

IPS Study Highlights Complexity of Long-Term Homelessness and Pathways Out of Homelessness in Singapore

A new landmark study by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) has found that long-term homelessness in Singapore is more complex and diverse than previously assumed, with individuals experiencing homelessness for reasons that accumulate across childhood, adulthood, and old age.

2 Drawing on three phases of interviews and life-history analyses of 91 individuals and families, the three-year study – *Ending Long-Term Homelessness* – identified not just factors that push people into homelessness, but also the conditions that enable them to exit and rebuild housing stability.

3 The study occurred in three phases over three years and adopted a qualitative approach. It consists of two parts:

- Phase 1 focused on pathways into homelessness, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. It involved 50 participants (34 individuals, 16 families); and
- Phases 2 and 3 focused on studying the phenomenon of long-term homelessness in Singapore using a life course approach. It involved 41 participants (28 individuals, 13 families).

Multiple Stressors and Pathways into Homelessness

4 All three phases of the study showed that homeless persons tended to experience multiple stressors, and often across life stages. Two characteristics were most likely to be associated with a higher number of stressors:

- Participants who were separated, divorced, or widowed, compared to those who were married or single; and
- Single-parent families, compared to individuals and all other family types.

5 Homelessness was found to be rarely the result of a single action or event in people's lives. Nonetheless, it was noteworthy that most participants' first experience of homelessness was either rough sleeping (49%), or unstable informal accommodation (46%).

Challenges and Enablers in Exiting Homelessness

6 The study examined two distinct homelessness typologies observed among participants in Phases 2 and 3:

- Rough sleeping (RS)-dominant for participants who spent majority of their time rough sleeping.

These participants tended to include male rough sleepers whose challenges included meeting basic needs, coping with poor physical and

mental health, and managing stigma. Some were entrenched in homeless subculture behaviours (e.g. drinking, begging and scavenging), which led to the weakening of their networks and relationships.

- Sheltered homelessness (SH)-dominant for participants who spent majority of their time in sheltered forms of homelessness.

Key challenges faced by these participants included difficulties over co-living and safety concerns, and short-lived stays due to tenuous social networks and precarious and the unsustainable nature of informal accommodations.

7 For both typologies, social work intervention was one key factor which helped participants exit homelessness. This included support from professionals in linking participants up with shelter support or assisting them with housing applications.

8 The median duration of homelessness for those who spent most of this period rough sleeping was four times as long as that for those who spent most of this period in shelters.

Shelter as a Transition towards Long-Term Housing

9 Overall, shelters were a source of physical security and functioned as a transitional space towards long-term housing plans. Individuals perceived that shelter provided them with physical security and convenience.

10 In general, participants who had experiences of exiting sheltered homelessness tended to fare better than the others in terms of their housing status. For many participants, exits to long-term housing were facilitated by shelter staff or social workers.

Key Life Transitions

11 Across the four main life stages that were examined, adulthood was the key life stage where more than half of the participants first experienced homelessness. Life experiences in these life stages tended to be an accumulation of childhood vulnerabilities. Likewise, participants' ability to navigate challenges in adulthood and older adulthood were likely to have long-term implications for outcomes in old age.

Policy Recommendations

12 The study proposed a paradigm shift from intervention to prevention in homelessness policymaking. Three key recommendations were put forward:

- Early risk assessment: Early intervention is instrumental in preventing the onset of homelessness and early identification of those at risk (i.e. those who are not yet homeless or in unstable informal accommodation).

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- Shelter enhancements in three areas: To encourage rough sleepers to seek shelter support early, a) more information should be provided for shelter support awareness; b) to review of shelter designs to adopt the Single Room Shared Facilities model; and c) efforts needed to enhance the shelter workforce, for example, enhancing conflict management and mediation training, increasing headcount, and hiring trained mental health professionals.
- Exit enablers: The three structural enablers of homelessness exit identified in the study were social service networks, employment, and the housing system. In recognition of these enablers, the study proposes three intervention measures to bolster efforts to address homelessness: a central coordination system to enable effective exits, debt relief and work placement programmes, and long-term housing support for homeless people.

13 Dr Harry Tan, Principal Investigator of the study, said: “We embarked on this study to answer a simple yet puzzling question: why do some homeless people sleep outdoors for such long periods? Long-term homelessness is a key challenge for governments, researchers, and outreach volunteers in Singapore and around the world, and the issues are often complex, unfolding across different stages of life. While policies are in place, tackling homelessness requires the efforts of government, community groups, and society as a whole.”

About the study

Ending Long-Term Homelessness builds upon the increased public awareness of homelessness since the COVID-19 pandemic, and local scholarship and national street counts that investigate the nature and scale of homelessness. Led by Dr Harry Tan, Senior Research Fellow at the IPS Policy Lab, the study was commissioned by the Ministry of Social and Family Development in 2021.

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About the Institute of Policy Studies

The Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) was established in 1988 as an independent think-tank to study and generate public policy ideas in Singapore. IPS became

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