SEEKING SHELTER: HOMELESS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN SINGAPORE

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To cite this report:
Ng, K. H., & Sekhon Atac, J. S. (2022). *Seeking shelter: Homeless during the COVID-19 pandemic in Singapore*. Singapore: Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/research/social-inclusion-project

Note:
All monetary values in this report are in Singapore dollars.

Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy

SOCIAL INCLUSION PROJECT

In memory of Professor Sir John Hills,
1954–2020

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study took place in 2021, the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic. This was a time when homelessness spiked in many countries due to an increase in unemployment, poverty and evictions. In Singapore, homeless shelters reached capacity at one point. The aim of this study was to capture the state of homelessness in Singapore in this exceptionally difficult time.

The research questions were: What was the level of street homelessness in 2021 and how did it compare with the situation before COVID-19? Given the widely-reported relocation of homeless persons into shelters, how did the size of the shelter population change? What were the causes and experiences of homelessness? To what extent did the pandemic alter the nature of housing insecurity in Singapore? What lessons may be learnt for tackling homelessness in the future?

CONTEXT

To be homeless is to lack access to adequate housing. Adequacy refers to security, physical adequacy and social adequacy. Homelessness is one of the harshest forms of social exclusion, related to a range of other challenges such as economic vulnerability, physical and mental health problems, and social disaffiliation.

Homelessness may take different forms. 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 overnight shelters and moving frequently because permanent housing is not available. Tertiary homelessness is living in insecure and inadequate accommodation, such as living in long-term shelters, temporarily with family and friends, in substandard or overcrowded conditions, or being at risk of losing accommodation.

In many places, homelessness remains a contentious issue and homeless people are a target of competing narratives. Where reasons for homelessness are thought to lie mainly in individual decisions, services tend to be more selective and paternalistic. Where the explanatory lens is wider, there is greater pressure on policymakers to address multiple dimensions of social exclusion and disadvantage.

Research on homelessness in Singapore has made progress in recent years. In 2019, Singapore's first nationwide street count was completed, reporting a total of between 921 and 1,050 persons. A method was developed for conducting a comprehensive large-scale street count that was repeated in this study. Over time, services have also expanded and the tone of policy has softened.

METHOD

This study consists of three components. First, a nationwide street count based on the cumulative count method. Second, it took into account the homeless shelter population by combining administrative data on shelter occupancy with street count figures for the first time. Third, in-depth qualitative interviews with shelter residents.

Street count

The street count 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.

The map of Singapore was divided into 298 zones across 25 districts. Most of the zones were in public housing estates where each zone covered about 50 blocks of flats, as well as a mix of other sites such as neighbourhood parks, hawker centres, community clubs and sports facilities. In the city and other non-residential areas, each zone was demarcated so that it would take around two hours to cover on foot.

More than 200 volunteers were recruited to conduct the fieldwork. Many of them had experience from the 2019 street count. Every fieldworker had to attend training, after which they were given two weeks to complete two zones. They could conduct the count on any day of the week as long as they started no 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.

Shelter count

In many places, homelessness counts include both rough sleepers (primary homelessness) and persons in homeless shelters (secondary homelessness). Omitting the latter may cause underestimation of the size of the homeless population.

Considering the large numbers of people driven into the shelters by the pandemic, it was particularly important to take into account the size of the shelter population this time round so as to accurately measure changes in the prevalence of homelessness between 2019 and 2021. The Ministry of Social and Family Development helpfully agreed to furnish data.

In-depth interviews

The researchers conducted in-depth interviews with 51 residents at a temporary shelter for homeless persons, to understand their personal circumstances, housing histories and pathways into homelessness. The participants were recruited with the help of social workers and through snowballing.

Most of the interview participants were men, aged 50 years and above, and Singapore citizens. The majority had only primary or secondary education. Many were working or looking for work. About half were divorced or widowed. Overall, the gender, age, marital, educational and employment profile of the participants is very similar to what is known about Singapore's homeless population.

FINDINGS

Street count and shelter data

Despite the far-reaching impact of the pandemic and intense state intervention, the scale of homelessness did not change significantly between 2019 and 2021. The combined street homeless and temporary shelter populations declined by just 7%, from 1,115 before COVID-19 to 1,036 in the second year of the pandemic.

But the form of homelessness had changed, as primary homelessness declined and secondary homelessness rose. The number of street homeless persons fell from 1,050 in 2019 to 616 in 2021, a drop of 41%. But occupancy in temporary shelters increased more than sixfold, from 65 to 420.

The street count found that the street homeless population in 2021 was comparable to that of 2019 in many ways:

- They were found in most parts of Singapore, with significant variation in prevalence across districts.
- Higher-count districts in 2019 continued to account for more homeless persons in 2021. At the district level, results were strongly correlated between the two street counts.
- More street homeless persons were found in larger, older and poorer neighbourhoods.
- Most of the homeless people were older Chinese men.

The main deviation from this overall pattern of consistency is a de-concentration of homelessness from the City district to residential districts.

- Although the City district still accounted for the largest number of homeless persons, its share of the total fell from 23% in 2019 to 12% in 2021.
- Instead of commercial buildings, homeless persons were more likely to be found in locations within residential neighbourhoods, such as void decks, pavilions, playgrounds, coffeeshops and hawker centres.
- This may reflect a retreat from areas that were more exposed to public view during the pandemic.

<u>In-depth interviews</u>

The study identified three distinct groups among the interview participants:

- **Long-term homeless persons** who had been rough sleeping even before the pandemic hit Singapore in February 2020. There were more men than women in this group. Many had completely lost contact with their family and had poor experiences with public rental housing. They were found while rough sleeping during the pandemic and referred to the shelter.

- **Newly homeless persons** who had not slept in public places before the pandemic. This group had a more even mix of men and women, who were still connected to their families even though relationships were strained. They used to move frequently between open market rentals and staying with family and friends, and sought housing support voluntarily after the pandemic started.

- **Transnational homeless persons** were Singaporeans who were living in Malaysia or Indonesia but frequently travelled to Singapore before the pandemic for work or visa renewal, and were displaced by border closures in 2020. These were almost all men; some had a spouse and children in their adoptive countries. Most were directed to the shelter by immigration authorities.

Participants' experiences reveal the wide range of things that people do to find housing when they have little financial means and social support, and the lack of accessible and adequate housing options in those circumstances.

Across the three groups, there were common factors that contributed to their homelessness. These are the dynamics of housing insecurity in Singapore.

- **Family conflict led to the loss of housing when marriages failed or people had to move out.** These were complex problems which felt irreversible. Relationships had broken down to the extent that even in a crisis like the pandemic, it was not possible to live with family.

- **Depending on extended family and friends for housing was not a long-term solution.** Many such arrangements ended when participants could no longer make a financial contribution or due to the friction of living together. The end could be abrupt and leave people without housing options.

- **Insecure work and income were at the heart of housing insecurity.** Homelessness was accompanied by irregular work, in-work poverty and inability to meet basic needs. Purchasing housing was not an option in these circumstances. For those in receipt of public financial assistance, it was often insufficient in amount and duration.

- **Among older people, physical and mental health problems were common and affected income stability.** Not all who seemed to require treatment and support were receiving it regularly.

- **The sustainability of open market rentals depended on cost and the kindness of landlords.** Keeping up with rents on low incomes was challenging. Tenants experienced many problems with landlords and could be asked to leave on short notice. Moving around was common and led to makeshift arrangements and eventually, for some, rough sleeping.

- **The public rental housing system contributed directly to homelessness.** Irrationalities in policies, especially the Joint Singles Scheme which requires applicants to pair up, created barriers to access and opportunities for conflict among tenants that led to exit from rental housing.

- **The conditions of rough sleeping were harsh and more difficult for women.** Basic needs such as safety, meals, hygiene and access to toilets were constant concerns. For women, even those with long-term experiences of rough sleeping, the situation never felt manageable.

- **The pandemic triggered admission to the shelter, but was not the dominant cause of housing insecurity.** Because of COVID-19, many jobs were lost, borders were closed and rough sleeping became unlawful. But the social context, economic circumstances and institutional barriers related to participants' housing insecurity had been present long before.

It was striking how similar the basic dynamics of housing insecurity were across the three groups. It was difficult to distinguish those participants who had slept rough before, from others who had not. Only very fragile living arrangements were holding back the latter from the streets. Policymakers and researchers must approach homelessness with a broader perspective, paying attention to its diverse forms and common underlying factors instead of focusing only on rough sleeping.

Policies and services

The pandemic might have triggered a crisis for homeless people, but their housing insecurity had often started long before COVID-19. The set of social conditions, economic circumstances and institutional obstacles related to their homelessness in the pandemic were not an anomaly or a one-off. Lessons must therefore be learnt from those elements of state intervention that were considered successful during this period, to inform the long-term response to homelessness beyond the pandemic.

The first step in intervention is identifying problems early and offering help. The efficient mobilisation of frontline public agencies to offer help to rough sleepers during the pandemic demonstrates the impact of a whole-of-government approach. It is not uncommon for homeless people to come into contact with public institutions – these are opportunities for intervention. Agencies such as the police and NParks can adopt a more consistent practice to flag housing insecurity and refer people for support. Organisations such as SSOs and hospitals must be more proactive in identifying housing problems. When social work agencies such as FSCs advocate for their homeless clients, public agencies must respond in a more collaborative and transparent way.

Exits from homelessness depend on accessible and adequate housing options. In a public housing system dominated by owner occupation, public rental housing will always be the last safety net for the most vulnerable members of society and the main exit option from homelessness. Unfortunately, problems in its current design – especially the requirement for two singles to share a small flat with no bedrooms – make it a major barrier to housing security and a significant contributing factor to homelessness. The formal eligibility rules must be fairer and accord priority to people who are at risk of homelessness or already homeless, and basic standards of space and privacy must be assured.

Poverty is at the heart of housing insecurity. A prominent theme in the interviews was in-work poverty, the result of low wages and insecure work with no assured hours and pay. The 2021 announcement that the Progressive Wage Model would be extended to new job sectors and occupations is a major move and should provide a much-needed boost to wages at the bottom. Its impact must be closely watched.

Outside the wage economy, there are homeless persons who cannot find work or are unable to work due to health problems. Their main recourse is public financial assistance, but amounts are currently insufficient for meeting basic needs. In debates about the adequacy of financial assistance, it is important to bear in mind the consequences of economic vulnerability, including homelessness.

Research directions

The next stage of homelessness research in Singapore must be based on the recognition that homelessness takes different forms. This study has made a start by introducing shelter occupancy numbers alongside street count figures and by interviewing a group of shelter residents. Future research must continue to include both indicators and delve into other aspects of homeless shelters: the profiles of residents, duration and conditions of stay, exit destinations and long-term outcomes.

Research should also take into account tertiary homelessness – living in insecure and inadequate accommodation. This includes publishing more detailed data on homeless persons residing long-term in the state-run welfare and sheltered homes. It also requires the treatment of *housing* research and *homelessness* research as connected parts of the same whole. This will help to resist the compartmentalisation of housing and homelessness as separate policy issues, and identify policy changes that can help people before they end up rough sleeping and ease them back more smoothly into stable housing.

This study uncovered broad themes on gender differences in the experiences of housing insecurity and homelessness. Women feel more anxious about safety when sleeping rough and some avoid it at all costs. Their housing insecurity comes from dependence on the goodwill of relatives and friends. This is still an under-researched area that needs much more attention.

Street counts of homelessness should be carried out every few years to provide timely guidance for policy and service planning. This implies that responsibility for these counts must one day pass to public agencies. Any street count led by the state should meet high standards of rigour, independence and transparency.

The years since the first nationwide street count of homelessness have been universally challenging. To be homeless in a pandemic is to experience even sharper dislocation and hardship. Unexpectedly, there have also been strong gains: homelessness has moved up the policy agenda and is now firmly in the public eye. Research can continue to play a key role to shore up the increased awareness and encourage change, so that housing that provides security, peace and dignity can become a reality for all.

INTRODUCTION

In normal times, homelessness is already one of the harshest forms of social exclusion, related to a range of other challenges such as economic vulnerability, physical and mental health problems, and social disaffiliation (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012; Oppenheimer et al., 2016; Sylvestre et al., 2018). In many countries, the COVID-19 pandemic had a disproportionate impact on homeless people living on the streets. Their numbers grew as unemployment, poverty and eviction rates climbed (Benavides & Nukpezah, 2020; Benfer et al., 2021). Neither exposed public spaces nor crowded shelters seemed to offer adequate protection from infection. Border closures turned many labour migrants into a new group of homeless persons. Singapore was no exception. In April 2020, as the country entered lockdown, known locally as the circuit breaker, the homeless shelters reached capacity and an unprecedented call was made for businesses, NGOs and households to open their premises to rough sleepers (Liu, 2020). Public agencies quickly expanded the network of temporary shelters with help from voluntary organisations and religious groups.

This study took place in 2021, the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic. The aim was to capture the state of homelessness in Singapore in an exceptionally difficult time. It wanted to know: What was the level of street homelessness in 2021 and how did it compare with the situation before COVID-19? Given the widely-reported relocation of homeless persons into shelters, how did the size of the shelter population change? What were the causes and experiences of homelessness? To what extent did the pandemic alter the nature of housing insecurity in Singapore? What lessons may be learnt for tackling homelessness in the future?

The report consists of six sections. Following this introduction, the second section reviews the context of the study: the homelessness literature, the impact of COVID-19 and homelessness research in Singapore. The third section outlines the research design and explains the methodological considerations and procedures. Section four presents results from the street count. As this was the second nationwide street count, the figures could be compared with those from the

first street count in 2019, before the pandemic. A significant extension is the introduction of occupancy data from the temporary homeless shelters between 2019 and 2021, providing for the first time a combined picture of primary and secondary homelessness in Singapore. Section five reports findings from in-depth qualitative interviews with a group of shelter residents, covering a range of topics from family relationships and livelihoods to housing experiences and gender. The final section summarises what has been learnt and offers recommendations for policies, services and research.

CONTEXT

WHAT IS HOMELESSNESS?

To be homeless is to lack access to adequate housing. In housing research, housing adequacy is conceived along three dimensions: *security* in terms of tenure, affordability and exclusive occupation; *physical adequacy* in terms of amenities, hygiene, safety and space; and *social adequacy* in terms of privacy, control of the use of space and conduciveness for social relationships (Busch-Geertsema et al., 2015). UN-Habitat (2009) aptly sums up these dimensions as security, peace and dignity.

Homelessness may take different forms (Busch-Geertsema et al., 2015; Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, n.d.). The first category is *primary or street homelessness*, also known as rough sleeping or being roofless. This is when people do not have accommodation and sleep in public spaces not intended for human habitation. Next is *secondary homelessness* or being houseless. This refers to people in temporary, crisis or transitional accommodation such as overnight shelters, and others who move frequently because they lack permanent housing. The third is relative or *tertiary homelessness*, which includes people living in insecure and inadequate accommodation, and at risk of losing their accommodation. Insecurity may arise from challenges such as housing costs, threat of eviction, family violence, and health problems that compromise capacity for independent living. Tertiary homelessness also includes people living in longer-term shelters, temporarily with family and friends, and in substandard or overcrowded conditions.

