

Survey of 180 people sleeping outdoors in Singapore reveals surprising findings

# Not all are jobless or homeless

✓ KOK XING HUI, THE STRAITS TIMES

Over a five-hour stretch, 100 volunteers found 180 people sleeping outdoors across 25 locations in Singapore.

Most were men above 50 and a good proportion of them also had jobs.

This point-in-time survey on homelessness is believed to be the first of its kind in Singapore.

It was conducted in March by volunteer welfare organisation Montfort Care and a volunteer group called SW101 which focuses on issues facing low-income individuals.

Of the 180 people the group tried to interview, 84 answered some or all of the survey questions, which ranged from their personal particulars like age and education background to if they owned a home. The rest declined to or were already asleep.

Those sleeping outdoors were found mainly in parks like 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, 18 for more than five years.

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



The MSF said some people have homes but choose to sleep in public.

PHOTO: THE STRAITS TIMES

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“You’d think that if people were sleeping outside, if these were the numbers and if it has been happening for so long, we’d have noticed. I think it reminds us how invisible they often are,” said Dr Ng, an Assistant Professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy.

That 60 per cent were working – more than half of those working were holding full-time jobs – was another surprising finding. Most held jobs as cleaners or security guards.

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

The homeless people that the researchers found did not fit the usual stereotypes of homeless.

Dr Ng said: “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.”

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

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 workplace.

MSF assists about 300 homeless cases each year – which it defined as people who have no means of accommodation.

Dr Ng’s team also found that none of those sleeping on the streets had asked for help from shelters and less than 20 per cent had sought help.

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