



HOMELESS IN
SINGAPORE:

RESULTS FROM A
NATIONWIDE
STREET COUNT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

CONTEXT

Homelessness exists in Singapore. But despite growing policy and public attention in recent years, the size of the homeless population in Singapore is not known. This is the first study to determine the scale of homelessness in Singapore through a nationwide street count.

Homelessness is commonly defined as living in inadequate housing situations. Adequacy has three dimensions: security in terms of tenure, exclusive occupation, and affordability; physical adequacy in terms of amenities, hygiene, safety, and sufficient space; and social adequacy in terms of privacy, control of the use of space, and conduciveness for social relationships. Homelessness affects physical and mental health, reduces economic opportunities, disrupts social relationships, and weakens one's sense of identity and dignity.

There are different forms of homelessness. In primary or street homelessness, people do not have accommodation and sleep in public spaces not intended for human habitation. Secondary homelessness refers to living in temporary accommodation such as shelters and hostels, or moving frequently because permanent housing is not available. In tertiary homelessness, people live in inadequate accommodation such as overcrowded housing, or may imminently lose their housing due to eviction, violence, or lack of social support.

Empirical research recognises three main explanations for homelessness: economic structural conditions such as poverty and unemployment; systemic barriers such as inadequate housing, shelters, and other services for people who need support; and individual circumstances such as traumatic life events, physical and mental health issues, addictions, loss of family relationships, and family violence.

METHOD

Knowing the number of homeless people and where they may be found allows services to be designed and organised in a systematic way. It also sheds light on the depth of housing insecurity and extent of social exclusion in society. In places like the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, counts of homeless populations are done by local authorities as part of regular policy activity.

The choice of method for this study was informed by practical considerations and current knowledge gaps. The study focuses on street homelessness on which information is most lacking. A previous street count in 2017 already produced some data on street homelessness in known locations. It was therefore decided that a nationwide street count would be done this time using two count strategies:

- A **cumulative count** took place nationwide over several months, covering all possible sites where homeless people might reside and relying on observation only. It produced data on the distribution of homelessness down to individual zones of around 50 residential blocks or which took two hours to cover on foot. This provided a baseline to inform zone selection for the second count strategy. While geographically comprehensive, this count cannot rule out duplication due to individuals moving across zones during the count period.
- A **single night count** involved deploying all the fieldworkers at the same time to conduct observation as well as interviews. Due to the demands on fieldwork resources, this could only be done in selected zones. Zone selection prioritised higher-count areas based on data from the cumulative count.

The two counts included anyone who was asleep or going to sleep in public spaces, following established definitions of rough sleeping. To help the fieldworkers judge if someone was about to sleep, they were given instructions to only count persons who had some form of bedding, had a lot of belongings, or were lying down.

This study relied on volunteers to conduct the fieldwork due to the scale of the project. In total, 480 volunteers including representatives from more than 20 NGOs and many individual members of public took part as fieldworkers in the two counts. All fieldworkers had to attend training prior to participating in the counts.

The map of Singapore was divided into 298 zones grouped into 25 districts. Most of the zones were in public housing estates, where each zone covered about 50 blocks of flats. These zones also included public facilities and commercial spaces. In the city and other non-residential areas, zones were demarcated so that each zone would take around two hours to cover on foot.

The cumulative count took place over three months in 2019. Each volunteer was assigned two zones and could conduct the count on any day of the week as long as they did not start earlier than 11.30pm. During analysis, every entry was checked by the research team and those that did not meet the criteria of persons already asleep or going to sleep were removed. The single night count took place in July 2019 and collected both observational and interview data. For persons who were awake and looked like they were going to sleep in a public place, the fieldworkers would invite them to take part in an interview.

FINDINGS

The two counts found that there were **between 921 and 1,050 street homeless people** in Singapore. The upper limit of this range comes from the 1,050 observations in the cumulative count, while the lower limit is based on the single night count which recorded 921 unique individuals. The actual size of the homeless population on the streets is likely to lie within this range.

The main findings from the cumulative count are:

- Homelessness occurred in most parts of Singapore, with significant variation in numbers across districts.
- A large majority of the observations were of homeless men.
- There were more homeless people in larger and older housing estates, and estates with more rental flats.

The single night count covered almost all the zones where observations were recorded in the cumulative count. It found that:

- Homelessness was again found in most parts of Singapore, with significant variation across districts.
- Most of the homeless people were older Chinese men.
- The most common locations were public housing void decks and commercial buildings.
- Homeless persons' appearance, possessions, and environment do not fit simple stereotypes.

Almost half of the homeless persons who were awake took part in an interview. Among these 88 interviewees:

- Most were Singapore citizens; single, separated, divorced or widowed; and had low education.
- Economic, family, housing-related, and health problems were reported as the main reasons for homelessness.
- Homelessness posed hardships and was often chronic, lasting 6 years or more for 1 in 3 persons.
- Irregular work and low pay were common.
- Poor health and nutrition were prevalent; 1 in 4 interviewees had eaten just one meal that day or none at all.
- Homeless persons may maintain some connections to their communities and social networks despite housing dislocation.
- Help-seeking and encounters with law enforcement agencies were frequent.

The geographical distribution of homelessness in the cumulative count and single night count are tightly correlated, suggesting that patterns of homelessness may remain stable over several months and that the count method was fairly consistent.

CONCLUSION

Street counts like this should be conducted every few years to provide timely guidance for policy and service planning. Future research can extend into areas beyond the scope of this study, such as the sheltered homeless population and people living in inadequate housing; spatial changes in homelessness over time; and the impact of demographic changes, economic conditions, housing policies, and service capacities on homelessness.

This study demonstrates a feasible process to develop and implement a national street count where existing information and local research offer limited guidance. The count procedure was also robust when applied to dense high-rise public housing estates as well as other public and commercial spaces. The study can provide a point of reference for other jurisdictions which would like to introduce their first street count, particularly urban centres.

Given the concealed nature of homelessness, there is scope to expand outreach services to connect homeless people to housing support. The design and funding of shelter services must be commensurate with the long-term nature of homelessness and the complexity of its underlying causes. Overnight shelters with a low entry bar and immediate availability may provide an important lifeline and an opportunity to regain stability.

Housing barriers can contribute to and prevent exit from homelessness. For the Housing and Development Board's public rental housing scheme, improvements can be made to the eligibility criteria and space provisions. The joint tenancy requirement deprives residents of basic privacy, creates conflict among co-tenants, and should be removed.

The Destitute Persons Act seems out of step with homeless people's needs in contemporary Singapore. Although it targets a minority of the homeless population, the possibility of involuntary admission casts a shadow even on homeless people who cannot be considered destitute and can prevent people from getting the help they need.

Low wages and insecure work remain key contributing factors to the inability to access stable housing. Work and wage interventions must be part of any comprehensive response to homelessness. At the same time, homelessness illustrates the consequences when work does not bring about economic security, especially among older workers. It makes a strong case for the role of public provision to ensure income security in old age.

This study provides an example of collaboration between researchers, voluntary groups, social work agencies, and members of public. Collaboration can promote community ownership of this complex social challenge and encourage people to find out more about homelessness, contribute what they can, speak up about their concerns, and participate in policymaking. It will help to challenge stereotypes about homeless people and create a safer environment for them. Achieving housing security for this vulnerable population will require such ownership, alongside improvements to economic conditions, policies, and services.

INTRODUCTION

Homelessness is a severe form of housing insecurity that affects physical and mental health, reduces economic opportunities, disrupts social relationships, and weakens one's sense of identity and dignity (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012; Oppenheimer et al., 2016; Sylvestre et al., 2018; Tan, 2018). It is bound up with multiple forms of social exclusion as both cause and effect. Internationally, research on homelessness has been extensive. Among the various approaches to studying homelessness, street counts to enumerate the homeless population have gained prominence as a tool to measure the scale of homelessness, guide policy development, and monitor service outcomes (Busch-Geertsema, Culhane, & Fitzpatrick, 2015). Such counts are undertaken regularly in places like the United States (USA), Canada, and the United Kingdom (UK). There have also been recent counts in Hong Kong and Taiwan.

Homelessness exists in Singapore.

This is the first study to determine the scale of homelessness in Singapore through a nationwide street count. Despite growing policy and public attention in recent years, the size of the homeless population in Singapore is not known. By measuring homelessness in a rigorous and transparent way, this study helps to develop local understanding of this complex issue and provide a baseline for further research. Its collaborative approach has brought together researchers, outreach groups, social service organisations and public volunteers, and offers a model of public engagement and community ownership to address social issues that require systemic and policy intervention. In the following sections, this report will set out the context for homelessness research in Singapore, explain the study method, and present the findings. The conclusion will take stock of what this study found and offer recommendations.

CONTEXT

WHAT IS HOMELESSNESS?

Homelessness is commonly defined as living in inadequate housing situations. To identify inadequate housing requires a clear understanding of what “home” and adequate housing mean, and the minimum housing standards in a particular society. In general, adequacy has three dimensions: security in terms of tenure, exclusive occupation, and affordability; physical adequacy in terms of amenities, hygiene, safety, and sufficient space; and social adequacy in terms of privacy, control of the use of space, and conduciveness for social relationships (Busch-Geertsema, Culhane, & Fitzpatrick, 2015). Similarly, UN-Habitat (2009) defines adequate housing as a source of security, peace, and dignity.

Homelessness takes many forms (Busch-Geertsema, Culhane, & Fitzpatrick, 2015; Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, n.d.). The most obvious is primary or absolute homelessness, also described as street homelessness or being “roofless”. This is when people do not have accommodation and sleep in public spaces not intended for human habitation. Then there is secondary homelessness, also known as being “houseless”. This category covers people in temporary, crisis or transitional accommodation – such as overnight shelters, emergency shelters, and short-stay hostels – or who move frequently because they lack permanent housing. The third is relative or tertiary homelessness, which refers to people at risk of homelessness, or living in inadequate or insecure accommodation. They tend to be the most hidden and may be living in longer-term shelters, in substandard or overcrowded conditions, under threat of eviction, or temporarily with family and friends. Or they may imminently lose their housing as they are experiencing family violence, unable to afford their current housing, or struggling with independent living due to health problems or lack of social support.

