From homeless to home: issues and challenges of housing continuity in Klang Valley, Malaysia

Zafirah Al Sadat Zyed and Izma Syazana Badrudin
Department of Real Estate, Faculty of Built Environment, Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and

Peter Aning Tedong
Department of Urban and Regional Planning, Faculty of Built Environment, Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Abstract
Purpose – This paper aims to discuss the issues and challenges related to housing continuity for individuals transitioning from homelessness to securing a place to live in Klang Valley, Malaysia. The aim of the study is to explore the problems and solutions in the context of housing policy, particularly as they pertain to homeless households. The study involves conducting in-depth interviews with various stakeholders involved in helping homeless households find shelter and access to public housing.

Design/methodology/approach – The research methodology comprises a comprehensive literature review encompassing housing affordability, affordable housing and homelessness both within Malaysia and globally to identify research gaps. One of the key questions highlighted the effectiveness of existing programs aimed at providing short-term shelter and social integration for homeless individuals. Additionally, it highlights one of the primary challenges in this process, which is the tendency of homeless individuals to return to homelessness due to various factors. The data collection uses a qualitative approach and the data are obtained through in-depth interviews with key stakeholders responsible for assisting homeless households in Klang Valley, Malaysia, encompassing federal, state and local government representatives. Purposive sampling ensures diverse stakeholder representation. Interviews are structured semi-structured to maintain consistency while allowing for open-ended discussions on challenges and successes in facilitating homeless individuals’ transition to stable housing. Thematic analysis of transcribed interview data focuses on recurring themes related to housing continuity, affordability and homeless households’ behavioural patterns.

Findings – There are five (n = 5) stakeholders consist of local government (Code: R1), ministries (Code: R2; R5) and government agencies (Code: R3; R4). The study revealed that various programs have been implemented to provide short-term shelter and facilitate the integration of homeless individuals into society. Nevertheless, a significant challenge identified was the recurring tendency of homeless households to return to homelessness. This “behavioural direction” was found to be influenced by multiple factors which includes mental health and attitude problem. The findings emphasise the need for collaborative efforts among all stakeholders to address the issues and challenges related to housing continuity in Klang Valley.

Originality/value – The originality of this research lies in its focus on the specific and under-researched context of Klang Valley, Malaysia, regarding the critical issues of housing affordability and the challenges of housing continuity for homeless households. While housing affordability and affordable housing are widely considered critical issues, the specific context of Klang Valley, Malaysia, provides valuable insights into the housing continuity challenges faced by homeless households. The study highlights the need for collaborative efforts among all stakeholders to address the recurring tendencies of homelessness and find sustainable solutions.
recognised as global housing policy concerns, this study delves into a localised setting where limited attention has been given to understanding the transitions of homeless individuals to stable housing. The findings provide unique insights into the efforts and challenges faced in Klang Valley, shedding light on the behavioural patterns and factors contributing to recurring homelessness. This paper offers a context-specific perspective that contributes to the broader understanding of housing continuity issues.

**Keywords** Housing affordability problems, Affordable housing, Homeless, Housing continuity, Klang Valley

**Paper type** Research paper

### Introduction

Homelessness is a complex issue that affects individuals, families, and communities (Kuhn and Culhane, 1998). It is often caused by a combination of structural and individual factors, such as poverty, unemployment, mental health issues and substance abuse (Culhane et al., 2017; National Coalition for the Homeless (NCH), 2021). Moreover, homeless households face various challenges in securing a place to live. In housing policy, housing continuity should be the main goal where every household from various background are provided with a stable and secure place to live. Housing continuity begins from a household who does not have shelter and ends when the household is able to have a permanent or long-term shelter. Previous studies have shown that short-term shelter programs, such as emergency shelters, transitional housing and rental assistance, have been effective in providing temporary relief for homeless households (Culhane et al., 2017). However, these programs do not address the root causes of homelessness and do not guarantee long-term housing stability. In addition, homeless households often face difficulties in transitioning from short-term shelter to permanent housing due to various factors, such as financial constraints, lack of affordable housing options and limited access to support services (Meschede and Chaganti, 2015).

