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**REVEALING HOMELESSNESS PHENOMENON IN MALAYSIA:  
A CASE STUDY IN GEORGE TOWN, PENANG**

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***Abstract***

Homelessness is not a new phenomenon in Malaysia, but in recent years it has become an increasingly prevalent social problem and requires a serious observation of all parties. The homelessness issues have also attracted the attention of the community and scholars because its implications on humanitarian issues, especially social exclusion and social justice. This study is based on three objectives, namely: (i) documenting demographic background of the homeless people in George Town; (ii) investigating the factors that caused them to become homeless people; and (iii) exploring the challenges of life experienced by the homeless people. Data collection was conducted through questionnaires with 30 homeless respondents, while in-depth interviews were conducted with 15 homeless informants in George Town. Data from the questionnaires were analyzed using SPSS, and data from in-depth interviews were analyzed using content analysis. The results of this study found that personal factors and environmental factors as the main contributor to the homeless population in George Town. This study has the potential to contribute to the knowledge on the issue of social exclusion which applies to the homeless people in Malaysia and its implications for the sustainability of urban community life.

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**Keywords:** Challenge, factor, homelessness, George Town, Penang, Malaysia.



## 1. Introduction

Homelessness is not a new phenomenon in Malaysia. However, lately it seems to be a social phenomenon that increasingly attracting public attention because it raised questions to the surrounding community. The homelessness issues are often published by the media especially those that occur in the major cities of Malaysia such as Kuala Lumpur, Shah Alam and George Town. The homeless problems usually occur as a result of difficulties in obtaining employment, low level of education, HIV, drug addiction, unemployment, and also those who are not able to bear the high cost of living in cities. This group also often makes the sidewalks, under bridges and bus stops as places to rest and sleep. In Malaysia, homeless people usually consisted the ethnic of Malay, Chinese, and Indian (Ramli & Dawood, 2017).

## 2. Problem Statement

Based on Table 01 below, in 2014, the homeless population in Malaysia has registered a total number of 1469 people consisted of 988 men and 481 women. In 2015, the number of homeless people increased to 1527 people consisted of 1003 men and 524 women. In 2016, the number of homeless people increased to 2278 people consisted of 1541 men and 737 women. The total number of the homeless population in Malaysia for the years of 2014, 2015 and 2016 were 5274 people consisted of 3532 men and 1742 women. The highest number of homeless population in Malaysia was recorded in Kuala Lumpur, Selangor and Penang.

**Table 01.** Total number of homeless population in Malaysia (2014, 2015, and 2016)

Year	Total of Homeless Population	Gender	
		Male	Female
2014	1469	988	481
2015	1527	1003	524
2016	2278	1541	737
<b>Total</b>	<b>5274</b>	<b>3532</b>	<b>1742</b>

Source: Social Welfare Department of Malaysia (2018)

Meanwhile, based on Table 02 below, the number of homeless people that was recorded in Penang in 2014 until 2016 were 952 people. In 2014, the number of homeless people registered were 176 people consisted of 143 men and 33 women. In 2015, the number of homeless people increased to 280 people consisted of 196 men and 84 women. In 2016, the number of homeless people increased to 496 people consisted of 362 men and 134 women. The total number of homeless population in Penang for the years of 2014, 2015 and 2016 were 952 people consisted of 701 men and 251 women. This can be seen from the number of homeless people in Penang that increased every year. Why the number of homeless people increase every year? What are the factors that led to this phenomenon? What has happened in their lives? All these questions necessarily have subjective answers and need to be addressed.

**Table 02.** Total number of homeless population in Penang (2014, 2015, and 2016)

Year	Total of Homeless Population	Gender	
		Male	Female
2014	176	143	33
2015	280	196	84
2016	496	362	134
<b>Total</b>	<b>952</b>	<b>701</b>	<b>251</b>

Source: Social Welfare Department of Malaysia (2018)

### 3. Research Questions

1. What is the demographic background of homeless people in George Town?
2. What are the factors that caused them to become homeless people?
3. What are the challenges of life experienced by homeless people?

### 4. Purpose of the Study

1. To document the demographic background of homeless people in George Town.
2. To investigate the factors that caused them to become homeless people.
3. To explore the challenges of life experienced by homeless people.

