

## HOMELESSNESS IN MALAYSIA: VICTIMS OF CIRCUMSTANCE OR BY CHOICE?

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper discusses the issues of homelessness in Malaysia, what constitutes and causes homelessness in Malaysia and how the society and government can help this marginalised group, according to public opinion. There is no official statistics showing the number of homeless in the city as only a few non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are aware of their existence. Needless to mention, the reasons why they end up sleeping on the streets. Homelessness affects thousands across Malaysia – people from all ethnicities, age groups, education levels, and geographic regions. Despite the pervasiveness of homelessness, people who are homeless are typically blamed for their homelessness. The media and public perpetuate myths of homeless women and men as "lazy", unmotivated people prone to making poor choices or as deviants who care nothing of the society or "being a burden". Observations, interviews and discussions were conducted among urban citizens. Data collected include their opinions, awareness and perceptions on the homeless in the country and various assistance currently available. Findings show not many are aware of the state of the homeless in the country. However, majority are concerned and willing to help through donations, food distribution, and creations of job and social services programs organized by the government or NGOs.*

Keywords: *homelessness, Malaysia, society, government.*

### INTRODUCTION

In Malaysia, there is no official definition of homelessness. Affairs of the homeless are lumped under the category of displaced and marginalised groups which fall under the broader umbrella of the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (MWFCDD) with enforcement duty mandated to the Social Welfare Department (SWD). Currently running of MWFCDD is guided by four major policies, the National Social Policy, National Policy on Women, National Policy for the Elderly, and National Social Welfare Policy. None of the policies have direct bearing to houseless and homeless persons implying that thus far this type of marginalised group have not been receiving much attention (Alhabshi and Abdul Manan, 2012).

Thus, homelessness may be defined in many ways, but is generally understood as the state of not having shelter, or a regular private space for sleeping, washing, and otherwise conducting one's day-to-day life. People experiencing homelessness often have little choice but to live or spend most of their time in public spaces, such as in parks and on the streets. This is the most visible form of homelessness, and one can often see in Kuala Lumpur. Some people have experienced homelessness for years or months, while some people have only recently become homeless (Food not Bombs, 2014).

Homelessness has roots in poverty and social exclusion. People become homeless for many reasons. Some become homeless after retirement or loss of a job. Some people have injuries, illnesses, or disabilities that make it hard to earn an income. Some people become homeless as a result of debt and/or financial or legal trouble. Some people face barriers to adequate employment because of incarceration history, limited literacy, or discrimination (such as against LGBTs, rural-urban migrants, or other marginalized groups). Some people struggle with addictions that make it hard to maintain personal health and financial well-being. Some people become homeless as a result of domestic abuse, depression, or personal trauma. Hence, some views that homeless people are criminals or unfit for work or purely lazy needs to be corrected (Indramalar, 2014)

Mackenzie and Chamberlain's (1992) definition includes three categories in recognition of the diversity of homelessness: 1). Primary homelessness is experienced by people without conventional accommodation (e.g. sleeping rough or in improvised dwellings); 2). Secondary homelessness is experienced by people who frequently move from one temporary shelter to another (e.g. emergency accommodation, youth refuges, "couch surfing"); and 3). Tertiary homelessness is experienced by people staying in accommodation that falls below minimum community standards (e.g. boarding housing and caravan parks). This definition was adopted by the Commonwealth Advisory Committee on Homelessness in 2001 and is widely used in the homelessness sector. The United Nations identifies homeless people under two broad groups: 1). Primary homelessness (or rooflessness). This category includes persons living in the streets without a shelter that would fall within the scope of living quarters; and 2). Secondary homelessness. This category may include persons with no place of usual residence who move frequently between various types of accommodations (including dwellings, shelters and institutions for the homeless or other living quarters). This category includes persons living in private dwellings but reporting 'no usual address' on their census form.