According to the World Bank report in 2021, Malaysia’s housing affordability remains a challenge due to rising house prices and stagnant income growth. The report states that the median house price in Malaysia is 4.4 times the median annual household income, which is above the global norm of three times. The report also shows that the lowest 40% of the income group in Malaysia faces a housing affordability gap of 34%, which means that they cannot afford the cheapest 40% of the available housing units (Olanrewaju and Tan, 2018). However, despite the introduction of various housing incentive schemes in Malaysia, there still remain major issues in housing affordability (Zyed et al., 2014, 2021, Badrudin et al., 2022). There are many types of public housing schemes which mainly consist of low-cost flats to assist low-income households to attain affordable housing (Khair et al., 2022; Teo et al., 2022). However, the demand for public housing far exceeds the supply, leading to a long waiting list. Due to this, homeless households face additional challenges in securing a permanent shelter. Mohd Adib and Ahmad (2018) identified that among the major challenges in addressing homelessness is the lack of affordable housing and limited access to support services. Therefore, this paper aims to discuss the issues and challenges of housing continuity in Klang Valley in the perspective of stakeholders.

### Literature review

**Homelessness in Malaysia**

The issue of homelessness is universal and unavoidable. The cities that cited the highest number of homeless are in Manila, Jakarta, Los Angeles, New York, Mosco, Mexico and Mumbai (Danarsiwi and Nurfarawahidah, 2018). Even though cities in Malaysia is not included in the list, the shocking rise in the number of homeless people in Malaysia demands...
immediate action on the part of the government (Abd Rahman et al., 2019). For a variety of reasons, the trajectory of housing among people has become more unstable and unpredictable in recent years (Holleran, 2021). As a result, Fuster et al. (2019) asserted that current housing scenarios have shifted away from homeownership culture toward renting or living in parents’ house for young people. For some, homelessness is their only option, which is a major concern for governments worldwide now (Ross-Brown and Leavey, 2021) including in Malaysia.

Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM) defines urban areas as gazette areas with more than 10,000 inhabitants and at least 60% of the population aged 15 years and above who earn their living from sources other than agricultural activities (Lazim et al., 2020). It covers an area of 2,793 square kilometres and includes Malaysia’s capital city, Kuala Lumpur (KL), as well as metropolitan areas surrounding KL that fall under the jurisdiction of the state of Selangor, each of which is governed by its own local government, which is the Kuala Lumpur City Hall (DBKL), Perbadanan Putrajaya, Shah Alam City Council (MBSA), Petaling Jaya City Council (MBPJ), Klang Municipal Council (MPK), Kajang Municipal Council (MPKj), Subang Jaya Municipal Council (MPSJ), Selayang Municipal Council, Ampang Jaya Municipal Council (MPAJ) and Sepang Municipal Council (MPSp).

The situation in Malaysia is analogous, where Klang Valley has been designated as a main focal point for the people because of the diverse job opportunities, good educational and a desirable place to establish a new family. According to Ho (2008), the pace of urbanisation was relatively modest during the post-independence period, from 1957 to 1969, due in part to the government’s policy of resuming agricultural and estate development. However, the massive, ongoing infrastructural development and a plethora of job prospects in the city enticed the Malays to migrate to the city. At the time, ethnic segregation was evident, with only 11.2% Malays resided in the city, whereas 44.7% Chinese and 30.7% Indians. As a result, since the 1970s, the government has endeavoured to persuade rural Malaysians to relocate to the cities to improve their standard of living, particularly young people. Since then, the pace of urbanisation has changed between 1970 and 1980, leading to a growing number of Malaysians with 46% compared to other ethnic groups in the city centre.

From 1970 to 2050, Figure 1 depicts the evolving pattern of Malaysian populations. On the one hand, the data showed that the population of rural areas was extremely high in 1970 but began to decline dramatically after the 1990s and is expected to continue to decline until 2050, when it will account for only 12% of the total population. On the other hand, migration of people to urban areas increased steeply following the 1980s, and the figure predicted that the urban population would comprise 88% of the total population by 2050. Furthermore, the

**Figure 1.**
Level of urbanisation in Malaysia, 1970–2050

*Source: DOSM (2020) in Tey (2022)*
The population of Klang Valley is expected to continue to grow in the future as well as Selangor is one of the urbanised states in Malaysia (Azmi et al., 2022). The desire to improve family well-being has compelled many young people to migrate to the city centre to obtain a higher level of education and secure a better job with a higher salary, resulting in an increase in the urban population in Klang Valley.