### 5. Research Methods

This study used quantitative and qualitative methods to obtain the data. Quantitative method was carried out through questionnaire with 30 homeless respondents, while qualitative method was carried out through in-depth interview with 15 homeless informants. Data from the questionnaires were analyzed using the statistical package for social science (SPSS), while in-depth interviews were analyzed using content analysis results from the transcription of the recorded conversation. Questionnaires were conducted with 30 homeless respondents to obtain the information regarding their background of demography. Meanwhile, in-depth interviews were conducted with 15 informants to obtain the information regarding the factors that led them to become homeless people and also the challenges they faced as homeless people. In-depth interviews were also carried out with the Community Service Movement Association from *Universiti Sains Malaysia*. The association always organize programs to help the homeless people in George Town by providing them with basic needs such as food. The researcher decided to go to the field and collect the data with the association as the homeless people seemed comfortable with them besides they can also control the condition in case something unwanted happens. The researcher had chosen *Kompleks Tun Abdul Razak* (KOMTAR) area only to conduct this study because the homeless population in KOMTAR are the most in Penang (“*KOMTAR Pulau Pinang Jadi Lubuk Gelandangan*”, 2018).

## 6. Findings

### 6.1. Demography of Homeless People in George Town, Penang

This section will explain the demography background of 30 homeless respondents which had been recorded using questionnaires. Demography background includes the information such as age, gender, ethnic, marriage status, level of education, occupation, and monthly income.

**Table 03.** Demography background of the homeless people in George Town

Characteristic	Total of Respondents	Percentage (%)	Characteristic	Total of Respondents	Percentage (%)
<b>Age (in years)</b>			<b>Occupation</b>		
20-30	3	10.0	Jobless	7	23.3
31-40	13	43.3	Security Guard	6	20.0
41-50	9	30.0	Cleaner	4	13.3
51-60	3	10.0	Kitchen Helper	3	10.0
61-70	2	6.7	Factory Operator	3	10.0
<b>Gender</b>			Parking Guard	3	10.0
Male	24	80.0	Bus Driver	2	6.7
Female	6	20.0	Boutique Assistant	1	3.3
<b>Ethnic</b>			Barber Assistant	1	3.3
Malay	14	46.7	<b>Monthly Income</b>		
Chinese	10	33.3	No Income	7	23.3
Indian	6	20.0	<MYR500	13	43.3
<b>Marriage Status</b>			MYR500-1000	6	20.0
Single	19	63.3	MYR1000-1500	4	13.3
Divorce	8	26.7			
Married	3	10.0			
<b>Level of Education</b>					
PSAT/UPSR	11	36.7			
LCE/PMR	5	16.7			
MCE/SPM	6	20.0			
No Formal Education					

#### 6.1.1. Age

Referring to Table 03 above, based on 30 homeless respondents, the percentage of 43.3% was recorded for the age category of 31-40 years with a total number of 13 homeless respondents, namely the highest compared to other ages. The second highest age category was 41-50 years which recorded the percentage of 30.3% with a total number of 9 homeless respondents. The third highest age category were 20-30 years and 51-60 years respectively had the same percentage of 10% with a total number of 3 homeless people. The lowest percentage of 6.7% was recorded for the age group 61-70 years with a total number of 2 homeless respondents.

### **6.1.2. Gender**

Based on 30 homeless respondents, the percentage of 80% was recorded for homeless men with a total number of 24 people, while homeless women recorded the percentage of 20% with total number of 6 people. This can be seen that the total of the homeless population in George Town mostly comprised of men. This also reflects homeless condition in other urban area within Malaysia. According to Shipley and Tempelmeyer (2012), usually men tend to be homeless compared to women.

### **6.1.3. Ethnic**

Based on 30 homeless respondents, Malay homeless had the highest percentage of 46.7% with a total number of 14 people. The second highest was Chinese homeless which recorded the percentage of 33.3% with a total number of 10 people. The lowest percentage of 20% was recorded for Indian homeless with a total number of 6 people. According to Suhaimi, Khaidzir, Nasrudin, and Hairi (2016) in his study also noted that when referring to ethnic group, more homeless from Malays are found as compared to other races.

### **6.1.4. Marriage status**

Based on 30 homeless respondents, most of them were single. The highest percentage was single category, which recorded the percentage of 63.3% with a total number of 19 people. The second highest category was divorced, which recorded the percentage of 26.7% with a total number of 8 people. There were homeless people who were married which recorded the percentage of 10% with a total number of 3 people. Most of the homeless respondents were single and they have stated that they are comfortable to live like that.

### **6.1.5. Level of Education**

Based on 30 homeless respondents, there were four categories for level of education that can be identified namely Primary School Achievement Test (PSAT or UPSR), Lower Certificate of Education (LCE or PMR), Malaysia Certificate of Education (MCE or SPM) and No Formal Education. For the highest category was the LCE/PMR which recorded the percentage of 36.7% with a total number of 11 people. The second highest was PSAT/UPSR category which recorded the percentage of 26.7% with a total number of 8 people. The third highest was No Formal Education category which recorded the percentage of 20% with a total number of 6 people. While the lowest category was MCE/SPM which recorded the percentage of 16.7% with a total number of 5 people. Based on the following data, it can be concluded that most of the homeless respondents in George Town have the MCE/PMR level of education.