This study addresses several different forms of homelessness in Singapore: street homelessness, people who lived in temporary shelters during the pandemic, and experiences of long-term housing insecurity that, for some, included frequently crossing the border between Singapore and neighbouring countries. While their experiences are diverse, the challenges they face all relate to a common fundamental deprivation of adequate housing.

EXPLAINING HOMELESSNESS

Research on the contributing factors to homelessness has largely settled on three groups of explanations: economic conditions such as poverty, unemployment and low wages; institutional barriers to housing, shelters and other support services; and individual circumstances such as traumatic life events, physical and mental health issues, addictions, breakdown of family relationships, and family violence (Bramley & Fitzpatrick, 2018). Homelessness is a process that unfolds as these factors interact (Fitzpatrick et al., 2013; Piat, et al., 2015). For instance, people with mental health issues may become homeless when they encounter a financial setback and are unable to access informal social support and shelters.

Yet in many places, homelessness remains a contentious issue and homeless people are a target of competing narratives (Schneider & Ingram, 1993). It is not uncommon to hear the term "choice" used casually, either to suggest that homelessness is a personal or lifestyle choice by people who in fact have better housing options, or that it is a fair and foreseeable outcome of poor decisions about work participation, personal finances and so on. Although such narratives have weak empirical bases (Allison, 2007; Ketchell, 2018; Parsell & Parsell, 2012), they blend seamlessly into neoliberal, anti-welfare discourses that locate the causes and solutions of social problems within individuals, their behaviour and their attitudes, rather than wider social structures and economic conditions. In Singapore, where homeownership is both a norm and an ideology, homelessness is sometimes defined away by focusing on legal property rights. In this line of thought, rough sleepers are not considered homeless as long as they have legal occupancy rights to a residential property, even when practical barriers such as marital breakdown or family violence may prevent them from accessing the housing.

While narratives are ideational in nature, they have material consequences for homeless people, including the way they are treated by public policies. Where reasons for homelessness are thought to lie mainly in individual decisions, homeless persons are seen as less deserving of public resources. In response, services tend to be selective and paternalistic, and seek in equal parts to support and to rehabilitate the person. Where the explanatory lens is wider, there is greater pressure on policymakers to intervene through more preventive and comprehensive strategies that address multiple dimensions of social exclusion and disadvantage.

HOMELESS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic has had far-reaching impact on homeless populations around the world. Homelessness spiked in many countries due to an increase in unemployment, poverty and evictions (Benavides & Nukpezah, 2020; Benfer et al., 2021). Homeless persons sleeping in public spaces during the pandemic faced physical and mental health challenges (Udechukwu et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2021), while those in overcrowded shelters were exposed to higher risks of infection (Baggett & Gaeta, 2021). Economically marginalised labour migrants saw their livelihoods disrupted and were physically displaced by travel restrictions (Shahare, 2021). The policy response has been vigorous, including introducing emergency food and shelter services; stepping up outreach, rental assistance and temporary housing; suspending evictions; distributing personal hygiene items; and providing health and safety information (Fitzpatrick et al., 2020; Honorato & Oliviera, 2020; Kelleher & Norris, 2020; OECD, 2021; Parsell et al., 2020; Wilczek, 2020). In the United Kingdom and Germany, rules that normally excluded migrants from accessing housing and welfare support were temporarily lifted (Barbu et al., 2021).

Singapore reported its first imported case of COVID-19 in late January 2020. Local clusters soon emerged and the Disease Outbreak Response System Condition (DORSCON) level was raised from yellow to orange in February. Travel restrictions and public health regulations were tightened in the following weeks as the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 outbreak a global pandemic. The first deaths from the disease in Singapore were recorded by late March. In April 2020, as Singapore entered the circuit breaker, infections surged among migrant workers living in crammed dormitories. Meanwhile, the media began to report rising numbers of homeless people seeking shelter as public spaces became inaccessible. At one point, some homeless shelters reached capacity and an unprecedented call was issued for businesses, NGOs and households to open their premises to rough sleepers (Liu, 2020).

The government responded vigorously (Hansard, 4 May 2020). Agencies that normally had enforcement responsibilities on the frontlines, such as the police and the National Parks Board (NParks), helped to refer homeless people to shelters and social services. Religious groups, NGOs and private organisations stepped forward to join the network of voluntary overnight shelter providers known as S3Ps (Safe, Sound, Sleeping Places), as many of them were not able to operate normal services during

1. The housing authority responsible for public housing in Singapore.

the circuit breaker and had spare physical capacity (Goh, 2020). The Housing & Development Board (HDB)[1] turned vacant rental flats into temporary shelters. As COVID-19 restrictions eased and the number of temporary overnight shelters fell, the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) opened new shelters that would run on a permanent basis. In January 2021, two new transitional shelters providing short-term stays and social work support for homeless persons started service, increasing the total capacity of such shelters from 100 to 500 places (MSF, personal communication, November 23, 2021).

RESEARCHING HOMELESSNESS IN SINGAPORE

Research on homelessness in Singapore has made progress in recent years. A pilot street count of homelessness covering 25 sites was conducted in 2017 (Kok, 2017). Then in 2019, Singapore's first nationwide street count was completed, reporting a total of between 921 and 1,050 homeless persons (Ng, 2019). That study developed and verified the reliability of a method to systematically measure the extent of street homelessness, which was repeated in this study. It demonstrated the potential of a participatory and collaborative approach to research that involved members of public, voluntary groups and social service professionals. The fieldwork that year was conducted by 480 volunteers recruited from an open call and more than 20 NGOs. Apart from the numerical results, the study produced a range of other information on the geographical distribution, personal profile and socioeconomic circumstances of homeless persons. The findings were cited in Parliament and extensively reported in the media (Hansard, 4 March 2020; Hansard, "Addressing homelessness", 6 January 2020; Tan, 2019 November 9), and helped to keep the issue of homelessness in the public eye.

Policy responses accompanied these developments. Several NGOs and volunteer groups had been organising shelter and outreach services for homeless persons since the mid-2000s. In the past, mentions of homelessness in Singapore could draw a stern official response that rough sleepers were not technically homeless because they had housing under their name (Tan, 2019 October 20; see Channel NewsAsia, 2010). There was also "the threat of a heavy hand" – the fear that homeless persons could be involuntarily institutionalised under the statutory powers of the Destitute Persons Act (Tan, 2019 November 14). Of late, observers have noted a softening of policy tone and a more collaborative approach, as community efforts and public understanding of homelessness grew. After the pilot street

count in 2017, the government began to work more closely with homeless outreach groups. In 2019, the year that the first nationwide street count reported findings, the government formally launched a collective of partner organisations known as the PEERS Network (Partners Engaging and Empowering Rough Sleepers) – including public agencies, NGOs and community groups – to conduct outreach and refer homeless people to shelters and other forms of support. In Parliament, a statement by the Minister for Social and Family Development brought the government's definition of homelessness in line with the established understanding in housing research (Hansard, "Addressing homelessness", 6 January 2020):

> MSF considers a person to be homeless if he does not have access to housing. This includes people who have no home. It also includes rough sleepers who have homes but face difficulty returning for various reasons such as serious hoarding, or conflict with family members or co-tenants. We seek to assist all homeless people and rough sleepers in need of help, to ensure their safety and well-being.

He also stressed that statutory institutionalisation would be "the last resort" for a small proportion of rough sleepers who are assessed to be "destitute". Instead, the focus would be on a "community-based social work approach" that includes the network of partners doing outreach and referral (PEERS Network); the overnight shelters which are operated on a voluntary basis by religious and community groups (S3Ps); and the transitional shelters which are state-funded but independently operated.

This study took place at the intersection of these two trajectories: the abrupt intensification of housing insecurity brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the steady rise of homelessness on the policy agenda within a context of greater public, media and research attention.

METHOD

This study is a follow-up to the first nationwide street count in 2019 (Ng, 2019). It draws methodological lessons from the previous study and extends the line of enquiry. Table 1 compares the research designs in the two studies.

TABLE 1.
Research designs of two homelessness studies

2019	2021
• Nationwide street count: cumulative and single-night counts • Survey	• Nationwide street count: cumulative count • Shelter data • In-depth interviews

This study has three components:

- First, a nationwide street count using the same cumulative count method as in 2019, which allows the results to be compared. The single-night count in 2019 was not repeated.
- Second, the study took into account the temporary homeless shelter population, combining administrative data on shelter occupancy with street count figures for the first time. At a time when the pandemic had pushed many homeless people to move into shelters, this step was critical for presenting a fuller picture of the state of homelessness in Singapore.
- Third, it introduced in-depth qualitative interviews with shelter residents to document long-term experiences of homelessness as well as the insecurities of living with COVID-19. These interviews replaced the survey component in the 2019 study.

The rest of this section explains the underlying considerations and detailed procedures for the three components of the study.

Considerations

Although the homelessness literature offers a range of methods for conducting counts (Busch-Geertsema et al., 2015), there is a basic distinction between a cumulative count that covers all parts of Singapore over a period of time, and a single-night count (also known as a point-in-time count) where data are collected simultaneously on one night but in selected areas only.

Cumulative counts are often the only feasible way to cover a large geographical area like an entire state or country. But due to the possibility of homeless persons moving across zonal boundaries during the count period, they cannot rule out either over-counting (when the same homeless persons are counted more than once because they appear in different active count sites at different times) or under-counting (when homeless persons are omitted because they appear in sites where counts have either not started or just been completed).

In comparison, *single-night counts* can produce snapshots of the number of unique homeless individuals on a particular night. But considerable resources are required to mobilise and deploy a large number of fieldworkers at the same time and to coordinate a logistically complex data collection exercise that must be completed in just a few hours. Such counts therefore have to be contained within locations where homeless people are reliably known to be found, at the risk of leaving out homeless persons outside these sites.

Alternatively, jurisdiction-wide estimates may be derived using stratified geographical sampling, where geographical areas are first categorised based on the likelihood that there are homeless persons. Physical counts are then conducted in a small sample of low-probability sites and a large sample of high-probability sites, and statistical extrapolation is used to produce estimates of the total population of homeless people. This method was not considered for the study as it depends on a stable underlying geographical distribution of homelessness, which could not be assumed under the conditions of the pandemic.

The 2019 study adopted both cumulative and single-night count methods in order to assess the amount of variance between the results and the extent to which the geographical distribution of homelessness fluctuated over time. It found only a small

difference of 12% between the total figures produced by the cumulative and single-night counts. There was also a strong correlation in the geographical distribution of homelessness between the two counts. In other words, the single-count night, while far more resource-intensive, did not offer a significant methodological advantage in the Singapore context.

On the basis of these findings, this study employed the cumulative count method only. The method was also better suited to conditions at the time of the study. A single-night count where hundreds of fieldworkers had to gather at a single meeting point for a final briefing and deployment, as was done in 2019, would not have been possible under the social distancing measures in 2021.

Otherwise, in terms of the definition of homelessness, geographical coverage and count procedure, the street count in this study repeated the approach in 2019, to allow meaningful comparison of results across years.

Definition

The street count was interested in anyone who was asleep or going to sleep in public spaces. This approach is similar to the UK's definition of rough sleepers 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). To operationalise the notion of "going to sleep" in a precise and consistent way, the fieldworkers were instructed to only count persons meeting any of these three criteria:

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

Coverage and zoning

The street count covered 298 zones grouped into 25 districts across Singapore.

In public housing estates, which accounted for the majority of zones, each zone covered about 50 blocks of flats. Fieldworkers were instructed to check only the ground level of these buildings (ie void decks) and not the upper floors. Residential zones also usually contained neighbourhood parks and gardens, hawker centres, town centres, 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 cover all these sites as long as they could gain entry.

In the city and other non-residential areas, the size of each zone was based on what could be covered on foot in around two hours. Other unique sites where homeless persons were known to reside, according to informants and previous research, were also included.

Generally, private housing estates, schools, industrial and office buildings, and nature spots in remote locations were left out because they were inaccessible to the public.

Recruitment, training and deployment

Most of the fieldwork was conducted by volunteers. In total, more than 200 volunteers were recruited via advertisements on social media and electronic flyers sent to NGOs and tertiary educational institutions. Many of the volunteers who responded had experience from the 2019 study.

All the fieldworkers attended training which covered the layout of count sites, observation procedures, data recording, safety and confidentiality. They were also given printed maps of their assigned zones.

Each volunteer was typically assigned two zones, usually near to where they lived, both for convenience and familiarity. They were given two weeks to complete the assigned zones and could carry out the count on any day of the week as long as they started no earlier than 11.30pm.

Data recording

Fieldworkers had access to a cloud-based Observation Form and recorded data on-site using their mobile phones. The form contained mostly close-ended items, about where and at what time they sighted homeless persons, and their observations of the individuals' appearance, possessions, activity and environment.

The fieldworkers were reminded to decide who to record based on the study's definition of homelessness rather than personal assumptions about homeless persons' nationality, occupation or appearance. They were also asked to leave out people who were obviously using public spaces to socialise or work, eg friends chatting at a coffeeshop, or security and cleaning staff on night shift. In cases where they were unsure, they were instructed to record as much description as possible, so the researchers could make a judgement during data verification.

Every entry was later checked by the researchers and observations that fell short of the criteria of being asleep or going to sleep in a public space were removed.

Safety and ethics

During training, the fieldworkers were reminded to be respectful and discreet when conducting observations, and not to make homeless persons feel watched or uncomfortable. They were also explicitly disallowed from taking photographs of homeless persons and disclosing their locations on social media or other public platforms. Every fieldworker signed an Undertaking of Confidentiality.

The study recruited only volunteers aged 21 years old and above. Training was compulsory and addressed safe practices, such as being alert to the surroundings and refraining from entering areas that felt unsafe. For large parks, they were asked to cover only entrance and rest areas which were lit. Although fieldworkers were assigned zones individually, they were allowed to bring a companion during the exercise, provided they were the ones recording the data.

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

SHELTER DATA

In many places, homelessness counts include both rough sleepers (primary homelessness) and persons in temporary homeless shelters (secondary homelessness). Omitting the latter may cause underestimation of the size of the homeless population.

In Singapore, occupancy numbers for both state-funded, independently operated transitional shelters as well as overnight shelters run by NGOs (S3Ps, or Safe, Sound, Sleeping Places) are only announced occasionally.

Considering the large numbers of people driven into the shelters by the pandemic, it was particularly important to take into account the size of the shelter population this time round so as to accurately measure changes in the prevalence of homelessness since 2019. MSF helpfully agreed to furnish the data for this report.

IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

Considerations

In 2019, the single-night count included a survey component where fieldworkers approached the homeless persons they encountered and, with their consent, administered a structured questionnaire (ie made up of multiple-choice items) that took around ten minutes to complete. In the end, only a small proportion of the total number of persons sighted on the night participated in the survey because of practical reasons. For the count results to be robust, fieldworkers had to be deployed late enough so that people who were going to sleep outside would already have settled down in their chosen locations. They were also instructed not to wake any homeless person who was already asleep. This left only a small group who were visibly preparing to sleep and agreed to be interviewed. There was also a direct trade-off between data collection for the survey and the street count. The more time fieldworkers spent administering the questionnaire, the more likely they would not be able to cover the entire zone by the end of the night. Nonetheless, the findings from the survey helped to sketch a general picture of the social, economic and housing circumstances of some of the homeless persons included in the count.

This study therefore opted to replace the survey component with in-depth interviews with shelter residents. This is a qualitative method to be distinguished from surveys. It involves trained researchers conducting long and detailed conversations with participants lasting an hour or more, following semi-structured interview guides that contain conversation topics and open-ended questions which the interviewers use as prompts rather than follow verbatim. In contrast to surveys, in-depth interviews are better able to explore sensitive topics and discover the meanings that people bring to their social experiences.

Studies employing in-depth interviews typically have smaller samples than surveys as the data generated by each participant are much richer and the aim is not to perform frequency analyses or statistical tests of relationships between variables, for which large representative samples are required in survey-based quantitative studies.

In late 2020 and early 2021, the researchers conducted in-depth interviews with 51 residents at a temporary shelter for homeless persons. The objective was to understand their personal circumstances, housing histories and pathways into homelessness. The participants were recruited with the help of social workers and through snowballing. As this is a hard-to-reach population, and there has been no published research on shelter residents in Singapore, all residents who agreed to take part were accepted for the interviews.

Sample

Table 2 presents the profile of the interview participants. Most of them were men, aged 50 years and above, and Singapore citizens. The majority had up to secondary education, which limited their employment opportunities. Most were working or looking for work. About half were divorced or widowed. Among those who were married, many reported having estranged relationships with their spouse. Overall, the gender, age, marital, educational and employment profile of the participants is very similar to that of the homeless persons observed in the street count and who participated in the 2019 survey.

TABLE 2.
Profile of interview participants

		Number of Participants
Sex	Male	39
	Female	12
Age	Below 40	2
	40–49	9
	50–59	21
	60–69	11
	70–79	8
Race	Chinese	24
	Malay	24
	Indian	2
	Eurasian	1
Marital status	Single	9
	Married	17
	Divorced	22
	Widowed	3
Nationality	Singapore Citizen	47
	Singapore Permanent Resident	3
	Long-term Visit Pass	1
Last country of residence before pandemic	Singapore	29
	Malaysia	14
	Indonesia	8
Highest education	Primary and below	16
	Secondary	21
	Vocational/certificate	8
	Diploma	4
	Degree	1
Work status	Employed	23
	Unemployed	19
	Not working, not looking	8
Experience of rough sleeping	Yes	33
	No	17
Total		**51**

Numbers do not add up to 51 for all variables due to missing data.

Procedure

The researchers followed an interview guide that covered family and economic situations, housing histories, and experiences of rough sleeping and shelter living. Each interview lasted around 60 minutes and took place in-person at a public place, usually a food-court or fast-food restaurant. The interviews were audio

recorded and transcribed in full. Most of the interviews were in English. The Mandarin and Malay interviews were first transcribed in their original language before translation into English. Malay interviews were conducted with the help of an interpreter who later also did the transcription and translation. All participants provided informed consent and their names are replaced by pseudonyms in this report to protect their identities.

The qualitative analysis began with the coding of transcripts according to the major thematic interests of the study. Patterns were then identified along these themes for three sub-groups of homeless persons: those whose homelessness had been long-term, those who were newly homeless during the pandemic, and persons whose homelessness was related to transnational living arrangements.

RESEARCH DURING A PANDEMIC

The study took place during an opportune period after the lifting of the circuit breaker in mid-2020 and before the introduction of another round of public health restrictions in mid-2021 known as Heightened Alert. There was only one minor adaptation to research preparations. As social distancing requirements reduced the training venue capacity, fieldworkers for the street count had to be spaced out over more training sessions. Other than this, research operations were not affected by the pandemic.

The research team were also concerned about whether the situation on the ground might have changed in unanticipated ways due to earlier space closures, and whether the observation and data recording procedures from 2019 were still feasible. So the team conducted counts in a small number of zones at the start of the study before the fieldworkers were deployed, to get a sense of different public spaces and how homeless persons were adapting to them during the pandemic.

One obvious difference was that some places (eg hospitals) were no longer freely accessible to the public. This was not considered a major setback to data collection since places that were inaccessible to fieldworkers would presumably also be out of bounds to rough sleepers. Another observation from the test counts was that some homeless persons seemed to be more alert to passers-by than in the past and had chosen spots that were more hidden from public view. Fieldworkers were informed of this during training and advised to pay more attention to possible blind spots when conducting the count.

FINDINGS FROM STREET COUNT AND SHELTER DATA

KEY FINDINGS

This study produced, for the first time, a combined count of street homeless persons (ie primary homelessness) and residents in temporary homeless shelters (ie secondary homelessness) in Singapore.

Despite intense state intervention and the far-reaching impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the scale of homelessness did not change significantly between 2019 and 2021. The combined street homeless and temporary shelter populations declined by just 7%, from 1,115 before COVID-19 to 1,036 in the second year of the pandemic.

But the form of homelessness had changed, as primary homelessness declined and secondary homelessness rose. The number of street homeless persons fell from 1,050 in 2019 to 616 in 2021, a drop of 41%. On the other hand, occupancy in temporary shelters increased more than sixfold, from 65 to 420.

The street count found that the street homeless population in 2021 was comparable to that of 2019 in many ways:

- They were found in most parts of Singapore, with significant variation in prevalence across districts.
- Higher-count districts in 2019 continued to account for more homeless persons in 2021. At the district level, results were strongly correlated between the two street counts.
- More street homeless persons were found in larger, older and poorer neighbourhoods.
- Most of the homeless people were older Chinese men.

The main deviation from this overall pattern of consistency is a de-concentration of homelessness from the City district to residential districts.

- Although the City district still accounted for the largest number of homeless persons, its share of the total fell from 23% in 2019 to 12% in 2021.
- Instead of commercial buildings, homeless persons were more likely to be found in locations within residential neighbourhoods, such as void decks, pavilions, playgrounds, coffeeshops and hawker centres.
- This may reflect a retreat from areas that were more exposed to public view during the pandemic.

TOTAL HOMELESS POPULATION

Following from the definition of homelessness as lacking access to adequate housing, and the understanding that homelessness takes different forms, a comprehensive measure of the total homeless population in a society must include:

- **The number of people sleeping in public spaces (primary homelessness):** These are rough sleepers, whose number may be measured by street counts.

- **The number of residents in temporary shelters (secondary homelessness):** In Singapore, they are accommodated in the overnight shelters run by NGOs and the transitional shelters funded by the state. The number of people in this group may be tracked using shelters' administrative data.

- **The number of people at risk of losing accommodation because of housing costs, family violence and other challenges; and living temporarily with family and friends, in long-term shelters, and in substandard and overcrowded conditions (tertiary homelessness):** These forms of homelessness tend to be hidden and are hard to measure. Numbers may be estimated through household surveys, and administrative data from social services (eg family protection services) and long-term shelters (eg welfare homes and sheltered homes). Because of the difficult conditions facing tenants in the public rental housing[2] system, some of them belong to this category too.

2. This refers to social housing provided on a subsidised rental basis by the HDB.

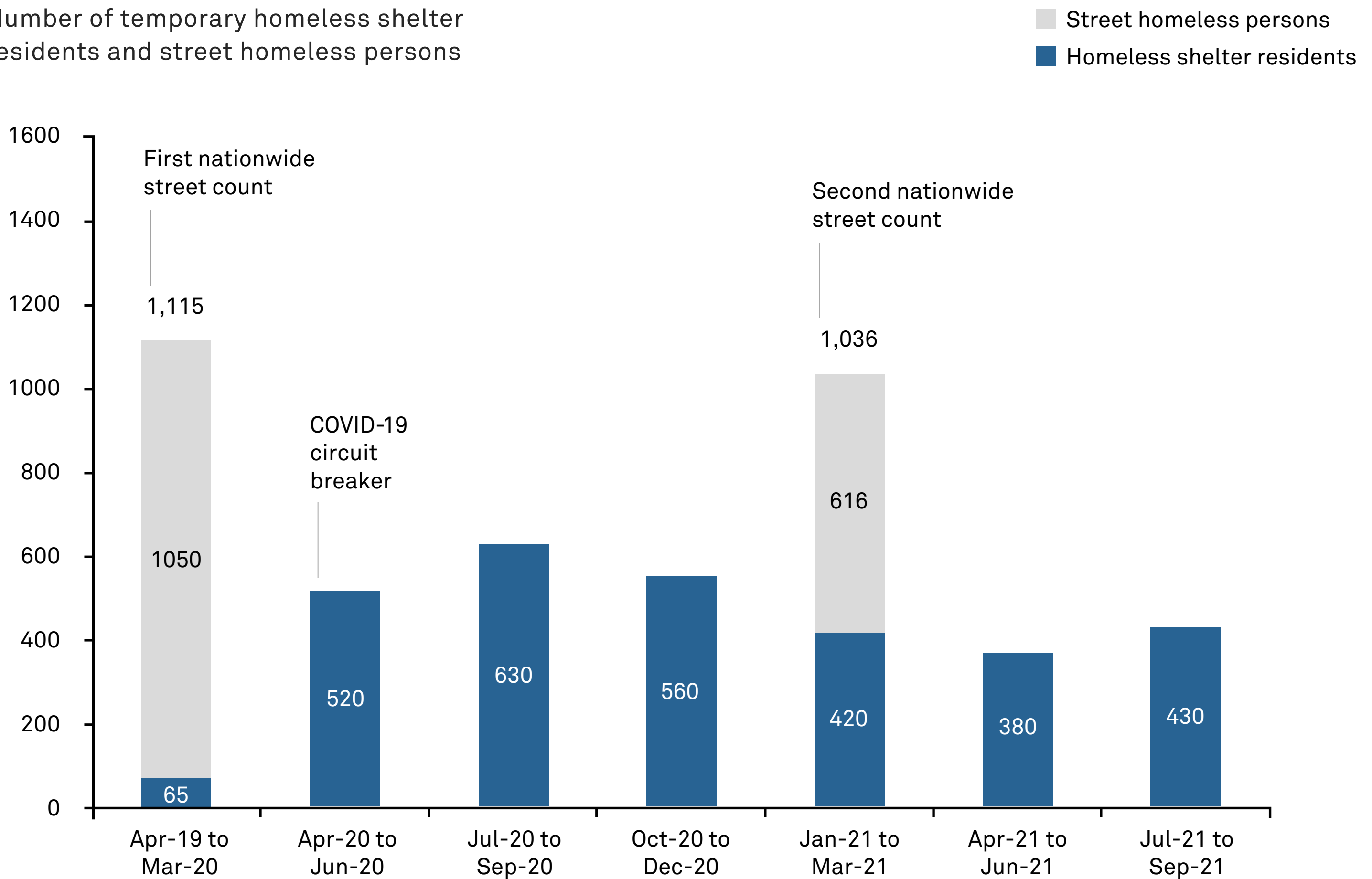
This section presents findings from the recent street count as well as occupancy data from temporary shelters over a longer period. Together, they provide a picture of primary and secondary homelessness in Singapore from 2019 to 2021. Tertiary homelessness remains an understudied area requiring much more research in future. The next section of the report on the in-depth interviews with shelter residents reveals some of their experiences of such long-term housing insecurity before they entered the shelters.

STREET COUNT AND OCCUPANCY IN TEMPORARY SHELTERS

Figure 1 presents the combined number of street homeless persons and temporary homeless shelter residents in Singapore at the points of the two street counts in 2019 and this study.[3] It also shows shelter population numbers on a quarterly basis from April 2020 to September 2021. This is the first time a fuller picture of primary and secondary homelessness in Singapore

has been made available. As can be seen, reliance on shelter numbers alone – or indeed street count numbers alone once the pandemic started – would have led to a serious underestimation.

FIGURE 1.
Number of temporary homeless shelter residents and street homeless persons



Street homeless figures are based on nationwide street counts conducted in 2019 and 2021. Shelter figures are averages of month-end occupancy numbers in each period provided by MSF.

3. These are best estimates based on the available data. Shelter figures are averages of month-end occupancy numbers in each period. The figure for April 2019 to March 2020 is for state-funded transitional shelters only as MSF did not track occupancy in overnight shelters operated by NGOs prior to April 2020, whereas figures from April 2020 onwards are based on both types of shelters. For the period April 2019 to March 2020, the total capacity (as distinguished from occupancy) of the transitional and overnight shelters was 130 places. Hypothetically, if all these places had been filled, the total homeless population including street homeless persons would have been 1,180 before COVID-19, and the difference between then and 2021 would be 12%.

Despite intense state intervention and the far-reaching impact of the pandemic, the combined size of the street homeless and temporary shelter populations remained fairly stable. The total number showed only a gentle decline of 7%, from 1,115 at the point of the first street count before COVID-19, to 1,036 in the second year of the pandemic. Within these aggregates, the two indicators for street homelessness and shelter occupancy moved in opposite directions.

- Street homelessness fell from 1,050 in 2019 to 616 in 2021, a sharp decrease of 41%. This is to be expected, considering the strict regulations about residing indoors during the circuit breaker and greater public watchfulness about people sleeping

in common spaces. That there were still more than 600 people on the streets is perhaps more surprising.

- Meanwhile, shelter occupancy surged from 65 at the time of the first street count to 420 in the second, a more than sixfold increase. In fact, shelter numbers were already subsiding by the time the 2021 street count happened, following a peak in the third quarter of 2020. This trend reflects the dramatic initial expansion of shelter capacity in response to large numbers of homeless people seeking help around the time of the circuit breaker, followed by a steady rate of exits from the shelters after that period. According to MSF (personal communication, November 23, 2021), the number of organisations operating overnight shelters increased from 7 to 45 during the circuit breaker and provided up to 920 places at one point. As some of these organisations resumed their normal worship and business activities after the circuit breaker and had to scale down their shelter services, capacity was maintained by new transitional shelters.