With the ongoing urbanisation and the de-stabilisation of the proportion of the total population to population in the urban areas, the supply of affordable housing will become more acute, and it will disproportionately affect vulnerable groups, particularly among low and middle-income groups that may leads to various social problems such as poverty, crime rates, prostitution, and others, including homelessness (Olanrewaju and Tan, 2018). Furthermore, housing within urban areas is becoming too expensive which resulted unreachable for many people (Hassan et al., 2018). This paper intends to highlight the issues and challenges of housing continuity from the viewpoint of stakeholders involve in mediating homeless in Klang Valley, Malaysia.

In Malaysia, homelessness is still seen as a taboo subject, and the preconception against them is growing, whether it comes from the public or from government officers. The Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development (MWFCD) oversees all issues surrounding homelessness, while the Social Welfare Department (SWD) oversees enforcing its regulations (Alhabshi and Abdul Manan, 2012). Both classified the homeless as destitute, which includes beggars and vagrants. Beggars are those who beg people for food, drinks or money. Vagrants are homeless people that wander from place to place (Ghee and Omar, 2015). Accurate statistics on the homeless in Malaysia are difficult to obtain. However, it is claimed that the majority of Malaysia’s homeless reside in Kuala Lumpur, Selangor and Penang (Ramli and Dawood, 2017). There are no reliable figures on the number of homeless in Malaysia, but the Department of Social Welfare (JKM) reported 1,934 in 2009, 1,048 in 2013 and 2,278 in 2016. Nonetheless, these homeless persons were being detained under the Destitute Persons Act 1977, where they were usually referred to as beggars or stray lice because to the lack of a policy particularly addressing homeless people (Jasni et al., 2021).

Additionally, the government has implemented number of programmes to address the plight of the homeless, including opening temporary shelters for them. In 2011, MWFCD provided funding for the National Welfare Foundation (YKN) to set up “anjung singgah” in Kuala Lumpur (KL). There are various amenities available for usage, including a canteen, temporary room, laundry room, bathroom, karaoke room, sports field and clothing donated by the general public. To assist them escape homelessness, they will all receive training to equip them ready for life in the real world and job matching (Adib et al., 2016). Additionally, the shelter also was affiliated with NGOs and other government bodies (Abd Rahman et al., 2019). In addition, as the development of Anjung Singgah, the Pusat Transit Gelandangan Kuala Lumpur has taken initiatives to alleviate the homeless issue. The Malaysian Resources Corporation Bhd (MRCB), Kuala Lumpur City Hall (DBKL), and the Ministry of Federal Territory (KWP) are the three government bodies that are involved in the establishment of the shelter. They spent around RM 3 million to construct a three-story, 1,319-square-foot structure on Jalan Pahang in Kuala Lumpur (Mohd Adib and Ahmad, 2018).

Furthermore, there are also temporary and emergency shelters located in and around KL and Selangor specifically for the purpose of accommodating victims of natural disasters such as flood victims. This is necessary because Malaysia is a nation with a high risk of flooding, primarily as a result of the country’s physical and human geography, which makes it particularly susceptible to monsoons and flash floods (Chan, 2015). There are several temporary shelters for specific target groups such as children, single mothers, the
elderly and others that are monitored by MWFC, State Welfare Development (SWD), other
government bodies and NGOs. For instance, there are shelters for unmarried teen mothers
who require social support. There are several programs available in shelters to help women
deliver their babies safely and then rejoin their communities (Shafie et al., 2021).

Even though, the respond of programs for homeless is not as rampant as the respond of
affordable housing shortages such as Rumah Mesra Rakyat, MyDeposit Scheme, People’s
Housing Programme, Rumah Transit/transit house programme, Rumah Selangorku,
RUMAWIP, Programme Perumahan Rakyat, Rumah Mesra Rakyat and Rumah Idaman
Rakyat (Lateef Olanrewaju and Idrus, 2020), it can be argued that, there are still significant
challenges to achieving housing continuity from being homeless. One of the key challenges
explored in the study is the behavioral direction of homeless persons, which often led to them
becoming homeless again. This was attributed to several factors, including a lack of social and
family support, financial constraints and mental health issues. Moreover, the welfare of
homeless is under the responsibility and purview of local, state and federal government and
thus implore the need to gain insights on the issues at hand in homelessness from their
standpoint.

