

吾家·露宿者攝影展
Home, Street Home - Photo Exhibition of the Homeless in Hong Kong
(17 April 2013)

The Society for Community Organization (SoCO) held a press conference today to announce the Photo Exhibition *Home, Street Home*, which reveals the true difficult circumstances of the homeless in Hong Kong. The exhibition is one in the series of ArtWalk 2013 exhibitions. SoCO invites the Secretary for Labour and Welfare, Hon. Matthew Cheung Kin-chung, JP as a special guest to the opening ceremony of *Home, Street Home*. SoCO urges the government and the public to squarely face the problem of the homeless in Hong Kong.

ArtWalk is Hong Kong's most popular art event held annually. This year, it will be held from 4.30 p.m. to 11.30 p.m. on 18 April (Thursday). Participants can enjoy a variety of art in 70 art galleries. The proceeds from the admission tickets (\$450 for adults and \$150 for students) will be donated to charities. Since 2005, ArtWalk has donated the revenue from admission tickets to our organization, supporting our work in serving the underprivileged and promoting human rights. SoCO sincerely thanks ArtWalk for the great support it has given to our organization. Our sincere thanks also go to the Schoeni Art Gallery. Since 2008, Schoeni has generously sponsored the exhibition venue so that more people can understand the issue of poverty.

In 2012 the per capita GDP in Hong Kong reached its highest in history. However, due to the failure of social policies, personal circumstances and poor livelihood, there remains nearly 1,000 homeless people who sleep in Hong Kong's streets. Amongst are middle-aged workers; rehabilitated mental patients who remain ill; single people and impoverished elderly people who have lost family support. They are the most underprivileged, most helpless group in our community. They are in dire need of concern and attention from the public.

In the *Home, Street Home* photo exhibition, SoCO is fortunate to have the photographer Mr. LEI Jih-sheng, the journalist HO Mei Wah and the photographer Alan LAU to accompany our social workers and go, day and night, deep into the dark corners of the community. Through their lens and words, they volunteered to recount the dark side behind our glamorous cosmopolitan city and unfold the life of the homeless. It is hoped that this will arouse the community's concern about the homeless and spur the authorities to assist them in improving their living conditions. **During the exhibition, there will be charitable sale of the postcards of the homeless (\$20 per set of 6 cards). The proceeds will all be used for charitable purposes.**

Social Welfare Department's homeless statistics did not represent the fact

Homelessness always existed in Hong Kong. Accurate statistics on the number of the homeless would help the formulation of more appropriate services. There are, however, loopholes in the way in which government estimates the number of the homeless. According to figures provided by the Social Welfare Department, there are 586 registered homeless people as at February 2013 but the Department has not taken into account those who have become homeless for less than a month. As long as a person is "arranged to enter a shelter for the homeless within one month", he / she will be de-registered by the government. **Furthermore, since most homeless people who have employments do not sleep in fixed locations in the street, they are often omitted from the Department's statistics.** The surveys conducted by SoCO in 2010¹ and 2012²

¹香港社區組織協會 2010 香港露宿者調查報告

show that employed persons represent 78.9% and 63.7% respectively of the persons not receiving comprehensive social security assistance (CSSA). Both figures are way above the Social Welfare Department's 2012 statistics that employed persons represent 25% of the persons not receiving CSSA. Therefore, **SoCO is of the view that SWD has most probably omitted some homeless people in its counting and has seriously underestimated the number of the homeless who have employments.** In order to avoid discrimination and officialdom's expulsion from locations, the vast majority of homeless are in the habit of going to sleep in not noticeable places after dark. They are high in mobility and difficult to contact. **SoCO estimates that there are about 1,200 homeless people in Hong Kong.**

Uncertainty in employment results in more than half of the homeless "become homeless again"

Owing to changes in the employment market, manual work tends to become short-term. As a result of job instability and exorbitant rent for residence, the situation of becoming unemployed again and becoming homeless again has become more prominent. Our 2012 survey shows that 52.4% of respondents are persons who have "become homeless again". The median of the intervening period between the two homeless occasions has dropped sharply from the 4 years in 2010 to 1 year in 2012. Quite a few of the homeless are engaged in short-term contract work outsourced by the government. It shows that labour policies indirectly affect the employment of the homeless.