There are many homeless people in Kuala Lumpur, including those who have jobs but do not earn enough to rent a room or house. They sleep on the streets of popular areas in the city. When night falls, scores of homeless people take over parks and five-foot ways, turning areas in Kuala Lumpur into their home for the night. These homeless in the capital city are not all beggars or vagabonds. In fact, many of them hold jobs during the day. However, they do not make enough to pay for houses or rooms and find it easier to make ends meet by sleeping on the streets. There are no accurate figures on the number of homeless people in the city as only a few non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are aware of their existence. The Star team visited one popular area which is an open space in Jalan Pudu, Kuala Lumpur. The area has more than 100 people (Foong and Ho, 2010).

Only 10 percent of homeless persons on the streets of Kuala Lumpur are non-Malaysians. Majority are locals. According to Reach Out Malaysia president and founder, Pete Nicholl, the demographics of those sleeping on the streets directly correspond with the demographics of the nation in terms of race, religion and ethnic background (Tan, 2014). He added that the main issue of homelessness is they do not have enough disposable income to even afford a room. Most do not come from Kuala Lumpur, they are from all over the country such as Perlis, Kedah, Terengganu, Melaka and Johor. Some are also left homeless because of errant employers who absconded, closed down their factories or have not paid salaries to their employees for up to four months, leaving them with no choice but to sleep in the streets.

A comprehensive support system is crucial to eradicate urban poverty and to ensure that lesser people end up homeless. Many countries adopt successful models in dealing with poverty including having proper social welfare as part of the nation policy to help these marginalised groups. United Kingdom has severe poverty problems from austerity cuts made by their government due to deficit. However, their social welfare system provides financial benefit to those unemployed and seeking for jobs. There exists job centres all over the country for people seeking employment. The job seeker is given an allowance for a period of time but you must go to the job centres, register and be interviewed. After some period of time, if the candidate does not take up the work or go for interview arranged or find employment, then the benefit given will be terminated.

In the United States, as part of the state government's mandate on social welfare, city councillors are directed to provide accommodation purely for the homeless. The rents and utility bills are free, with the housing the local council providing counsellors for the homeless to help reintegrate them back into society. While some countries are trying help the poor to come off the streets, in Canada, the Vancouver city councillors implemented foldable shelters on benches in the city (Tan, 2014).

Nonetheless, the stories of the many homeless people in Malaysia are all different, but the problems they face go beyond the need for shelter, safety and food. Homeless people face numerous social disadvantages that exclude them from fitting in – they have reduced access to public and private services such as healthcare, education, employment and even banking services. It makes it harder for them to apply or secure a job when they cannot even own a bank account. There are numerous non-governmental organisations and some private individuals that provide food and care to the homeless. The Social Welfare Department and National Welfare Foundation have several programmes that address the problem. More often than not, however, people who are homeless stay away from government programmes as they fear being "sent away" to state-run facilities and shelters where they will be stripped of their freedom (Indramalar, 2014).

In Malaysia, homelessness remains an issue but the fact has not been fully accepted by the public office. Lacking awareness and understanding of what constitute homelessness is one of the reasons. Key welfare related agencies, Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (MWFC), Department of Social Welfare (DSW) and Desa Bina Diri (DBD) rehabilitation centre have their own stance as to what constitute homelessness. MWFC and DBD categorised the homeless as destitute, i.e., defining them as beggars and vagrants. Beggars refer to persons who live by asking for money or food and vagrants refer to persons without a settled home or regular work who wanders from place to place and lives by begging. In their opinion the Act (Destitute Persons Act of 1977) could be used to enforce control over the homeless. DSW, a department under the ambit of the MWFC disagrees. The spokesperson Zulkapli Sulaiman labelled the homeless as drifters and “trouble makers”. They could not be placed under the Destitute Act of 1977 according to Zulkapli because many of them are healthy and some do have job.

Due to the varied perspectives and causes of homelessness, it is relatively hard to craft policy addressing all the homeless in Malaysia. There is no unitary understanding on what constitute homelessness even among relevant welfare institutions namely the MWFC and DBD. They see the homeless as destitute thus bind them under the Destitute Act. The DSW on the other hand sees the homeless as a public nuisance thus has left them to be dealt by the police.

