

# Homelessness in Singapore

By Austin Min-Seok Moon

## Abstract

This study assesses the current landscape of homelessness in the Republic of Singapore. It relies on literature review and field research, including multiple interviews with homeless individuals in Singapore contacted through an outreach volunteer program. The paper provides insight into current social issues by first describing the economic development of Singapore, whose swift economic growth has left a substantial impact on the nation's social structure. The 'hidden-away' nature of Singapore's poverty is further explored, as the country is often recognized for its economic prosperity rather than its financially struggling lower class. The Singaporean government has achieved a great deal of success in implementing a wide range of policies and programs to support the living conditions of individuals and households in need. While the welfare and support programs enacted by the government are not perfect, the government program has largely been successful and is recognized as 'best in class'. The paper sheds light on the social structure and the policies contributing to the underrecognized nature of homeless issues in Singapore.

# **Background**

The Republic of Singapore is a relatively young country in Southeast Asia, having only become an independent state in the mid-20th century. Prior to this, Singapore had been colonized by Britain, occupied by Imperial Japan during the Second World War, and been a part of the Federation of Malaysia (Leinbach 2020). The history of Singapore is dotted with the interference and involvement of other nations and ruling powers. However, Singapore's status today as a major player on the international field cannot be disputed. Its economy has achieved unbelievably rapid growth and development, placing the nation in its position today as a central port and hub of international trade. The country's economy is one of the most successful not only in Asia, but worldwide. According to the Index of Economic Freedom, as of the year 2020, Singapore possessed the world's freest economy, with a GDP of \$565.8 billion and a unemployment rate of 3.8%. Its status and reputation as "one of the world's most business-friendly countries" is backed by such evidence of prosperity (The Index of Economic Freedom 2020). One might assume, then, that the problem of homelessness that is so significant in major cities around the world might be less of an issue in the prosperous state of Singapore. However, a closer examination of Singaporean society reveals a hidden truth.

## **Homelessness in Singapore**

Singapore has been recognized by the World Bank as a country that "inspired many cities and countries striving to reach a similar level of development within one generation" (World Bank 2019). The image that Singapore projects to the international community is one of prosperity and success, a nation that holds the highest homeownership record at 90%, outpacing the United States (60%) and Japan (55%) according to IMF (2011). However,

homelessness still exists in Singapore, with an estimated 0.2% homelessness rate from a ‘point in time’ field survey conducted in 2019 (Ng 2019). Due to its relatively significant small number and more glamorous aspects of society, it is easy to have it go unnoticed. This leads to the unfortunate reality that Singaporeans living in poverty “suffer from a lack of visibility” (Struble 2018).

Overall, there is a severe lack of data regarding the scale of homelessness within Singapore. In a recent study by the National University of Singapore, approximately 1,000 people spent each night on the streets of Singapore (Tan 2019). Fieldworkers employed two strategies to arrive at a reliable conclusion, producing data through both a single night count and a cumulative count taking place over several months (Ng 2019, 4-5). This is a surprisingly low number for an densely populated city with the population of Singapore, which was 3,523,191 as of September, 2020 (Department of Statistics Singapore). According to the team, central areas such as the Central Business District, Bedok, and Kallang were locations with the highest numbers of homeless, reaching up to 241 people (Ng 2019, 25-26). The distribution of the homeless population in Singapore is displayed in Figure 1. An important observation from this landmark nationwide street count was the fact that “clear associations between the homeless population and public housing stock in each district” was discovered. The homeless were inclined to be found in districts with “a higher proportion of public rental housing” and less within districts with “a higher percentage of large flat types” (Ng 2019, 28). Given that public housing connotes financial difficulty while large flats indicate wealth and prosperity, it appears that homelessness is more common in areas where individuals of poverty are higher in concentration.