The way homelessness is defined in a society has many implications. In public policy, definitions are acts of problem identification. They determine what issues deserve attention, attribute cause and responsibility, and delimit the range of possible solutions. Narrower notions focused on primary homelessness may be adopted when the policy priority is to tackle the most urgent forms of homelessness through remedial services, or when there is concern about policy resources and political pressure if the scope of definition is enlarged (Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, n.d.). On the other hand, broader definitions

that take into account the risk of homelessness may reflect a more preventive approach and deeper concerns about social exclusion.

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ACCESS AND CHOICE

Central to the concept of homelessness is the lack of access to better housing options than the current situation. This is sometimes taken to mean that people who have legal occupancy rights to a residential property cannot be considered homeless even if they are sleeping in public spaces. However, legal rights are only one dimension of housing access. There may also be social and practical barriers, such as when a breakdown of relationships leads to a person leaving the family home, or when someone has a registered address but has to sleep in a public location in order to access employment and services due to a lack of transport options.

Related to this is the suggestion that some homeless people do not lack access to adequate housing but reject it as a personal or lifestyle choice because they prefer the freedom of living on the streets, over a lifetime of wage labour to pay for stable, permanent housing (Parsell & Parsell, 2012). This perspective has been criticised as a romanticisation of the experiences of homelessness. Researchers have argued that “we are yet to see any empirical or theoretical work that demonstrates the pleasurable or beneficial dimensions of homelessness” (Parsell & Parsell, 2012, p. 423). In a study of homelessness in Singapore, Tan (2018) similarly noted that “the stories of how older people suffered when they slept rough demonstrated that homelessness was not a lifestyle choice for them” (p. 136).

The term choice may be used in a different sense to depict homelessness as a consequence of poor choices or decisions in the past. This view often joins up with critiques that the welfare state encourages reliance on public resources, and tends to be favoured in neoliberal regimes and by conservative governments (Parsell & Parsell, 2012). It locates responsibility for homelessness with the individual, draws from a discourse of pathology and deviance, and sets the ground for policy responses that emphasise public order and rehabilitation.

In contrast to the narrative of choice, empirical research on homelessness recognises three main explanations: economic structural conditions such as poverty and unemployment; systemic barriers such as inadequate housing, shelters, and other services for people who need support; and individual circumstances such as traumatic life events, physical and mental health issues, addictions, loss of family relationships, and family violence (Bramley & Fitzpatrick, 2018). Homelessness may further be understood as pathways where these factors interact and unfold, leading eventually to a decision to live on the streets (Fitzpatrick, Bramley, & Johnsen, 2013; Piat et al., 2015; Tan, 2018). For instance, people with mental health issues may become homeless when hit by personal financial crises, and after they reject shelter stays due to concerns about safety. Such decisions rarely reflect free choice from among meaningful and adequate options (Allison, 2007; Ketchell, 2018).

Such decisions rarely reflect free choice from among meaningful and adequate options.

HOMELESSNESS IN SINGAPORE

There is no official definition of homelessness in Singapore. Instead the legislation most closely related to homelessness, the Destitute Persons Act, defines a “destitute person” as:

- (a) any person found begging in a public place in such a way as to cause or be likely to cause annoyance to persons frequenting the place or otherwise to create a nuisance; or
- (b) any idle person found in a public place, whether or not he is begging, who has no visible means of subsistence or place of residence or is unable to give a satisfactory account of himself.

There is no systematic and regular measurement of homelessness in Singapore, so the basic question of how many homeless people there are has never been answered. However, official statements about service provision and usage provide some indication:

- The Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) intervened with an average of **300 homeless “cases” per year** between 2005 and 2015 (Hansard, 24 March 2016), and an average of **385 “cases” per year** between 2015 and 2017 (Hansard, 14 January 2019).

- In 2018, there were three **transitional shelters** for people who are ineligible for Housing and Development Board (HDB) housing and have no means of accommodation, with capacity for **156 families and 60 individuals** (Hansard, 8 January 2018).
- Under the Destitute Persons Act, people may be admitted to **welfare homes**. At the end of 2017, there were about **1,800 “destitute persons”** in these facilities (Wong, 2018).
- **Crisis shelters** provide temporary accommodation for women and children who experience family violence or cannot find accommodation. During 2016-2018, four crisis shelters served about **190 cases** in total each year (Hansard, 8 May 2019).

The formal policy position towards homelessness is that “sleeping in the rough puts [people’s] welfare, health and safety at risk, and also impacts the immediate neighbourhood” (Hansard, 7 March 2018). The stated response is a mix of immediate, temporary housing options, addressing “underlying issues” through employment assistance and relationship counselling, arranging access to social and healthcare services, and working on long-term, stable housing options, with emphasis on restoring family ties and returning homeless persons to their families (Hansard, 24 March 2016).

METHOD

Homelessness in Singapore is under-researched. In recent years, there have only been two published academic studies. Tan and Forbes-Mewett's (2017) ethnographic research investigated the experiences of older homeless people, their pathways into and out of homelessness, and the portrayal of homelessness in public discourse. A narrower study by Teo and Chiu (2016) examined the stresses and coping responses in a temporary housing programme. Of the many questions that may yet be asked, the scale and geographical distribution of homelessness are among the most pressing and essential. Knowing the number of homeless people and where they may be found allows services to be designed and organised in a systematic way. It also sheds light on the depth of housing insecurity and extent of social exclusion in society.

Of the many questions that may yet be asked, the scale and geographical distribution of homelessness are among the most pressing and essential.

STREET COUNTS

Counts of homeless populations are conducted in many places, usually by local authorities as part of regular policy activity. In the USA, Canada, and the UK, such counts provide an empirical basis for understanding, monitoring, and responding to homelessness. In this region, recent counts have also been conducted by researchers in Hong Kong and Taiwan (Au Liu & Ching, 2014; Cheng & Yang, 2010). Depending on the adopted definition of homelessness, a count may be concerned only with unsheltered, street homeless people (primary homelessness), or it may include the sheltered homeless population living in accommodation services (secondary homelessness).

In 2017 a street count of homelessness was conducted in Singapore for the first time (Kok, 2017). It found 180 people sleeping in public spaces and produced important findings about the profile of homeless people. Most of them were older men. Those who spoke to the fieldworkers were mostly in work, but had low education and held low-paying jobs. The majority were single, divorced or widowed, and had been homeless for more than a year. Although the study covered fewer than 30 sites, it also served as a pilot for the present nationwide study.

There are several methods for conducting counts (Busch-Geertsema, Culhane, & Fitzpatrick, 2015). A basic distinction exists between cumulative counts that take place over a period of time and point-in-time counts which happen on a single night. Cumulative counts may be the most practical way of covering a large geographical area like an entire state or country. But if the different zones are tightly clustered, it is possible that homeless people may move across zonal boundaries during the count period and be counted more than once. These duplicates will inflate the total figure.

Single night counts produce more accurate snapshots of the total number of unique homeless individuals, but require the deployment of a large number of fieldworkers at the same time. For this reason, some counts are limited to certainty sites or known locations where homeless people are known to reside. Doing this saves resources but depends on reliable information about certainty sites and does not produce jurisdiction-wide estimates. The street count in 2017 was based on this approach.

Jurisdiction-wide estimates may be derived using stratified geographical sampling. Geographical units are first categorised based on their probability of having homeless persons. Counts are then conducted in a small sample of low-probability sites and a large sample of high-probability sites, and the results are extrapolated to produce statistical estimates of the total number of homeless people. Again, this strategy is only possible if high-quality information about the geographical distribution of homelessness is already available.

A more advanced statistical approach is the count/recount method adapted from capture/recapture techniques in ecological surveys. Focusing on high-probability sites, information that identifies individual homeless persons is collected in the first count. A second count is then conducted and log-linear models are used to derive estimates based on the number of repeated persons. This approach requires resources for multiple counts and information about high-probability sites.

As an alternative to street-based methods, homelessness counts may focus on services. In service user surveys, a tally is first taken of the total number of people using all non-accommodation homelessness services on a chosen day. Next, a sample of service users are asked to complete a survey asking whether they were unsheltered the previous night. The results may then be extrapolated to derive the size of the unsheltered population.

The precision of these estimates depends on the availability of comprehensive homelessness services with wide coverage and high rates of access by homeless people.

Homelessness service providers may also be asked to produce intelligence-led estimates if they have accurate information about homeless individuals in their service areas, based on either self-report or street contact. The information may be obtained from registries of homeless people encountered by street outreach services if such databases already exist.

STUDY DESIGN

The choice of method for this study was informed by practical considerations as well as current knowledge gaps. While administrative data on the sheltered homeless population in Singapore were available, information on primary homelessness was lacking. The focus of the study was therefore fixed on primary or street homelessness. The absence of a comprehensive national network of homelessness services that can provide reliable data ruled out service user surveys and intelligence-led estimates. The 2017 street count already produced some data on street homelessness in certainty sites. It was therefore decided that a nationwide street count would be conducted this time by covering as many locations as possible and, if necessary, to derive an estimate of the total population by applying stratified geographical sampling. Information generated from this study about high-probability sites would also allow count/recount studies in future.

Operationally, two count strategies were implemented:

- The first was a **cumulative count** that took place nationwide over several months, covering all possible sites where homeless people might reside and relying on observation only. It produced data on the distribution of homelessness down to individual zones of around 50 residential blocks or which took two hours to cover on foot. This provided a baseline to inform zone selection for the second count strategy. While geographically comprehensive, this count cannot rule out duplication due to individuals moving across zones during the count period.
- The second was a **single night count** which involved deploying all the fieldworkers at the same time to conduct observation as well as interviews. Due to the demands on fieldwork resources, this could only be done in

selected zones. Zone selection prioritised higher-count areas based on data from the cumulative count. If necessary, extrapolation could have been done to produce a national estimate by combining data from the two counts.