40% of the homeless not receiving comprehensive social security assistance cannot afford rent

After minimum wage legislation took effect, and although the median salary of the homeless has increased from HK\$3,000 in 2010 to HK\$5,000 in 2012, private housing rent has increased by a wide margin. Consequently, many homeless people are forced to sleep in the street because they cannot afford the exorbitant rent or rent deposit of bed spaces and wood-partitioned cubicles in private flats. Moreover, since 2005, the government has abolished single people's hostels that had been charging rent of only \$430 per month. There is a lack of services to support the housing of the homeless. In addition, the Housing Department allocates less than 1,000 single-person public housing units each year. It means single persons have to wait indefinitely for allocation of public housing. Therefore, the homeless can only regard the street as their homes, which shows that the government does not have sound policies to address the housing problem of the low-income people.

CSSA rent allowance is inadequate.

Even the homeless receiving CSSA sleep in the street because the rent allowance under the CSSA is inadequate. With effect from 2003, the government reduced the ceiling of CSSA rent allowance from \$1,505 to \$1,265. The amount was increased, for the first time, to \$1,335 in February 2012 and then to \$1,440 in February 2013. However, the CSSA rent deposit was cancelled. Also cancelled were the special allowances for CSSA recipients under 60 years old, such as allowances for dental care and spectacles. According to SWD's statistics, the actual rent paid by nearly 70% of single persons CSSA recipients living in private housing exceeded the ceiling of rent allowance. As at January 2012, 37,638 households receiving CSSA were living in private housing. These included 22,688 cases where the monthly actual rent exceeded the ceiling of rent allowance. The figure represented 60.3% of the CSSA cases in private housing. If only the single-person families in private housing who receive assistance are counted, the ceiling of rent allowance was exceeded in nearly 70% (67.6%) of the cases. The trend indicates the situation will become worse.

The homeless are harassed; the government has no policy to protect them

Hong Kong does not have, at present, any clear legislation on whether or not people may sleep in the street. SoCO has found on several past occasions that government officials used "targeting executive measures" to

address the problem of street-sleeping. According to our survey in 2012, the homeless interviewed say they have been harassed by the police / security guards (30.4%) and worried about personal safety (25.5%). Government departments incessantly expel the homeless and, clear their personal belongings from streets, but have no policies to protect the homeless.

SoCO's recommendations

To address the difficulties of the homeless as described above, we urge the government to implement the following reform proposals:

1. **To improve the policy on the homeless** – the government should reactivate the SWD's pre-1997 practice to calculate the number of homeless people by "head counting", so as to arrive at a better "plan to serve the homeless". As in Japan, policies and legislation should be established to protect the homeless.
2. **More low-cost single-people hostels in urban areas** – reactivate the low-cost (e.g. monthly rent of HK\$430) single-people hostels in urban areas to assist "non-CSSA homeless" (representing 39.9% of the homeless) to move into housing flats.
3. **Reform the CSSA system** – the authority should review the CSSA system, including: providing special allowances for dental care, spectacles etc; Revise the rent allowance for single-person CSSA recipients back to the \$1,505 level and provide rent deposit allowance to the homeless who are CSSA recipients to promote employment.
4. **Improve the public housing policy** – the authority should build more public housing flats, review the proportion of one-person independent units in the urban area and shorten the "public housing waiting time" of single persons.
5. **Strengthen the support services for mental health patients** – at present, some "hospital psychiatric outreaching teams" may not be willing to examine the homeless in the street. The authority should strengthen the services of the "hospital psychiatric outreaching teams". Under the co-ordinated efforts of four outreaching teams, visits should be paid to the homeless in the main areas where the homeless are staying.

Society for Community Organization