Figure 1 shows snapshots of the homeless population. It does not indicate in and out flow – the number of persons who became street homeless or entered the temporary shelters each month, or who exited these situations. Current research on the impact of COVID-19 suggests strongly that housing insecurity had increased since 2020. In Singapore, the displacement of people with transnational living arrangements also created a new group of homeless persons (see Section 5). It is therefore very likely that the total number of people affected by homelessness had in fact increased in 2021. That the totals in 2019 and 2021 are so close may be due to exit rates keeping up with the higher rate of entry into homelessness. These exits could have happened through access to public rental housing, help from family and friends, improvements to work and financial situations, and the easing of pandemic-related regulations. MSF (personal communication, November 23, 2021) reported that more than 470 people transited from the shelters into longer-term housing between April 2020 and November 2021, an average of about 24 persons per month. A deeper understanding of the impact of COVID-19 would require detailed data on shelter admissions and exits throughout 2019 to 2021 (ie before and after the onset of COVID-19), and the type of housing arrangements that shelter residents moved on to.

It is striking that a year into a global pandemic that reshaped so many aspects of social life and economic order, the scale of homelessness in Singapore had not changed significantly. Only the form of homelessness did, as primary homelessness was partially replaced by secondary homelessness.

STREET HOMELESSNESS

TOTAL NUMBER OF STREET HOMELESS PERSONS FELL BY 41% SINCE 2019 BUT GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION REMAINED CONSISTENT.

Based on the street count in this study, there were 616 homeless persons in 2021, including 435 who were already asleep and 181 who were going to sleep in public spaces. The fieldworkers recorded 773 observations, but data checks removed 157 entries which did not meet the definition set in this study for people going to sleep. Compared to 2019, the final count had fallen by 41%.

Figure 2 shows the geographical distribution of the observations based mainly on URA Planning Area boundaries. Observations from isolated and outlying high-count locations that may be easily identified have been left out to ensure confidentiality.

FIGURE 2.
Geographical distribution of street homeless persons

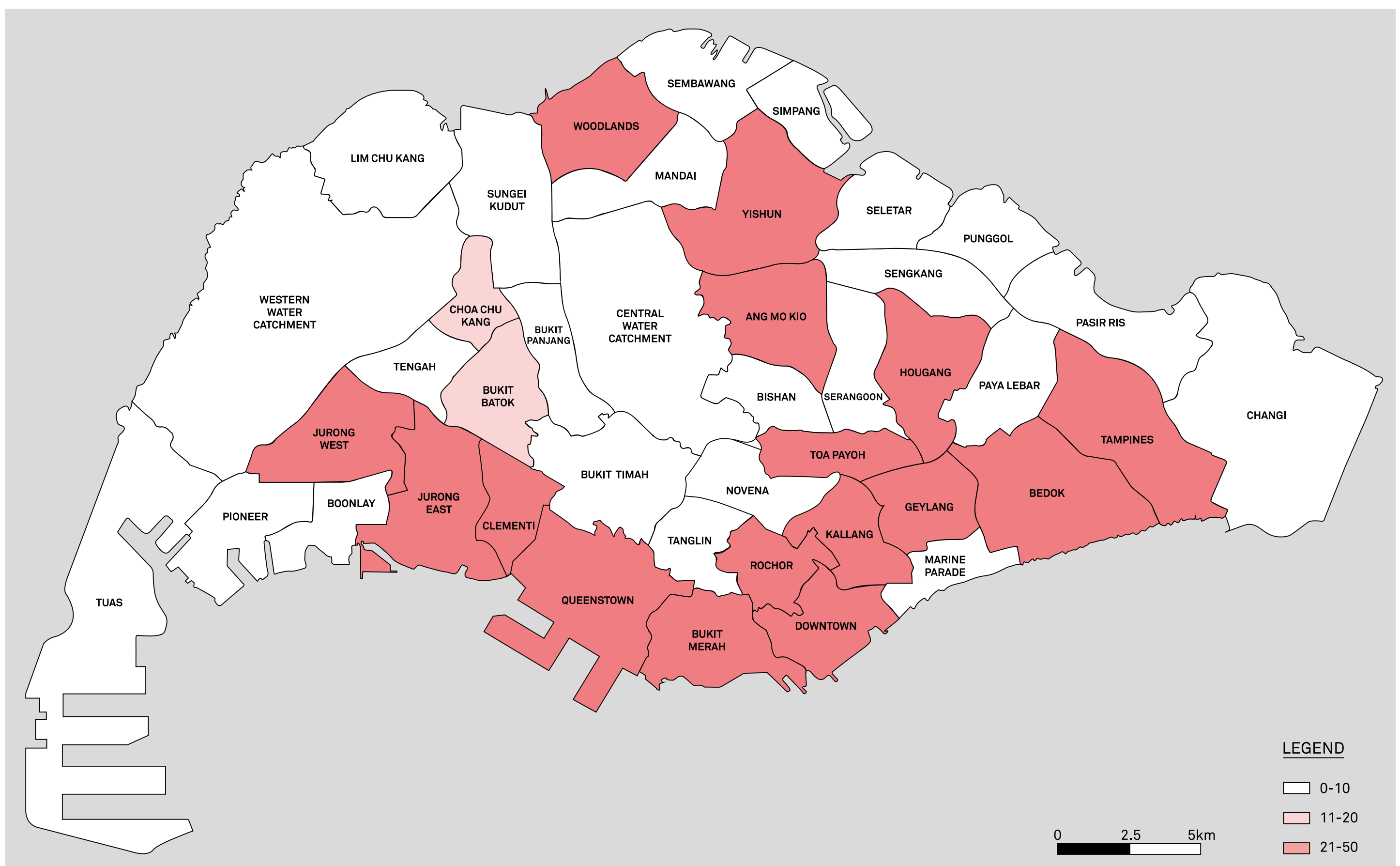


TABLE 3.
Number of street homeless persons by district in 2021 and 2019

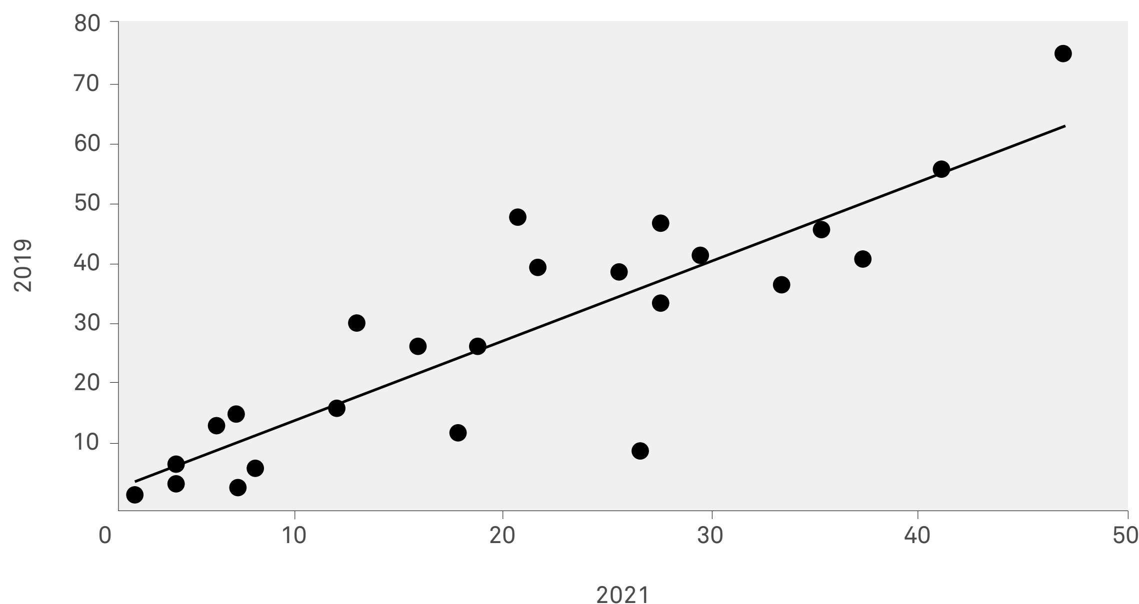
	2021		2019*	
DISTRICT	**NUMBER OF PERSONS**	**%**	**NUMBER OF PERSONS**	**%**
City	72	12%	241	23%
Bedok	47	8%	74	7%
Kallang	41	7%	55	5%
Yishun	37	6%	40	4%
Jurong West	35	6%	45	4%
Woodlands	33	5%	36	3%
Toa Payoh	29	5%	41	4%
Ang Mo Kio	27	4%	46	4%
Tampines	27	4%	33	3%
Queenstown	26	4%	9	<1%
Clementi	25	4%	38	4%
Hougang	21	3%	39	4%
Tiong Bahru	20	3%	47	4%
Jurong East	18	3%	26	2%
Choa Chu Kang	17	3%	12	1%
Bukit Merah	15	2%	26	2%
Bukit Batok	12	2%	30	3%
Serangoon	11	2%	16	2%
Bukit Panjang	7	1%	6	<1%
Bishan	6	<1%	15	1%
Sengkang	6	<1%	3	<1%
Pasir Ris	5	<1%	13	1%
Punggol	3	<1%	7	<1%
Sembawang	3	<1%	4	<1%
Bukit Timah	1	<1%	2	<1%
Others^	72	12%	146	14%
Total	**616**	**100%**	**1,050**	**100%**

Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding.
^Outlier high-count sites
*Based on cumulative count

Even with the sharp dip in total count, homelessness remained geographically widespread at the district level. Similar to 2019, counts were reported in all 25 districts in 2021, with significant variation in density: ranging from just one observation in Bukit Timah to 72 in the City district (Table 3). The average count was 22 homeless persons per district.

The general pattern of geographical distribution is also unchanged. The City, Bedok, and Kallang districts still returned the highest counts, while districts such as Bukit Panjang, Sengkang, Punggol, Sembawang and Bukit Timah produced fewer than

FIGURE 3.
Correlation between number of street homeless persons by district in 2021 and 2019



For the purpose of presentation, the outlying data point for the City district has been omitted.

ten observations in both years. As a proportion of the total counts, the results varied by no more than two percentage points between 2019 and 2021 in all but three districts. Figure 3 shows the strong correlation between the results of the two street counts at district level (r=0.85).

DE-CONCENTRATION OF STREET HOMELESSNESS FROM CITY TO RESIDENTIAL DISTRICTS WHERE ABSOLUTE NUMBERS INCREASED IN A FEW AREAS.

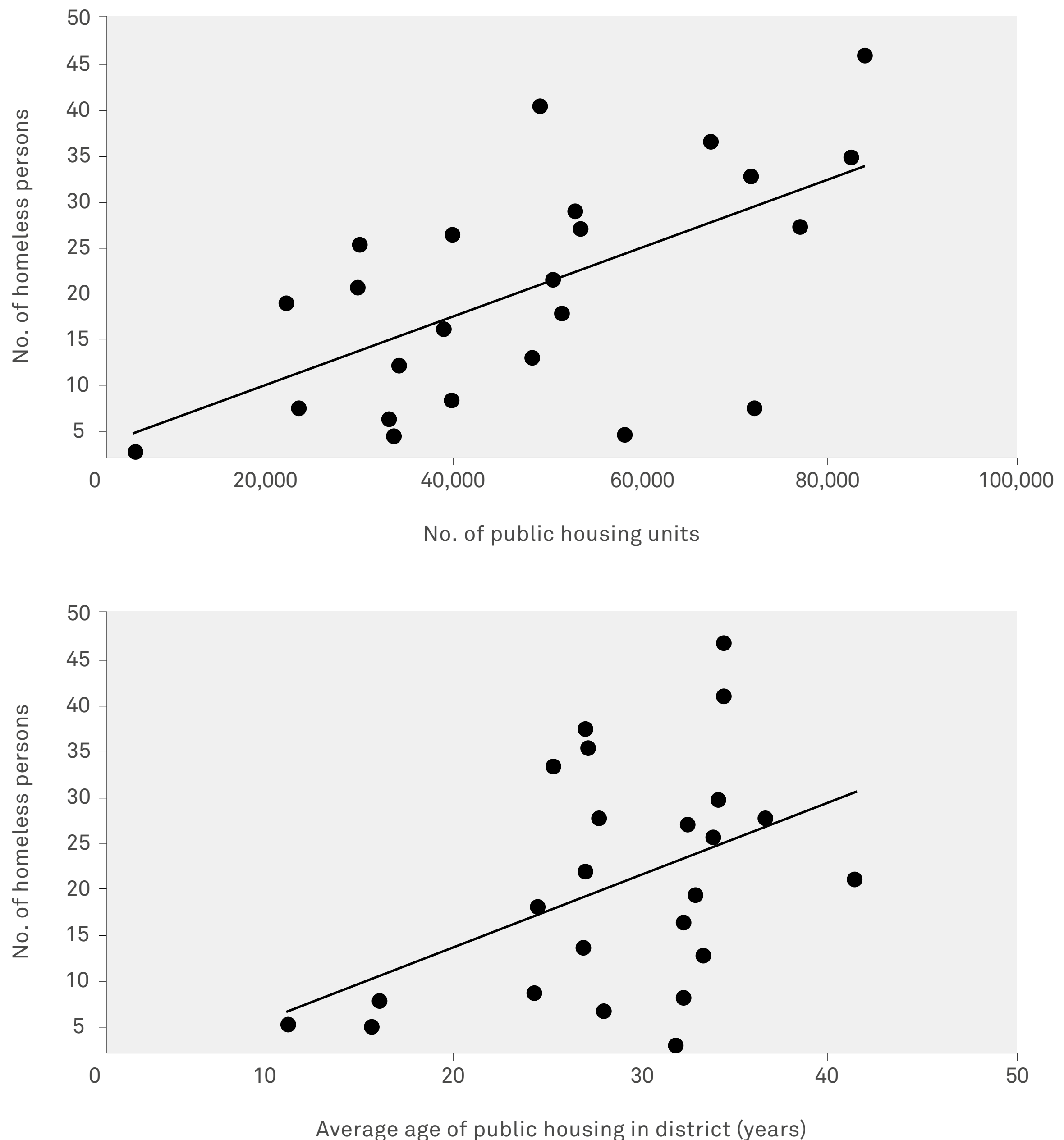
The only deviation from this overall pattern of consistency is a noticeable de-concentration of homelessness from the City district to residential districts. This may reflect a retreat from areas that were more exposed to public view during the pandemic. Although the City district still accounted for the largest number of homeless persons in 2021, the proportion of counts contributed by this district fell to just 12%, compared to 23% in 2019. Its share of counts was redistributed to many residential districts across different parts of Singapore, such as Jurong West, Woodlands, Yishun, Toa Payoh, Kallang and Bedok. Queenstown recorded the largest increase, from less than 1% of the total number in 2019 to 4% in 2021.