Since the two counts were concerned with street homelessness, they included anyone who was asleep or going to sleep in public spaces. This is similar to the definition of rough sleepers in the UK as “people sleeping, about to bed down (sitting on/in or standing next to their bedding) or actually bedded down in the open air (such as on the streets, in tents, doorways, parks, bus shelters or encampments); or people in buildings or other places not designed for habitation (such as stairwells, barns, sheds, car parks, cars, derelict boats, stations, or ‘bashes’)” (Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, 2018, p. 10). It is also in line with the understanding of homelessness in Singapore outlined by the Minister for Social and Family Development in a recent interview: “sleeping in the void deck, sleeping at the staircase landing of a commercial building, that’s homeless...If you’ve got a home but you cannot go home for whatever reason, you’re homeless” (Tan S., 2019).

Since the two counts were concerned with street homelessness, they included anyone who was asleep or going to sleep in public spaces.

To help the fieldworkers judge if someone was “bedding down” or about to sleep, they were given instructions to only count persons meeting at least one of these criteria:

- Had some form of bedding (e.g. cardboard, floor covering, loose furniture – not street furniture, pillow/blanket, enclosure/screen, inside vehicle)
- Had a lot of belongings (e.g. a large bag, several bags, many plastic bags, full trolley)
- Were lying down

FIELDWORKER RECRUITMENT AND TRAINING

This study relied on volunteers to conduct the fieldwork due to the scale of the project. Bringing in partner organisations and public volunteers was also a way to promote community ownership and public awareness of the issue. Volunteers were recruited through an electronic flyer initially circulated via

social media and email to NGOs, youth volunteer networks, and tertiary institutes. Two experienced homelessness outreach groups became important partners in the study: Catholic Welfare Services and Homeless Hearts of Singapore. MSF helped to issue a call for social workers in community-based Family Service Centres to volunteer. In total, 480 volunteers including representatives from more than 20 NGOs and many individual members of public took part as fieldworkers in the two counts.

In total, 480 volunteers including representatives from more than 20 NGOs and many individual members of public took part as fieldworkers in the two counts.

All fieldworkers had to attend training prior to participating in the counts. At the training for the cumulative count, the fieldworkers were given printed maps of their assigned zones and instructed as to what sites to cover within the zone. They were also given printed instructions and briefed on when to record observations, what to record, and how to submit the data they collected.

For the single night count, the two-hour training session also covered the administrative arrangements for count night; use of the questionnaire; engagement skills; interview techniques and etiquette; and safety measures. Experienced social workers were enlisted to facilitate a role-play session and give individual feedback to the fieldworkers on interviewing skills. Outreach volunteers from Homeless Hearts of Singapore gave a presentation at each training session on what to expect when engaging homeless persons.

COVERAGE AND ZONING

The researcher and a small team of volunteers visited selected sites at the start of the study to ascertain the appropriate zone size and to field-test the deployment and data return process. The map of Singapore was eventually divided into 298 zones grouped into 25 districts. Most of the zones were in public housing estates, where each zone covered about 50 blocks of flats. Within these estates, the fieldworkers were instructed to check only the ground level (i.e. void decks) and not the upper floors. Besides residential blocks, these zones also included neighbourhood parks and gardens, hawker centres, town centres, neighbourhood shopping centres, community clubs, sports facilities (such as sports halls, stadia, and swimming pools), MRT stations, bus terminals, and places of worship. Volunteers

were asked to physically check all these places unless they were closed or inaccessible.

The map of Singapore was eventually divided into 298 zones grouped into 25 districts.

In the city and other non-residential areas, zones were demarcated so that each zone would take around two hours to cover on foot. Other individual sites were added based on information gathered from the 2017 street count, media reports, social workers, outreach workers, researchers, and other informants.

Private housing estates were not covered. Commercial buildings were generally not covered unless they were in public housing estates (e.g. town centres) or the city area. All off-access areas such as schools and social service premises were not covered. Public parks in remote locations with limited access by public transport were also left out.

The cumulative count covered all 298 zones, with each zone visited by a fieldworker who combed the area on foot. Based on data collected in the cumulative count, 169 zones were selected for the single night count. The process of zone selection is discussed in more detail under the Findings section.

DATA COLLECTION

CUMULATIVE COUNT

The cumulative count took place over three months in 2019. Each volunteer was assigned two zones, usually near to their place of residence, both for convenience and familiarity. They had two weeks to complete the two assigned zones and could conduct the count on any day of the week as long as they did not start earlier than 11.30pm.

Data collection in the cumulative count was based entirely on observation. The fieldworkers were given an Observation Form for recording the locations and times when they sighted homeless persons. They were also asked to write descriptions such as the person's appearance, possessions, physical environment, and what the person was doing at the time. These qualitative data provide texture to the numerical count and were helpful for determining which entries to include in the final tally.

The fieldworkers were asked to make a record of every person who was asleep in a public space, and not to omit anyone on

the basis of assumed nationality or occupation, or notions of what homeless people look like. When recording persons who looked like they were going to sleep, apart from using the criteria mentioned earlier, they were instructed to leave out people who were using public spaces to socialise or work, e.g. friends chatting at a coffee-shop, or security and cleaning staff on night shift. For instances that were not obvious, they were asked to record as much description as possible, including an indication that they were “unsure”.

During analysis, every entry was checked more than once by the research team to see if the person was already asleep, or if they met at least one of the criteria for people going to sleep in a public space. Entries that did not were removed.

SINGLE NIGHT COUNT

The single night count took place in July 2019. The fieldworkers were assigned to teams of at least two persons. Each team covered a single zone and, as far as possible, had social work expertise or outreach experience, language abilities other than English and Mandarin, and a mix of ages. The zone assignment took into consideration where the fieldworkers lived (for ease of returning home after the count) or, for fieldworkers representing community-based NGOs, the locality that they served. In high-count sites, the teams were made up entirely of social workers, to improve the chances of successful engagement for interviews.

The count took place from around 11.30pm to 2.30am. Data were collected in two ways. First, an Observation Form was used to collect information similar to that gathered in the cumulative count, for all persons who were asleep in public spaces or looked like they were going to sleep. Just as in the cumulative count, data checks were done at the analysis stage to remove entries that did not meet the criteria for determining whether someone was likely to be sleeping in a public space.

Next, for persons who were awake and looked like they were going to sleep in a public space, the fieldworkers would approach and invite them to take part in an interview. Participation was voluntary and verbal consent was sought. A screen question at the start made sure that the interview was terminated for people who reported that they were not going to sleep in public.

Upon completing the interview, S\$5 cash was issued as a token of appreciation. The fieldworkers were asked not to wake anyone up for the interview.

For the interview, the fieldworkers used a structured questionnaire with items on demographic profile, history and conditions of rough sleeping, economic situation, health, social support, and contact with public agencies and social services. At the end, the fieldworkers offered the interviewees the option of being contacted by officers from MSF who could connect them to social services. This was entirely voluntary and they were free to decline. The possible outcomes of such contact, including involuntary admission to the welfare homes, were explained to the homeless persons. No names or contact information was collected in the interview except for persons who agreed to be contacted by MSF.

On count night, a count coordination team consisting of researchers and social workers was stationed in the university after all the teams were deployed, to monitor progress, answer queries, and coordinate responses to any emergencies.

Chinese and Malay versions of the questionnaire were available for homeless persons who were willing to be interviewed but could not speak English. In cases where there was no Malay speaker in the fieldwork team, the fieldworkers could call the count coordination team where someone was available to conduct the Malay interview with the homeless person over the phone.

SAFETY AND ETHICS

During training, the fieldworkers were reminded to be discreet and not to make homeless persons feel watched or uncomfortable. For the cumulative count, they were instructed not to approach or interview anyone, since that was beyond the scope of data collection and they would not have been trained in the interview procedure at that point. If not done carefully, such contact might have caused disturbance or alarm among homeless persons.

All fieldworkers were informed that taking photographs of homeless persons was strictly prohibited, and that homeless persons' identities and locations must not be disclosed on social media and other public communication channels. They signed an Undertaking of Confidentiality as a commitment to this understanding.

All fieldworkers were informed that taking photographs of homeless persons was strictly prohibited, and that homeless persons' identities and locations must not be disclosed on social media.

A minimum age of 21 years old was set for the volunteers. All of them had to attend training in order to take part in the study. During training, the fieldworkers were instructed to be mindful of their surroundings at all times and not to enter any area that felt unsafe. For large parks, they were advised to cover only the entrance and visitor service areas which are open and lit.

Although fieldworkers were assigned zones individually for the cumulative count, they could bring a companion along during the exercise, provided they were the ones recording data.

For the single night count, a safety protocol was introduced to help fieldworkers decide how to respond to emergencies, including contacting the count coordination team that was on standby throughout the night. The count coordination team operated three telephone helplines which the fieldworkers could use for questions related to research or safety. In addition, eight experienced social workers among the fieldworkers were appointed as leads for four geographical regions – North, Central, East, and West. They were briefed beforehand on the safety protocol and were available to provide prompt, on-site support to the other fieldwork teams in their regions in case of emergencies.

The study protocol was approved by the National University of Singapore's Institutional Review Board.

FINDINGS

KEY FINDINGS

The two counts found that there were **between 921 and 1,050 street homeless people** in Singapore. The upper limit of this range comes from the 1,050 observations in the cumulative count, a geographically comprehensive count conducted over three months which may contain duplicates. The lower limit is based on the single night count which recorded 921 unique individuals in selected zones only, including some which could not be completed because of the time it took to conduct interviews. The actual size of the homeless population on the streets is likely to lie within this range.

The two counts found that there were between 921 and 1,050 street homeless people in Singapore.

The main findings from the cumulative count are:

- Homelessness occurred in most parts of Singapore, with significant variation in numbers across districts.
- A large majority of the observations were of homeless men.
- There were more homeless people in larger and older housing estates, and estates with more rental flats.

The single night count covered almost all the zones where observations were recorded in the cumulative count. It found that:

- Homelessness was again found in most parts of Singapore, with significant variation across districts.
- Most of the homeless people were older Chinese men.
- The most common locations were HDB void decks and commercial buildings.
- Homeless persons' appearance, possessions, and environment do not fit simple stereotypes.

Almost half of the homeless persons who were awake took part in an interview. Among these 88 interviewees:

- Most were Singapore citizens; single, separated, divorced or widowed; and had low education.
- Economic, family, housing-related, and health problems were reported as the main reasons for homelessness.
- Homelessness posed hardships and was often chronic, lasting 6 years or more for 1 in 3 persons.
- Irregular work and low pay were common.
- Poor health and nutrition were prevalent; 1 in 4 interviewees had eaten just one meal that day or none at all.
- Homeless persons may maintain some connections to their communities and social networks despite housing dislocation.
- Help-seeking and encounters with law enforcement agencies were frequent.

