# Homelessness in Singapore

# What is Homelessness?

Homelessness is commonly defined as **living in inadequate housing situations**.

Homelessness is further subdivided into three categories:

**1** Primary or absolute homelessness, where people do not have a home and sleep in public spaces not intended for human habitation.

**2** Secondary homelessness - refers to people in temporary, crisis or transitional accommodation – such as overnight shelters, emergency shelters, and short-stay hostels – or who move frequently because they lack permanent housing.

**3** Relative or tertiary homelessness, which includes those at risk of homelessness, or living in inadequate or insecure accommodation.

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*"Singapore got homeless meh? I thought we rich?"*

# Homelessness still exists.

A 2019 nationwide street count, the first of its kind in Singapore, found that there were between 921 and 1050 street homeless people in Singapore. This count excludes the secondary and tertiary homeless.

To put it simply, they are a real, but invisible group in Singapore.

"They are just less visible. It's often difficult to distinguish a homeless person from any other member of the public…"

- Dr. Ng Kok Hoe, author of the 2019 study.

# "But I never see any homeless before..."

An absence of presence is not absence. From this study, it is clear that homelessness is a chronic issue, not just a mere anomaly to our gleaming, wealthy metropolis.

A large majority of them were men (83%), with a positive correlation between the homeless population and age of housing estates as well as prevalence of rental flats.

The homeless have been found across all districts of Singapore.

Homelessness is often a long-term issue, lasting 6+ for 1 in 3 persons.

Descriptions of homeless people in Singapore may not fit stereotypes, with many being described as presentable. You may not even notice a homeless person in Singapore.

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# Legally speaking, there is STILL no official definition of homelessness in Singapore.

**Legal jargon most closely related is the Destitute Persons Act, which defines a "destitute person" as:**

(a) any person found begging in a public place in such a way as to cause or be likely to cause annoyance to persons frequenting the place or otherwise to create a nuisance; or
(b) any idle person found in a public place, whether or not he is begging, who has no visible means of subsistence or place of residence or is unable to give a satisfactory account of himself.

## Why does this matter?

Because public policy definitions (or lack thereof) such as these will determine what issues deserve attention or are prioritised, and limit or expand the range of possible solutions. The lack of an official homelessness classification (or poverty index) in Singapore speaks to the approach we take in tackling it.

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## "Isn't this their fault though?"

Homelessness is often portrayed as a result of poor personal choices, ultimately allowing the government and society to abdicate responsibility for dealing with it.

Yet, homelessness is in reality an interplay of both personal AND structural, systemic factors. Such external factors include but are not limited to:

Poverty Cycle / Trap

Unforseen Circumstances / Shocks

Stigma of receiving Help / Assistance / Temporary Shelter

Fear of punitive consequences of sleeping rough, which discourages people to come forward and seek help

## *"What can we do to help?"*

According to former NMP Anthea Ong, a "greater whole-of-society push" is required to tackle homelessness. Therefore, both government and non-government stakeholders need to play greater roles in eradicating homelessness.

On the individual's part, there are NGOs that help the homeless in Singapore by befriending them, connecting them to official social services, and providing them with shelter. Such NGOs include:
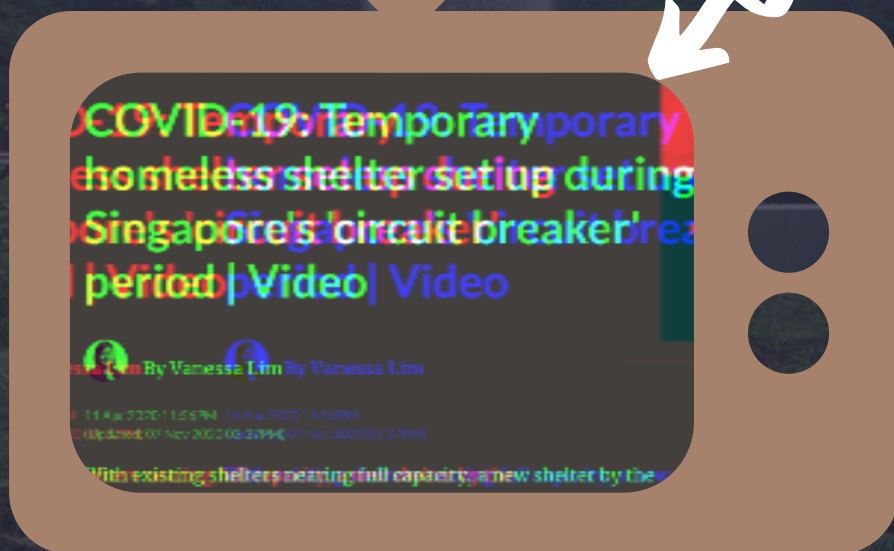
Homeless Hearts of Singapore

Crisis Centre

**Do consider donating and volunteering!**

## "Gahmen leh?"

In recent years, thanks to the release of reports and the work of activists on the ground, there has been an intensification of attention, resources and help toward the homeless.

A shelter in part set up by MSF and HDB!

COVID-19: Temporary homeless shelter set up during Singapore's circuit breaker period | Video

By Vanessa Lim

11 Apr 2020 11:56PM
Updated: 09 Nov 2022 03:37MC

With existing shelters nearing full capacity, a new shelter by the

Furthermore, the mainstream media and government has become more attentive to such issues, with multiple responses and assurances from the Ministry of Social and Family Development during the heat of the COVID-19 crisis.

Homelessness can be eradicated. It is an active choice we make whether it remains an issue or not. We can push the conversation toward a more open, tolerant space.

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# Resources

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Ng Kok Hoe, 2019; Homelessness in Singapore: Results From a Nationwide Street Count; Lee Kuan Yew School Of Public Policy. https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/docs/default-source/faculty-publications/homeless-in-singapore.pdf

Ong, A. (2019, June 26). Greater whole-of-society push needed to tackle homelessness. TODAYonline. https://www.todayonline.com/commentary/we-must-own-homelessness-society

## *For more information, go to: bit.ly/HomelessnessSG*

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