



Of the 180 people found sleeping outdoors by volunteers over a five-hour period in March, 21 had been sleeping outdoors for more than a year and 18 for more than five years. ST PHOTOS: DESMOND WEE

180 found living on the streets

Volunteers find many of them have jobs and do not fit stereotypes of homeless people

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KEY FINDINGS

Members of SW101, a volunteer group of social workers and academics, and staff from charity Montfort Care found 180 people sleeping on the streets here. They were conducting a street survey to find out how many people were sleeping in public and therefore might be homeless. These are the key findings of their survey:

- 61 per cent were aged 50 and older; 24 per cent were in their 20s to 40s.
- 88 per cent were men.
- Of the 84 who answered a question on their marital status, 40 per cent said they were single.
- 23 out of 84 had an HDB flat in their name – 15 were rental flats and five were purchased.
- 48 out of 80 who answered about their employment were employed.
- Of the 74 who answered a question on their education level, 53 per cent said they had primary school education or less, 40 per cent had secondary school education, 8 per cent had post-secondary certificates or diplomas.

Over a five-hour stretch, 100 volunteers found 180 people sleeping outdoors across 25 locations in Singapore. Most were men aged above 50, and a good proportion had jobs.

This point-in-time survey is believed to be the first of its kind here. It was done in March by volunteer welfare organisation Montfort Care and volunteer group SW101, which focuses on issues facing low-income individuals.

Of the 180 people, 84 answered some or all of the survey questions, which ranged from personal particulars, like age and educational background, to home ownership. The rest declined or were already asleep. Those sleeping outdoors were found mainly in parks such as East Coast Park and at HDB blocks.

The exercise, conducted from 9pm to 2am, also revealed that 21 had been sleeping outdoors for more than a year, and 18 for more than five years.

Assistant Professor Ng Kok Hoe, who is part of the research effort, said he was alarmed by how long people were sleeping in public.

“You would think that if people were sleeping outside, if these were the numbers and if it has been happening for so long, we would have noticed. I think it reminds us how invisible they often are,” said Prof Ng, who is from the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy.

That 60 per cent of them were working – 58 per cent full-time, 38 per cent in casual employment – was another finding that surprised the team. Most of those with jobs were cleaners or security guards.



In Chinatown, coffee shops that open 24 hours and staircases are some of the places where people can be found sleeping.

A quarter of those surveyed have a registered address, often a rental flat under the Joint Singles Scheme.

The homeless people found did not fit stereotypes.

Said Prof Ng: “They are able-bodied, and they are actually holding down jobs – just not very rewarding jobs. The low wages are a reminder

of the work issues that a particular segment of the population faces.”

The point-in-time count methodology is common in the United States and Britain, where it is used to monitor homeless populations.

When *The Straits Times* visited Chinatown late on Monday night, there were people sleeping across

plastic chairs, on cardboard laid out on benches, and with their heads down on the tables of 24-hour coffee shops. One, slumped on the table in a coffee shop, said he has a job clearing tables at People’s Park Complex.

The Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) clarified that some may have homes but choose to sleep in public because of family disputes, or because they are shift workers who want to be near their workplaces. MSF said it assists in about 300 homeless cases each year – which it defined as people who have no means of accommodation.

But while the Government can house them in shelters, some prefer the freedom of living on the streets, said Mr Abraham Yeo, 35, founder of volunteer group Homeless Hearts, which befriends the homeless.

Prof Ng’s team also found that, in the past year, none of those sleeping on the streets had asked for help from shelters, and less than 20 per cent had sought help from friends and family, MPs and the authorities.

Tampines GRC MP Desmond Choo, who sits on the Government Parliamentary Committee for Social and Family Development, said measures are in place to help the homeless find shelter.

He hoped people can encourage those sleeping in public to seek help. “We should be concerned for the homeless for their security and well-being, regardless of the reasons for them not going home,” he said. “Only with proper shelter can they set about rebuilding their lives.”

Prof Ng suggested one way forward is for outreach efforts and shelter services to be expanded. But it is important for the public to first understand the challenges faced by the homeless: “When the public is not aware of the problem, our society cannot begin to address it properly.”

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