

# Where the homeless stand

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**KUALA LUMPUR:** In the late hours of the day, the capital undergoes a transformation as hundreds of homeless people migrate to their regular sleeping spots to settle down for the night.

Witnessed by few, this scene is recorded once every 10 years when scores of enumerators descend on every known nook and cranny to conduct a headcount of the nation's homeless.

Armed with clipboards and pens, enumerators were guided by policemen and city hall enforcement officers as they found their way around from midnight to 7am last Wednesday.

One bench in front of Pasar Seni here has been home to Hussein, 42, for about a year.

"I was previously in the Jinjang area," he said amidst a flurry of camera flashes as the media documented the event.

Questions on his previous employment yielded that he had had short stints as a coffee shop waiter but none had lasted.

Questions were asked for the sake of curious media crews during the first round of the headcount, but enumerators had been briefed not to talk directly to the homeless due to safety concerns.

Each enumerator was told to note down through observation the

gender, and if possible the ethnicity of each person counted.

Collected in Malaysia's 14 cities, the data is intended for the sole purpose of providing a more accurate depiction of Malaysia's population for the National Population and Housing Census which runs from July 6 to Aug 22.

However, despite existing data, statistics on the homeless, unlike other information, have never been made publicly available, and indications are they never will be.

Dorairaju Suppa who heads the Special Enumeration Committee responsible for enumerating, among others, special categories like the homeless, said statistics for this category are not made available because the numbers are insignificant.

"No one has ever requested the data," he said during an interview with the committee.

Suppa said that in previous censuses, data on the homeless had not been placed in a specific category but came under an enumeration block known as "others". He said data on the homeless from the 2000 census had been merged with other data during processing.

This year, a specific block has been created for the homeless, according to district and state.

As such, data revealing interesting information such as the varying levels of homelessness between different cities should now officially exist.

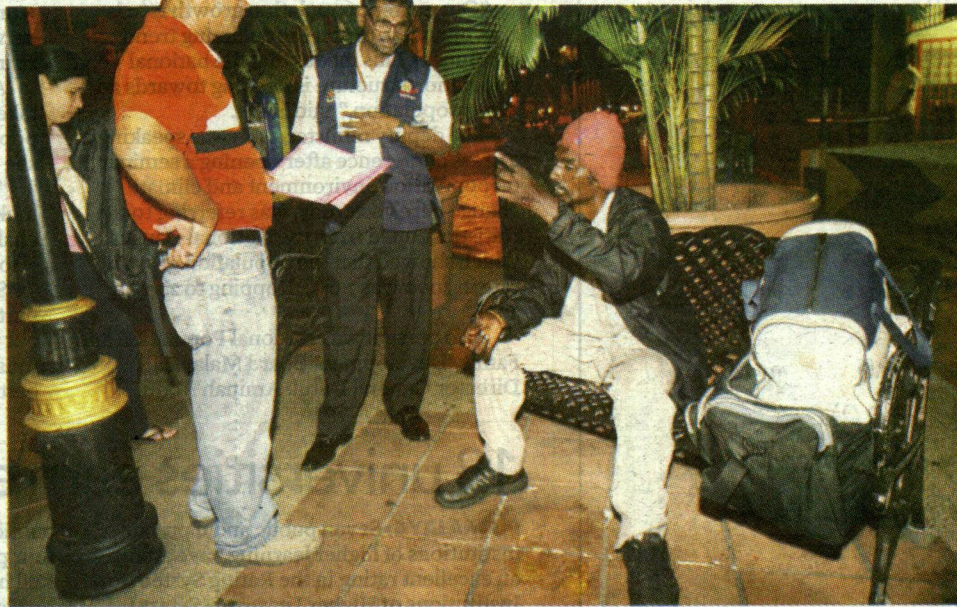
Suppa said the purpose of the special block was to improve the quality of data storage and allow

interested agencies to make requests for the data.

However, chief statistician and census commissioner Datuk Wan Ramlah Wan Abdul Raof said the data would not be released unless it meets a certain standard of reliability.

"The data collection process is not foolproof as homeless people have no fixed address; so we cannot determine any true figures; just estimates," she said. "To make sure the data is reliable, we would have to have access to a data series."

Despite all the effort put into gathering the data, it looks as though official information on the number of individuals living on the streets that would shed some light, reliable or not, on the homeless situation in Malaysia will remain elusive.



SHARIL AMIN/  
THESUN

City Hall enforcement officer Shamsuddin Othman (left) and Suppa speak to a homeless person outside Pasar Seni.