

Study calls for earlier intervention, redesigned shelters to tackle long-term homelessness

Social science researchers here have called for a greater focus by policymakers on upstream prevention of homelessness, noting that Singapore has, for the most part, focused its resources on those who are already sleeping rough.

A landmark three-year study by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) has found that long-term homelessness in the city-state is linked to multiple stressors accumulated across life stages, which supports the case for identifying and supporting those in unstable home situations before they transition to sleeping in public spaces, said researchers.

Long-term homelessness refers to those who sleep in public spaces or stay in transitional shelters for more than a year.

The study, which was commissioned in 2021 by the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) and published on Jan 9, 2026, also found that individuals who received help from shelters tended to fare better than those who slept rough – on average, they

were homeless for one-quarter the time, and were twice as likely to transition to long-term housing.

The study involved 50 participants, including individuals and families, across three phases from August 2021 to May 2024. There were nine dropouts by its conclusion.

IPS researchers used a qualitative approach to gain a more in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences, though the small sample size meant the data may not be representative of the wider homeless population in Singapore.

The researchers found that homelessness was rarely the result of a single action or event – all participants experienced multiple stressors, with half of them having five or more such stressors. These include low education, physical and mental health conditions, self or spousal incarceration, failed marriage and unemployment.

Respondents who were separated, divorced, or widowed were more likely to be associated with more stressors than married peo-

ple and singles. Single-parent families were also the most likely to report a high number of stressors.

The study noted that while most participants first experienced homelessness in adulthood, their experience tended to be an accumulation of childhood vulnerabilities, such as growing up in a low-income household and the lack of parental supervision.

Participants were also grouped under two types of homelessness – those who rough sleep; and those who were living in shelters, welfare homes, or informal accommodation such as backpacker hostels and family members' homes.

Among the first group, the median duration of homelessness was 16 years, with most having slept rough for more than a decade. In contrast, those in the second group were homeless for a median duration of 3½ years.

Researchers said social work intervention was a key factor that helped participants exit homelessness. This included support from professionals in linking them up

WHOLE-OF-SOCIETY EFFORT

While policies are in place, tackling homelessness requires the efforts of government, community groups and society as a whole.



DR HARRY TAN, principal investigator for the IPS study on homelessness in Singapore.

with shelter support, or assisting them with housing applications.

"Shelters were a source of physical security and functioned as a transitional space towards long-term housing plans," said the study. "Individuals perceived that shelter provided them with physical security and convenience."

Even so, those with shelter support expressed challenges such as

privacy loss, conflicts with fellow shelter users over living habits, and safety concerns.

Given the positive effect that shelters have on helping individuals access stable long-term housing, researchers recommended that shelter designs be reviewed, such as to adopt the Single Room Shared Facilities (SRSF) model that the Housing Board piloted for rental flats in 2023.

This model, where tenants have their own room but share common facilities such as kitchens and toilets, could be effective in enhancing the shelter experience, they said.

The researchers said it might also be worthwhile to explore the potential of SRSF rental flats as the default housing arrangement for people who are homeless, while existing shelters could serve as specialised interim accommodation for those with more complex issues, such as recurring substance addiction or mental health conditions.

They also recommended increasing the staff headcount at shelters, and adding trained mental health professionals so that shelter users can receive more holistic support.

More broadly, the researchers proposed more early risk assessment and intervention to reach at-

risk groups before they become homeless.

They suggested adapting tools that have worked overseas. These include a student survey pioneered in Geelong, an Australian city, found to have been effective in detecting youth at risk of homelessness, and an assessment tool used in Calgary, Canada, to flag homelessness risks across its population.

The study noted that unlike Western countries, Singapore already has a viable universal homelessness prevention strategy due to its well-established public housing policy. "In the other domains, our view is that upstream prevention has been subject to insufficient research and policy focus, with the bulk of resources concentrated on emergency and repeat prevention," it said.

Dr Harry Tan, who was principal investigator for the study, said long-term homelessness is a key challenge for governments, researchers and outreach volunteers in Singapore, and issues are often complex and unfold across different stages of life.

"While policies are in place, tackling homelessness requires the efforts of government, community groups and society as a whole," he said.

Syarafana Shafeeq