

# StarMetro

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## It's a rough life

The homeless battle prejudice, misplaced intentions of well-meaning groups and their own shortcomings while trying to survive on the streets of Kuala Lumpur.



**Permanent shelter:** Many homeless people live under a bridge next to Sungai Klang in the heart of Kuala Lumpur's city centre, near Pasar Seni. — FARID WAHAB/The Star

By FARID WAHAB  
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EIGHTEEN years ago, Mazlan, then 30, flew from his hometown in Kuching, Sarawak, to the peninsula in search of a better life.

He took up menial jobs to support himself, got married and had two children.

But he did not get the life he had hoped for, and now walks the city streets daily in search of shelter and food.

Mazlan is among tens, if not hundreds, of homeless who can be seen around Jalan Tun HS Lee and Lebuhraya Pudu in Kuala Lumpur.

A check by *StarMetro* found several homeless individuals congregating near Kota Raya, Pasar Seni and next to Sungai Klang.

Interviews revealed that family estrangement, job loss and drug abuse were among the reasons that led to them becoming homeless.

Mazlan has been homeless for 16 years.

Jobless, he relies on the kindness of strangers for food and some money.

"I also do odd jobs such as helping move crates for nearby shops and becoming a parking attendant."

"If I am lucky, I can make around RM70 a day, but it's not every day that this happens," he said.

Mazlan said he was used to liv-

ing on the streets.

"People look down on us. I feel sad knowing other people have money to spend, but I do not," he said.

His morale took another hit, when the Welfare Department took away his children, aged three and two, about two years ago.

"I was told to get a job and find a proper place to live if I wanted to get them back," he said.

He didn't answer further questions about his family.

Another homeless man, Mohd Fikri, 33, came from Sandakan, Sabah, to the peninsula 15 years ago to work as an electrician.

He then did various odd jobs to earn money.

Mohd Fikri said he had been married several times.

His second marriage produced two children — aged 11 and seven.

"But we have not been in contact for a long time."

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# Feeding a need but fostering dependency

By FARID WAHAB  
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GIVING food to the homeless seems noble but some social activists say it is a short-term measure that can prove harmful in the long run.

"It fosters an unhealthy dependency on aid and it disincentivises the homeless from seeking to improve their condition," said the activists.

Rashdan Rashid said Kuala Lumpur City Hall (DBKL) should be empowered to fine those who distribute food to the homeless without its approval.

"This is to ensure there is no overlap between government agencies and non-governmental organisations when giving out aid," he reasoned.

DBKL, in a statement on Sept 13, told the public not to give food directly to the homeless.

"This could create safety, hygiene and wastage issues," DBKL said, adding that it had designated two food distribution centres in Medan Tuanku and Chow Kit.

Rashdan, who has been working with the homeless since 2014, said simply giving food only treated the symptoms but not the cause.

"Every homeless person has a sad story to recount.

"They need counselling to help them make sense of what happened.

"Some have a criminal record, and as a result have been disowned by their family.

"Others are dealing with mental health issues which need to be

addressed," he said.

The chairperson of Kuala Lumpur and Selangor Association for the Homeless and Needy, said the homeless should be equipped with skills to become independent.

He cited the Federal Territories Ministry's initiative to recruit the homeless to work at farms under Kuala Lumpur City Hall (DBKL) as a good example.

Tzu Chi Foundation Malaysia recycling coordinator Francis Tan said cooperation between government agencies and NGOs was crucial to address the homelessness issue.

"Work together to brainstorm ideas on how to help the homeless get back on their feet," he said, adding that the government must



DBKL urges individuals and organisations not to give food directly to the homeless, so that the distribution can be better coordinated. — Filepic

ensure its plans could be executed sustainably.

Tan disagreed with DBKL's move to designate specific spots to distribute food to the homeless.

"DBKL should send them to the

Anjung Kelana centre in Taman Desa where they will be provided food.

"There, the homeless can also receive training instead of roaming and sleeping on the streets," he said.

## 'New law needed to deal with homeless issue'

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"No one in my family looks for me.

"I have lost my handphone, so it is difficult to reconnect," said the ninth of 10 siblings.

Mohd Fikri has thought about returning to Sabah but cannot afford the airfare.

"I have really bad asthma, so I buy have to buy medication. It is priced at RM10 and it can last about three days.

