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Housing Aid for the Homeless in Japan and South Korea

日本と韓国におけるホームレスへの居住支援

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Housing Aid for the Homeless in Japan

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In Japan, the first official use of the borrowed English language term 'homeless' in the language of policy was in the 'Special Measures Law Concerning Assistance for the Rehabilitation of the Homeless' enacted in 2002. The background leading up to this law was the appearance of blue plastic-tarp tents in the parks, under highway overpasses, and along the river banks of the largest cities in Japan during the late 1990s. Suddenly tent dwellers and street sleepers became visible to the eyes of the public, and they began to be recognized as an urban problem. This was particularly the case in Osaka City, where a survey for the first time of actual conditions of rough sleepers throughout the entire city in 1998 made clear that their number had reached 8,660 and caused quite a shock. A drastic increase of rough sleepers, up to 5,798, was seen in the 23 wards of Tokyo in 1999. Especially within Osaka City the numbers approached a peak with 2,593 living in tents and shacks in the city's parks in the year 2000, and 1,502 sleeping on the streets in 1999 (in 2008, there were 426 living in parks and 370 on the streets). In public urban spaces this became a very conspicuous phenomenon. They are the 'visible homeless', and this is one of the reasons that the Japanese official definition of 'homeless' only includes the 'street homeless' and not the homeless living in shelters, which is something we need to keep in mind.

By using this borrowed English expression 'homeless' in dealing with the problem of people living on the street, they were openly and legally recognized as a new urban problem. However, in terms of the actual conditions of homelessness, this is really not a new problem by any means. The homeless, the people described with this new-sounding term, are the laborers who since long ago have hung around casual labor hiring sites, who, when out of work, slept rough while seeking day labor, and the people living on the streets who slept under highway overpasses and in train stations and parks, surviving by collecting and recycling all kinds of thrown away materials. The fact is, we should not be misled into thinking that the word 'homeless' is anything but a new name for these people.

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The phenomenon of sleeping rough in Japan is something that historically always accompanied the casual labor hiring sites (*yoseba*) where male day laborers would congregate. Most of these day laborers lived in *doya*, rude lodgings or flophouses, while working at day labor, and since most of them had no residency papers, as a problem of poor people with no fixed abode, they were shunted into the particular local areas around *yoseba* hiring sites and dealt with according to the few policies that pertained only to those districts. Their lifestyle always went hand in hand with rough sleeping. In the first nation-wide survey of rough sleepers made in 2002,

36.2% of the national total of 25,296 had experience of working and living at *yoseba* hiring sites. Among those with such experience, 49.4% had worked at Kamagasaki in Osaka City, 31.3% at Sanya in Tokyo's Taito Ward, 20.2% at Kotobuki-cho in Yokohama, 19.6% at Sasajima in Nagoya, and 19.4% at smaller scale *yoseba* hiring sites in Fukuoka, Kobe, and other cities. For their housing arrangements, *doya* lodgings provided the workers with a one-room living space of 4.95 square meters with shared kitchen and shared toilet facilities. If periods of no work continued when they could not pay the low lodging cost of US\$10 per night, they were simply pushed out into sleeping on the streets.

Among the types of work people had done just before starting to live on the street, 61.2% were in construction, building industries, goods transport, and other kinds of unskilled labor, with very few in manufacturing (10.5%) or office work, retail, or services (14.3%). At these *yoseba* hiring sites, most of the day laborers in construction and the building industries had lost contact with their families and were living alone, and when a large number of them were pushed out to live on the street because of the economic downturn beginning in the late 1990s, and because of their own aging, they became the single biggest reason for the appearance of the homeless problem. And the influence of people, activists who had been aiding rough sleepers at *yoseba* hiring sites was overwhelming in the enactment as a Diet member's bill of the 2002 law (which will only be in effect for ten years).

In the 2002 national survey, the nine largest cities, beginning with Tokyo and Osaka, had 65.9% of the total number of homeless nationwide, while at the same time homelessness had become a visible phenomenon in regional cities as well. Routes leading to homelessness not limited to *yoseba* hiring sites are beginning to be seen in all regions of Japanese society. A nationwide questionnaire survey was taken again in 2007. Its purpose was a mid-term evaluation of the effects of the new law. It showed that the total number of homeless had declined by 6,732 to 18,564 (and this would be 15,759 in the 2009 survey), that the number of people living in parks had greatly declined, but that the number living along river banks had increased. The average age of the homeless had increased by 1.6 years to 57.5 years, and the proportion of people who had been homeless for five years or more had climbed to 41.4%. The number of people working mainly by collecting discarded materials had increased as much as 6% to 70.4%. In contrast to the people who had managed to escape life on the streets within a short period of time, a trend can be seen towards permanent solidification of the lifestyle of people who can survive while sleeping rough.

