

SOCIAL

Moves aimed at helping the homeless find shelter, tackling the problem of child abuse and cleaning up the charity sector came into focus over the past year



Landmark study highlights issues of homeless people

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Once a hidden problem, the state of homelessness has been making the headlines. Last month, the first nationwide study of homelessness in Singapore found about 1,000 people sleeping on the streets.

The landmark street count by Assistant Professor Ng Kok Hoe of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy unearthed a host of information about the homeless.

Six in 10 of those interviewed were working, mostly in low-wage positions such as cleaners and security guards. Half of those polled had been sleeping on the streets for between one and five years. One in four had either rented a flat from the Housing Board at highly subsidised rates or bought an HDB flat but chose not to go home because of conflicts with their co-tenants.

Pastor Andrew Khoo, chief executive of New Hope Community Services, which runs shelters for the homeless, said: "To many people, it's really shocking to know there are about 1,000 homeless people in Singapore. We have basic expectations that all of us are clothed, have shelter and our basic needs are met."

Why it matters

At the public lecture where the street count's findings were shared, the Ministry of Social and Family Development's (MSF) senior director Lee Kim Hua said the ministry defined a homeless person as someone "who feels he has no home to go back to, whether he owns a house or is renting a place".

Social workers interviewed pointed out that the MSF's definition of a homeless person is significant, as the authorities had in the past stressed that many of those on the streets were not actually homeless; they had a place to stay but chose not to go home for various reasons.

Prof Ng said: "In a society where many people may regard stable housing as a norm and where public policies are organised around and premised on home ownership, homelessness is a particularly punishing form of economic inequality and social exclusion."



The first nationwide study of homelessness in Singapore last month found about 1,000 people sleeping on the streets. Half of those polled had been doing so for between one and five years, while six in 10 were working, mostly in low-wage positions such as cleaners and security guards. PHOTOS: DESMOND WEE, ST FILE

He added that living on the streets affects one's well-being, safety and work opportunities, and Singaporeans should be aware of and concerned about the issue.

In the past two years, a host of services have emerged to help these rough sleepers. There are now five churches, a temple and a charity offering the homeless refuge for the night. At least one more Safe Sound Sleeping Place – Sultan Mosque – is expected to open its doors from the first quarter of next year.

There are three transitional shelters here where homeless people can stay for a longer period of time while social workers help them find housing and resolve other issues. Another such shelter is in the works.

An 11-member inter-government agency task force, chaired by the MSF, has been set up to review poli-

1,000

Approximate number of people sleeping on the streets here, according to the first nationwide study of homelessness in Singapore.

cies, programmes and protocols to address the complex underlying issues that lead to homelessness.

The ministry has also brought together various government agencies, the community and religious groups to help the homeless. The Partners Engaging and Empowering Rough Sleepers (Peers) Network was launched in July and it now has 26 members. This means

that more homeless people are getting the help they need and the help is better coordinated.

The recent spurt of services for the homeless is significant.

Pastor Khoo said: "In the past, the (issue of) rough sleepers was hidden and forgotten. But with the new services and intentional outreach, many have been helped and some have got HDB rental flats."

What lies ahead

Prof Ng's study has highlighted areas that have to be addressed to tackle the issue.

For example, some people choose to sleep on the streets even though they have a rental flat because of clashes with their co-tenants.

Under the HDB joint singles scheme, a single person must pair

up with another single to rent a one-room rental flat at highly subsidised rates.

Prof Ng and others argue that the joint tenancy requirement for singles should be removed to better address one of the factors behind some ending up homeless. Also, efforts to reach out to homeless people and link them with help services can be stepped up to assist more people.

"Much time has been lost because homelessness has not always been recognised as a problem in Singapore," he said.

"As the economy and society change, we must continue to have research to update and deepen our understanding of such a complex problem."

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