

MEDIA RELEASE

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First Nationwide Street Count Reveals Approximately 1,000 Homeless People in Singapore

8 November 2019 – Researchers at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy have conducted Singapore’s first study to measure the scale of homelessness in Singapore.

Assistant Professor Ng Kok Hoe from the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore (LKYSPP) led a team of close to 500 volunteer fieldworkers who covered all 12,000 blocks of residential flats and other public and commercial spaces over a period of three months.

These volunteers recorded the numbers of individuals who were asleep or going to sleep in public spaces. They had some form of bedding, a lot of belongings, or were lying down. The study revealed around 1,000 street homeless people in Singapore.

Homeless in various districts

The highest counts of homeless persons were reported in the City, Bedok and Kallang districts, with more than 50 persons per district. Fewer than 10 homeless persons were observed in districts such as Bukit Panjang, Sembawang and Sengkang.

“Despite growing public attention in recent years, the size of the homeless population in Singapore has always been unknown. Measuring homelessness in a systematic and transparent way enables us to provide guidance for policy and service planning,” said Dr Ng.

Reasons for homelessness

47% of homeless people interviewed cited unemployment, irregular work and low wages as reasons for homelessness. Other main reasons for homelessness include family relationship problems and inadequate or inaccessible housing services.

Homelessness is not consistent with stereotypes

Many homeless persons had found ways to keep their appearance. 28% of homeless people were described as having a presentable appearance in the fieldworkers’ notes.

At the same time, homelessness posed hardships. Almost half of the interviewees reported health problems, and 1 in 4 persons had eaten just one meal that day or none at all. Homelessness was often chronic, lasting 6 years or longer for 31% of them.

Accessibility to Housing in Singapore

Some of the homeless persons had housing registered in their names, or they could think of safer places to sleep such as with friends, family or at their workplaces. But when asked why

they did not access these alternatives, they reported relationship problems, conflict with co-tenants, or employers' disapproval.

Their accounts highlight the differences between legal occupancy rights and actual access to housing.

Please refer to annex for more highlights of the findings.

Room for Improvement

"There is room for improvement in the current landscape of public and social services," added Dr Ng. 40% of the homeless people interviewed had sought help in the past year. The Social Service Offices were mentioned most frequently (19%), followed by Family Service Centres (9%) and Members of Parliament (9%).

The report highlighted opportunities such as expanding outreach services, offering overnight shelters with lower barriers to entry, and removing the joint tenancy requirement as part of HDB's public rental housing scheme so that there is adequate living space and privacy.

Dr Ng added that a research project like this can promote community ownership of this issue and encourage people to contribute in their own way. Achieving housing security for this vulnerable population will require such ownership alongside changes to policies and services.

These findings were derived from a nationwide cumulative count that took place over three months, a single night count in selected zones as well as interviews with 88 homeless persons.

More details of the study can be found in the accompanying research report.

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About the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy

The Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy is an autonomous, professional graduate school of the National University of Singapore. Its mission is to educate and train policy-makers and leaders, with the objective of raising the standards of governance throughout the region, improving the lives of its people, and, in so doing, contributing to the transformation of Asia and beyond. In addition to Masters and PhD programmes, the LKYSPP offers high quality customised Executive Programmes that cater to the needs of time-constrained senior managers and professionals, with the aim of delivering creative solutions to real management and leadership challenges.

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Annex

Findings from the study also revealed the following:

- 87% of homeless persons were men and 46% were Chinese.
- Half of the homeless persons were judged to be in their 50s or older.
- Around 30% of the homeless people interviewed were either separated, divorced or widowed, while 34% were single, which may signify a loss or lack of social support.
- Homelessness was often chronic – 31% had been homeless for 6 years or more
- Poor health and nutrition were prevalent - 1 in 4 persons had eaten just one meal that day or none at all.
- Below 40% of the homeless people interviewed stated that they had housing registered under their name. These were mainly rental and purchased Housing and Development Board (HDB) flats.
- The most common locations where homeless persons were encountered were HDB void decks and commercial buildings.
- Despite housing dislocation, homeless persons may maintain some connections to their communities and social networks.