### **6.1.6. Occupation**

Based on 30 homeless respondents, the highest percentage of 23.3% was recorded for Jobless category with a total number of 7 people. The second highest percentage of 20% was recorded for Security Guard with a total of 6 people. The third highest percentage of 13.3% was recorded for Cleaner with a total number of 4 people. The fourth highest categories were Factory Operator, Kitchen Helper and Parking

Guard which respectively recorded the same percentage of 10% with a total number of 3 people. The fifth highest percentage of 6.7% was recorded for Bus Driver with a total number of 2 people. The lowest categories were Boutique Assistant and Barber Assistant which respectively recorded the same percentage of 3.3% with a total number of 1 people. Researcher believes that all those jobs were not in professional categories. Most of them worked in services category whereby the salary they received monthly was not enough to support their daily life as well as renting a house.

#### 6.1.7. Monthly Income

Based on 30 homeless respondents, the highest percentage of 43.3% was recorded for the homeless people who had job and monthly income below than MYR500 with a total number of 13 people. The second highest percentage of 23.3% was recorded for the homeless people who did not have job and monthly income with a total number of 7 people. The third highest percentage of 20% was recorded for the homeless who had job and monthly income between MYR501-1000 with a total number of 6 people. The lowest percentage of 13.3% was recorded for the homeless people who had job and monthly income between MYR1001-1500 with a total number of 4 people. On an average, most of the homeless respondents' monthly income were below MYR1000. That amount was not enough to cover the cost of living in urban areas mainly Penang which has been stated as a famous city that has the highest cost of living in Malaysia. According to an article in the *mStar* online newspaper stated that Penang was ranked first with the highest cost of living in Malaysia. Among the contributing factors were the highest price for rental or housing loan (“*Kos Hidup Di Pulau Pinang Makin Tinggi*”, 2015).

#### 6.1.8. The Factors Become Homeless

This study showed several factors that had been led to the occurrence of the homeless symptoms in George Town. Based on the 15 homeless informants who have been interviewed by researcher, there were six factors that led them to become homeless namely:

**Table 04.** Factors that lead to homelessness

No	Categories	Total of Informants
1	Jobless	5
2	Have no shelter	3
3	Influence of drugs	3
4	Family conflict	2
5	Evicted from home	1
6	Have no family members	1
<b>Total</b>		<b>15</b>

Based on Table 0.4 above, the highest factor is “Jobless” which involved five homeless informants. This factor is often seen as a problem of unemployment. The problem of unemployment usually happens among the homeless people where they did not obtain any jobs to support their life. This as can be evidenced by Informant 10, whereby he said that he tried several times to apply for jobs, but no employers wanted to accept him because of his age and that he had no fixed address. Jobless is an important factor

that needs to be addressed by government to reduce the risk of homelessness symptoms. According to a study by Herman, Susser, Struening, and Link (1997), 10 of the homeless people who were interviewed stated that jobless was the main factor that led them to live as a homeless people.

The second highest factors are “Have no shelter” and “Influence of drugs” which both involved three homeless informants. “Have no shelter” factor will encourage someone to be homeless, choosing to live and sleep on the streets, on the sidewalks and so on. In this case, the homeless are closely related to the expensive rate of the housing rental in urban areas. This can be evidenced by Informant 2, as he said although he had a job, he still cannot afford to pay the housing rent in George Town because his salary is not enough. So he chose to live on the streets as a last resort. Furthermore, he does not have any family members who can support him. According to the National Coalition for the Homeless (2007), most of the homeless people are unable to provide enough money to pay rent even if they work every day. Some of them even work in two minimum wage jobs and still do not have enough money to rent a house. Meanwhile, most studies showed that the “Influence of drugs” normally being one of the main factors why people become homeless. This can be evidenced by Informant 3, as he said that he took drugs due to his friends’ influence. The problem of drug addiction also significantly associated with the homeless people in George Town. According to Didenko and Pankratz (2007), most of the people became homeless because of the influence of drugs and many of them are homeless adults.

The third highest factor is “Family conflict” which involved two homeless informants. According to Fitzpatrick, Kemp, and Klinker (2000), a number of homeless people reported problems with family members, including serious conflict with parents, sometimes ended in violence. Ran et al. (2006) states that individuals who are single, divorced and separated are the factors related to the increasing number of homeless population. This can be evidenced by Informant 6, in which case she said that she was divorced because of not giving money to her husband to buy drugs. She also experienced mental pressure and depression after the divorce and decided to stop working and live as a homeless people.