The geographical distribution of homelessness in the cumulative count and single night count are tightly correlated, suggesting that patterns of homelessness may remain stable over several months and that the count method was fairly consistent.

The rest of this section discusses these findings in greater detail.

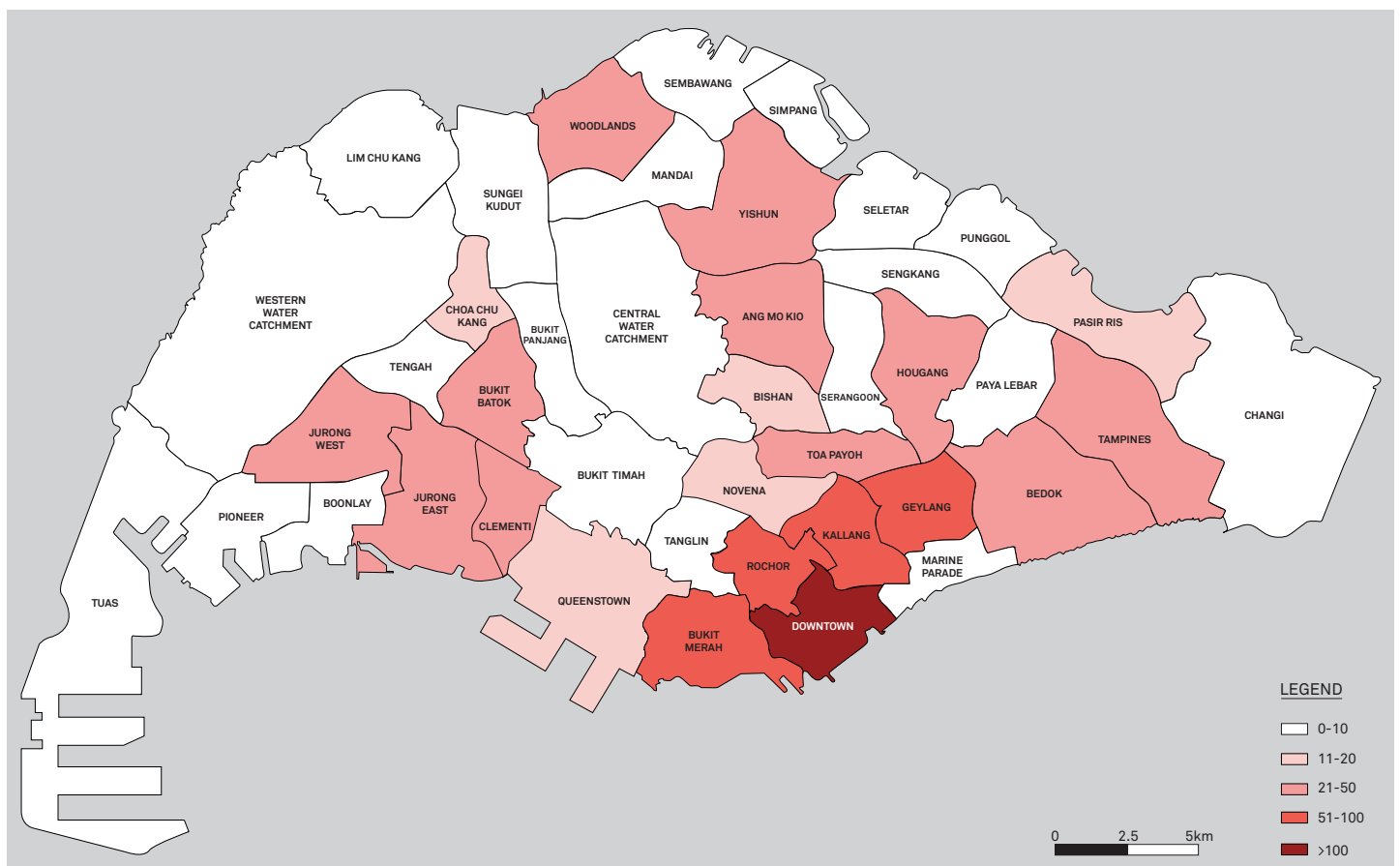
CUMULATIVE COUNT

HOMELESSNESS WAS FOUND IN MOST PARTS OF SINGAPORE IN THE CUMULATIVE COUNT OVER SEVERAL MONTHS, WITH SIGNIFICANT VARIATION IN NUMBERS ACROSS DISTRICTS.

The fieldworkers initially recorded 1,194 observations of people who were either asleep or judged to be going to sleep in public spaces, in 25 districts consisting of 298 zones. During data checks, 144 entries were discounted because they did not meet the criteria set in this study for people going to sleep. This left a final figure of 1,050 observations, consisting of 862 observations of people already asleep in public spaces and 188 observations of people who were going to sleep.

Figure 1 shows the geographical distribution of the observations. The map is largely based on URA Planning Area boundaries. Observations from several outlier high-count sites that may be easily identified have been omitted to ensure confidentiality.

FIGURE 1.
Geographical
distribution of
observations from
cumulative count



At the district level, homelessness was found to be geographically widespread. Observations were reported in all 25 districts (Table 1). However there was significant variation in the numbers, ranging from 2 observations in the Bukit Timah district to 241 in the City district. The average number was 42 observations per district. The highest tallies were reported in the City, Bedok, and Kallang districts, which returned more than 50 observations each. At the other end, fewer than 10 observations were recorded in each of six districts: Queenstown, Punggol, Bukit Panjang, Sembawang, Sengkang, and Bukit Timah.

Homelessness was found to be geographically widespread. Observations were reported in all 25 districts.

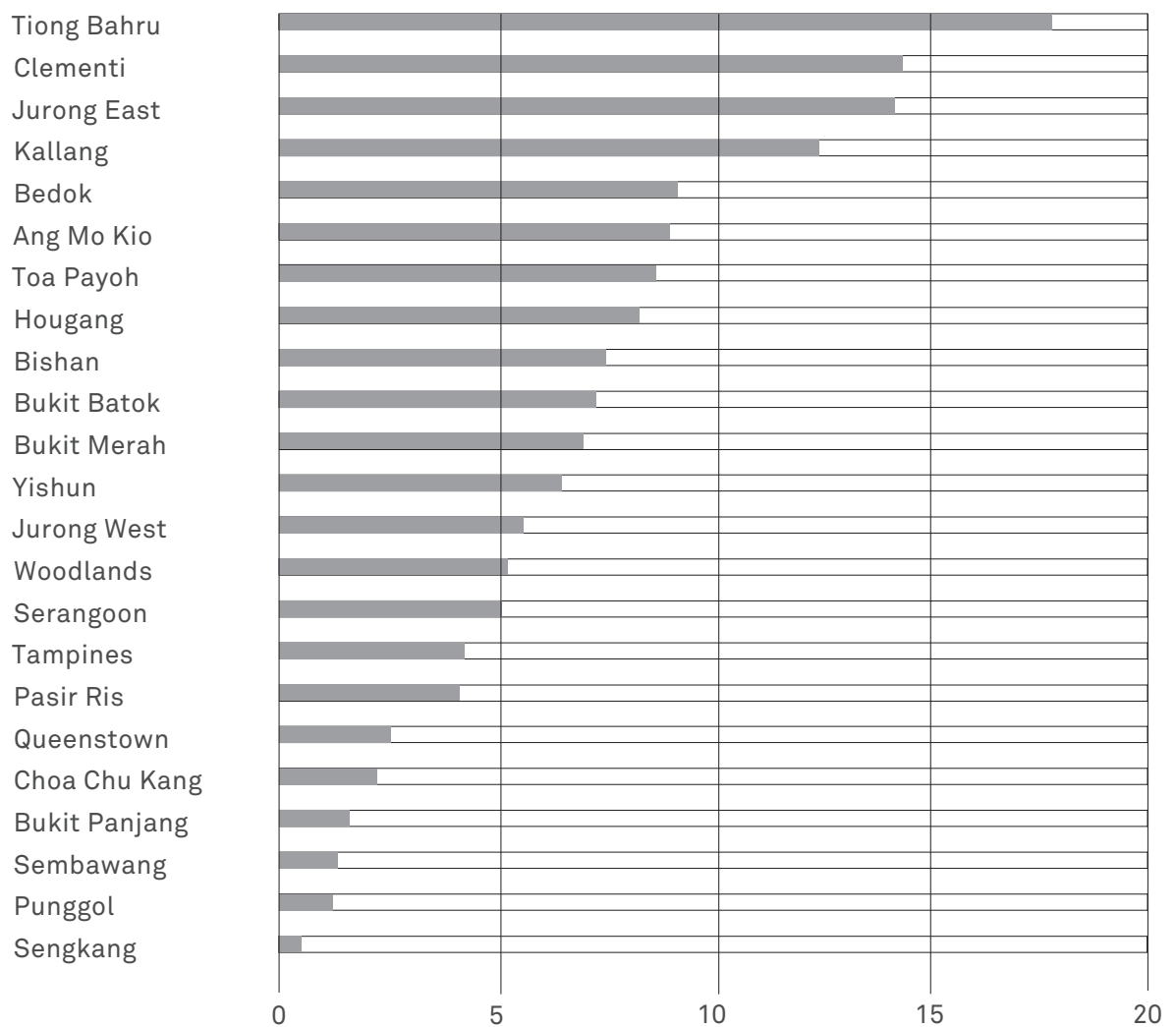
TABLE 1.	DISTRICT	OBSERVATIONS
Number of observations of homeless persons by district in the cumulative count	City	241
	Bedok	74
	Kallang	55
	Tiong Bahru	47
	Ang Mo Kio	46
	Jurong West	45
	Toa Payoh	41
	Yishun	40
	Hougang	39
	Clementi	38
	Woodlands	36
	Tampines	33
	Bukit Batok	30
	Bukit Merah	26
	Jurong East	26
	Serangoon	16
	Bishan	15
	Pasir Ris	13
	Choa Chu Kang	12
	Queenstown	9
	Punggol	7
	Bukit Panjang	6
	Sembawang	4
	Sengkang	3
	Bukit Timah	2
Others^	146	
Total	1050	

[^]Outlier high-count sites

At the zonal level, the observation numbers also varied significantly. Of the 298 zones, one third returned no observations. Around 60% of the zones had between 1 and 10 observations, while a small number of zones had more than 10 observations. On average, each zone had 3.5 observations.