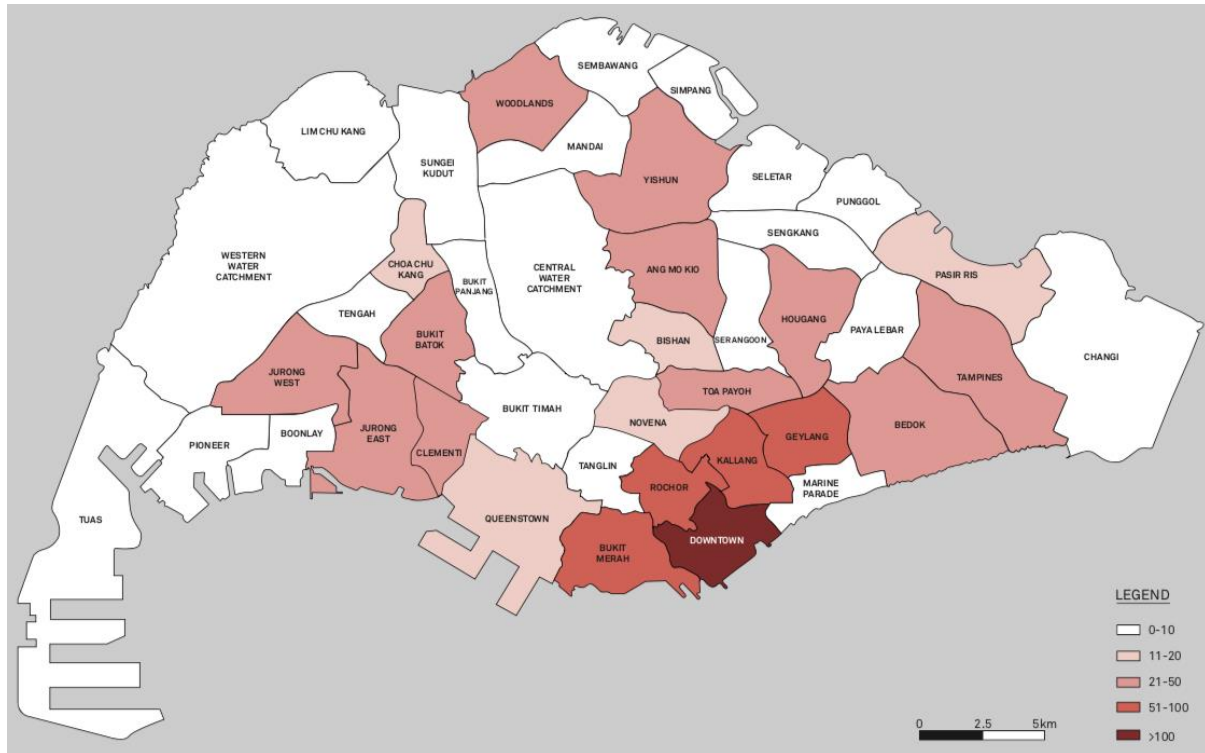


Fig. 1. “Geographical distribution of observations from cumulative count” (Ng 2019, 25)

The correlation between poverty and homelessness is not novel. However, two questions should be further analyzed in case of Singapore: 1) What type of government subsidy is available that contributes to the low homeless rates, and 2) What directives are being undertaken to alleviate homeless problems and what more can be done.

## Singapore Housing Policy and Subsidy

In 1960, the Singapore government launched a comprehensive housing plan to ensure every Singaporeans have a chance to own a personal home. The core principle of Singapore government’s ‘social safety net’ was centered on self-reliance and mutual obligation. The common understanding among Singaporeans is that ‘government will provide as long as one is gainfully employed’.

Today, the Republic of Singapore has one of the highest rates of home ownership in the world, reaching as high as 90.4% as of the year 2019 (Department of Statistics Singapore 2020). This was made possible by the extensive housing policies that the Singaporean

government has in place under its Housing and Development Board. In contrast to the country's liberalized economy, free of governmental interference, its public housing authority is heavily involved. For instance, in 1964, the Home Ownership for the People Scheme was introduced by the government, and the effort to "push home ownership" resulted in the improvement of the "country's overall economic, social, and political stability" (Housing & Development Board n.d.). Singapore's Housing and Development Board provides assistance for people to rent or purchase heavily subsidized housing, allowing buyers to "use less than a quarter of their monthly household income to pay for the mortgage instalment of their flat" (Housing & Development Board n.d.).

The Singapore government's efforts to make home ownership affordable have led to an impressively high home ownership rate. This is even more noteworthy considering the fact that Singapore's housing market is one of the most expensive in the world. The inhabited dwellings in Singapore are also dominated by the Housing and Development Board, with these governmentally subsidized homes comprised 78.6% of the households in 2019 (Department of Statistics Singapore 2020).