Research methodology
This study adopts qualitative research design to explore the issues and challenges of
housing continuity from homeless to securing a place to live in Klang Valley. The
qualitative research approach is chosen to allow for an in-depth exploration of the
experiences and perspectives of stakeholders who assist homeless persons to attain shelters
as well as transition to public housing. The primary data for this study was collected
through in-depth interviews with stakeholders, including representatives from federal, state,
and local government. The stakeholders were selected based on their roles and experiences
in assisting homeless households in Klang Valley to secure housing. Purposive sampling
was used to determine the respondents in the study. Purposive sampling is a non-
probability technique where the researcher selects respondents based on the researcher’s
conviction and relies on researcher’s discretion (Obilor, 2023). Therefore, the chosen number
of respondents are sufficient to achieve the objectives of the study.

The respondents are chosen based on their relevancy toward homelessness issues and
challenges in Klang Valley. There are five (n = 5) stakeholders consist of local government
(Code: R1), ministries (Code: R2; R5) and government agencies (Code: R3; R4). The
respondents are selected based on their experience in addressing the problems, whether
through participating in formulating policy or involved in managing programs and shelters
for homeless persons. In addition, the selection of the representatives for each agency were
selected by the state department based on who would be able to best represent the agency
considering the subject matter. The in-depth interviews were conducted face-to-face and
lasted between 45 min and an hour within a period of three months. The interviews were
conducted using an interview guide with open-ended questions to allow the participants to
express their views on the issues and challenges of housing continuity for homeless persons.
The questions are group into five themes which are shown in Table 1. The interviews were
audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

The data collected through the in-depth interviews were analysed using thematic
analysis. This approach involves identifying themes and patterns in the data, which are
then used to develop an understanding of the issues and challenges of housing continuity for
homeless persons in Klang Valley. The data were analysed manually, and the analysis
process involved reading and re-reading the transcripts, identifying patterns and developing
themes.
Findings and discussions
The findings and discussion presented in this section will follow the themes’ sequence in the interview questions. From the thematic analysis, each section of themes will discuss the issues and challenges of housing continuity from homeless in the perspective of local, state and federal government. The discussions will then synthesise to draw a recommendation and conclusion.

**Theme 1: Views on current homeless problems**
According to the stakeholders, most of homeless persons are willing to live in the streets even though they have income and stable job. This is because, most of them prefer to be homeless rather than use the money to rent a place, as stated and argued by the majority of the respondents. Significant findings are quoted below:

“There are people living on the streets who are employed but still prefer to live on the streets, either because they do not want to settle down or because they cannot afford to pay rent.”

Code: R5

“Nowadays, homeless becomes a way of life for certain people. Even though we provided them with employment or house, at the end, they still come back to the streets. The reason is food is easy to find because of many food donations.”

Code: R2

“In homeless shelter like Anjung Kelana, Anjung Singgah or Pusat Transit Gelandangan, the homeless are only living there temporary and after few months, they can go. We try to search employment place for them and give them public housing to rent, but most of the time, it is a failed effort. Placing them in the homeless shelter for a certain period is the only thing that we can do for now. It is difficult for us to help them back into the society, unless they have own effort to change.”

Code: R4

Therefore, it can be concluded that the key issue of homeless persons lies not on the unavailability of shelters or other housing affordability problems such as expensive house price, insufficient of income or housing choice, but rather, the lifestyle of homelessness fits them. However, it is important to note that this findings cannot be generalise to the
homelessness community but it does give a clear indication of issue at hand. Majority of the respondents also asserted that most of homeless persons have an attitude problem as some of the homeless people do have a stable job, yet they are the ones that choose to become homeless voluntarily.