The observation numbers can also be interpreted relative to the size of the resident population in each district. The highest densities of observations were recorded in the Tiong Bahru, Clementi, and Jurong East districts, which had 14 or more observations per 10,000 flats (Figure 2). The Bukit Panjang, Sembawang, Punggol, and Sengkang districts had the lowest densities, fewer than 2 observations per 10,000 flats. On average, there were 7 observations per 10,000 flats.

FIGURE 2.
Number of observations per 10,000 flats in the district



LARGE MAJORITY WERE MEN.

Consistent with what the 2017 street count found, 83% of the observations this time were of homeless men, while just 8% were of women. No information on sex was recorded for the remaining 10% of observations. Race was difficult to determine by observation, especially in concealed locations with poor visibility, so no information was recorded for 42% of the observations.

MORE HOMELESS PEOPLE IN LARGER AND OLDER HOUSING ESTATES, AND ESTATES WITH MORE RENTAL FLATS.

A striking finding in this study is that there are clear associations between the homeless population and public housing stock in each district. Given that homelessness entails physical *dislocation from* permanent housing, it is remarkable that patterns of homelessness are nevertheless *related to* the permanent housing environment.

There are clear associations between the homeless population and public housing stock in each district.

The number of observations is positively correlated with the total size ($r=0.49$) and average age ($r=0.57$) of the public housing stock within each district – more homeless people were found in districts with larger and more mature housing estates (Figure 3). The observation figures also correlate with housing type. Homeless people were more likely to be found in districts with a higher proportion of public rental housing ($r=0.41$; Figure 4), and less likely to be found in districts with a higher percentage of large flat types, including 5-room, executive, and multi-generational flats ($r=-0.61$; Figure 5). If flat type is taken to indicate economic status, then it seems homelessness is more prevalent in poorer neighbourhoods. Such geographic concentration of homelessness in poorer areas has also been found in Australian capital cities (Parkinson et al., 2019).



FIGURE 3.
Correlation between age of public housing stock and number of observations in each district in the cumulative count

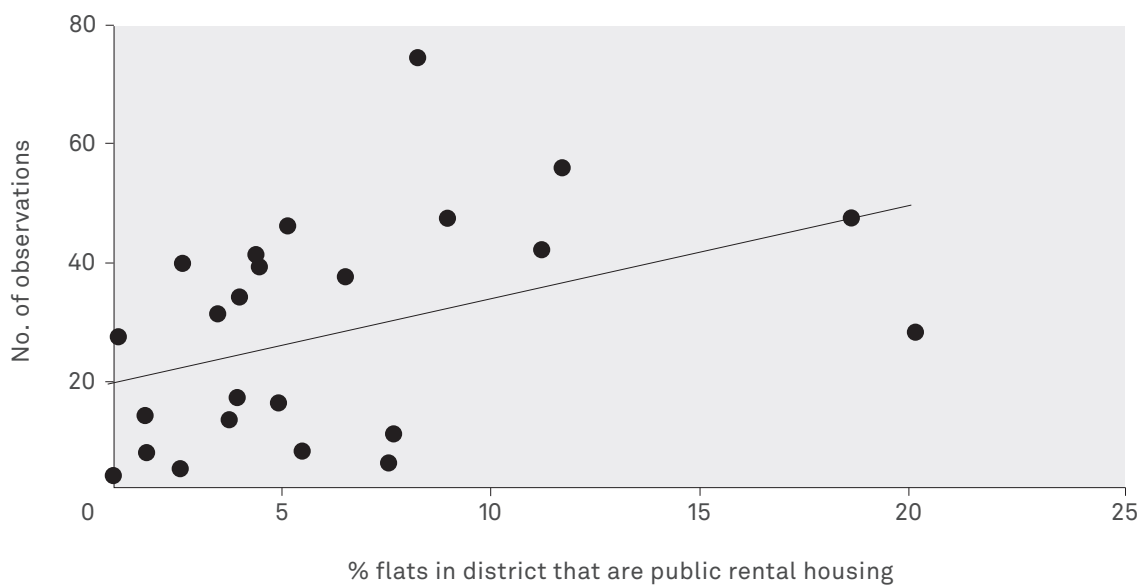


FIGURE 4.
Correlation between public rental housing and number of observations in each district in the cumulative count

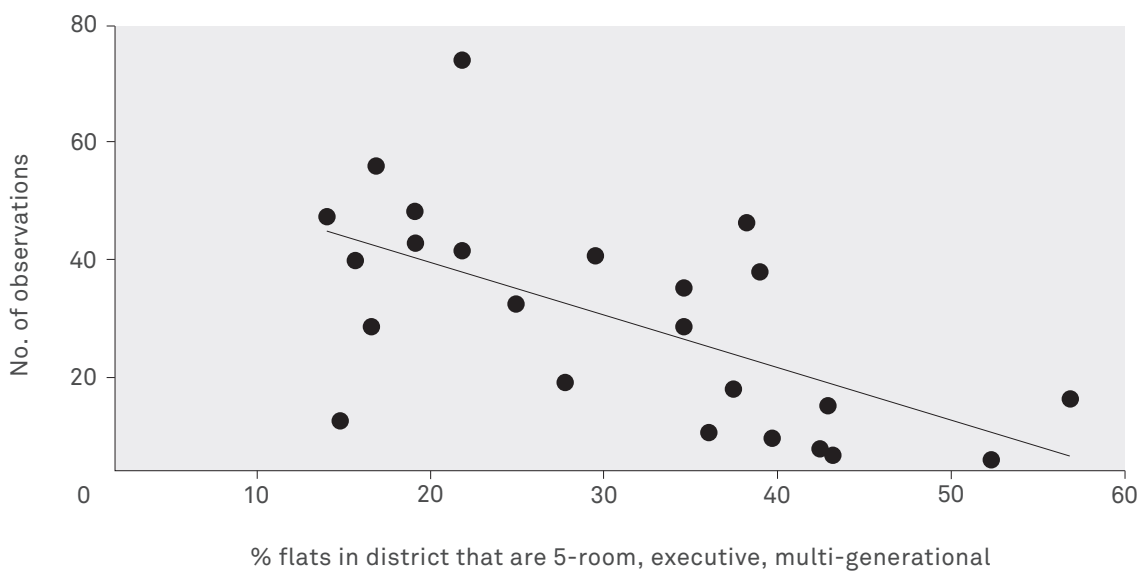


FIGURE 5.
Correlation between large flat types and number of observations in each district in the cumulative count

SINGLE NIGHT COUNT

ALMOST ALL THE ZONES WITH OBSERVATIONS IN THE CUMULATIVE COUNT WERE COVERED IN THE SINGLE NIGHT COUNT.

Following the principles of stratified geographical sampling, zone selection for the single night count prioritised zones with more observations in the cumulative count and was adjusted according to the number of fieldworkers available on the count night. Eventually the single night count covered all the zones that returned two or more observations in the cumulative count, 24 of the 51 zones which recorded one observation in the cumulative count, and none of the zones with no observations recorded in the cumulative count (Table 2).

TABLE 2.
Zone selection for single night count based on cumulative count figures

NO. OF OBSERVATIONS PER ZONE IN CUMULATIVE COUNT	NO. OF ZONES IN CUMULATIVE COUNT	NO. OF ZONES COVERED IN SINGLE NIGHT COUNT
0	102	0
1	51	24
2 or more	145	145
TOTAL NO. OF ZONES	298	169

In all, the single night count covered 86% of the zones with at least one observation in the cumulative count. These zones represented 97% of the total figure in the cumulative count. This meant that an estimate produced by extrapolation would not have been much higher than the actual figure from the single night count, and so extrapolation was not deemed necessary.

THE DISTRIBUTION OF HOMELESSNESS REMAINED STABLE OVER SEVERAL MONTHS; THE COUNT METHOD WAS FAIRLY CONSISTENT.

There is remarkably strong correlation between the cumulative count and single night count figures ($r=0.91$ for the zonal figures and $r=0.98$ at the district level; Figure 6). This is a significant finding in both empirical and methodological terms. It suggests that the geographical distribution of homelessness was stable within the several months between the two counts and that the procedure for measuring homelessness in this study was fairly consistent.

The geographical distribution of homelessness was stable between the two counts and the procedure for measuring homelessness was consistent.

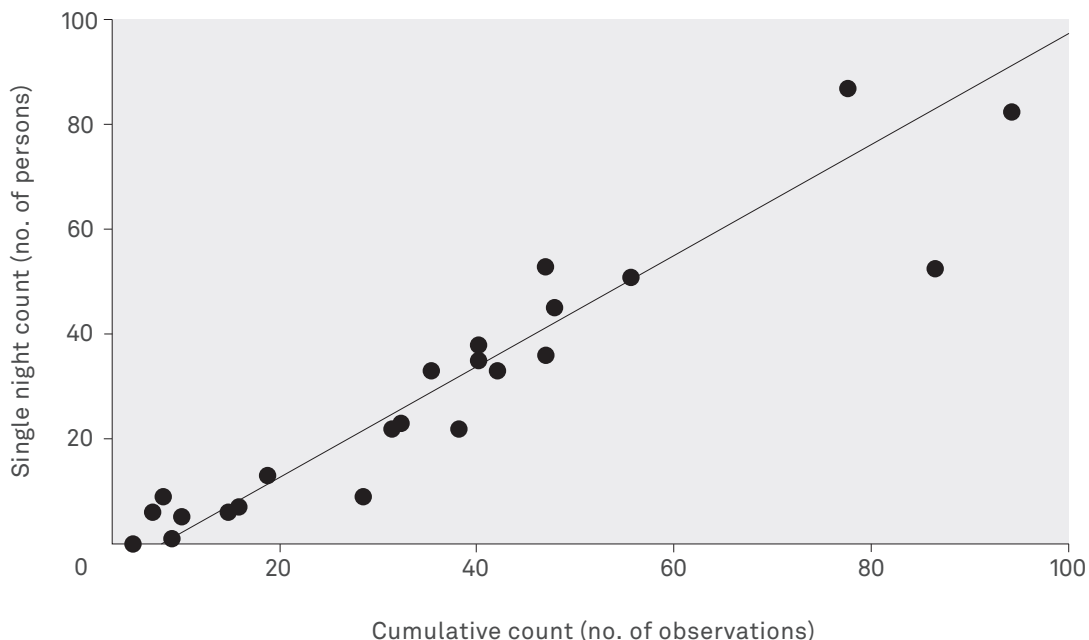


FIGURE 6.
Correlation
between
cumulative
count and single
night count
by district

HOMELESSNESS WAS FOUND IN MOST PARTS OF SINGAPORE IN THE SINGLE NIGHT COUNT, WITH SIGNIFICANT VARIATION ACROSS DISTRICTS.

