What is homelessness?

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 we see often in Kuala Lumpur. Some people have experienced homelessness for years or months, while some people have only recently become homeless.

Why does it happen?

Homelessness has roots in poverty and social exclusion. People become homeless for many reasons. Some become homeless after retirement of 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. Some people end up homeless because of the break-up of a family. Some persons living on the streets are refugees who are poor and forbidden by law from working in Malaysia.

Most of the time, homeless persons grapple with several problems simultaneously like:

- Depression, addiction and debt;
- Injury, unemployment and family break-up; or
- Old age, illness and abuse.

Therefore, even though 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.

Our solution: Working together to end inequality and exclusion

It is no coincidence that socially marginalized and excluded groups, such as people with disabilities, victims of abuse, formerly incarcerated persons, LGBTs, senior citizens, refugees, and people struggling with addiction are vulnerable to homelessness. Problems faced by marginalized groups are not often taken seriously within society—which means that people from these groups encounter more difficulty accessing the education, income, health care, housing and/or other fundamental securities and assistance they need.

Problems faced by persons experiencing homelessness are complex and cannot be solved by one person alone.

We must work together as a community and a society to end socio-economic exclusion and inequality.

In this issue:

| What is Homelessness?                  | 1 |
| Some Causes                           | 2-5 |
| Myth-Buster                           | 6 |
Factors Linked to Homelessness, Related Policy, and What Government Can Do.

**Low Wages**

- 1 in 5 * homeless persons named low wages as a factor in their homelessness.

**Current Policy**

The present minimum wage of RM900 per month, as set under the Minimum Wage Order, is a poverty wage for workers—especially those in urban areas where the cost of living is high. At the same time, many workers still earn less than minimum wage due to poor enforcement of the law.

**What Government Can Do**

Enforce, review and improve the Minimum Wage Order and labor-related laws to ensure all workers receive an adequate minimum wage.

Ensure workers have power to influence regulation of their wages, working conditions, and job security through the formation of and participation in labor unions.

---

**Unemployment/Underemployment**

- 1 in 2 * persons named unemployment as a factor in their homelessness.

**Current Policy**

Malaysia has no national system for unemployment assistance, despite the fact that many retrenched workers do not receive compensation through private employment contracts. The Social Welfare Department offers only limited financial assistance to persons unable to earn a living wage, such as single mothers, senior citizens, and persons with disabilities.

**What Government Can Do**

Unemployed persons are at high risk of losing assets and falling into poverty. Also, under-employment (where people cannot find or commit to full-time employment due to limited work opportunities, personal injury, ageing, etc) is a contributing factor to homelessness.

Public policy and/or programs to provide or supplement the income of persons unable to earn an adequate monthly income are necessary.

---

**Lack of Affordable Housing/Transportation**

**Persons hoping**

To exit homelessness are often frustrated by a lack of affordable housing within reasonable distance of their workplaces.

**Current Policy**

Federal targets for low-cost housing under the Malaysia Plan and PHP have not been in line with demand, and construction has not met set targets. While the federal government is taking new steps to improve the lack of affordable housing through direct provision (PR1MA), present focus is primarily on ownership, not on rental options that would benefit persons who are unmarried and/or in search of immediate housing.

**What Government Can Do**

Ensure sufficient supply of quality housing, including an array of low-cost and rental options, for families and individuals throughout the city. To overcome continual problems in the quality and availability of low-cost housing the public sector ought to take responsibility for more direct provision, as well as improved regulation of private sector units.

Also, transportation needs of low-income groups must be equally considered when planning housing. All city residents should have access to affordable transportation near their homes for travel to work, school, and other destinations.

* From Profiling Golongan Gelandangan (Homeless) di Wilayah Persekutuan Kuala Lumpur, a report by the Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development on the Social Welfare Department’s 2010 survey of 1,387 persons experiencing homelessness in Kuala Lumpur.
Factors Linked to Homelessness, Related Policy, and What Government Can Do.

Chronic Illness
- Long-term illness that cannot be cured, such as asthma, arthritis, and diabetes
- 15 to 30%** of persons living on the streets suffer from chronic illness.

Current Policy
- Malaysia’s 2010 National Strategic Plan for Managing Communicable Disease demonstrates new concern for chronic disease management. However, policy focuses on moderating individual behavior (diet, physical activity, etc.) rather than improving medical services.
- Moreover, despite the fact that homelessness exacerbates existing health problems, government does not yet address the special health needs of persons living on the streets.

