirus, given that even their basic needs were not met. Mr Abraham Yes, co-founder of the Homeless Hearts of Singapore, a charity that helps the homeless, said there are many families now at risk of becoming homeless, given the steadily rising rent in the open market and financial challenges they face.

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