The fieldworkers recorded observations of 983 people who were either asleep or judged to be going to sleep in public spaces. Of the latter, 62 were discounted during data checks because they did not meet the criteria for persons going to sleep. This left a final figure of 921 people, consisting of 730 people already asleep (79%) and 191 people who were going to sleep in public spaces. These were almost certainly unique individuals as counting on a single night and a screen question asking whether the interviewee had already spoken to other volunteers made duplication very unlikely.

At the district level, homelessness was geographically widespread on count night, with observations recorded in 23 of the 24 districts covered (Table 3). No homeless persons were encountered in Sengkang district. Homelessness was unevenly distributed, ranging from 1 person in Punggol district to 251 persons in the City district. The average number was 38 persons per district. The largest numbers were reported in the City, Bedok, Jurong West, and Kallang districts, where more than 50 persons were recorded. At the other end, fewer than 10 people were found in districts such as Choa Chu Kang, Sembawang, Queenstown, and Punggol.

TABLE 3.	DISTRICT	PERSONS
Number of homeless persons by district in the single night count	City	251
	Bedok	60
	Jurong West	53
	Kallang	51
	Ang Mo Kio	45
	Clementi	38
	Tiong Bahru	36
	Hougang	35
	Tampines	33
	Toa Payoh	33
	Bukit Merah	30
	Bukit Batok	23
	Woodlands	22
	Yishun	22
	Serangoon	13
	Bukit Panjang	9
	Jurong East	9
	Pasir Ris	7
	Bishan	7
	Choa Chu Kang	6
Sembawang	6	
Queenstown	5	
Punggol	1	
Sengkang	0	
Others^	126	
Total	921	

[^]Outlier high-count sites

One or more homeless persons were encountered in 137 of the 169 zones (81%) visited on count night – a higher percentage than the nationwide cumulative count. No homeless persons were found in 19% of the zones while more than two thirds had between 1 and 10 persons. The remaining 13% of zones had more than 10 persons each. On average, each zone had 6.7 homeless persons, again higher than in the cumulative count. These indicate that the single night count was able to target zones that were more likely to have homeless people.

MOST OF THE HOMELESS PEOPLE WERE OLDER CHINESE MEN.

The vast majority of homeless persons were men (87%). But there were also almost 100 women sleeping in public spaces. Based on the fieldworkers' observation, 46% of them were Chinese, 16% Malay,

and 11% Indian. The fieldworkers were not able to tell the ethnicity of the others. Half of the homeless persons were judged to be in their 50s or older, a third were in their 20s to 40s, and 6 people (below 1%) were observed to be below 20. In 16% of the instances, the fieldworkers were not able to make a firm judgement.

THE MOST COMMON LOCATIONS WERE HDB VOID DECKS AND COMMERCIAL BUILDINGS.

The fieldworkers encountered people sleeping in many different types of location (Table 4). Almost 50% of the homeless persons were found in public housing estates, in spaces such as void decks, pavilions, and coffee-shops. There were also many people sleeping at commercial buildings – in shopping malls and outside shops and restaurants.

The fieldworkers encountered people sleeping in many different types of location.

TABLE 4.
Locations of homeless persons during single night count

TYPE OF LOCATION	PERCENTAGE OF HOMELESS PERSONS ENCOUNTERED
Void decks	31.9
Commercial buildings	28.6
Pavilions, playgrounds	10.1
Parks	6.3
Coffee-shops, hawker centres	6.1
Fast-food restaurants	2.4
Community Clubs	2.1
Sports facilities	1.3
Others [^]	11.3
Total	100.0

[^]E.g. MRT stations, bus terminals, places of worship, carparks, and other unique sites

HOMELESS PERSONS' APPEARANCE, POSSESSIONS, AND ENVIRONMENT DO NOT FIT SIMPLE STEREOTYPES.

The Observation Form provided space for the fieldworkers to write notes, in their own words, about the homeless persons' appearance, possessions, environment, and any concerns about well-being. These notes were coded during data analysis. Since they come from free-text fields that allowed the fieldworkers to decide whether, what, and how much to record, they are indicative of what caught each fieldworker's eye and are not an exhaustive account. As a whole, the fieldworkers' descriptions paint a variegated picture of homelessness that does not accord with simple stereotypes.

The fieldworkers' descriptions paint a variegated picture of homelessness that does not accord with simple stereotypes.

Many of the homeless persons were described as presentable (28%) while fewer were noted as appearing untidy (10%) or without a shirt (5%). The fieldworkers recorded notes such as:

"He looks well-groomed and wears short sleeve t-shirt with long pants, belt and shoes."

"Well-dressed. Batik shirt and black pants."

"Football jersey and bermuda, slippers."

"Wearing a shirt, with jeans, socks and covered shoes."

"Dressed in long sleeves t-shirt and long pants. Slippers on the floor. Hair quite neat. Sleeping on a bench."

"Wearing dark blue track pants, with blue t-shirt, wearing slippers and look washed and clean, with proper grooming and hygiene."

"Looks like he wore the clothes for quite a while."

"...clothes look a bit dirty, looks frail and tired, limping."

"Long white hair which is not properly groomed. Wearing a t-shirt and shorts. She seemed tired."

"...hair a bit long...was not wearing a shirt."

Around 3 in 4 of the homeless persons had no possessions with them or carried only one bag or a few plastic bags. Only 5% had a trolley or luggage with them. For this small group, their possessions were described as:

"Cardboards, a pushcart with 2 bags with items."

"Canvas trolley bag with a polyester bag with a zip placed on top, 4 pieces of cardboard, a black sling bag."

"Has a trolley (those brought along for marketing) worth of belongings with many plastic bags tied to it. Also has a backpack and some cardboard."

“Luggage with a few plastic bags stacked on top of it. Another bag under the bench. Another bag covered by shirt on bench.”

“A lot of possessions. Items were stacked around body to form a cubicle - bottles, porcelain vases, lots of newspapers and even tarp. Rag and bone items. There was a bicycle/trolley of sorts. The items covered the entire table and stools around the table, serving as a shield.”

The physical environment where people were found to sleep varied.

About a third of these places were described as bright or well-lit, while a fifth were described as dark. About 14% of the locations were considered open and exposed (i.e. in full view of passers-by) while 9% were described as concealed or providing some sort of privacy. Only 10% of the homeless persons had soft bedding like blankets and pillows. To illustrate this variety:

“Smoking area, generally quiet and clean, airy open space, well-lit.”

“Bench at void deck, well-lit, clean, open, quiet.”

“...near the playground, well-lit, no cover, quite clean, open space and well-ventilated.”

“...clean, well-lit, using cardboard box as bedding, concealed behind table.”

“In well-lit corridor but by the shadow of a table-tennis table.”

“Well-hidden although this is an open area. Wouldn't have observed if we didn't hear the snoring sound. Clean. The area is not as well-lit because it's hidden behind a wall near the staircase door.”

“Partially hidden by pillar. Dim and relatively quiet. Toilets accessible.

“Dark corner of the block, blocked off by an unused danger sign.”

“Very dark, well-concealed under staircase.”

“Well-covered by the HDB walls, people can't see unless they are looking for them.”

“Well-lit, within the market in the open walkway...there are rats around.”

“...near a rubbish collection point which is full.”

"...near main road and a bus stop, a little bit noisy, nearby is clean but the smell is not good, well-lit."

"Quite a lot of traffic as it is near entrance/exit, but not very noisy. Quite clean, open, very well-lit."

"Slightly dim although with lights. Exposed, facing road and bus. Clean and windy."

"The environment is clean, there are restaurants nearby, can hear chattering a bit, overall not too noisy. Well-lit, sheltered, but still there is human traffic, although at this hour there is significantly less."

"Near toilet, close to bus bay exit, beside McDonald's. Area is well-lit with occasional announcements."

"Brightly lit bench, near loud groups of youth."

"A shop nearby is playing music loud, there are some people still talking loudly and having social activities, it's under a street lamp so it's quite bright."

"...well-lit, quite clean, there was a group of elderly people gathering at the table next to him."

"Well-lit corridor, in same proximity as other sleepers."

"Between 2 benches, with other females in a close cluster."

ALMOST HALF OF THE HOMELESS PERSONS WHO WERE AWAKE TOOK PART IN AN INTERVIEW. MOST WERE SINGAPORE CITIZENS; SINGLE, SEPARATED, DIVORCED, OR WIDOWED; AND HAD LOW EDUCATION.

1 The fieldworkers estimated the ages of all the homeless persons they encountered by observation (as "below 20s", "20s to 40s", or "50s and above") before approaching them to conduct the interview which included a question about age. The observed ages were accurate 94% of the time.

Out of the 191 persons who were awake but going to sleep in public spaces, 88 agreed to take part in the interview – a participation rate of 46%. Of these interviewees, 92% were men. Half of them were Malay and 38% were Chinese. Compared to the profile of all 921 homeless persons encountered on the night, the interview sample had a higher percentage of men and Malays. The age of the interviewees ranged from 20 to 78 years old, with an average of 54 years old. Almost 60% of them were in their 50s and 60s; another 11% were in their 70s.¹

Around 30% of the interviewees were separated, divorced, or widowed, while 34% were single, which may signify a loss or lack of social support. Eight in ten of the interviewees were Singapore citizens and another 3% were Permanent Residents. Malaysians represented 8% of the interviewees while other nationalities made up fewer than 6%. The highest educational level was primary school or below for 35% of the interviewees, while 41% had secondary school qualifications. Only two persons interviewed on the night had completed university education.