However, the housing policies of Singapore are not without their faults. The present challenges for Singapore's public housing originate from its scale and how quickly the country has developed. Considering the heavy reliance on public housing, housing options need to be comprehensive to cater to the differences in household sizes, financial means, social needs, and housing expectations. The government successfully addressed the citizens with the higher income bracket – however, the provision for lower income households has been more problematic. In the 2000s, the supply of smaller flats declined and the housing prices increased as the nation enjoyed an economic boom.

Today, four housing assistance schemes exist for the homeless in Singapore: Public Rental Housing, Interim Rental Housing (IRH), Transitional Shelters, and Welfare Homes.

Of the four schemes, Public Rental Housing is the most sought after, as it is the only option for lower-income families, but the capacity is strained as the public rental sector had not expanded over the years and was governed by strict eligibility rules. Simultaneously, social trends are challenging the traditional definitions of the family unit, with a rise in singles and single-parent families, which are typically not included in the previous eligibility criteria. The government is making compromises to the eligibility rules and has set a target to increase the total number of rental units by 40% over a decade (Hansard 2016).

### **Singapore's Initiatives to Support the Homeless: Government and Community Programs**

Due to Singapore government's comprehensive housing subsidy programs that includes financing options via Central Provision Fund and the range HDB options, there is a predominant view that homelessness is caused by individual causes. This attitude towards homelessness is clearly visible in the stance taken by the Singaporean government.

The specific term "homelessness" never actually appears in Singapore law. Instead, the country has in place the Destitute Persons Act and the Miscellaneous Offences (Public Order and Nuisance) Act. One study points out the fact that these laws partly stem from "19th-century British colonial vagrancy laws" and are intended for the purpose of "policing, rehabilitating and providing compulsory care". The authors of this study opine that the very idea that rehabilitation is necessary for the homeless population "reinforces the government's stance that homelessness is a result of personal problems and failures (Forbes-Mewett and Tan 2017, 6).

Despite the lack of legal acknowledgement of 'homelessness', government support currently exists through welfare homes as provided under the Destitute Persons Act, 2013. According to the Act, 'any idle person found in public place, whether or not he is begging, who has no visible means of subsistence or place of residence or himself' can be picked up

by Ministry of Social and Family Development (‘MSF’) and be admitted into welfare homes for care and rehabilitation (Destitute Persons Act, 2013 Rev. Ed.) Government’s focus on ‘rehabilitation’ clearly reflects their perspectives that the cause of homelessness is an individual failure, not a structural one.

The causes of homelessness are not singular. According to research by Harry Tan and Helen Forbes Mewett, while ‘poverty’ is the common cause for homelessness, the ‘pathways’ for individuals to reach such a state are diverse. This is an important realization, as without understanding the ‘pathways’, a standard rehabilitation program may be ineffective in addressing the root causes of homelessness.

Today, there are 12 welfare homes in Singapore to house the homeless for rehabilitation. However, field research shows that these institutions were found to be ‘restricting’ as the residents were only allowed to leave the premises for work. “Mr. Tan”<sup>1</sup>, an interviewed homeless man, stated that he felt ‘freer on the streets than the institutions’ because he could choose where to eat and leave as he wished to. Another man, “Uncle Roland”, was critical of the strong restrictions on curfew times and the consumption of alcohol, which was strictly banned. Many of the homeless chose to stay out of the shelters, even if it meant sleeping in an open void deck mostly in empty parking lots. In many cases, the homeless were not aware of the government assistance programs that are available to them. In order to address the homeless, the Singapore community is reaching out to the homeless. The Voluntary Welfare Organizations (VWOs) and community organisations are addressing the social institutions that are currently lacking.

The VWOs and the community organizations focus on ‘rehabilitation’ by providing social support. The community organizations help the homeless first by befriending them and continuing the social support after they have found homes. The key is on building

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<sup>1</sup> Names have been modified to provide anonymity

‘sustained trust and engagement’ and educating them on the options, especially as the homeless often distrusted the government (A journey in helping the homeless in Singapore, Straits Times March 30, 2020). The community outreach programs are relying on individuals and organizations to help the homeless reintegrate back into society by providing meals and premises.