The Welfare Department conducts exercises dubbed ‘Operasi Gelandangan’ (which it refers to as “rescues”) to help get homeless people off the streets. Welfare officers can, under the Destitute Persons Act 1977, round up a person who has “no visible means of subsistence or place or residence or is unable to give a satisfactory account of himself” and place him in government welfare institutions that are established for “the care and rehabilitation of destitute persons”. For the homeless, these exercises are not rescues but raids. They fear being detained against their will, even if they are eventually placed in welfare homes. The Destitute Persons Act 1977, which aims to “control vagrancy”, clearly needs to be reviewed to consider people who are homeless. Most people who are homeless are not inadequate or criminal but are just people without homes owing to unfortunate social, personal or economic circumstances. They need a policy and laws that protect them and safeguard their rights and interests (Indramalar, 2014).

This paper attempts to examine public perceptions over the homeless issues in Malaysia; among questions asked what constitutes and causes homelessness in Malaysia and how the society and government can help this marginalised group, according to public opinion.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

A total of 85 working adults selected randomly from Kuala Lumpur took part in this research. These participants were invited to complete a self-administered questionnaire, consisting of close-ended questions. The first objective gathers public opinion on what constitutes ‘homelessness’. Participants were asked to select how they understand ‘homelessness’ in Malaysia and which United Nation’s definition closely depicts the marginalised group in our country. The next section examines causes which lead to homelessness based on public knowledge. More than ten causes were listed to assess participants’ opinions before measuring how concerned they are towards the homeless and whether they are ready to help, and in what manner. Data was analysed using PASW Statistics 18.0. Descriptive analysis were run to interpret the findings.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

A total of 55 respondents participated in this study, representing 64.7% response rate. These respondents are within the age range of 20 to 67 years old. Out of the 55 respondents, 36 are male and 19 are females, of different ethnics. Table 1 shows the selection made by respondents on the definition best describes homelessness in Malaysia. Significantly, among causes cited for homelessness are shown in Table 2.

Types of assistance willing to be offered by respondent include the following: donation (36%), food distribution (25%), job creations (45%), participation in social service programs held by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or charity bodies (58%). These findings suggest that although homelessness is fundamentally a problem of poverty—where people have insufficient income (such as wages or pension) to pay for housing and basic needs—the solution requires much more than asking homeless people to “get a job”. The solution also requires much more than just charity. It is imperative that we develop public policies and strategies for reducing and preventing homelessness today.

## *Homelessness in Malaysia: Victims of circumstance or by choice?*

Table 1. Percentages on definition of homelessness in Malaysia (n = 55)

| <b>Definition</b>  | <b>Percentages (Frequencies)</b> |
|--|----------------------------------|
| Primary homelessness (or rooflessness). This category includes persons living in the streets without a shelter that would fall within the scope of living quarters   | 70.9% (39)                       |
| Secondary homelessness. This category may include persons with no place of usual residence who move frequently between various types of accommodations (including dwellings, shelters and institutions for the homeless or other living quarters). This category includes persons living in private dwellings but reporting 'no usual address' on their census form. | 29.1% (16)                       |

Table 2. Causes of homelessness (n = 55)

| <b>Causes</b>   | <b>Percentages (Frequencies)</b> |
|---|----------------------------------|
| Low wage  | 5% (3)                           |
| Unemployment  | 13% (7)                          |
| Lack of affordable housing  | 2% (1)                           |
| Chronic illness   | 2% (1)                           |
| Mental/ Health Problem (including depression)   | 7% (4)                           |
| Domestic violence   | 15% (8)                          |
| Labour exploitation   | 5% (3)                           |
| Disabilities  | 15% (8)                          |
| Ageing  | 5% (3)                           |
| Debt  | 5% (3)                           |
| Addictions to gambling, alcohol, or drugs are disorders that complicate one's ability to avert or escape homelessness | 18% (10)                         |
| Regional disparities/ rural-urban migration   | 7% (4)                           |

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