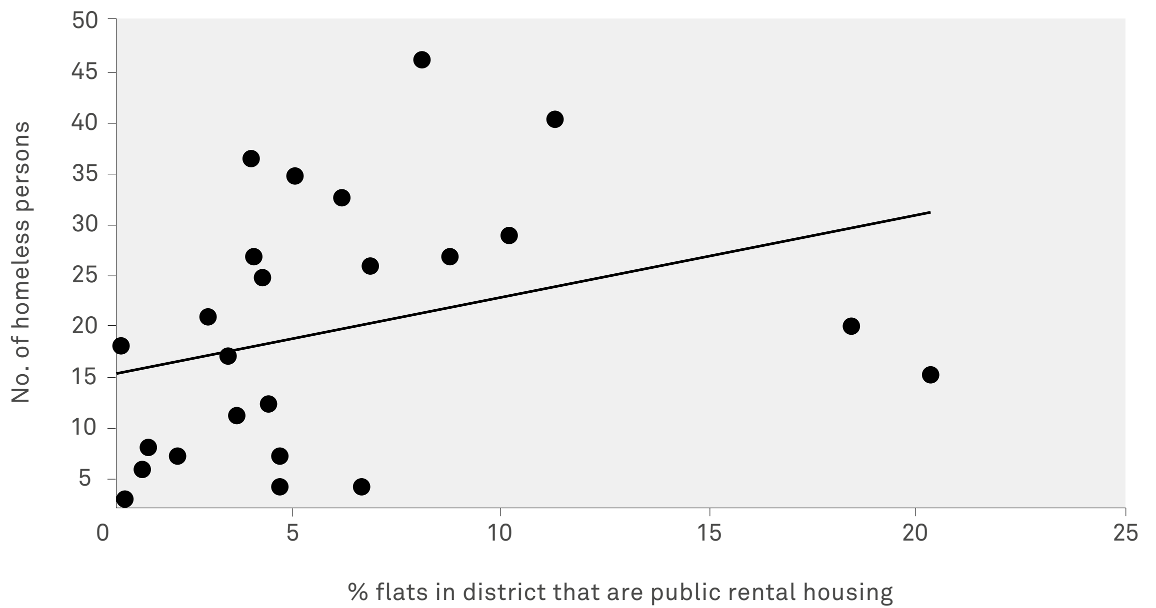
Although the national count fell by 41%, many residential districts saw smaller decreases. In fact, the absolute numbers increased by 17 in Queenstown and 5 in Choa Chu Kang. There were also marginal increases, albeit from lower baselines, in Bukit Panjang and Sengkang.

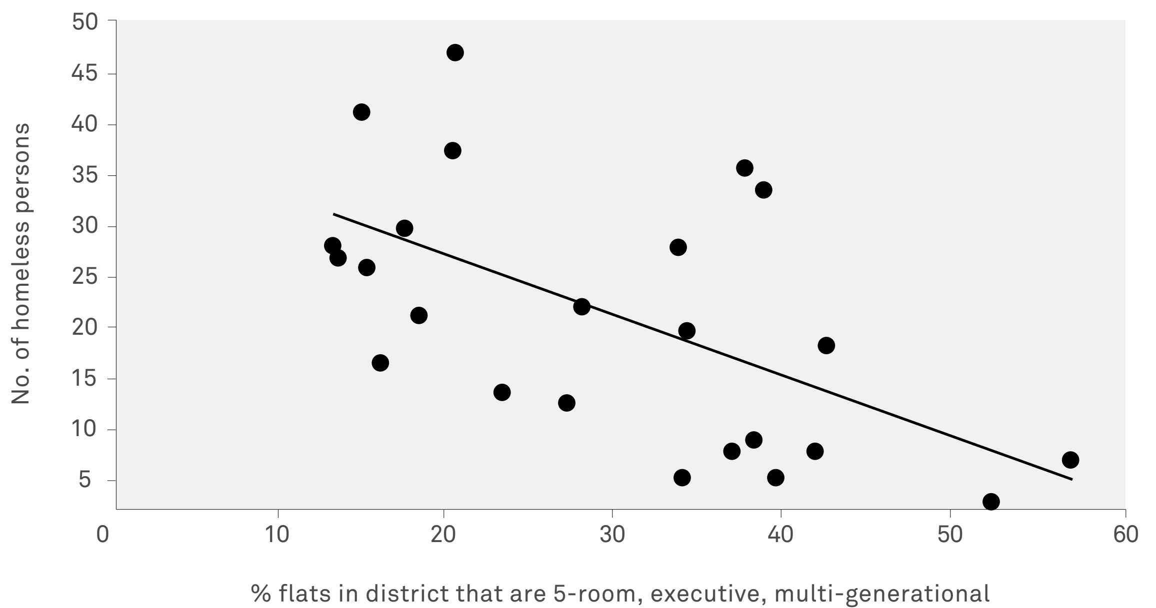
SIMILAR TO 2019, MORE STREET HOMELESS PERSONS WERE FOUND IN LARGER, OLDER AND POORER NEIGHBOURHOODS.

The underlying relationships between homelessness and the composition of public housing in each district, first detected in the 2019 street count, remain intact (Figure 4). More street homeless persons were found in districts with more public housing units (r=0.60) and older housing stock (r=0.44), and where there were more public rental housing (r=0.30) and fewer large flats (ie 5-room, executive, and multi-generational flats, r=-0.58) within the housing stock. If public housing is an indicator of economic profile, then homelessness remained more prevalent in poorer neighbourhoods. This may be expected when poverty is a risk factor for housing displacement and homeless persons prefer to sleep in neighbourhoods where they used to live.

FIGURE 4.
Correlations between number of street homeless persons and public housing stock by district







THE TYPICAL PROFILE OF HOMELESS PERSONS WAS SIMILAR TO 2019. MOST WERE OLDER CHINESE MEN.

The profile of homeless persons has been remarkably stable. The majority of homeless persons in both years were men (83% in 2021 and 87% in 2019). Women made up a tenth of the counts (12% in 2021 and 10% in 2019). According to the fieldworkers' observations, 49% of homeless persons in 2021 were Chinese, 14% were Malay, and 16% were Indian (compared to 46% Chinese, 16% Malay and 11% Indian in 2019). In terms of age, 45% of the homeless persons were judged to be in their 50s or older, 38% between their 20s and 40s, and just 0.5% were below 20 years old (compared to 51%, 33% and 0.7% respectively in 2019). The fieldworkers were not able to make a firm judgement about age and ethnicity in the remaining cases.

INSTEAD OF COMMERCIAL BUILDINGS, HOMELESS PERSONS WERE MORE LIKELY TO BE FOUND IN LOCATIONS WITHIN RESIDENTIAL NEIGHBOURHOODS.

The results in terms of locations corroborate the earlier observation that homelessness had shifted from the City district to residential districts (Table 4). Compared to 2019, there was a sharp decline in the proportion of homeless persons found in commercial spaces (from 29% to 12%). Instead, homeless persons were more likely to be in locations within public housing neighbourhoods, such as void decks (increase from 32% to 35%), pavilions and playgrounds (from 10% to 14%), and coffeeshops and hawker centres (from 6% to 11%). The percentage of homeless persons found in parks also doubled from 6% to 12%.

TABLE 4.
Locations of street homeless persons in 2021 and 2019

	PERCENTAGE OF HOMELESS PERSONS	
TYPE OF LOCATION	2021	2019*
Void decks	35	32
Commercial buildings	12	29
Pavilions, playgrounds	14	10
Parks	12	6
Coffee-shops, hawker centres	11	6
Fast-food restaurants	<1	2
Community Clubs	2	2
Sports facilities	2	1
Others^	13	11
Total	**100**	**100**

Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding.
^Eg MRT stations, bus terminals, places of worship, carparks and other unique sites
*Based on single-night count

FINDINGS FROM INTERVIEWS WITH SHELTER RESIDENTS

KEY FINDINGS

All the interview participants were residents of a temporary homeless shelter. They had arrived at the shelter at around the same time in the middle of 2020, with a range of experiences with housing insecurity before. The study identified three distinct groups among the participants.

- **Long-term homeless persons** who had been rough sleeping even before the pandemic hit Singapore in February 2020.
- **Newly homeless persons** who had not slept in public places before the pandemic.
- **Transnational homeless persons** were Singaporeans who were living in Malaysia or Indonesia but frequently travelled to Singapore before the pandemic for work or visa renewal, and were displaced by border closures in 2020.

Their profiles, backgrounds and housing experiences are summarised in Table 5.

TABLE 5.
Three types of homelessness during the COVID-19 pandemic

	Long-term homeless persons	Newly homeless persons	Transnational homeless persons
Sex	More men than women	Mix of men and women	Almost all men
Age	From 30s to 70s	From 30s to 70s	Mostly in their 50s
Family relationships	Almost all divorced, separated or never married; past conflict and estrangement, many had lost contact entirely	Almost all divorced, separated or never married; family relationships distant and strained, but still connected	Long-term drift and overseas travel, still connected to family, some started new families in Malaysia or Indonesia
Work and finances	Low-wage and insecure jobs, extreme poverty	Low-wage and insecure jobs, a few with better-paying jobs in the past, difficulty meeting basic needs	Regular border crossings for low-wage and insecure jobs in Singapore, informal work for a few outside Singapore
Housing histories	Lost matrimonial home or never purchased housing, encountered barriers in public rental system, episodes of low-cost market rentals	Lost matrimonial home or never purchased housing; moved frequently between family, friends and low-cost market rentals	Lived in Malaysia or Indonesia, encountered difficulties obtaining public housing in Singapore for non-citizen family
Rough sleeping	From a few months to many years, pre-dates pandemic	No more than a few days when displaced during the pandemic	Wide range of experiences, during trips to Singapore for some, none at all for others
Entry to shelter	Found while rough sleeping during pandemic, some self-referrals	Self-referrals when pandemic disrupted housing arrangements	Most were stopped at immigration checkpoint and directed to shelter after border closures

Across the three groups, there were common factors that contributed to their homelessness. These are the dynamics of housing insecurity in Singapore.

- **Family conflict led to the loss of housing when marriages failed or people had to move out.** These were painful experiences which felt irreversible. Relationships had broken down to the extent that even in a crisis like the pandemic, it was not possible to live with family.

- **Depending on extended family and friends for housing was not a long-term solution.** Many such arrangements ended when participants could no longer make a financial contribution or due to the friction of living together. The end could be abrupt and leave people without housing options.

- **Insecure work and income were at the heart of housing insecurity.** Homelessness was accompanied by irregular work, in-work poverty and inability to meet basic needs. Purchasing housing was not an option in these circumstances. For those in receipt of public financial assistance, it was often insufficient in amount and duration.

- **Among older people, physical and mental health problems were common and affected income stability.** Not all who seemed to require treatment were receiving it regularly.

- **The sustainability of open market rentals[4] depended on cost and the kindness of landlords.** Keeping up with rents on low incomes was challenging. Tenants experienced many problems with landlords and could be asked to leave on short notice. Moving around was common and led to makeshift arrangements and eventually, for some, rough sleeping.

- **The public rental housing system contributed directly to homelessness.** Irrationalities in policies, especially the Joint Singles Scheme, created barriers to access and opportunities for conflict among tenants that led to exit from rental housing. Failure to obtain rental housing and bad experiences as tenants were common in the housing histories of long-term homeless persons.

- **The conditions of rough sleeping were harsh and more difficult for women.** Basic needs such as safety, meals, hygiene and access to toilets were constant concerns. For women, even those with long-term experiences of rough sleeping, the situation never felt manageable.

- **The pandemic triggered admission to the shelter, but was not the dominant cause of housing insecurity.** Because of COVID-19, many jobs were lost, borders were closed and rough sleeping became unlawful. But the social context, economic circumstances and institutional barriers related to participants' housing insecurity had been present long before.

4. The majority of public housing in Singapore is sold and flat owners may rent out bedrooms for income. Most participants were referring to these when they talked about open market rentals.

Breakdown in family relationships

Without exception, all the participants in this group had experienced problems in their family relationships. There were historical misunderstandings with parents or siblings that led to participants leaving the family at a young age. One participant moved out to live on his own after he found out that his father was having an affair. A few had been cared for by grandparents or other relatives in their childhood and never felt close to their parents. Most of their marriages ended in divorce or separation. These were acrimonious breakups involving years of conflict, even violence. Many participants had not been in contact with their family for years, and did not know their addresses and telephone numbers. A mark of the breakdown in family relationships which weighed particularly heavily was not being informed when there was a death in the family.

Family conflict led to the loss of housing. The men spoke about selling the matrimonial flat or ceding it to their spouse and children as part of the divorce settlement. But it was not just the men. One female participant had to move out after separation because the flat was rented in her husband's name. This was usually the start of a series of transient housing arrangements, as the goodwill of family and friends wore out. In the most extreme case, a 70-year-old female participant said she had moved 15 times in between episodes of rough sleeping.

The language used to describe these events indicated how traumatic and irreversible they felt. Participants talked about being "disowned", "chased away" and "kicked out". They said that they had "severed all ties" and "cut off the relationship". When asked if they could turn to their family for shelter in a crisis, such as the pandemic, it was not surprising that all the participants said no. They gave many reasons: they had no means of contact; they were not on speaking terms with their families; they felt too ashamed to ask for help; they "did not want to become a burden"; or their family had rejected them.

These were painful experiences. During the interviews, participants were often pensive when asked about their families, and clearly still hurt and troubled by the past. They expressed bitterness about their spouse turning their children against them; regret and self-blame about their role in the conflict; and a sense of resignation that reconciliation was not possible. Over time, the

emotional stress took a toll on some, sending them in a downward spiral that cost them their jobs, their incomes and eventually their ability to afford housing. Hairul, a 49-year-old participant, described how he lost his job of 24 years as a bus maintenance technician:

> After I divorce, I...you know, I'm depressed. Then after that I got so many problem lah, so many problem. Work problem, financial problem, then after that I have to give the house to my ex-wife in exchange for my kids' maintenance, because I cannot do anything, already I distress, work also cannot cope, then from there, I been forced to resign. Then starting from there, I went down.

Low pay and work challenges

Contrary to stereotypes about worklessness among homeless people, participants reported long work histories and a wide range of occupations. The most common were cleaner (eg office or house), dishwasher (eg at food courts, hawker centres or banquets) and security officer. There were technical jobs like taxi repair, bus maintenance, MRT technician, renovation contractor and cook. There were strenuous occupations like mover, delivery and cargo loading. Others were in service and retail lines, such as foot reflexologist, masseuse, customer service officer and sales promoter. Only one participant fit that popular image of homeless persons as collectors of recyclables (ie "cardboard collector").

Notwithstanding the variety of occupations, many of these jobs commanded low wages of around $1,000 a month. A few participants earned close to $2,000 in the past and the highest reported amount was $2,800. The nature of work was also insecure. Many participants were casual or on-call workers with no assured hours or incomes. They described their jobs as "temporary", "ad hoc" or "freelance". The terms of payment were varied. Those doing cleaning, repair or moving, for instance, were paid between $20 and $70 per job. Others were paid daily or weekly, depending on arrangements with their employers. Low and irregular pay made it difficult to keep up with rent. The lack of employment protections and benefits also meant that participants were easily tipped into crisis when work was disrupted. When a 75-year-old male participant slipped in the bathroom and fractured his arm, he was hospitalized and lost his job as a delivery van driver. As he was unable to pay rent, he was later evicted by his landlord.