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On the other hand, the number of people escaping living on the streets has increased remarkably, and most of them have made use of the welfare payment system. In 2006, there were 30,299 cases nationwide of people receiving welfare payments and escaping from sleeping on the streets. The highest percentage group of these, 37.9%, made use of medical facilities, but there

are many cases where their health was damaged while living on the streets and they were admitted as emergencies, and this is not a desirable way to escape homelessness. A large number, 23.6%, utilized low-rent recovery assistance lodging. This is a representative kind of transitional housing that has been resurrected by assistance for the homeless, and most of these are managed by non-profit organizations. They are making a great contribution to the escape from homelessness in areas where the homeless rehabilitation aid system of the public sector is weak. They make use of the housing allowance in the welfare payments of their clients for their operating expenses, and expenses for their housing assistance services do not come from the public sector.

The proportion of those who have made use of the homeless rehabilitation aid centers that were set up by the public sector as a channel for escaping homelessness is 15.6%. These homeless rehabilitation aid centers, prescribed by the Homeless Assistance Law, are mainly in the largest cities, with 19 locations in 9 cities and a capacity of 2,025 people, and there are shelters at 11 locations with a capacity of 1,953 people. This should underscore that they have contributed to no more than 15.6% of the people escaping homelessness. Among those who have left these facilities, 23.2% have done so in connection with finding employment, and 39.2% have used welfare payments to start living in ordinary housing or have moved into welfare facilities. The remaining 37.6% are cases who have either left voluntarily or been forced to move out; the likelihood of their returning to sleeping on the street thereafter is quite high, and the number of people who repeatedly go into and come out of these transitional facilities for the homeless is increasing (in Osaka City, 30% are people who repeatedly enter and leave homeless-related facilities). The cases of people who directly enter ordinary housing and manage to house themselves using welfare payments do not exceed 7.9%.

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Using the welfare payments in this way as their one and only trump card, escapees from homelessness finally began to make progress in the early 2000s, although the largest contributions to this were made by homeless assistance NPOs and volunteer organizations. In a nation-wide survey of those escaping homelessness conducted by an NPO in 2007, it became clear that for assistance in entering transitional facilities or in obtaining welfare payments, between half and two thirds of the formerly homeless had received assistance from NPOs and volunteer groups. The NPOs were able to overcome the dysfunction of the official Japanese safety net in which people cannot receive welfare payments because they have no dwelling where they actually live or have no residency papers.

That brought about a great turning point in the welfare payments system, but if a single person earns US\$1,000 per month through this payment, and they can afford to live in the community, then this creates no incentive for the public sector to establish housing policies for this kind of single person. Their average age is fairly high, creating an effective employment-

finding aid policy is difficult, only a very scanty range of employment assistance options have been created up till now. They go on living alone in local areas while receiving welfare payments. There is practically no after-care system in place for such people. Also, the turnover rate is low in welfare relief facilities that are supposed to accept people with livelihood difficulties, and up till now they have made hardly any contribution to improving the problem of homelessness. Problems of alcohol dependency or other handicaps always increase the risk of returning to living on the street.

Meanwhile, since 2002 Japanese society has been inflicted by continuing circumstances of insecure employment and new phenomena of housing-poor and housing-vulnerable people, such as 'freeters' (unskilled part-time workers who frequently change jobs or only work casually), Internet cafe refugees, people laid off from companies, and ex-prisoners. The appearance of homeless young people mainly in their 20s and 30s is a problem that has met with a different response from society than the one towards the older homeless. Action on this problem by the Health and Labor Ministry has been quick. Finally the society has begun to recognize that construction of mechanisms for aiding the homeless in the broadest sense is connected to constructing the most important social insurance safety net in Japanese society.