"I also have a back injury which means I cannot handle heavy jobs," he added.

Despite his current living situation and having been hauled up by Kuala Lumpur City Hall (DBKL) before, Mohd Fikri said he could cope.

"There are non-governmental organisations that give us food for breakfast, lunch and dinner every day.

"I am not afraid of the authorities as I am just living here and minding my own business," he said.

An Indonesian who gave her name as Yati, 40, claimed to have been staying under the bridge next to Sungai Klang for the last five years.

She came to Malaysia to work as a maid but fled after a month, citing harsh treatment from her former employer's family.

"I then went to work in Raub, Pahang, briefly before coming here to live with my boyfriend.

"I am married in my home country, but I have lost contact with my husband," said Yati, adding that her passport had expired.

She was upset with DBKL, which she said regularly rounded up homeless in the area.

"They threw away all the clothes which I got from NGOs. If they come again, I will give them a piece of my mind," she added.

Yati recently lost all her clothes again as they were carried away by floodwaters on Dec 18.



Some of the homeless people choose to live on the streets instead of staying at DBKL's transit centre for the homeless.



With their few belongings hanging above them, destitute individuals roll out cloths to sleep rough on the banks of Sungai Klang. — Photos: SHAARI CHEMAT/The Star



A homeless person makes his makeshift home on a pedestrian bridge in the city centre. — Filepic

### Tough pleasing everyone

While some city folk sympathise with the plight of the homeless, others want the government to remove them from the streets.

A general worker in Lebuah Pudu, who wanted to be identified only as Aliya, said the homeless contributed to social ills and make the area dirty.

"I also feel unsafe when walking in this area, especially at night, as they tend to fight among themselves," she said.

Aliya lamented that NGOs giving out free food had encouraged more homeless to congregate in the area.

Kuala Lumpur Welfare Department director Che Samsuzuki Che Noh said the authorities were under pressure from interest groups that demanded better treatment for the homeless.

He emphasised that there was a need for legal provisions that could better address the homeless problem in the city.

He noted that the Destitute Persons Act 1977 was inadequate to deal with the issue.

"This Act is meant for vagrants

who are causing public nuisance. It is not aimed at the homeless in a general way.

"For now, we can place these people in welfare centres, but we have no power to compel them to stay.

"A comprehensive law is needed to outline the roles and authority of the government agencies involved," he said.

Samsuzuki explained that the National Anti-Drugs Agency was responsible for those involved in drug activities while the Immigration Department handled

illegal immigrants.

On July 15, 2020, Women, Family and Community Development Minister Datuk Seri Rina Harun told the Dewan Rakyat that the government was planning to review the Destitute Persons Act.

She said an updated version was needed as the current Act was passed a long time ago.

### Homeless centre experience

In previous operations led by DBKL, homeless individuals picked up were vetted for their immigration and Covid-19 status, as well as any involvement in drug activity.

Those who were cleared were sent to the Anjung Kelana shelter in Taman Desa, Kuala Lumpur, where they were taught skills like tailoring, woodworking and farming.

The Moh Faisal was one of those who was eager to leave the centre.

"The food was bad and the pay was low," he said of the farming programme. The programme was introduced by Federal Territories Ministry to help the homeless gain a trade skill and earn an income.

Che Moh Faisal claimed that he was separated from his family after his parents divorced when he was 10.

"I lived in a welfare home and rarely met them. I don't know if I

have any siblings," he said, adding that his parents had already died.

The 38-year-old from Kuantan, Pahang, said he came to Kuala Lumpur in his early 20s and worked as a waiter and a security guard.

At one point, he voluntarily checked himself into a drug rehabilitation centre in Raub where he stayed for a year.

"There, I injured my leg while playing football, which has affected my ability to work.

"When I returned to KL, I vowed to never get involved with drugs again," he said.

Che Moh Faisal has staked a claim on an area next to the bridge in Sungai Klang.

He sleeps on a piece of cloth with all his belongings in a bag next to him.

A few metres away, a man was seen bathing under a pipe.

The 38-year-old gardener from Banting, Selangor, claimed that he was in the country's capital city for a holiday.

He said he was staying on the streets instead of a hotel room for the duration to save money.

"I have had the experience of being homeless for two months after I lost my job several years ago.

"In Banting, I live in accommodation provided by my employer," he said.