Health problems posed challenges to work, especially for older people. Both physical and mental health conditions were common. Participants shared about their histories of anxiety, depression and schizophrenia. Suicide ideation was frequently mentioned, in connection with a sense of despair about their family, financial and housing situations. Several participants had been admitted to hospital due to suicide risk and had regular psychiatric appointments. There was also a group of participants with long-term sleep problems. They struggled to get a good night's rest when sleeping rough and could not focus on work during the day. As one person explained, "you don't sleep well, you don't work well, you don't earn well". Participants were dealing with a range of physical health problems such as skin conditions; heart problems; asthma; a history of passing out; and difficulty walking. Many had a history of hospitalization and surgery, or were on medication for chronic conditions. Poor health led to participants losing their jobs, especially those in physically demanding occupations. It was not uncommon for dishwashers, for instance, to be assigned shifts lasting 10 to 14 hours per day, for six days a week.

Extreme poverty

Many of the participants were living in extreme poverty. They had little or no savings, and had to carefully ration any money they received by cutting back on basic needs like food and toiletries.

> I don't even have one meal in one day. Don't say meal lah, kopi-o ah. You don't talk four, five dollars. One dollar twenty cent also I can't afford to buy.
>
> – Aziz, 52-year-old man, lost contact with his ex-wife and family

Interviewer: $500 [of financial assistance], is it enough?

Participant: No, it's not, actually.

Interviewer: So how do you manage?

Participant: Spend wisely. Do not splurge on anything that is not enough.

Interviewer: What do you mainly cut back on?

Participant: Basically, um, like food. I cut back a lot on food. I don't splurge anyhow. Basically, essential things like your toiletries, like you want to purchase ah, never mind, this one can wait, this one can wait. You keep on telling yourself that, most of the time... Sometimes like you are really very hungry, you just, like don't...you just ignore your hunger, because like you have no money.

– Mahia, 39-year-old woman, slept rough for three years after her divorce

They relied on unstable wages or meagre financial assistance to survive from day to day. Public financial assistance was usually less than $500 for no more than a few months. They had to wait several weeks each time they applied. Some did not qualify for help from the emergency assistance schemes during COVID-19 because they had been in informal employment and could not prove that they had lost their jobs. Older participants who could not find employment resorted to running errands for friends, like helping to buy food or do household chores. It was also the older participants who seemed most despondent about their situations and could not envision a more stable future:

Right now, I don't want to think about that. Anyway, I am already old. How much time I have left, you wouldn't know. If one day passes, that's enough. Right? Now he says six months to wait until my flat comes, maybe seven months. That is next year's problem, we don't think about next year's problems.

– Heng, 66-year-old man, worked as dishwasher, had chronic health problems

It's better to die than live ah! [long pause] You are alone, stay one person...can people live like this? Why don't you die... The moment open my eyes, worry about meals, no food, have to wait for people to give me food. You tell me lah, if I get the virus, isn't it better?

– Guan, 51-year-old man, slept rough for three years after leaving prison

Becoming homeless

These participants became homeless via a similar pathway. Those who had bought a flat typically sold it or ceded it to the spouse after divorce. The proceeds went to various purposes, like children's education, medical expenses or settling debts. Others never bought a flat and lived with their in-laws when married. Following divorce, they had to move out. Due to low earnings and savings, buying housing as an individual was not an option. Public rental housing became the main recourse. Where this failed, the likelihood of homelessness increased significantly.

Participants encountered many barriers in the public rental housing system and multiple failed attempts to get a subsidized rental flat were common. The Joint Singles Scheme was repeatedly cited as a serious problem. This scheme requires single persons to pair up for the housing application and share a small studio flat with no bedrooms. Some participants could not find a partner or the partner withdrew their interest during the application. There is also an income limit which applies to the two applicants' combined incomes. Some participants with very low earnings were disqualified because they breached the income threshold after adding the partner's earnings.[5] At the time of the interviews, even with the support of social workers at the shelter to submit fresh housing applications, some of these problems were already recurring. Participants shared about recent applications breaking down after arguments with their partner or when the partner was hospitalised.

5. In a pilot scheme that started in December 2021, income eligibility is assessed on an individual rather than combined basis (MSF, personal communication, July 27, 2022). But this remains an exception. The scheme covers about 160 flats, in a public rental sector with around 64,000 flats (HDB, 2021, 2022).

Several participants had managed to obtain public rental housing in the past, but had poor experiences. They described conflicts with their co-tenant, not feeling safe, sleeping outside and eventually moving out. Requiring two persons who do not know each other to live together created many opportunities for friction. There were co-tenants with poor personal hygiene or who brought female friends home to spend the night. There were disagreements over rent payments because these are collected on a household rather than individual basis.

There were also other obstacles in public rental housing rules beyond the Joint Singles Scheme. Several participants could not access public rental housing because they did not have their divorce certificate or had recently sold a purchased flat. One participant had hoped to rent an entire flat for himself and his son (instead of sharing with another person under the Joint Singles Scheme), but was rejected because his son was studying overseas.

Another participant had successfully obtained a new purchased flat which would be ready in three years, but was denied interim rental housing while waiting. She ended up sleeping rough.

Many participants' housing histories included episodes of open market renting, usually a bedroom in a HDB flat costing between $500 and $800 per month. It was common for those staying with relatives to pay rent as well, at slightly cheaper rates. Given their low and unstable earnings, this was an expense that easily overwhelmed them. Once they ran out of money, they had to move out. Housing problems were sometimes due to the landlord. Participants recounted many run-ins with unreasonable landlords, such as being locked out of the flat; arbitrary curfews; demands for advance rent; restrictions on using the kitchen and washing machine; refusal to fix a broken shower; and other "tricks to make you uncomfortable so you'll move".

On the whole, moving around was a common experience. In between renting, participants turned to backpacker hostels that charged daily rates. When they could not afford even these, they would sleep in public places. Over time, rough sleeping became a permanent arrangement.

Experience of homelessness

Participants' accounts of sleeping rough were consistent with the findings from the street counts and the 2019 survey. They recalled sleeping in void decks, town centres, markets, hawker centres, coffeeshops, fastfood restaurants, gardens and parks. When deciding on a location, different factors mattered for individual participants. For some, it was tied to the availability of support. They talked about friends in the neighbourhood who would help them out; a friendly hawker who gave them unsold food at the end of each day; and a community of other homeless people in the area. Amenities and minimising discomfort were important, so people slept where they could find a long bench and had easy access to a toilet or shower. Female participants were concerned about their safety. They talked about their fears of being robbed or molested, of public toilets being very dark, and their preference for locations where there were security officers on patrol. The male participants, on the other hand, stressed the importance of avoiding locations where the police were known to conduct frequent checks.

Long-term rough sleeping was common. Participants had slept rough for between a few months and 25 years. During this time, they endured many hardships and meeting basic needs – including getting sleep – was a constant challenge.

> Actually, we can't sleep properly. Actually ah, when we heard like something, like a little bit of noise only, then we wake up. Like not, no proper sleep ah, like not really sleeping ah. Always, always wake up lah, like half an hour then wake up, see...then sleep again. Then little bit, little bit sound only, then wake up.
>
> – Hairul, 49 years old, male

> Sleep outside, mosquitoes lah, rats lah, cockroaches lah, disturbing. So not enough sleep. Sometimes one hour, I woke up. Two hours, I woke up.
>
> – Rahim, 65-year-old man, rough slept for 12 years

Participants described being hungry and having to find protection from the rain and the cold. There were accounts of skipping meals for several days at a time, depending on generous passers-by to provide food, getting free meals from temples and mosques, and eating leftovers:

> Interviewer: How did you get your food?
>
> Participant: Ask from people ah. Sometime, uh, like leftover food. Sorry, I just tell the truth.
>
> Interviewer: To survive, right?
>
> Participant: Yeah, I just, like coffeeshop, see ah, got leftovers, then eat ah. Just little, little, sit down, eat ah. Or McDonald, Burger King ah, just see if got leftover food, then just sit down there, pretend to sit, then just take like that.
>
> – Hairul, 49 years old, male

Depending on their location, toilets were not always available. They sometimes had to walk long distances to find a petrol kiosk in the middle of the night. One participant would keep an empty plastic bottle with him, just in case. Maintaining personal hygiene was not easy. They had to wash themselves quickly at public toilets in sports facilities and coffeeshops. They also had to find places to keep their belongings: workplaces, hostel lockers, swimming pool lockers, or with friends and relatives. Losing personal items was common and losing important personal documents led to problems when applying for housing. A few participants said they had lost most of their belongings and could now keep what they still had on their person.

Impact of COVID-19

In the midst of a pandemic, when health was a major concern for many people, many of the participants felt indifferent about the risks of infection despite having no shelter in the initial months. This reflected not a lack of knowledge about COVID-19, but their incapacity to meet what they considered even more basic needs than health. As Mahia (39 years old, female) explained:

Participant: If you are being homeless, the most important thing you worry about, your shelter. Health and everything will be second option. The shelter is...that is important.

Interviewer: So you don't really think about passers-by walking and spreading...

Participant: No. You think of where you're going to stay, where you're going to live, that's the most important thing. Because without a shelter, you don't feel safe. Even though you get the virus, whatsoever, but you don't have a shelter...

In fact, COVID-19 affected their lives in many ways. Jobs were lost across a range of occupations. Disruptions to tourism affected jobs like hotel kitchen cleaner, airport customer service officer and masseuse. When dining in and social gatherings were restricted, restaurant cooks and wedding banquet dishwashers lost their jobs. Even movers and port workers were affected, due to a decline in the volume of work and limits on the number of workers in each team. Unlike professional occupations that could switch to working from home, the nature of participants' jobs was such that they could not be performed remotely.

At the time of the interviews, many were looking for work but finding opportunities hard to come by.

Public space restrictions made it difficult to find places to sleep in. Participants talked about having to "hide" from enforcement personnel, being approached by police officers in places where they used to sleep undisturbed, and later getting "caught". Admission to the shelter happened in different ways. Some participants met police officers and safe distancing ambassadors while they were sleeping outside and were brought to a shelter. Other participants who were concerned about breaching public health regulations called the police themselves. Social networks became an important source of information and referral channel to social services. Participants heard about shelters and got social workers' contact numbers from their friends. One participant was brought to a shelter by a fellow rough sleeper who had met an outreach worker. Social workers from Family Service Centres (FSCs) were described as particularly helpful. Social Service Offices (SSOs) and hospitals were also intake points. Participants who were seeking financial assistance or receiving medical treatment at the time were referred to shelters.

For many participants, these contacts with public institutions and social services during the pandemic were not their first. In their years of rough sleeping, they had numerous encounters with police officers, who normally checked their identification cards and advised them not to sleep in public places. They would then simply move to another spot for the night. One participant had been seeing SSO officers for four years but had not received housing assistance. When the COVID-19 restrictions started, he received a call from the SSO directing him to a shelter. Another participant had been on financial assistance and was also in Court for stealing food at a supermarket, but did not receive support for housing. These encounters must count as missed opportunities for intervention.

NEWLY HOMELESS PERSONS

The second group of participants had no experience of rough sleeping prior to the pandemic. In contrast to long-term homeless persons, they were more reserved and more concerned about privacy and confidentiality during the interviews. Occasionally, they volunteered information on past career achievements and stressed that they had no prior contact with social services until the pandemic. On the whole, this group seemed to be still adjusting to the circumstances of living in a shelter.

Connected to family but relationship distant and strained

Compared to long-term homeless participants, this group of participants were socially less isolated and kinship featured more prominently in their lives. Many were still connected to their immediate or extended families, even though the relationships were fragile or strained from past conflict. Fong, a 54-year-old woman who had separated from her husband for ten years but not filed for divorce, described her attempt to ask her family for help:

> During the pandemic, when my landlord chased us out, I went to my ex-husband's place. I had no choice, I can't call first because I don't have his contact number. Because at that time, you need a place to stay, you're not allowed to stay outside. So I went back to talk to my daughter about letting me stay till the pandemic is over. She told me to go kill myself.

The older participants, even if they were divorced, were still in touch with their children and one even contributed financially whenever he could. But they generally did not consider their children a source of social or material support. None of the participants' children knew that they were in a homeless shelter. In contrast to the transnational homeless participants who were commuting to Singapore in order to provide for their families and young children, most of the participants' children in this group were grown-up.

Low-wage work and poverty

Economically, these participants were indistinguishable from the other two groups. There was a consistent pattern of low-wage jobs across their work histories, such as cleaning, security,

waiting tables, fast-food restaurant service crew, hairdressing and parcel sorting. The reported work incomes ranged from $700 to $1,200 per month. There were frequent job changes and work was often part-time, so incomes were unstable. In a few cases, employment had been disrupted by serious health problems and imprisonment. Finding work that paid enough had been a persistent problem for most participants long before the pandemic.

All the participants were struggling financially and had little or no savings. There were accounts of eating only one meal a day and not having enough money to take public transport. Due to long-term poverty, some of them had received financial assistance from SSOs, with amounts ranging from $350 to $600 per month. The consistency of the support varied. Assistance had lapsed in some cases, but in other instances was described as having lasted for years. For those who had no prior contact with the social services, admission to the shelter suddenly opened opportunities for them to address a wide range of issues with the help of social workers, such as rental housing applications, divorce proceedings and children's school expenses.

Housing instability

Like long-term homeless persons, participants in this group had long histories of housing instability. But there were differences in the nature of instability and participants' pathways into the shelter during the pandemic.

Participants who had bought their own flats when they were married went through a similar experience of losing housing after their marriage broke down. They had to move out, sell the matrimonial home, or give up the flat to their spouse as part of the divorce settlement. As their personal finances were already tight, this usually triggered a series of short-term housing arrangements over many years, especially moving between low-cost rentals in the open market. Whenever they ran out of money for rent, they had to move.

But in contrast to long-term homeless persons, most of the participants in this group had no experience of the public rental housing system. A few mentioned that they were deterred by having to find a partner for the Joint Singles Scheme. Instead, they were more likely to depend on their family and friends. Participants who were not married usually lived with their

parents. Others moved in with their children, cousins, step-siblings or friends after divorce. Accessing housing through social relations presented another form of insecurity. These arrangements usually came to an end when friction escalated into open conflict and, in one case, even physical confrontation. They illustrate how family and informal social support is not without challenges when it comes to living together in close quarters. Although participants in this group had no experience of rough sleeping before the pandemic, the housing they could access through social networks had a makeshift quality that introduced anxiety or traded off other basic needs. A participant described how she had to be separated from her children because her cousin would only take her children in but not her. Another person lived as an unregistered co-tenant in his friend's public rental flat.