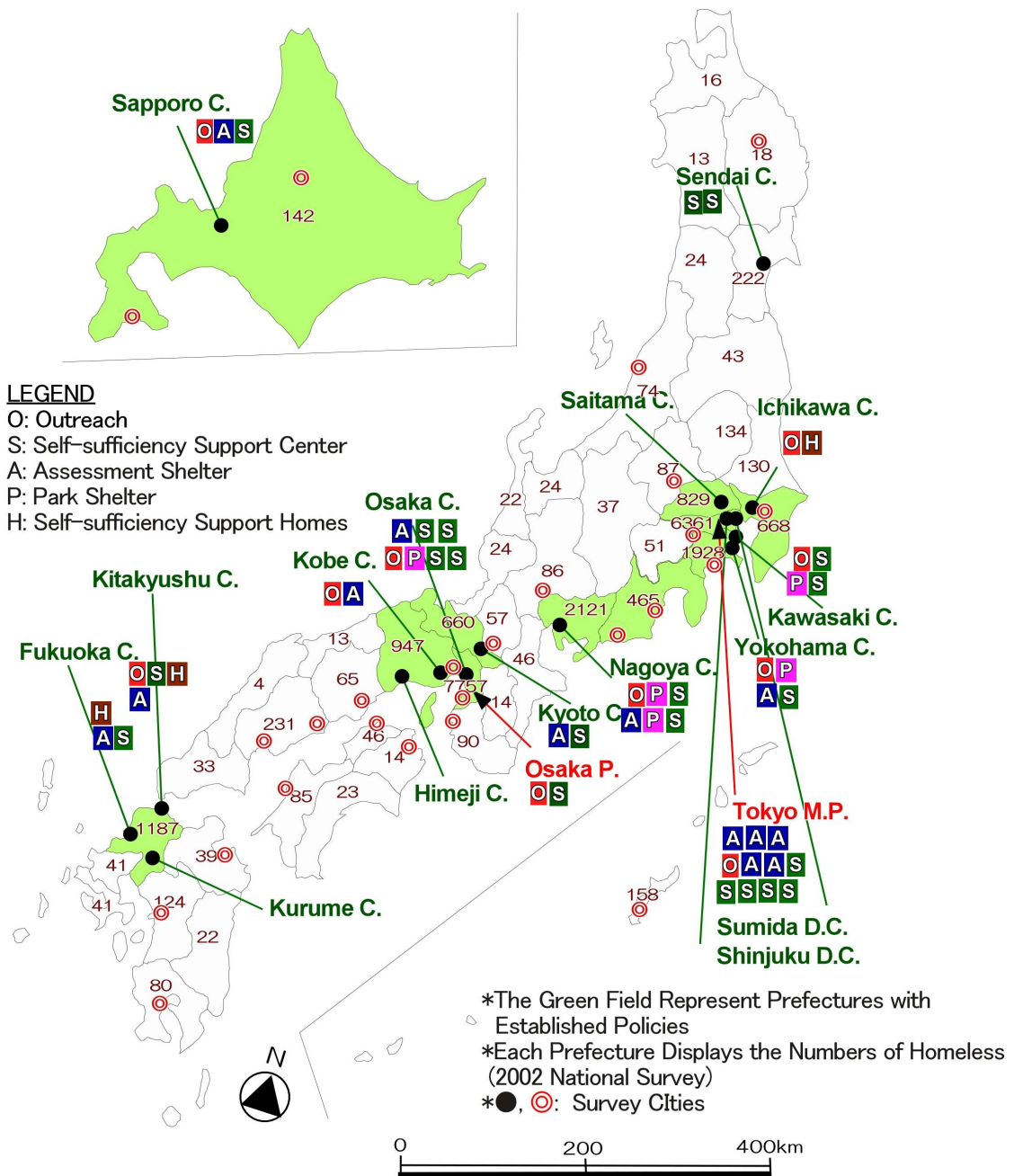


Figure 1: The Status of Public Sector Homelessness Support in Japan and Actual Condition on Prefecture and City Scale

Housing Aid for the Homeless in South Korea

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Housing Conditions of Urban Low Income People

South Korea's homeless problems, which expanded greatly on the heels of the financial crisis of the late 1990s, are at present continuing at an ongoing level, betraying the optimistic scenarios that said the problems would be solved along with economic recovery. This suggests darkly that the homeless problem is not a temporary one, but something that is the result of social exclusion in housing over many years.

