

First Nationwide Street Count of Homelessness in Singapore

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1. Context and Impact

Homelessness is one of the severest forms of economic exclusion and housing insecurity. Measuring homelessness is therefore an important way to monitor access to adequate and affordable housing. Singapore's first nationwide street count¹ of homelessness took place in 2019. The study revealed the scale and conditions of homelessness in the country. It prompted a national conversation, led to the expansion of street outreach services and continues to inform policymaking. Set in the context of a society where concern about economic inequality has been deepening, this study contributes to progress towards a more inclusive and sustainable city, the reduction of housing inequality, and the eradication of poverty.

2. Method

To overcome the challenges of enumerating a mobile population and the lack of data to inform site selection, this study combined two count strategies.

- A **cumulative count** that took place nationwide over several months, relying on individual fieldworkers to conduct observation in their assigned zones. It generated, for the first time, a geographically comprehensive baseline of street homelessness in Singapore, covering 298 zones of around 50 high-rise housing blocks each across 25 districts.
- A **single night count** in selected zones with observational and interview components, done by teams of fieldworkers that were all deployed at the same time. This count produced a snapshot of homelessness at one point in time.

To ensure the continuity of this project into the future, the study mobilised a broad base of support from government agencies, NGOs and the public. A total of 480 volunteer fieldworkers took part in the count, after attending training conducted by the researcher and experienced outreach workers.

3. Findings

In total, around 1,000 homeless people were found sleeping in public spaces across Singapore.

- Homelessness was geographically dispersed, with significant variation in density across districts.
- A large proportion were older men.
- Homelessness was often chronic, lasting 6 years or more for 1 in 3 homeless persons who were interviewed.
- Poor health and nutrition were prevalent; 1 in 4 interviewees had eaten just one meal that day or none at all.
- Unemployment, irregular work, and low wages were the most frequently reported reasons for homelessness. 6 in 10 homeless persons interviewed were in work, but they mostly held low-paying jobs like cleaning and security.
- Housing-related problems were often cited, such as inability to pay rent or mortgage, failure to qualify for housing services, and conflict with co-tenants in social housing.
- Many homeless people had experienced family conflict but still maintained connections to the community, choosing to sleep in places near to family and friends.

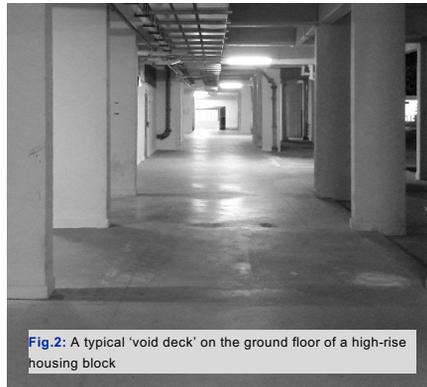


Fig.2: A typical 'void deck' on the ground floor of a high-rise housing block

4. The 'void deck'

Singapore is a densely populated country (7,866 population per square km) with an extensive public housing programme that accommodates around 80% of the population in high-rise housing blocks.² Under a concerted homeownership policy, the vast majority of public housing stock is owner-occupied and built to a high standard, with only a small fraction of older and smaller flats available for let as social housing.

As much of the landscape outside the central financial districts is occupied by public housing, this has given rise to the phenomenon where most homeless people are found within public housing estates. They sleep on the ground floor which is typically an open, vacant space with no housing units, meant for community activities. In these spaces, known as 'void decks', housing inequality becomes apparent – homeless and economically vulnerable people live amidst property owners in this wealthy home-owning society.

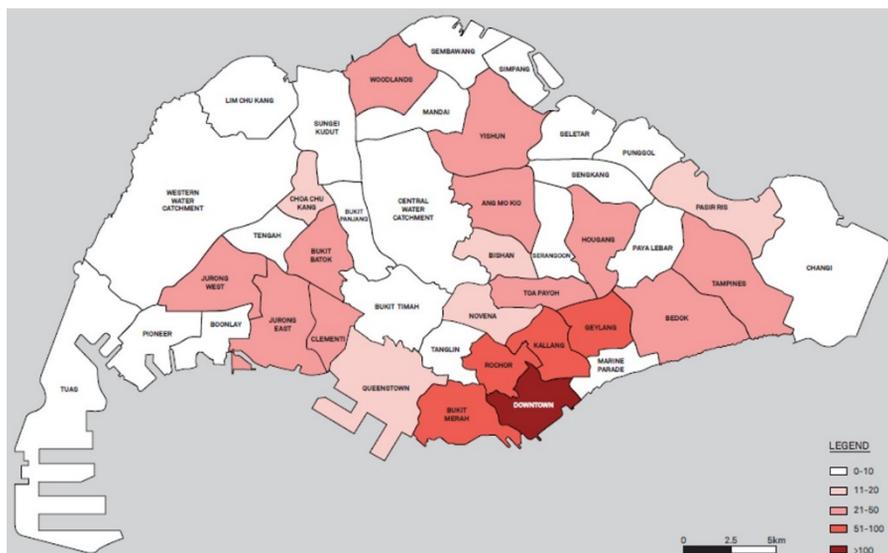
Fig.3: Locations where homeless people were found

Type of location	% of homeless persons found
'Void decks'	31.9
Commercial buildings	28.6
Pavilions, playgrounds	10.1
Parks	6.3
Coffee-shops, eateries	6.1
Fast-food restaurants	2.4
Community Clubs	2.1
Sports facilities	1.3
Others (train and bus stations, places of worship, etc.)	11.3
Total	100.0

Conclusion

- Given the poor living conditions and chronic nature of homelessness, there need to be **overnight shelters** with a low entry bar and immediate availability, and **medium-term housing services** that offer an adequate duration of stay.
- In the long run, the sustainability of shelter services depends on the availability of more permanent options in the housing system. The strict eligibility criteria and overcrowding in **social housing** are key targets for reform.
- Homeless people in Singapore were mostly older and in work. **Wage protection** and more comprehensive old-age **pensions** must be part of the long-term response to homelessness.
- This study demonstrates a **feasible method** for introducing a large-scale street count in dense urban centres where prior local research offers limited guidance. It can inform other studies in similar jurisdictions.

Fig.1: Geographical distribution of the homeless population in Singapore by urban planning boundaries



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References

1. The full study report, *Homeless in Singapore: Results from a Nationwide Street Count*, is available at: <https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/docs/default-source/faculty-publications/homeless-in-singapore.pdf>
2. Department of Statistics Singapore. (2019). *Population Trends 2019*.