The last factors are “Evicted from home” and “Have no family members” which respectively involved one homeless informant. According to Informant 12, he said that he was evicted from home by his parents because of his past history as prisoner before. Because of that, his parents cannot accept him to be in the family and they are ashamed of him. The villagers often throw negative perception to him. This is also supported by Levinson (2002) which he argues that the public perception seems to equate the homeless people with crime, whether this belief is supported by empirical evidence or not. Also, these findings are related with DeLisi’s study (2000), especially when thinking about homeless, people may want them to be helped in an abstract way, but at the same time probably look at them as a threat that is harmful and exposed to criminal behaviour. Meanwhile, for the “Have no family members” factor, according to Informant 14, he said that he was the only child in his family. He had no siblings and his parents died more than 10 years ago. Since there were no family members, he felt his life swaying with no direction. In addition, he did not come from a rich family. He brought himself to George Town to find the purpose of life and now work as a security guard at one of the shopping mall around George Town. He rented a house before but had to stop renting because of not having enough money to pay the rent. According to Ravenhill (2000), family problems are the most common starting point for homeless people regardless of age. According to Fertig and Reingold (2008), having no family members is one of the main

factors that one decides to become a homeless person because of their life are swayed and they have no guidance.

### **6.1.9. The Challenges of Life**

Based on the 15 homeless informants who have been in depth interviewed by researcher, there were three challenges of life experienced by them namely:

#### **6.1.9.1. The Perception of Public People**

Based on the in-depth interviews with 15 homeless informants, the most difficult challenge for them is the perception of public towards them. Public perception towards them is still in unsatisfactory condition. They were often labeled as bad people, criminal, idler, dirty, ex-prisoner and HIV sufferer. This can be evidenced by Informant 11, as he said that he still remembered the experience of being spat by the public on the sidewalk, although he did not threaten them. According to Informant 15, he noticed there were often people who look down on him. He was labeled as a lazy person because he did not want to work or get a job at that time. The result showed that the perception of public towards homeless people are still at low level. This finding is supported by Shier, Jones, and Graham (2010), who stated that homeless people are often treated as useless and such a failure by the public. When they are threatened by the whole society, this will have a huge impact on the homeless people's self-esteem.

#### **6.1.9.2. Hardship in Life**

Every homeless people have a tough life that cannot be described by other people. Only they themselves who understand their situation. According to Informant 12, he often felt threatened by the environment. The weather and the people around sometimes complicate his situation. Hot weather, cold, rain, drought and so on sometimes affect his health because his life is exposed in an open area. In addition, homeless people have always struggled with the pain of the disease that is suffered by them. According to Informant 10, he was also experiencing difficulties to face the next day because he had no money to buy medicines and personal items. As a result, the homeless had to face the next day with challenges especially to those who have the disease, jobless, with no financial resources and so on.

#### **6.1.9.3. No Peace of Life**

Having a life as homeless person usually do not have any peace in life. It is hard to understand what is the meaning of peace behind their life. Every day that is passed through by them is filled with trials and tribulations. They have no home to shelter and they sleep in the open area such as sidewalks, bus station and so on. They are exposed to unhealthy environment due to living in an open area. Their period of sleep and rest have limitation that is at night only. This can be evidenced by Informant 5, he said that during the daytime he will not be in open area because of fear to be arrested or threatened. During the night time, he will go to the open area to get some sleep and rest. As a result, these homeless people condition become very depressing and do not reflect the peace of life within themselves as they cannot live a perfect life just like everyone else.



## 7. Conclusion

In conclusion, factors such as jobless, having no shelter, the influence of drugs, family conflict, evicted from home and having no family members are the starting point of a person becoming homeless. If homeless problems are not addressed by the concerned parties, of course, it will complicate their situation and life. Based on researchers' observation, the homeless people must not be perceived as lazy, dangerous or even useless people. The homeless are also human beings like everyone else. What differentiate us with the homeless is the fate and problem that befallen them. Homeless people are also not lazy as touted by the public. There were some among the homeless who had skills such as cooking, sewing, carpentry and so on. They also had various background of education levels. Most of them had LCE/PMR and MCE/SPM level of education. So they were not the people who did not have knowledge. Due to the urbanization process that cannot be chased by some people, it has triggered such problems. In addition, less of job opportunities, high cost of living, expensive house rental and indifference action of stakeholders will further complicate the issue. Besides that, homeless people also need to be given some counselling sessions because most of them have different problems and they need to be helped by some individuals or agencies. Being ignored without getting any advice or support from the society had caused their condition to become more worst and they felt marginalised. Lastly, deep and comprehensive study needs to be done by concerned parties in drafting a plan of action to help the homeless people for a sustainable life and that will make them no longer marginalized in all aspects.

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