At the end of 2002, the South Korean government announced that the housing supply availability level had exceeded 100%. So the housing problem is no longer a problem of an inadequate number of units available. On the other hand, a research report has come out that 3,300,000 households, or 23% of all households, are living in housing that falls below the 'minimum housing standard' (as reported in 2000). This is a cutaway view of low income people's housing which is hidden from view in the age of 100% housing supply availability. If we dig deeper, the dark shadows of the era of 100% housing supply come more vividly into view. First of all, there is the problem of rising housing cost due to urban renewal and an inadequate supply of smaller, low-rent dwellings. After the 'Smaller Dwelling Mandatory Construction System' was abolished in 1998, the proportion of smaller dwellings within the overall housing supply gradually diminished, the purchase prices and rental fees for smaller dwellings escalated, and this brought about an increase in the burden of housing expenses for lower income people. The housing cost burden for lower income people is particularly heavy. The 'Rent to Income Ratio' (RIR) is inverse to income, and the lower the income of people living in sub-standard housing, the more the housing cost burden increases. The RIR for people in the lowest 10% income level is 28.6%, but for people in the highest 20% income levels, it is no more than 11.7%. The problems of insecure housing and substandard housing as represented by underground rental housing, vinyl house encampments, *jjogbang* (illegal hostel rentals), etc., have yet to be solved. Additionally, there are concerns over social exclusion of residents, such as the residents of public housing projects.

Definition and Current Status of the Homeless

In South Korea, in general those in the homeless category are roughly classified into two groups. One group has been called *purangja* (vagrants or bums) since early times, and the other

group are the 'street sleepers' who suddenly increased in number at the time of the financial crisis of the late 1990s. In contrast to the former, who have been addressed in social welfare project laws, the street sleepers have until now not been legally addressed but were simply the object of budgetary measures. However, since 2003 a systematic base for dealing with them has finally been put into place. For example, in section 2 of the revised regulations of the Social Welfare Projects Law of July 2003, a clause for 'street sleepers' was inserted into the range of social welfare projects, and on January 5, 2005 the existing 'Regulations for Establishing and Operating Vagrant (*Purangja*) Welfare Facilities' were revised as 'Regulations for Establishing and Operating Street Sleeper and Vagrant Protection Facilities (referred to below as "the regulations")'. Nevertheless, both words are used interchangeably, and confusion remains since the meaning of neither term has been defined precisely. For example, in 'the regulations' just cited, street sleepers are described as "persons of 18 years or older having no fixed abode, who have lived on the streets for a considerable time, and through that have entered street sleeper shelters". Concerning *purangja*, they describe them as "persons 18 years or older with no fixed abode or means of livelihood who have loitered or lived on the streets for a considerable period, and through that have entered *purangja* welfare facilities". This leaves unsolved both the vagueness of the conceptual definitions and the difficulties of developing projects that it causes. Moreover, there are arguments that a preventative definition should be developed which focuses on the long-term homeless as "persons who cannot solve their housing problems through their own or their families' efforts" which would include people living in insecure and temporary housing (such as vacant homes or welfare facilities) in addition to those who have been homeless on the streets for medium or long terms.

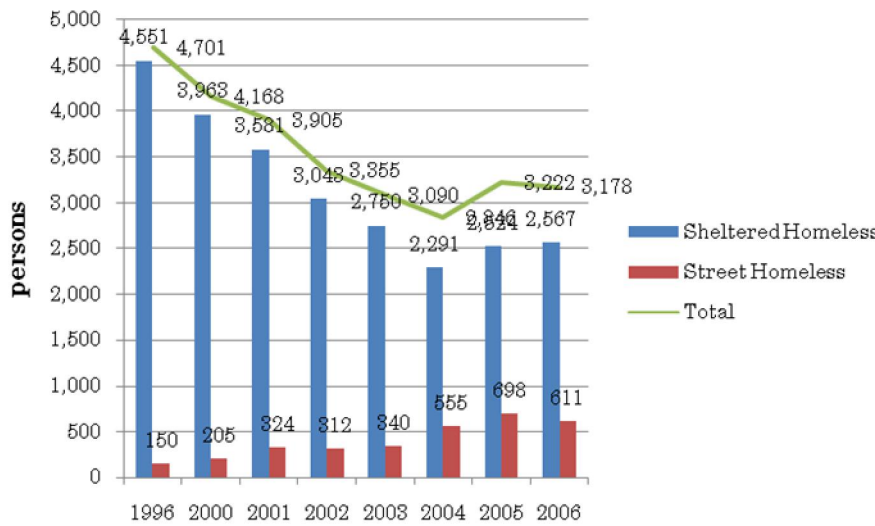
Meanwhile, speaking only about the street sleepers, up until now only 'those in shelters' and 'those sleeping on the street' have been identified as the homeless, and the government has reported on the scale of homelessness by lumping the two together in its statistics. According to their figures, the number of homeless nationally is approximately 5,000, of whom roughly 4,000 are shelter entrants and about 1,000 are sleeping on the street.