What Government Can Do
- Raise public awareness of the debilitating effects of chronic illness. Also, improve the capacity of public and private health care providers to diagnose and assist patients in managing chronic illness. Chronic illness can be far more devastating to the health of homeless persons due to exposure to the elements and irregular or insufficient nourishment, rest, and medical care. Special attention to chronic illness among homeless populations is required.

Mental Health Problems, Including Depression
- 1 in 5 ** homeless persons surveyed suffers from poor mental health—often depression.

Current Policy
- Since the 2001 National Mental Health Act, government has taken steps to ensure better care, especially through community-based models. However, stigma and a lack of mental health care integrated into primary care services stand as obstacles to diagnosis and treatment for persons facing mental health problems.

What Government Can Do
- Increase public knowledge—and reduce stigma and fear—of various mental health problems, as well as how they affect individuals, families, and communities. Also, increase the capacity of public and private health care providers to diagnose and assist patients (and caregivers) in managing mental health.

Domestic Violence
- Inability to access services or support for escaping abuse at home motivates some victims to turn to the streets for safety.

Current Policy
- The government has established One Stop Crisis Centres (OSCCs) in public hospitals nationwide to provide medical care and other support to victims of domestic violence. However, a lack of funding and coordination under the Ministry of Health has negatively impacted the efficacy of the program. The 1994 Domestic Violence Act provides legal protections for victims of domestic violence, but police inaction and/or a lack of social support undermines the ability of victims to improve their own security. Moreover, housing and financial assistance for persons wishing to leave an abuser are not yet at sufficient levels.

What Government Can Do
- Develop programs to protect and assist victims of domestic violence, including through the provision of emergency housing. Ensure that persons in public institutions and government agencies (such as schools, hospitals, police enforcement, and social welfare offices) are prepared to assist victims quickly and effectively.

** From a survey of 48 persons living on the streets and 14 newly homeless clients of Anjung Singgah in Kuala Lumpur, conducted October-November 2012.
**Factors Linked to Homelessness, Related Policy, and What Government Can Do.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Labor Exploitation (Work-related Injuries, Unpaid Wages, etc)</th>
<th>Current Policy</th>
<th>What Government Can Do</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Being deprived of compensation for a work injury or one's regular labour propels some people into homelessness, and prevents workers who are already homeless from exiting homelessness.</td>
<td>Manual laborers earning under RM4500 a month and non-manual laborers (with some exceptions) earning less than RM 2000 a month are covered under the Employment Act 1955; However, enforcement of protections against unpaid wages, failure to provide relief for injury, and other abuses is rare, despite the vulnerability of low-income workers. Persons earning above these levels are protected only by private contracts, also difficult to enforce. SOCSO members are entitled to benefits in cases of injury, disease, and debilitating conditions, but do not always receive them. Comparable assistance is not generally available for persons not covered under SOCSO.</td>
<td>Ensure enforcement of all labor-related laws so that employers comply with employment regulations and workers receive all essential employment-related benefits. Review and improve public policies and services to better protect the health and welfare of all workers and guarantee adequate compensation for their labor and any injuries.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disabilities</th>
<th>Current Policy</th>
<th>What Government Can Do</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 in 10 * persons living on the streets has a physical, mental, developmental, or other disability.</td>
<td>While the government has taken steps to improve the standing of persons with disabilities (PwDs) through the enactment of the 2008 Persons with Disabilities Act, little has been done to tackle discrimination they face in housing, education, and employment. Presently JKM provides a monthly allowance of RM300 for PwDs earning less than RM1200 a month, and an allowance of RM150 for PwDs in school or community-based care. However, such sums do not guarantee an adequate minimum income for a decent standard of living or a dignified life.</td>
<td>Ensure persons with disabilities have proper access without prejudice to essential housing, education, transportation, and employment. Also improve avenues for providing early diagnosis and support to persons with disabilities at a young age.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ageing</th>
<th>Current Policy</th>
<th>What Government Can Do</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 in 5 * persons living on the streets is over age 60.</td>
<td>Over half of Malaysia’s working adults are self-employed or employed in the informal sector, and thus exempt from EPF and public officer pensions. National Policy for the Elderly covers social, but not economic concerns of seniors such as pensions or health care costs. Government policy and programs to assist seniors in poverty are sparse, and limited to little more than Bantuan Orang Tua (monthly financial assistance of RM 300), day care, or undignified care in welfare homes for destitute persons.</td>
<td>Develop programs to reduce poverty among senior citizens, particularly by ensuring adequate minimum income (such as through pensions) and affordable housing and medical care.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* From Profiling Golongan Gelandangan (Homeless) di Wilayah Perasekutuan Kuala Lumpur, a report by the Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development on the Social Welfare Department’s 2010 survey of 1,387 persons experiencing homelessness in Kuala Lumpur.
Factors Linked to Homelessness, Related Policy, and What Government Can Do.