One of the programs, such as Homeless Hearts of Singapore relies on volunteers to visit the homeless every day. The organization is centered on the idea of ‘befriending’ the destitute. This deviates from the ‘rehabilitation’ philosophy adopted by the government and focuses on providing consistent material goods and shelter. More importantly, the organization tries to resolve the broken social support networks that drove them to be homeless. Volunteers are encouraged to address the people that they encounter as friends rather than destitute or homeless people. They focus on forming lasting relationships by taking in volunteers who are passionate about the cause and ensure that there is an activity on a daily basis.

Homeless Hearts of Singapore primarily relies on volunteers through their personal network. Volunteer networks continue to expand through personal referrals as the volunteers suggest his or her service work to their friends. Most volunteers consist of undergraduate students, who are primarily Singaporean and Chinese as the homeless mostly speak Mandarin. The bulk of their work is done on the streets via hands on service and rely on group chat via WhatsApp for communications. In the group chat, the service leader, Derek Lim, encourages the volunteers to sign up for designated districts primarily located in the ‘heartland of Singapore’ areas including Yishun, Changi Village, Paya Lebar, and China Town, about a week in advance. The volunteers then purchase supplies such as masks, bread, water, and snacks to distribute to other volunteers in their designated district. Each trip typically lasts three to four hours, visiting anywhere between eight to fourteen homeless



people to check on their status and provide non-monetary, and when necessary, monetary support. Ultimately, they seek to alleviate the immediate hardships of those sleeping on the streets until their friends can find a sustainable shelter.

As oftentimes the organization serves as a medium for the government and rough sleepers to communicate with, organizations that revolve around alleviation not unlike Homeless Hearts of Singapore often find themselves in a clash between government organizations and the homeless. There are two governmental branches, which are the Housing Development Board and the Social Service Offices, that could work in tandem to solve the issue of homelessness for some. The Housing Development Board provides relatively cheap, affordable housing, while the Social Service Offices offers further financial subsidies. However, homeless people are often cut off from such subsidies for various reasons. One such example is “Uncle Ng”, who happened to carry \$2000 in debt from loans . Although his income was not specified, he mentioned that he could not make up for his debt, which barred him from receiving loans from the Social Service Offices. This, in turn, greatly limited his capability to buy his own house. He, however, did specify that he wanted his own house compared to the government-provided flat which he could apply for with a flatmate. For such reasons, he sleeps under a bridge unseen by most pedestrians.

The challenges that the Homeless Hearts of Singapore faces is that oftentimes, people are unwilling to accept the subsidies from the Social Service Offices due to various reasons. Hence, volunteers in the Homeless Hearts of Singapore work to convince the homeless to accept their subsidies. Even then, according to a team leader, Kai Xiong, some “Uncles” argue with the officer of the Social Service Offices. This leads to conflict between the volunteer organization and the government, as the government officials often tell the volunteers not to convince the homeless to visit the offices if they are not ready to be open to their subsidies.

In essence, despite government funding and programs, as well as the efforts of non-governmental organizations, a plethora of extremely personal factors ranging from familiar circumstances and culture to the egos of different stakeholders frequently interfere with the process of providing safe housing for all.

## **Conclusion**

The overall situation regarding homelessness in the country of Singapore does not appear to be very serious on a widespread scale relative to other major cities in the world. On the whole, Singapore's economy has flourished, helping the country become a significant player and contributor to the global market and economy. And there is no doubt that Singapore has built one of the most successful housing programs in the world. Therefore, the most pressing matter relating to homelessness in Singapore is the way in which the issue is dealt with for the minority. Statistics show that the percentage of Singaporeans that require government aid is actually very small. Most people in Singapore hold ownership over their own homes, earn a high-average income, and only a small proportion of society suffers from the impacts of problems such as crippling poverty or drug addiction. The Singapore government's shortcoming, however, is failing to ensure that the lowest, most struggling sector of society is visible and receiving the aid that they require.

Being such a small sliver of the whole, it is relatively difficult for this marginalised group to receive the personalized aid that they desperately require from society. While the housing system may continue to work for the vast majority of citizens, such groups of people tend to be either forgotten or seen as an issue far too specific and personal for the government to address.

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