Table 1 Homeless Statistics According to the Health and Welfare Ministry

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
In Shelters	4,601	4,321	3,569	3,612	3,497	3,763	3,563
On the Streets	445	517	670	928	969	959	1,293
Totals	5,046	4,838	4,439	4,540	4,466	4,722	4,856

However, if one adds to this number the approximately 6,000 residents of *jjogbang* (rental hostels), most of whom have experienced sleeping on the street, and whose numbers and circumstances are very closely related to street sleepers, one can estimate the total number of people as exceeding 10,000.

Incidentally, most of the street sleepers mentioned above are concentrated in Seoul. As



shown in the chart below, in recent years there are about 3,200 street sleepers in Seoul, so one can see that more than 60% of the total number of street sleepers are concentrated in Seoul. About 2/3 of the shelter entrants as well are utilizing homeless shelters in Seoul.

Figure 1 Trend in the Numbers of Homeless in Seoul

Source: Seoul Homeless Rehabilitation Aid Groups (changes in the number of homeless from 1998-2006; for 1999-2005, as of the end of January; for 2006, as of the end of December)

The demographic profile of the homeless is overwhelmingly adult males, over 90%, with the largest number in their 40s. The next largest age cohort are in their 50s. This is consistent with the fact that the largest number were in their 30s when homeless assistance policies began ten years ago. On the other hand, the number of female homeless has been gradually increasing in comparison with the late 1990s. The average period of homelessness has lengthened somewhat compared to the late 1990s, and the proportion of repeat shelter entrants has become higher than the number who are entering shelters for the first time. Additionally, the recent influx of young people with debt or credit problems is also increasing, and they appear to have a weaker desire to go to work compared to the existing homeless people.

Evolution of Homeless Assistance Policies and Private Housing Assistance

It was after the publication of the 'General Assistance Measures for the Urban Homeless' by the Health and Welfare Ministry on June 7, 1998 that the government seriously began to address assistance for the homeless who had drastically increased in number around Seoul Station. Subsequently, in July of the same year in Seoul, the 'Seoul Homelessness Measures Association' was organized, composed of citizens' groups, government officials, experienced academics, etc., and assistance projects began through a public-private partnership. In the early period of countermeasures implementation, immediate shelter was the main emphasis, and securing places for people to sleep was at the top of the agenda. Thereafter, stress also came to be given to

rehabilitation assistance in order to get the homeless off the streets. After 2001 there were various changes, and in conformity with the principle of 'giving help on the spot', 'roadside clinics' were regularly set up (beginning in April, 2002). Also, 'Drop-in Centers' have been established by private organizations where even those who are not necessarily living in shelters, such as those living on the streets or in *jjogbang*, can freely use living facilities such as showers and laundry. Additionally, the *jahwal ūi jip* (transitory housing) program has been launched as medium-term housing for those leaving the shelters. (These are private rental housing units that have been leased out and where those transitioning from homelessness may stay for up to a maximum of four years). Also, although there has not yet been a great response, 'Rental Assistance Projects' where 50% of housing rent is subsidized are also being carried out.

In recent years, for those inhabitants of sub-standard dwelling spaces such *jjogbang*, vinyl houses, etc., who are known to be closely related to the homeless, a 'Purchased Rental Housing Project for Single Householders' has begun where private groups buy or lease rental housing and then make it available. In addition, from homeless assistance groups there is aid for the homeless to move into *jjogbang* using private funds, and aid activities have evolved for seeing that livelihood assistance welfare payments can be received.

Remaining Issues of Homelessness Assistance

In the response to the homeless problem over the last ten years, there are many good points to be noted, such as the movement from immediate shelter provision to rehabilitation aid, or the putting into practice of the 'on the spot assistance' directed at the homeless on the streets who had fallen outside the net of countermeasures up until now. However, more preventive and inclusive measures are needed for dealing with the potential homelessness of the ever increasing number of people with insecure housing situations or those in sub-standard dwellings due to the aforementioned decline in cheap housing. In other words, from now on what needs to be dealt with are these issues: an accurate survey of the conditions of the housing-poor groups and an understanding of their needs; provision for the participation of these people together with private aid groups throughout the entire process of countermeasures; various types of housing supply provided by various housing supply agencies (private non-profit housing with support included); community revitalization through local leadership; and social inclusion for the homeless that is informed by a vision of building social capital.