COVID-19 and housing displacements

The outbreak of COVID-19 had a direct impact on many participants. Job loss led to rent arrears and eventually having to move out. A participant who had been renting a bedroom in a HDB flat, had his tenancy terminated because the landlord was worried that he "might bring COVID home". Public health regulations also had indirect and unforeseen consequences. The participant who was living as an unregistered co-tenant was asked to leave because his friend feared that his presence might contravene the ban on social visits during the circuit breaker. Another person who was staying at a hostel suddenly ran out of housing options when hostels could no longer accept Singaporean guests. A 74-year-old female participant who was staying with a friend had to move out because the friend's daughter would need the bedroom after returning from England (following government advisories to citizens who were abroad). These predicaments proved the fragility of their housing arrangements.

At a time when individual economic resources were under severe strain, housing displacements drove participants to seek help from formal social services. Whereas long-term homeless persons found their way into the shelter through a variety of channels, including encounters with the authorities on the street, all the participants in this group sought help for housing voluntarily. They approached SSOs, FSCs and the police directly. After that, admission to the shelter was fairly swift.

Only a few participants in this group slept in public places briefly, in between losing their previous housing and admission to the shelter. During the interviews, they recounted in great detail their sense of physical dislocation and the extreme discomfort and anxiety when they were sleeping outside. In doing so, they also provide a reminder of the hardships of long-term homelessness, when such discomfort and anxiety become a part of daily living.

TRANSNATIONAL HOMELESS PERSONS

The third group are Singaporeans who lived in Malaysia or Indonesia but travelled frequently to Singapore. Their emergence among the homeless population during the pandemic provided a rare opportunity to examine how transnational mobility – as distinguished from permanent migration – contributes to housing insecurity. Most of the media attention in 2020 was focused on Malaysians who lived in Johor and commuted to Singapore for work (Meah, 2021; Yusof, 2020). There were only isolated accounts of people like the participants in this group, who became homeless after they returned to Singapore to wait out the border closures.

Drift and social disaffiliation

These participants' family situations had many similarities with the two earlier groups. For many of them, family relationships had broken down due to marital conflict, estrangement, divorce, bereavement and misunderstandings. In a process best described as drift, they left their family or matrimonial home and entered a pattern of transience and instability – sleeping at the workplace, staying with friends and sleeping rough. In some instances, grief played a prominent part as the death of a spouse or loss of a marriage caused a rupture in their lives, and led them to travel overseas for long periods and eventually relocate:

> I've been out of Singapore for the past three years. After my wife pass away, my mind is down, everything is down, I can't do anything much. This was quite...very long, drastic. I decided to give away all, everything, about Singapore.
>
> – Johan, 58 years old, left Singapore after his wife died of cancer

> That time, I was depressed. I stay there [in Malaysia], is because I don't want to have so much pressure, I want to throw all the... You know when you are sad, you want to throw all the past out? You, you do not want to see Singapore. When you want to change...you want to start your life new.
>
> – Keat, 51-year-old man, not allowed to see children after divorce

In contrast to some forms of transnational householding where migrants make their livelihood overseas in order to provide for their families at home, the participants in this group had neither commitments nor a secure base to which they could return in Singapore. Long periods of travel could mean losing the social connections from their younger years. As explained by Keong, a 61-year-old man who had been living outside Singapore for the past 30 years:

> I haven't come back to Singapore for so many years, the people I know are long gone. In the past, when I knew them, there were no handphones, only pagers. Not like now, only takes a phone call, where are you, let's have tea, you can WhatsApp. No such thing last time! We had to rely on the house phone and pager. We lost touch ever since I left...some have moved...there's no way to find them.

Some of the participants still maintained family ties in Singapore. They spoke about exchanging occasional telephone calls and visiting family members when they were sick. During the pandemic, family sent food to the shelter and provided postal addresses for participants to receive mail. One participant said he used to shower and do his laundry at his sister's home when he was sleeping rough. But there were well-defined boundaries – family support did not extend to providing housing. When asked, almost all the participants said they did not want to "disturb" their siblings or grown-up children, or that they had been rejected in the past.

Meanwhile, participants varied in the extent to which they had built a new life in Malaysia or Indonesia. For some, leaving Singapore provided a chance to start over. They got married and raised children, and had a supportive network of family and friends. But there were others who still seemed unsettled despite

spending many years in their adoptive countries. Their accounts of living across two countries painted a picture of uncertainty, impermanence and anxiety, as they continued to negotiate family obligations, economic challenges and institutional barriers.

Mobility and economic insecurity

Financial considerations were another key factor in participants' transnational living arrangements. They spoke about unaffordable living expenses in Singapore, with housing (including rental) and food costs most frequently mentioned. There were a few cases of debts and having to pay maintenance after divorce. But in general, the problem with expenses was a product of their low incomes. Living in Malaysia or Indonesia therefore served as a form of arbitrage, to stretch Singapore's stronger currency in places with lower living expenses.

Among the participants, there were two patterns of mobility. The first was to work in Singapore but live in Malaysia or Indonesia, while the second was to both live and work in Malaysia or Indonesia. Both required frequent border crossings.

Economically, the first and more common scenario of working in Singapore is comparable to the two groups discussed earlier. These participants typically worked in low-wage occupations such as security, cleaning, food stall assistant, construction worker, supermarket assistant and driver. Their employment was usually casual or on-call, without fixed hours or pay. Some worked short contracts lasting between a few months and two years, with gaps in between when they had no earnings. Many of their jobs were lost to the pandemic, although a few entered the pandemic unemployed because of health problems or their contracts had lapsed. They survived on payments from their Central Provident Fund (CPF)[6] accounts, or public financial assistance which was usually insufficient.

6. These are mandatory individual savings accounts, made up of employer and employee contributions, mainly for retirement, housing and health purposes.

Most of the participants who worked in Singapore had a spouse and children in Malaysia or Indonesia. Working in Singapore was a practical decision. Their social visit passes did not allow them to take on formal work in their host countries. Besides, they thought the pay would be "too small". The trade-off was having to commute long distances. Many participants made this trip daily. The journey was exhausting and frustrating, especially if they got caught in peak-hour traffic. One participant said that whenever he was held up at work and missed the last ferry to

Batam, he would have no shelter for the night. A few participants returned to their families once a week or saved up to visit once every few months. To cut costs, they slept rough or at their workplaces while in Singapore. These arrangements typically lasted for years.

The second scenario entailed even greater economic precarity. These were participants who lived as well as worked in Malaysia or Indonesia. Many of them had failed to find work in Singapore that paid adequately. But due to visa restrictions, they could only do odd jobs for very low incomes in Malaysia or Indonesia, such as coffeeshop assistant or running a roadside food stall. This was just manageable because they did not have to provide for a family – all these participants were single, divorced or widowed.

All the transnational participants held social visit passes that were valid for only 30 days each time, so those who did not cross the border for work had to make a trip to Singapore and re-enter Malaysia or Indonesia every month, just to renew the visa. This routine usually took just a few hours. Participants used the chance to visit relatives, attend medical appointments or do banking. If they ended up staying overnight, they would sleep rough.

Housing barriers

Due to limits on homeownership for social visit pass holders in Malaysia and Indonesia, participants who were married to nationals had to purchase housing in their spouse's name. These practices are reminiscent of older Singaporeans in Malaysia who reside discreetly in low-cost housing meant for Malaysians, and have to learn to lower their visibility and minimise contact with formal institutions (Khamsya, 2016). These formal barriers in the migration and housing system had consequences for housing security. The most striking example was a participant who had lived in Malaysia for 20 years but, in his words, "never had a home".

In Singapore, the male participants' housing histories were comparable to the earlier groups. Many had lost their matrimonial home due to divorce and could not afford to purchase housing again. When they tried to access public rental housing, they encountered similar difficulties with housing rules. For instance, those who had sold their matrimonial flat were disqualified from renting for 30 months.[7] Participants with a

7. In recent years, this policy has become less explicit. Current regulations only state that proceeds from the sale of property in the past would be taken into account during application.

Malaysian or Indonesian spouse faced additional obstacles. They were not eligible for public rental housing as a couple, unless the spouse was a Singapore Permanent Resident. If they applied for a rental flat as a single person, they would have to share the flat with a co-tenant under the Joint Singles Scheme, which meant there would not be room for their spouse when they visited Singapore. As a result of such barriers, these participants could not live in Singapore with their family.

Impact of COVID-19

Among the homeless persons interviewed in this study, COVID-19 had the most visible impact on transnational persons. As their lives were lived across two countries, and depended on free and frequent movement in between, travel restrictions in 2020 threw their worlds into disarray. Not all of them were fully aware of the situation when they entered Singapore for the final time before the borders were closed. Many arrived with only a small backpack, expecting another routine commute, and were surprised to learn that they would not be able to return to their families. Several participants managed to arrange a hasty trip to Malaysia to collect some belongings and bid farewell.

At the Singapore checkpoint, returning participants were identified as having no housing and referred for assistance so they could comply with COVID-19 rules on staying indoors. Given the rapidly changing public health situation, there were some inconsistencies in procedures. One participant said that he was asked to pay for a hotel stay and was only brought to a shelter after he had used up all the money he had on him. Participants were also moved around several different shelters in the subsequent months. But otherwise, participants found the process of shelter admission on the whole efficient.

Being stranded in Singapore meant that they could not be with their families in Malaysia or Indonesia. None of the participants had expected the situation to last for as long as it did. As with the other groups, jobs were lost during this period. For participants who used to sleep at their workplaces, this also meant a loss of shelter. In the interviews, many spoke of their wish to return to their families, but knew they could not even if non-nationals were allowed into Malaysia and Indonesia, because they would not be able to afford the costs of testing and quarantine each time, and the delays to travel caused by quarantine would make it impossible to hold their jobs.

When asked about future plans, responses were mixed. Participants who were not married were most likely to contemplate resettling in Singapore after the pandemic, having been compelled by circumstances to stay for much longer than they anticipated. Among married participants with family overseas, some hoped to relocate to Singapore with their family, given the opportunity and resources. Others preferred either to resume their commutes or make a clean break and leave Singapore for good after the pandemic. In many instances, people had only vague and tentative plans that seemed consistent with the mobility and flux in their lives.

GENDER AND HOMELESSNESS

Women's experiences of homelessness are a prominent theme in the academic literature. Studies have highlighted the connections between women's homelessness and violence, mental illness, diseases and risky behaviours (Bagheri Amiri et al., 2014; Beijer & Andréasson, 2009; Beijer et al., 2018; Jasinski et al., 2010; Rodriguez-Moreno et al., 2020; Salem et al., 2019; Watson, 2016). But so far, the topic has not been systematically studied in Singapore. Twelve of the interviews in this study were with women, providing a rare opportunity to identify several broad themes.

Comparing the accounts of the men and women in the long-term and newly homeless groups reveals that women were far less likely to resort to rough sleeping because of concerns about safety. When the pandemic disrupted already unstable housing arrangements, women typically sought help immediately from government agencies and social services, instead of sleeping outside. There were multiple accounts of this pathway among the newly homeless group. When women mentioned rough sleeping, they described it as a frightening prospect and a situation to avoid at all costs. As one participant put it, "I'm a woman you know? I can't be out on the streets."

Women who did have to sleep rough recalled it as an ordeal. A 52-year-old participant who slept in the void deck for a few days when she was locked out by her landlord described it as a "very terrible experience". Among the few female interviewees who had experiences of long-term homelessness, their choice of location when sleeping outside was telling. Compared to the men, they were more likely to choose enclosed commercial spaces where there were security officers and other customers. Examples are 24-hour fast-food restaurants, cafés and shopping

complexes. Perhaps due to heightened vigilance and a sense of vulnerability, it was also less common to hear about women joining groups of rough sleepers – given that most rough sleepers are men.

To be clear, rough sleeping was always difficult for the men as well as the women. When rough sleeping became long-term, all of them had to learn strategies to meet basic needs. However, while some of the male interviewees recounted their rough sleeping experiences as a matter of fact, the women – even if they had slept outside for years – rarely seemed to have gotten used to the situation. Siew (53 years old), who had slept rough for ten years, would still change her location every night:

> Every night I go to a different block to sleep, because for safety-ness mah. Because if I always sleep at the same garden every night, if someone saw me ah, if the bad guy saw me, they will do something, right?

Mahia (39 years old), who had been sleeping outside for three years, recalled her constant fear and anxiety:

> I worried. I worried about things getting lost. I worried about people...I worried about being molest.

Instead of rough sleeping, women were more likely to rely on their social support networks for housing options. Staying with relatives or friends was common. This meant having to maintain a certain degree of connection even if the underlying relationships were strained. Unlike most of the men, the women usually had not completely broken off contact with their family. Among the men, on the other hand, there was a greater mix of social support and open market rentals to meet housing needs. This in part reflects differences in economic independence, especially among older participants. The older women often had very little education and shorter work histories, putting open market rentals beyond their reach. Even staying with family usually required making a financial contribution. When this was not possible, as in the case of a 74-year-old participant, she did household chores and ran errands instead for the relatives she was living with. Both staying with family and in market

rentals created pressures and posed insecurity, whether it was the friction of co-residence and the unpredictability of social generosity, or having to sustain rental payments on unstable wages. Therefore both men and women moved frequently and rarely settled in any one place for more than a few years.

Although housing insecurity was in many cases linked to marital breakdown, the nature of this linkage was different between the sexes. The men typically lost their matrimonial home as part of the divorce settlement. But the women's housing dislocations tended to follow a social pathway rather than a legal one. One participant had to move out of the family home after her marriage broke down, even though the divorce was not formalized. This would later make it difficult for her to qualify for public rental housing. A few women never owned housing in Singapore with their former spouse. Instead they lived overseas or with their parents and in-laws. These housing arrangements unravelled following divorce. This should draw attention to the fact that access to housing is determined not only by formal property rights, but also various forms of social interdependence.

Of the three groups of homeless persons identified in the interviews, the transnational group most clearly portray a patriarchal economic structure that has been described in the migration literature as "mobile masculinity and localized femininity" (Amster and Lindquist, 2005; Ong, 1999, p. 20). Almost all the married persons in the transnational group were Singaporean men married to Malaysian or Indonesian women. The gap in living standards between Singapore and neighbouring countries shaped the financial dynamic within these transnational households. The men were the ones commuting to Singapore to earn a livelihood for their families. They saw themselves as the primary breadwinner in the marriage. Even when work and income had stopped during the lockdown and they were themselves depending on free meals at the shelter, none of them considered asking their wives for money. As explained by Awang, a 68-year-old man who had remarried and lived in Batam for more than 30 years while doing odd jobs in Singapore:

Interviewer: So, your situation in the shelter, [your family in Indonesia] all know lah?

Participant: They know, because when I stay here, I take photo, I show them.

Interviewer: Oh okay. And they ever help you with anything?

Participant: No lah, because the other side also very hard, right? We are Singapore, so we are the one...I the one who support there lah. No matter how, I must find the money. I must work.

Although the researchers were not able to interview the spouses outside Singapore, these accounts highlight how the disruptions and hardships during the pandemic affected not just homeless persons in Singapore but also their wider circle of dependants.