**Theme 2: Role of government agencies regarding homeless**

Majority of the respondents argued that their role in mediating homeless problems is limited. They stated that the main challenge of playing their role in mediating homeless problems is the non-existence of policy and act. Furthermore, it is unclear the role of government agencies in tackling the issue of homelessness which caused the agencies to manage the problem inefficiently. Therefore, several recommendations have been suggested to improve the homelessness issue, especially in defining their roles and having a clear policy to mitigate the problem of homeless persons. Significant findings are quoted below:

“We already made a Strategic Plan for 2021 to 2025 to address the issue of homelessness, beggars, and the poor. We have targeted this drafting to be completed in 2023. That is in terms of legal framework. In terms of operational, we have also proposed the existence of community-based settlement centres operated by NGOs for the three groups above. That is an ongoing five-year plan from 2021 to 2025. In the policy, we will categorise homeless people in different categories so that all agencies are ready to accept this homelessness with various problems and issues, and not just put this burden on one agency only. The definition and categories of homeless people should be highlighted in the policy to give a clear picture to the stakeholders and agencies. Hopefully, the policy will see the light in 2023.”

Code: R2

“We do not have a specific policy for the homeless but we have a draft or Kuala Lumpur Structure Plan. Indeed, we have stated that homelessness is one of the main focuses because in 2020/21, one of the goals is to make KL an exclusive and fair city. We are still in the draft phase for a homelessness policy because we feel these people should not be side lined and these people need to be helped in terms of a better quality of life. We really cannot get them out of the cocoon of 100% homeless but at least we can give them better facilities and quality of life such as accommodation, food, health and so on.”

Code: R5

“For me, the house for the homeless people also needs to be taken care of and the shelter also should be part of the policy to ensure there is continuity for homeless people to enter back into the society. We also should help them until they can afford to buy a house like other people in the society. If we separate them from the housing policy, it is like we are claiming that they do not belong in this society and they are not part of residents of this country. Just because they are different from other normal people, we must not treat them differently and alienated them. They deserve to live normal life just like other people and become home owner in the future as well.”

Code: R1

The findings revealed that there are various programs to assist homeless households with short-term shelter and integration into society. However, one of the main challenges is the behavioural direction of homeless persons. Many homeless persons prefer living on the streets and do not take up the opportunities provided by programs aimed at helping them secure long-term housing. Some factors that contribute to this behavioural direction include the lack of motivation to change their current situation, mental health issues, and substance abuse.
**Theme 3: Mediating homelessness through housing pathways**

According to the findings, there is no policy in Malaysia that cover the issues and problems of homelessness including in Klang Valley. However, many programs have been conducted to assist homeless households with short-term shelter and to integrate with society by federal, state and local government, as well as non-governmental organisations (NGO). Significant findings are quoted below:

“In 2010, KPWKM, JKM and YKN started collecting data on who live on the streets and we made the first homeless centre using the YKN building and we called friends from NGOs like Pertiwi Soup Kitchen and Kechara Soup Kitchen to help us. Our cooperation with DBKL and KWP began in 2016 when we saw homeless people, we decided to build “Pusat Transit Gelandangan” in Kuala Lumpur.”

Code: R2

“JKM is supposed to help poor people only, but as we are under KPWKM, we decided to help KPWKM and YKN to handle the issue of homelessness. We also include NGOs in our team.”

Code: R3

Majority of the respondents agreed that there are various incentives taken by the government agencies to help homeless people to have a temporary roof over their head such as building transit for the homeless like *Pusat Transit Gelandangan*, *Anjung Singgah* and *Anjung Kelana*. Other than temporary homeless shelters, they also provide a temporary house or room for homeless people to rent with low rental fees. Significant findings are quoted below:

“The objective is for short-term shelter. We do not build the house to be occupied for a long time. Usually, this transit house is provided for those who are affected by losing their jobs, being evicted from home, and others. So, this house is made for temporary accommodation before they get a job or return to their family”

Code: R5

“We also have transit accommodation such as at Jalan Pahang. The transit place can be stayed by anyone. For those who work, they will go to work during the day and return to the transit centre at night.”

