

Conversations about the Homeless

1) Hi, before we begin can you share with me your name, age & a short description of what you're currently doing?

RESPONSE: My name is Nathaniel Chan, 23 years old. I'm studying for my year 3 finals.

2) So, as a (what they're currently doing), have you ever come across someone who was homeless?

- if yes, can you share the encounter?

- if no, do you think there are homeless people in Singapore?

RESPONSE: Lots, I've spent the last 3 years in the UK studying and most encounters are different. Some people might be persistent in trying to get you to give them some money and others often sit by silently with a sign or just a container to collect money. I've had similar encounters in Singapore too.

3) What do you think being homeless means?

RESPONSE: Lacking basic needs like shelter, permanent access to running water, power, perhaps even food. But homelessness is a state that goes beyond poverty; it also encompasses anyone who doesn't have a permanent residence and this deprives them of a lot of basic social services, having a bank, paying bills, receiving aid, so it's a lot more pervasive than what people might think.

4) Can you share what you think these people do daily?

RESPONSE: A lot of them might actually have a job, trying to accumulate enough resources to get a permanent place of residence. They could be trying to secure legal or financial aid too. Being homeless is not necessarily associated with begging, I think.

5) And what about their night routine?

RESPONSE: Depends on the situation they're in, but I'd imagine tiding out the night is an immense struggle especially overseas in countries with temperate climates when winters are painfully cold. They might also be struggling to find shelter, sometimes being chased away from public places if they linger too long.

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- 6) When was the last time you:
- had a shower?
 - had a meal?
 - washed your clothes?

RESPONSE: Literally just for everything. I hate to say this, but my maids help with the laundry, I don't usually wash my own clothes.

- 7) Imagine yourself without a home, where in Singapore would you go to fulfil these basic needs?
- food & water
 - sanitation
 - shelter, safety & security

RESPONSE: I genuinely don't know; I guess I take these things for granted such that these aspects of life simply exist, rather than something I actively fight to receive. I might try and ask friends or relatives for help.

- 8) Why do you think these individuals/groups end up as they are now?

RESPONSE: They could have been kicked out of their home by their family members, lost their jobs or had to sell/mortgage their property, potentially faced debt issues, debilitating medical conditions that they couldn't afford to pay.

- 9) Do you think there's a way out of their predicament?

RESPONSE: My understanding is purely an English response to poverty and not Singaporean. It's difficult to eradicate poverty with sweeping solutions, but in the same way as tracing people for pandemics and viral outbreaks, we can learn a lot about the causes of people's homelessness. The solution could come in the form of government aids to provide temporary accommodation, food, clothing, etc. It's also important to help them re-establish a steady source of income, whether it's by equipping them with basic work and communication skills or giving them options to look out for in the job market. It might even help to educate them on their legal rights and protections, and what benefits or subsidies they might be eligible to claim.

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10) So being homeless is of course without shelter, but that doesn't exclude them from having their belongings – personal items and at times even family members. How would you advise someone in such a situation?

RESPONSE: Again, I'm not sure what are the proper channels or avenues to seek aid for homelessness here to I'll give an English perspective and assume that it works similarly, it would be outrageous if it didn't. I would think there are *pro bono* advice groups and clinics that people can go to in order to seek help. Just because they deal with legal issues does not necessarily mean they won't help, as often times they are well equipped to signpost people to other institutions that may be better equipped to help with specific problems. But from what I know, homelessness can indeed stem from financial or legal trouble, and what people need to know are their rights and protections and what they can claim in terms of aid. With this basic understanding, they might be able to know how much money they can receive, especially if it is a large family who requires more resources to sustain themselves. They might be able to find legal counsel who can advise them on their state of affairs, and if they are kind enough may offer legal services for free in an effort to better their situation.

11) Here are some examples of campaigns and activations done overseas. Do you think they will be effective in a place like Singapore?