CONCLUSION

HOMELESS IN A PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic had far-reaching impact on homeless people. A previous nationwide street count in 2019, published just months before the outbreak, had established a baseline on the scale of homelessness in Singapore. As reported in the media, shelter capacity and other services were ramped up during the circuit breaker in 2020, and large numbers of homeless people moved off the streets and into these shelters. This study aimed to capture the impact of these developments and update the 2019 findings through another comprehensive street count two years on. By incorporating data on occupancy in temporary homeless shelters, it also provided – for the time – a fuller picture of both primary and secondary homelessness. In addition, in-depth interviews were conducted with shelter residents to understand their housing experiences and pathways into homelessness. Collectively, these three components of the study extend understanding of the level and nature of homelessness in Singapore, how it was affected by the pandemic, and the larger dynamics of housing insecurity in a society that is widely recognised for its public housing policies.

The street count and shelter data showed that the scale of homelessness in Singapore had not changed significantly. Between 2019 and 2021, the combined total of street homeless persons and temporary shelter residents fell by just 7% from 1,115 to 1,036. But the form of homelessness had changed, as primary homelessness was partially replaced by secondary homelessness. Street homelessness decreased by 41%, from 1,050 persons in 2019 to 616 in 2021, while occupancy in temporary shelters increased more than sixfold from 65 to 420 in this period. The rapid expansion of overnight shelter capacity – from around 60 places at the start of 2020 to a peak of 920 during the circuit breaker – was a considerable feat and evidence of what can be achieved with bureaucratic will and an active civil society. Compared to the streets, the shelters offered greater safety, protection from the elements and access to basic amenities. Once in the shelter, the residents also had the chance to receive other services and make housing plans with the help of social workers. But shelters are not currently designed to be the final stop. They are not adequate housing. In the interviews, some residents expressed relief that they had accommodation; others spoke about problems with living conditions; and nearly

all felt uncertain about their housing prospects. What to make of the rise of secondary homelessness relative to primary homelessness in Singapore depends on what happens after people leave shelters.

Despite the sharp fall in numbers, the characteristics of street homelessness in Singapore had not changed noticeably. The street count found that geographically, homelessness remained widespread. Rough sleepers were found in all 25 districts covered in the count. There was a strong correlation between the results of 2019 and 2021: higher-count districts continued to account for more homeless persons. More street homeless persons were found in larger, older and poorer neighbourhoods, and most rough sleepers were older Chinese men. The main difference in 2021 was that homelessness had de-concentrated from the City district to residential districts, perhaps reflecting a retreat from areas that were more exposed to public view during the pandemic. Overall, it appears that neither a global pandemic nor intense state intervention had altered the basic landscape of street homelessness in Singapore.

The interviews with shelter residents produced rich findings. Three groups were identified among the interview participants: long-term homeless persons who had been rough sleeping even before the pandemic; newly homeless persons who had no experience of rough sleeping before the pandemic started; and transnational homeless persons – Singaporeans who lived in Malaysia or Indonesia but frequently travelled to Singapore before the pandemic and were displaced by border closures in 2020.

The three groups had different housing histories and pathways into the shelter. Many long-term homeless persons had struggled with public rental housing, either encountering barriers at application or having to move out due to problems with the Joint Singles Scheme. Newly homeless persons had been vulnerable to the uncertainties of depending on relatives and friends for housing, and of renting in the open market. These arrangements lasted until there was conflict or they could no longer sustain the rent on unstable wages. Housing instability for transnational homeless persons arose from the basic contradiction that they were living permanently in places where they only had short-stay rights, yet did not have a permanent home in the country where they were citizens and to which they had to frequently return for work or visa renewal. These experiences reveal the wide range of things that people do to find housing when they have little

financial means and social support, and the lack of accessible and adequate housing options in those circumstances.

Across the three groups, housing insecurity had similar foundations. Family conflict led to the loss of housing when marriages failed or people had to move out. The emotional distress associated with the breakdown of relationships affected other aspects of life, such as work. Economic precarity was a universal theme. It meant that housing options were severely constrained once participants could no longer live with their family. The implications of being unable to purchase housing are particularly significant in a society where homeownership is designed to be the main route to adequate housing, and the subsidised public rental housing sector is as a result undersupplied and strictly regulated. It was striking how similar these basic dynamics of housing insecurity were across the three groups. In these domains, it was difficult to distinguish those participants who had slept rough before, from others who had not. Often, only very fragile living arrangements were holding back the latter from the streets. This presents a strong case – for both policymakers and researchers – to approach homelessness with a broader perspective, paying attention to its diverse forms and common underlying factors instead of focusing only on rough sleeping.

POLICIES AND SERVICES

The pandemic might have triggered a crisis for homeless people, but their housing insecurity had often started long before COVID-19, and not because of it. The set of social conditions, economic circumstances and institutional obstacles related to their homelessness in the pandemic were not an anomaly or a one-off, even for the group of newly homeless persons. Lessons must therefore be learnt from those elements of state intervention that were considered successful during this period, to inform the long-term response to homelessness beyond the pandemic.

The first step in intervention is identifying problems early and offering help. A key strategy in the homelessness response during the pandemic was the mobilisation and coordination of frontline public agencies to offer shelter accommodation to rough sleepers. The efficiency of the operation contrasts sharply with participants' previous experiences. As housing insecurity tends to accompany other problems such as poverty, poor health and family breakup, it is not uncommon for people who are homeless or in unstable housing to come into contact with public agencies. These encounters are opportunities for housing intervention. Many participants recounted seeking financial assistance from

SSOs, regular hospital appointments and being approached by police officers when they were rough sleeping. Yet these had not led to housing assistance in the past. The approach only changed when rough sleeping became a health risk in 2020. While it is true that homeless people were themselves anxious to seek shelter during the pandemic, the efficient outreach and intake process demonstrates the impact when public agencies operate in a joined-up way and adopt a whole-of-government perspective.

The application of this lesson will vary for different agencies. For those whose mandates are not directly related to housing, such as the police and NParks, the first step may be to adopt a more consistent practice – as part of their daily operations – to flag housing insecurity and refer people for housing support and other services. Public service organisations with a social welfare objective, such as SSOs and hospitals, must take a more proactive approach to identify housing problems. Social work agencies such as FSCs already have expertise to assess housing needs, but face difficulties when advocating for their clients (Ng & Neo, 2019). For them to be more effective at helping homeless people, public agencies must respond to advocacy in a more collaborative and transparent way.

Exits from homelessness depend on accessible and adequate housing options. In a public housing system dominated by owner occupation, public rental housing is the last safety net for the most vulnerable members of society and the main exit option from homelessness. Unfortunately, problems in its current design make it a significant contributing factor to homelessness and a major barrier to housing security. Participants' accounts highlighted issues that have been raised in Parliament and by researchers (Hansard, 29 February 2016; Hansard, 7 March 2018; Hansard, "Impact", 6 January 2020; Hansard, 4 March 2020; Ng, 2020; Ng & Neo, 2019). Among these, the Joint Singles Scheme is by far the most prominent problem. By requiring two singles to share a small flat with no bedrooms, it creates conflict between tenants and causes people to leave rental housing. The income limit to qualify for rental housing is applied to the two applicants' combined incomes even when they are unrelated. This income limit has not been revised since 2003, which means it has become much stricter in real terms. Recent measures to facilitate the pairing of tenants and install partitions in already small rental flats indicate appreciation of some of these difficulties, but do not address them directly. For public rental housing to be an adequate housing option, the formal eligibility

rules must be fairer and accord priority to people who are at risk of homelessness or already homeless, and basic standards of space and privacy must be assured.

Poverty is at the heart of housing insecurity. A prominent theme in the interviews was in-work poverty, the result of low wages and insecure work with no assured hours and pay. Wage conditions at the bottom of the labour force have long been a concern and disproportionately affect older workers who are overrepresented in the homeless population. In 2021, it was announced that the Progressive Wage Model – a system of mandatory sectoral wage ladders pegged to training and productivity – would be extended beyond the three job sectors it currently covers, with the aim of bringing low-wage workers across the workforce closer to the median wage (Ministry of Manpower, 2021). This is a major move that can significantly alter wage distribution in Singapore. The extent of its impact will depend on the actual wage levels in each wage ladder, since these will vary across sectors and occupations. The coverage of progressive wages will also not be complete. Wage improvements in some parts of the economy will still depend on market forces. These developments must be closely watched.

Outside the wage economy, there are homeless persons who cannot find work or are unable to work due to health problems. Their main recourse is public financial assistance. In the interviews, participants who had received help in the past described the hardships of living on small amounts of assistance and having to cut back on basic needs like food. In 2020, the median amount of Short-to-Medium-Term Assistance was $500, while the current rate of financial assistance under Long-Term Assistance is $640 for a single older person who is permanently unable to work (MSF, 2021a, 2021b). A recent study found that a single elderly person in Singapore needs $1,421 per month to achieve a basic standard of living that enables a sense of belonging, respect, security and independence (Ng et al., 2021). Public assistance rates fall significantly short. In fact, from participants' experience of open market rentals, the entire amount of such assistance is easily used up for rent alone. In debates about the adequacy of financial assistance, it is important to bear in mind the consequences of economic vulnerability, including homelessness.

RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This study and its previous edition in 2019 were motivated by the observation that, in many places, homelessness street counts are part of routine data collection by local authorities. There are obvious uses for such data. They guide the design and siting of services, indicate directions for policy reform, help to create public awareness of marginalised groups, and deepen knowledge of housing insecurity and social exclusion. Before the 2019 nationwide street count, homelessness figures cited in Parliament were based on the number of cases helped by public agencies. These usually fell below 400 per year (Hansard, 14 January 2019), far short of the actual size of the homeless population. The 2019 study, apart from producing a comprehensive measure of street homelessness, tested two different count strategies and verified their reliability. The lessons learnt are critical for resolving the tension between geographical coverage and research resources; they have been applied directly to this study and offer a template for future research. This research also demonstrated a way of working that involves collaboration between researchers, voluntary groups, social work agencies and members of public. Over time, it has become part of a virtuous cycle of growing collective concern, media interest, policy attention and service infrastructure. Three years on, attention must turn to the next stage of homelessness research in Singapore.

The large-scale relocation of homeless persons from the streets into the shelters during the pandemic provides a timely reminder to recognise that homelessness takes different forms. Focusing narrowly on only one of these forms, such as street homelessness, may lead to a misrepresentation of the state of housing insecurity in society, and misdirect resources and attention away from the larger, more fundamental, goal of adequate housing. If there is now a more even spread between primary and secondary homelessness (ie rough sleeping and short-term accommodation in temporary shelters), then research too must address both phenomena. This study has made a start by introducing shelter occupancy numbers alongside street count figures and by interviewing a group of shelter residents. Future research must continue to include both indicators and delve into other aspects of homeless shelters: the profiles of residents, duration and conditions of stay, exit destinations and long-term outcomes.

Further down the continuum, research should address tertiary homelessness – being at risk of losing accommodation because of housing costs, family violence and other challenges; and living temporarily with family and friends, in long-term shelters, and in substandard and overcrowded conditions. This can begin with publishing more detailed data on homeless persons residing in the state-run welfare and sheltered homes. It also requires the treatment of *housing* research and *homelessness* research as connected parts of the same whole. Housing research has grown steadily in Singapore in recent years, particularly on public rental housing policy and single mothers' experiences (AWARE, 2016, 2022; Ng, 2020; Ng & Neo, 2019), and lends a helpful depth of perspective to homelessness studies like this one. Approaching research in this way can help to resist the compartmentalisation of housing and homelessness as separate policy issues. In a society defined by high rates of homeownership and an extremely residualised public rental housing sector, an effective response to homelessness will inevitably require changes to policies on sold and rental public housing, so that people may be helped before they end up rough sleeping and eased back more smoothly into stable housing. Research on the full continuum of housing insecurity will help to identify areas for change.

This study revealed important gender differences in experiences of housing insecurity and homelessness. The street counts in both 2019 and 2021 showed that women were far less likely than men to sleep rough. The interview participants explained that this was due to concerns about safety. The few women who had slept rough in the past did not describe their experiences as a matter of fact – like some men did. They looked for enclosed commercial spaces where there were security officers and other customers. It was a time of distress and constant anxiety. Before the pandemic, women were more likely to rely on their social support networks for housing, such as staying with relatives and friends. They became homeless when goodwill ran out. The older women, in particular, were not able to afford market rentals. They often had very little education and short work histories. Women who lost housing during the pandemic typically sought help from public agencies immediately. These broad themes provide a starting point for further research on women's experiences of homelessness in Singapore. Paying greater attention to the full continuum of homelessness should also help to shed light on women's housing insecurity, as they are more likely to fall into the category of tertiary rather than primary homelessness.

As argued in the 2019 report, street counts of homelessness should be carried out every few years to provide timely guidance for policy and service planning. They must become standard procedure in policymaking. This implies that responsibility for leading and sustaining these counts must one day pass to public agencies. There are huge advantages to this, not least continuity due to their relative stability and access to resources. But it is not a straightforward matter, as research conducted by the state is not the same as research done by independent scholars. In any society, there are a multitude of public agencies with different policy stakes and wider-ranging interests in homelessness than housing security alone. In the context of Singapore, this is further complicated by the valorization of homeownership in the public housing sector and the absence of a consistent practice to publish all social research done by public agencies. It is therefore useful to set out research and reporting standards for any street count that is led by the state. First, rigour. This means adopting the best available expertise and meeting the highest methodological standards. Second, independence. There are different ways to ensure this, such as appointing a panel of research advisors representing a broad range of perspectives, and involving NGOs and members of public in data collection instead of relying solely on public employees. Third, transparency. Definitions of key research concepts and the process of data gathering and analysis must be carefully documented and fully disclosed. The results must be published and made available in the public domain.

The years since the first nationwide street count of homelessness have been universally challenging. To be homeless in a pandemic is to experience even sharper dislocation and hardship. Unexpectedly, there have also been strong gains: homelessness has moved up the policy agenda and is now firmly in the public eye. Research can continue to play a key role to shore up the increased awareness and encourage change, so that housing that provides security, peace and dignity can become a reality for all.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study was made possible by funding from the Community Foundation of Singapore.

The authors are grateful to the shelter residents who participated in the interviews and shared their deeply personal experiences, and the social workers who helped with recruitment.

The fieldwork for the street count could not have been done without the generosity and dedication of the volunteers.

Terence Teo and Calvin Heng provided research assistance from 2018, when they were just starting university and this study was only an idea, until their graduation in 2022. Thank you for your commitment, energy and many talents.

Tang Wen Yue produced the maps for the reports with great efficiency and precision. Huda Shahri helped with interpretation, transcription and translation for the Malay interviews. A team of research assistants took care of the remaining transcriptions.

The Ministry of Social and Family Development kindly provided shelter occupancy data for inclusion in the report.

Report design was done by Studio Vanessa Ban LLP.

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