Debt

Current Policy
The government’s Credit Control and Counseling Agency (AKPK) provides debt counseling and advice to persons with debt. Its programs help clients resolve debts with financial service providers under Bank Negara, but cannot help resolve debts with illegal lenders.

What Government Can Do
Raise awareness of public services for persons facing debt, such as AKPK. Also develop measures to: a) identify and reduce predatory lending practices by banking institutions and illegal lenders alike, and b) provide assistance to victims.

Addiction

Addictions to gambling, alcohol, or drugs are disorders that complicate one’s ability to avert or escape homelessness.

Current Policy
Historically, drug users have been treated punitively under federal laws that allow for their arrest and compulsory detention in rehabilitation centers. Such treatment violates constitutional rights, yet continues today under the Drug Dependents Act. However, at the same time, the Malaysian government is developing a more effective approach to addressing addiction, by decriminalizing drug use and introducing medication-assisted and other treatment programs. This allows persons with addiction disorders to seek the help they need. Public programs for gambling, alcohol, and other addictions are not yet available.

What Government Can Do
Now medically recognized as a disorder, addiction cannot be cured through an individual’s willpower alone. Medical and social support are essential. Addiction must be recognized as a public health issue—rather than a criminal justice one. Broaden access to essential addiction treatment services by promoting research into addiction and collaborating with public health experts to ensure public policy and programs fit client needs. Inform and educate the public on addiction and treatment options. Make certain all policies and laws, such as, the Dangerous Drugs Act and the Drug Dependents Act, honor the constitutional rights and liberties of citizens.

Regional Disparities/Rural-Urban Migration

Current Policy
Federal attention to balanced regional development was introduced by the NDP and continued under the 7th and 8th Malaysia Plans. While economic growth has been achieved across all states, development is still concentrated in Kuala Lumpur, Penang, and Selangor. Wide disparities in per capita income and infrastructure exist between more developed and less developed states.

What Government Can Do
Reduce disparities in regional development, which limit opportunities for work and education, as well as access to utilities, infrastructure, and basic necessities for persons in less developed areas. Enhance opportunities for public participation in decision-making processes as a means to improve allocation of national resources in line with regional priorities and needs. More balanced national development will allow Malaysians to achieve the standard of living they desire without having to relocate to more developed, or rapidly developing, areas.

* From Profiling Golongan Gelandangan (Homeless) di Wilayah Persekuatan Kuala Lumpur, a report by the Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development on the Social Welfare Department’s 2010 survey of 1,387 persons experiencing homelessness in Kuala Lumpur.

** From a survey of 14 clients of Anjung Singgah in Kuala Lumpur, conducted October-November 2012.
Myth: Homeless people are lazy and do not work.

False. Many homeless persons work, usually in cleaning, security, or restaurant positions. A large number of companies actively send ‘scouts’ to the streets to hire homeless persons because they see them as a readily exploitable pool of labour, persons with little choice but to work long hours for low wages, and few demands. Jobs often require 10-12 hour shifts (sometimes at odd hours) and pay between RM 25-40 per day.

Senior citizens and other persons who have difficulty finding work in the formal labour market often spend hours collecting recyclables in order to make a meagre income of RM 5-10 per day.

Some homeless persons who do not work are frustrated by the lack of opportunity to gain fair compensation for their labour, or re-enter the field of work they are experienced in. It is certainly a rational decision for many to NOT undertake viciously exploitative work at degrading wages. At the same time, the stigma attached to homelessness results in discrimination that prevents people, including formerly professional or specialized workers, from finding work in formal labour markets.

Among homeless persons who do not work, lest we forget, are significant numbers of people who endure sizable challenges because of health problems, disabilities, and/or addiction disorders.

Whether they work, or not, homeless persons generally know that work alone is not the answer. Access to secure, non-exploitative work at living wages, along with appropriate housing and health care, is key.