ECONOMIC, FAMILY, HOUSING-RELATED, AND HEALTH PROBLEMS WERE REPORTED AS THE MAIN REASONS FOR HOMELESSNESS.

When asked why they were sleeping in public spaces, the most commonly cited reasons are related to unemployment, irregular work, and low wages (47%). This is followed by family conflict and break-up (37%), housing problems such as inability to pay rent and mortgage or having sold their housing (27%), difficulties getting the housing services they needed (24%), and health problems (18%). This set of explanations resonates with current understanding of homelessness. There are well-established associations between poverty and homelessness – poverty increases the risks of homelessness, which then makes it difficult to exit poverty (Bramley & Fitzpatrick, 2018; Johnsen & Watts, 2014). Low incomes also have a direct impact on the ability to access stable accommodation, especially where affordable housing is undersupplied or difficult to access (Parkinson et al., 2019).

There are well-established associations between poverty and homelessness – poverty increases the risks of homelessness, which then makes it difficult to exit poverty.

Just below 40% of the interviewees had housing in their name. These were mainly HDB public rental flats (15%) and purchased HDB flats (11%). Others mentioned having a hostel place or a residence overseas. Similarly, 39% said they could have stayed in a safer place that night, such as with family and friends, or at their workplace. But when asked why they did not do so, they reported family conflict, not wanting to inconvenience friends, problems getting along with co-tenants, or wanting to be near the workplace. These responses show that actual access to better housing options is often hindered by practical and social barriers.

HOMELESSNESS POSED HARDSHIPS AND WAS OFTEN CHRONIC, LASTING 6 YEARS OR MORE FOR 1 IN 3 PERSONS.

As Tan (2018) observed, the state of being homeless in Singapore is “physically and mentally demanding, dangerous and subjected to constant surveillance by government authorities” (p.135). About 56% of the interviewees had encountered problems when sleeping outside, including having their possessions stolen (30%) or being asked to move on (16%). A few interviewees had been verbally or physically abused.

For most of the interviewees, sleeping in public spaces had become a long-term arrangement. Only 18% of them started sleeping in public spaces within the year. Half of them started between 1 and 5 years ago, while 31% had been sleeping in public for 6 years or longer. Four persons reported being homeless for more than 20 years. About 44% of the interviewees said that they slept in public spaces every day. But for the others, sleeping arrangements changed frequently. Around 20% slept in public half or most of the time, while another 20% did so less than half of the time. This pattern of chronic homelessness is consistent with what Tan (2018) found in his analysis of the difficulties of exiting homelessness in Singapore as well as findings from the 2017 street count.

IRREGULAR WORK AND LOW PAY WERE COMMON AMONG HOMELESS PERSONS.

Six in ten of the interviewees were in work, while 40% of those not in work were looking for work. The most common occupations were cleaning (27%), odd jobs (15%), security (10%), and retail (8%), which are among the lowest-paying occupations in Singapore. The interviewees who were working split evenly between those in full-time work, and those working part-time or on a casual basis. In sharp contrast, 89% of all employees in Singapore are in full-time work (Ministry of Manpower, 2019).

Of the interviewees who were in work, fewer than half were paid monthly. Several were paid weekly, while 1 in 4 were paid daily. Some interviewees reported that the number of work days available varied from week to week, as did their wages. For those paid monthly, their wages ranged from \$560 to \$3,000, with a median of \$1,400 per month. For others, weekly pay ranged from \$20 to \$600 (median \$325), while daily pay ranged from \$20 to \$75 (median \$53). In 2018, the median monthly work income of employed residents in Singapore was \$3,467 – 2.5 times as much as the amount reported by the interviewees (Ministry of Manpower, 2019).

On the whole, this employment pattern corroborates the most frequently cited reasons for homelessness – irregular work and low wages.

This employment pattern corroborates the most frequently cited reasons for homelessness - irregular work and low wages.

The majority of interviewees did not have income from non-work sources. Among the 30% who did, some received public financial assistance ranging from \$200 to \$480 per month. CPF payments (\$200 to \$570 per month) and family members (\$80 to \$500 per month) were also mentioned. A few people received small amounts of cash or in-kind support from charities, religious organisations, and friends.

POOR HEALTH AND NUTRITION APPEAR TO BE COMMON; 1 IN 4 HAD EATEN JUST ONE MEAL THAT DAY OR NONE AT ALL.

People with mental health problems are more likely to become homeless (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2014), while the homeless population often face barriers to healthcare and are at risk of many negative health outcomes (Haldenby, Berman, & Forchuk, 2007).

About 45% of the interviewees in the single night count reported having health problems, the most common being high blood pressure (11%); diabetes (8%); heart conditions (8%); and injuries, joint pain, and spinal problems (8%). Around half of the interviewees had not seen a doctor in the past year, including a quarter of those who reported health problems. However, interviewees with health problems saw a doctor more frequently – 6.4 times on average in the past year compared to fewer than once among interviewees with no health issues. The average number of visits to the doctor was 3.2 times among all the interviewees.

Nutrition is a serious concern. At the time of the interviews, which was around midnight, half of the interviewees had consumed only two meals that day, while 24% had eaten only one meal or none at all.

At the time of the interviews, which was around midnight, half of the interviewees had consumed only two meals that day, while 24% had eaten only one meal or none at all.

For 9% of the homeless persons, the fieldworkers flagged concerns in their notes about visible physical injuries and ailments, physical disability, frail appearance, or possible mental health conditions:

"...his right ear lobe appears to be infected and enlarged."

"Bearded and has a wound wrapped on left foot. One of hands seemed wounded with bandage."

"Both legs in a cast."

"...leg is swollen and has dark colour."

"Dirty, swollen feet."

"Frail, in pain, black long-sleeve top and pants and face mask. In clear discomfort. Dishevelled. Neck is swollen from skin rash. Slight swelling in both feet, with purplish redness. Dryness and rash."

"Has a wheelchair next to him, one of the legs amputated, sleeping on pillow and cardboards. The other homeless people we interviewed said that everyone takes care of him and lets him have priority to toilet use."

"Left leg amputated till knee."

"Possible poor mental state. Not able to speak, grunts and uses gestures."

"Bending forward, rocking on the chair, in his own world (possible mental health issues)."

"Slurring, not alcohol, had difficulty understanding and expressing himself (possible mental health problem)."

HOMELESS PEOPLE MAY MAINTAIN SOME CONNECTIONS TO THEIR COMMUNITIES AND SOCIAL NETWORKS DESPITE HOUSING DISLOCATION.

When deciding where to sleep, the homeless persons had two main considerations. The first is practical. The most frequently mentioned reasons were proximity to the workplace (38%) and comfort and safety (22%). Some interviewees also mentioned wanting to be near public amenities (9%). The second consideration is social. Many interviewees slept in places close to where they used to live (17%), or where their family (16%) and friends (9%) were currently living. This suggests that the choice of location may be related to accessing social and material support, and that

homeless people may maintain connections to their communities even after the loss of stable, permanent housing. Others may be forming new friendships. Although most of the interviewees (69%) were alone, 25% shared their sleeping spaces with friends.

Almost 40% of the interviewees said that they did not sleep in other kinds of public spaces than the ones where they met the fieldworkers. While 56% reported having slept in other places, these tended to be within walking distance to their present locations. Again, this indicates that while homelessness is generally a mobile phenomenon, the mobility may be limited within fairly small localities.

Despite living outside, the majority of the interviewees had recent contact with family or friends. About 1 in 5 had not spoken with their family or friends in the past month.

HELP-SEEKING AND ENCOUNTERS WITH LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES WERE COMMON.

Four in ten of the interviewees had sought help in the past year. The Social Service Offices were mentioned most frequently (19%), followed by Family Service Centres (9%) and Members of Parliament (9%). The HDB and shelters were mentioned by only three interviewees each. Several persons had approached religious organisations, Community Development Councils, and NGOs for help.

Being approached by public and enforcement agencies was fairly common. Six in ten of the interviewees reported having been approached by these agencies in the past year, with the police being the most common (53%), followed by MSF (11%) and the National Parks Board (8%).

The nature of these encounters varied. MSF officers mainly suggested places to get help. Police officers, on the other hand, often checked the interviewees' NRIC and asked why they were sleeping outside. In some instances, the interviewees would then be left alone and reminded to take care of their possessions. In other cases, they were asked to leave. According to one fieldworker's notes, "when that happened, the homeless person would walk away from the place and move to another location nearby." The interviewees mentioned that some police visits were in response to public complaints. One person described an encounter when he was taken away and placed in a welfare home for two or three weeks, noting that "he really didn't like it".

In some instances, the interviewees would then be left alone and reminded to take care of their possessions. In other cases, they were asked to leave.

CONCLUSION

MEASURING THE SCALE OF HOMELESSNESS

This is the **first study to measure the scale of homelessness** in Singapore. Although there has been growing public and policy interest in recent years, rigorous research on the issue remains lacking. By measuring homelessness in a systematic and transparent way, this study can shed light on the extent of housing insecurity and its impact on social exclusion in Singapore. Street counts like this **should be conducted every few years** to provide timely guidance for policy and service planning. While a collaborative model involving volunteers has many advantages, sustaining a regular research activity of this scale will require resources and support from public agencies. **Future research** can also extend into areas beyond the scope of this study, such as the sheltered homeless population and people living in inadequate housing; spatial changes in homelessness over time; and the impact of demographic changes, economic conditions, housing policies, and service capacities on homelessness.

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To overcome the challenges of enumerating a mobile population and the lack of data to inform site selection, this study combined two count strategies. The first was a **cumulative count** that took place nationwide over several months, relying on individual fieldworkers to conduct observation in their assigned zones. It generated, for the first time, a geographically comprehensive baseline of street homelessness in Singapore, covering 298 zones of around 50 residential blocks each across 25 districts. The second was a **single night count** in selected zones with observational and interview components, done by teams of fieldworkers that were all deployed at the same time. This count produced a snapshot of homelessness at one point in time.