Code: R1

According to the one of the respondents (R1), there are no plans to build long-term housing for homeless persons. However, for homeless persons that are used either on daily wages, part time or full time, they have income and they can afford to pay rental, they will be placed at *Rumah Bimbingan* where they can rent it with cheaper rental fees. The rent is RM124 per month with 4 people inside the house. The house is originally a PPR, but they convert it to *Rumah Bimbingan* just for homeless persons. Regardless, there is still a problem of ensuring homeless persons to be able to support themselves with long term shelter faced by the respondents. Motivating homeless persons to be with the norm of society has its challenges that requires collaborative efforts from all participating agencies.

**Theme 4: Views on collaborative ways to improve housing outcome for homeless**

Majority of the respondents agreed that the main problem is the lack of policy to provide a direction to mediate homeless persons to integrate in the society. Furthermore, they also argued that there is an unclear role of various government agencies in handling the issue of homelessness. Therefore, the respondents provided salient views on how various agencies can work together to improve the housing outcome of homeless persons. When asked on
placing the issue of homeless shelter as part of the housing policy, majority of the respondents agreed to this notion. They added that it is important for homeless persons to integrate in the society and they deserve basic shelter like other people in the society. Significant findings are quoted below:

“For me, the house for the homeless people also needs to be taken care of and the shelter also should be part of the continuum. We also should have a solution to help them walk along the continuum until they can afford to buy a house like other people in the society. If we separate them from the housing policy, it is like we are claiming that they do not belong in this society and they are not part of residents of this country. Just because they are in a different situation from other normal people, we must not treat them differently and alienated them. They deserve to live normal life just like other people and become home owner in the future as well.”

Code: RS1

Additionally, policy makers should develop a stronger national or state housing policy that includes homeless shelters as one of the types of basic housing. Furthermore, majority of the respondents also agreed that housing continuity is important to encourage homeownership across all households’ affordability. They added that that there are indeed many loopholes in the current policies such as lack of direction for homeless persons. Policy makers should cover all segments of housing that are available in the housing market in the future beginning from homeless persons.

Majority of the respondents also highlighted the challenges to provide affordable housing for homeless persons. The lack of available affordable housing units and the high cost of living in urban areas especially in Klang Valley, are significant barriers to housing continuity for homeless persons. Furthermore, the collaborative efforts among all stakeholders to address the issues and challenges of housing continuity in Klang Valley are highly needed. Based on the findings, it is highlighted that the key challenges of housing continuity for homeless in the perspective of stakeholders are lack of policy directions and overlapping roles of agencies to mediate homelessness in Klang Valley. Therefore, the respondents state that developing a specific policy for this issue will help to further strengthen the livelihood of homeless persons. They added that the policy should include categories of homeless persons as the mediation will be different across the categories. This is due to the various type of homelessness as some of them are only temporarily homeless due to family problems or financial issue and others may need only several weeks or month to stay in temporary housing because they lost employment. The respondents also explained that the issue may not be severe in the country now, but if the government agencies are not aware of the current and impending issues, the possibility of a crisis in the near future is high.

**Conclusion**

This study aims to investigate the issues and challenges of homeless persons in the perspective of stakeholders in assisting homelessness in Klang Valley. Stakeholders involved in assisting homeless persons as well as managing programs to provide temporary shelter where selected and interviewed. The study adopted qualitative method and the data were analysed through thematic analysis. Four main themes were highlighted which are current homeless problems, role of government agencies, mediating homeless through housing pathways and collaborative ways to improve housing outcome for homeless.

Based on the findings, The government has implemented several incentives, including shelters for the homeless. However, there is a lack of policies in place to assist homeless people in transitioning out of homelessness and into society. It is pertinent to provide long-term shelters for homeless persons to ensure housing continuity in Klang
The findings also highlighted the need for a collaborative approach among all stakeholders to address the challenges of homeless persons. Furthermore, achieving housing continuity for homeless persons is a complex issue that requires collaborative efforts from all stakeholders, including the government, non-government organisations and the community. Short-term shelter programs should be complemented with long-term support services, such as employment assistance, mental health treatment and family support. In addition, increasing the supply of affordable housing and addressing the root causes of homelessness, such as poverty and unemployment, are crucial in achieving housing continuity for homeless persons. Moreover, this study has implications for policymakers and stakeholders involved in the provision of affordable housing and addressing homelessness in Malaysia.

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Further reading


**Corresponding author**
Zafirah Al Sadat Zayed can be contacted at: zafirahzyed@um.edu.my

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