RESPONSE:

These could be effective for the following reasons:

- a) Educating the public: we are often ignorant about the true circumstances plaguing individuals facing homelessness. Even those researching the subject may only have a third-persons perspective of what it is truly like. But public initiatives to bridge the knowledge and experiential gap is important to contextualise homeless for the general public.
- b) Sympathy: to the vast majority, a bench may merely be that. But to someone suffering from homelessness, it's the only place they've managed to find to rest for the night. This helps to make homelessness an issue that can be normalized, such that homelessness is seen as a problem that needs both our attention as well as our emotional support to commit to. We should avoid treating it like an eyesore that passes our fleeting attention. In the UK there are many charities and movements that conduct initiatives like 'Sleep in the Park' where supporters join together and sleep in the rough and the cold to experience what homelessness is like and to spread awareness of how deeply severe it is.
- c) Impetus for government action: I am not sure how effective public initiatives are in stoking government intervention to address societal problems, but when enough attention is given to a specific problem, the public outcry may be so great that the government would not or should not be able to ignore.

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Why it may not work:

Correct me if I'm wrong but I recall there being a specific offence to use certain public spaces as accommodation, essentially some form of prohibition against living in public spaces, so it may not be possible to designate benches or parks for homeless people to stay. I'm also aware that public perception and image is very important to our government... So I'm not sure if putting these sorts of public campaign advertisements to raise awareness would make it seem like it is so prevalent a problem that the government has failed to address it effectively. So these sorts of things may or may not be allowed for legal or political reasons.

12) Is homelessness a policy problem or community problem?

RESPONSE: Again, unsure about the Singaporean story on homelessness. But if it were a policy problem, it could be that as a result of failing to protect certain basic human rights or needs, the law has allowed people to slip through the cracks of society and not provide the adequate financial and legal safety net to help these people out of their homelessness. Bearing in mind the meritocratic nature of our country, hard work and results are (bluntly put) a measure of a person's worth and contributions, but many times life's circumstances may plunge you into insurmountable conditions that hard work alone will not be enough to save you from. Does the law have a cap on how much debt a person is allowed to accumulate such that he at least has a certain amount of money to his name to continue living with basic necessities like food, water or shelter? Or is it possible for people to lose everything in the event of a disastrous business venture that made them file for bankruptcy? Is the legal system robust enough to protect the vulnerable from cases of fraud or abuse? If people lose their jobs due to an economic downturn or a viral outbreak, are the economic policies sufficient to create occupational and financial resilience?

It could be a community problem too, in how the privileged majority perceive homelessness. I would think that a general lack of sympathy and willingness to help has made us purposefully oblivious to their issues and open times if becomes very discouraging for the homeless to seek help if they see themselves as unworthy of it.

13) Let's put aside political intervention. Who in society do you think can drive the greatest impact upon this community?

RESPONSE: I think any individual can make noticeable changes to the lives of the homeless. Whether it means sparing a small amount of cash, food, or even a little time to talk and make them feel welcome. More than that, each of us who lead stable lives inevitably have something that they don't, whether it's the relevant knowledge about social services, work experience, smart and sustainable living methods, etc. and most of all, time. We don't know much longer these people are able to sustain themselves for and treating this issue with urgency is key.

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14) In your own capacity now as a (*what they're currently doing*), how do you think you can reach out to the homeless?

RESPONSE: I've been engaging in a lot of *pro bono* work during my time in law school and I honestly feel it's a very direct and effective method in helping people manage their issues. I acknowledge that I am privileged to have been offered quality education and being equipped with legal knowledge should not go to waste; I feel lawyers have an inherent responsibility to help the vulnerable with their legal problems especially when they can't afford it or when they don't even know where to start. True, their issues are not purely legal, and it may not be their priority, but understanding country's legal system necessitates an understanding of its services, institutions and support mechanisms which are meant to provide the basic rights and protections accorded to all citizens. If the least I can do is signpost people towards the right channels and avenues, then they are already starting the journey towards stabilizing their lives.

15) Which would you be more interested/open to participating:
- an outreach activation
- an immersive experience (role-playing/experiential)
- none of the above?

RESPONSE: Both (depending on time constraints.)

– INTERVIEW END –