An important finding from this study is that the figures from the cumulative and single night counts are tightly correlated. Areas with higher totals in the first count were likely to also have higher totals in the second. This correlation is found not just at the level of districts, which are fairly large areas, but also at the level of zones, where more variation might be expected. That figures collected several months apart are related may reflect a **stable geographical distribution** of homelessness in Singapore. It also suggests that the **method in this study is consistent** and able to filter out “noise”, for instance,

erroneously counting people who did not intend to sleep outside but fell asleep “by accident”.

This study makes several **methodological contributions**. It demonstrates a feasible process to develop and implement a national street count where existing information and local research offer limited guidance. The count procedure was also robust when applied to dense high-rise public housing estates as well as other public and commercial spaces. The study can therefore provide a point of reference for other jurisdictions which would like to introduce their first street count, particularly urban centres. Specific lessons were learnt that can inform future street counts in Singapore. For instance, if the geographical distribution of homelessness is stable, then it is possible for the observational data collection and interviewing to be done on separate nights. This can help to reduce the pressure on fieldworkers’ time in the single night count and increase the number of completed interviews.

A PICTURE OF HOMELESSNESS IN SINGAPORE

The cumulative count returned a total of 1,050 observations. This count is geographically comprehensive but cannot rule out duplicates. The single night count returned a total of 921 unique individuals in selected zones. On this basis, the actual size of the homeless population is likely to lie within the range of **921 to 1,050 at a single point in time**.

Both counts found that **homelessness was geographically widespread** in Singapore, with **significant variation** in numbers across districts. The fieldworkers encountered homeless people in 23 of the 24 districts covered in the single night count, with the district totals varying from 1 person (in Punggol district) to 251 persons (in the City district). The majority of observations in the two counts were of **older men**, providing strong evidence that this demographic profile dominates the homeless population in Singapore.

The qualitative observational data show that homelessness presents in diverse ways that are **not consistent with stereotypes** of vagrancy and destitution. Many of the homeless persons had found ways to maintain their appearance, did not keep many possessions, and often slept in spaces that were clean and sheltered. At the same time, **homelessness posed hardships**. When choosing locations, there appears to be a trade-off between safety and peace. Exposed spaces that are under the public eye are safer but noisier, while quieter places may be remote and render homeless people more vulnerable. Basic needs such as regular meals were not always met. Some homeless persons accessed medical care

frequently, but half of them did not, including a quarter of those who reported health issues. They also faced dangers such as theft and were often approached and questioned by law enforcement agencies.

The three main reasons for homelessness that emerge from this study are **insecure work and poverty; family relationship problems; and inadequate or inaccessible housing services**. These are deep and complex problems, often giving rise to chronic homelessness. Half of the homeless persons had been sleeping in public for between 1 and 5 years, while almost a third had been sleeping outside for 6 years or longer. Some of them did not sleep in public every day, but switched between different housing arrangements periodically. **Persistent street homelessness combined with constant instability** characterises their housing insecurity and indicates the considerable challenges of exiting homelessness.

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The definition of homelessness discussed at the start of this report, based on the **availability of accessible options**, is informative. Some of the homeless persons had housing registered in their names, either public rental flats or purchased HDB flats. Others could think of safer places to sleep, such as with family and friends or at the workplace. But when asked why they did not access these alternatives, they reported relationship problems, conflict with co-tenants, or employers' disapproval. Their accounts highlight the difference between theoretical and practical options, between legal occupancy rights and actual access.

POLICY AND SERVICES

That there exists a sizeable population sleeping in public spaces on a long-term basis despite 40% of them having sought help in the past year shows that there is room for improvement in the current landscape of public and social services. In some areas, there are opportunities for immediate reform. In others, the challenges run deeper.

For the planning and design of social services, the findings from this study offer some guidance. Few interviewees mentioned seeking help from shelters. Given the concealed nature of homelessness,

outreach services are critical for connecting homeless people to housing support. Voluntary efforts in this area have grown in the last few years. There is scope to expand outreach services to new sites using the findings from this study. Whether this should be done by encouraging and supporting more voluntary groups, introducing publicly funded services, or extending the mandate of existing community-based organisations like Family Service Centres and Social Service Offices is a matter that deserves careful consideration and consultation. Feedback should be sought from the voluntary outreach groups that have been on the front line of this work in recent years.

Given the long-term nature of homelessness and the complexity of its underlying causes, **shelter services** that impose a short, arbitrary duration of stay are unlikely to be adequate or well-received. The design and funding of services must be commensurate with the deep-seated problems related to social relationships, work, and health that this population faces. In addition, considering the poor physical environment that some homeless people are currently living in, **overnight shelters** with a low entry bar and immediate availability may provide an important lifeline and an opportunity to regain stability. In a positive development, several such shelters have opened in the past year (Tan T., 2019).

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In the long run, the effectiveness and sustainability of shelter services also depend on the availability of more stable and permanent options in the housing landscape into which shelter residents may graduate. The most obvious is the HDB's **public rental housing scheme**. However, the eligibility criteria are strict, space is inadequate, and conflict between co-tenants due to the requirement for single occupants to share a "one-room flat" with no bedrooms is well-documented (Hansard 29 February 2016, 07 March 2018). Such conflict was mentioned by several interviewees in this study as a contributing factor to homelessness. Removing the joint tenancy requirement as an immediate step will not only improve this exit path from homelessness, but will also help to realise basic standards of privacy for the poorest residents in the public housing sector.

The **Destitute Persons Act** seems out of step with the patterns of homelessness and homeless people's needs in contemporary Singapore. It targets a minority of the homeless population. The definition of destitution in the act includes elements such as begging in a public place and having no means of subsistence which do not accurately describe most of the people sleeping in public spaces. For people who fit the criteria, admission to the welfare homes is both care and detention as they do not get to decide when to leave. The possibility of involuntary admission casts a shadow even on homeless people who cannot be considered destitute, causing anxiety when they encounter officers from public agencies and suspicion towards outreach workers. It can prevent people from getting the help they need. It also creates serious ethical challenges for research and inter-agency collaboration. A revision of this act to bring it up to date, or clarification of its application to homelessness, will help to address these issues.

The problem of **low wages and insecure work** in Singapore has been studied (Ng, Ng & Lee, 2018), and is a worrying dimension of homelessness. Despite recent measures to increase income supplements for workers and mandate employers to pay progressive wages in occupations such as cleaning and security – in which many of this study's interviewees were employed – low wages remain a key contributing factor to the inability to access stable housing. Low-wage workers also face other disadvantages. Work availability and incomes tend to be unpredictable, or work may only be available at odd hours when public transport is not running and commuting by other means is too expensive. Sleeping in public near the workplace may then present as the most practical option. A full discussion of wage and work conditions is beyond the scope of this report. But it is clear that policy interventions in this area must be part of any comprehensive response to homelessness.

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COMMUNITY AND SOCIETY

As a severe form of housing insecurity, homelessness emerges where there are gaps in a society's interlocking network of market, public, and familial provision. In this regard, the profile of each homeless population is telling. In Canada and the USA, for example, around a fifth of homeless people are youths and children (Gaetz et al., 2016; U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2018). This has been attributed to shortcomings

in school and care systems, and the points of transition between public institutions and the community. The situation contrasts sharply with Singapore, where very few young people were recorded in the counts. Instead, homeless people in Singapore are mostly older and in work. Homelessness clearly illustrates the consequences when work does not bring about economic security and family support is not available. It makes a strong case for the role of public provision to ensure income security in old age. The prevalence of homelessness within public housing estates is also a stark reminder that homeownership is not within everyone's reach. The public housing programme in Singapore is governed along the principle of ownership-first, leaving few alternatives outside of owner occupation and creating hardships for people who are seeking and living in subsidised rental housing (Ng & Neo, 2019). Barriers to public housing can lead to homelessness. These larger questions about how society is organised – in terms of **work and old-age income security, of homeownership and housing security** – are the context in which responses to homelessness must be situated.

Homelessness clearly illustrates the consequences when work does not bring about economic security and family support is not available.

One of the most striking findings in this study is that the number of homeless people correlates with the characteristics of public housing in each district. There are more homeless people in larger and older housing estates, and those with a higher proportion of rental flats. What does this signify? Older housing estates also tend to have older resident populations (Housing and Development Board, 2014), so it is clear that the profile of the homeless population – older and low-income – mirrors the demographic profile of the housing estates where they were found. In fact, many homeless people chose to sleep in locations near to where they previously lived and did not generally move very far away from the localities they were familiar with. They also kept in contact with their family and friends. Collectively, the evidence suggests that while homelessness entails a physical dislocation of living arrangement, many homeless people **continue to be a part of the community** where they formerly lived, by staying in the area and maintaining social ties. Others build new networks with fellow homeless persons and look out for one another.

This connection between poverty, place, and homelessness raises questions such as who are regarded as **rightful members of a community** and who are not, and what is the basis of one's rights to public spaces such as void decks, rest areas, and parks. Should the anxieties of a homeowner about loitering be privileged over the basic need of another member of the community for a peaceful night's sleep? When people install dividers on benches and other forms of defensive architecture to discourage rough sleeping, call on law enforcement officers to ask a homeless person to move on, or remove a homeless person for admission to an institution, what does it say about the community? At their heart, should communities be defined by property ownership and formal occupancy rights, or other forms of identity and connectedness? This study hopefully offers a basis for further reflection and dialogue.

Should communities be defined by property ownership and formal occupancy rights, or other forms of identity and connectedness?

In recent years, the collective response to homelessness in Singapore has intensified. There has been greater concern in society and more collaboration between public and voluntary groups. This study is an example of such collaboration, in this case between researchers, voluntary groups, social work agencies, and many individual members of public. It brings together their technical expertise, practical experience, local knowledge, and personal generosity. A research project like this can promote **community ownership** of this complex social challenge and encourage people to find out more about homelessness, contribute what they can, speak up about their concerns, and participate in policymaking. It will help to challenge stereotypes about homeless people and create a safer environment for them. Achieving housing security for this vulnerable population will require such ownership, alongside improvements to economic conditions, policies, and services.

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