

10 Whose problem?

Japan's homeless people as an issue of local and central governance

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Japan is often portrayed as a highly centralized state, in which national government tends to dictate policy to the regions (Johnson 1995). This view has been contested, for example by Muramatsu Michio (1997), whose reassessment of relations between central and local governments lays particular stress on the importance of welfare programmes as manifestations of that relationship (1997: 90). This study of recent homeless policy broadly supports Muramatsu's position on Japanese-style governance: here is an awkward issue that the central government has traditionally been more than happy to leave to cities and prefectures to sort out, but which now demands a national response.

Background

Until about 1999 the government of Japan largely ignored the issue of homelessness. Article 25 of the national constitution, backed up by the 1950 Livelihood Protection Law (*Seikatsu Hogo-hō*), guaranteed every citizen of Japan a 'minimum standard of civilized living'.¹ The government's position was that anyone unable to provide for themselves was eligible for livelihood protection (*seikatsu hogo*) and that consequently there was no need for anyone to become homeless. Faced with the steadily mounting evidence of tents, shacks and cardboard boxes around the major cities, the government would argue that homeless people fell into one of two categories: (1) people who had not applied for welfare, out of pride or ignorance of the benefits available; and (2) people who had applied for welfare but had been turned down on the judgement of their local welfare office. Hence the problem was transferred to the individuals themselves or to local authorities.

In the last few years, however, homelessness has risen high enough to trigger a modest media boom.² The TV and print media have tended to focus on 'new homeless' – laid-off white-collar workers, young people, women, and so on. However, it has been argued elsewhere (Gill 2001b) that the media's search for novelty has obscured the fact that even today most homeless people are in fact of the 'old homeless' type – middle-aged to elderly working-class men. This perception is regularly confirmed by quantitative research (Kanagawa-ken 2001; Tamaki and Yamaguchi 2001), and most recently by the national government survey of 2003, briefly discussed below.

Why does the livelihood protection programme not cover these people? Usually because of rules invented at ground level by the officials implementing the programme. In many cities applications are still turned down unless the applicant can prove that s/he is (1) over the age of 65; or (2) too ill or injured to work. Just being unemployed is not enough. In some districts, too, applicants must have a bank account and a permanent address – the latter a particularly harsh requirement for a homeless person.

Violent attacks on homeless people have become a regular occurrence, and people are clearly becoming desensitized to them. Murders get four or five paragraphs in the newspaper and lesser incidents barely merit a paragraph. According to my own coverage of the Japanese press, the two years from 1 July 2001–30 June 2003 saw at least twenty murders of homeless people, eight of them by fellow homeless people. These incidents have strengthened negative associations with homeless people and fuelled ‘not in my backyard’ (NIMBY) opposition to any attempt to construct homeless shelters near the homes of ‘ordinary folk’.

In 1998, the Ministry of Health and Welfare (MHW; Kōseiishō) at last acknowledged the problem, issuing an estimate for Japan’s national homeless population: 16,000. Subsequent surveys in 2000 and 2001 generated headline figures of 20,000 and 24,000 (Table 10.1). These figures were totalled from a haphazard collection of regional counts. In early 2003, the first attempt at a co-ordinated national survey generated a figure of 25,296. This included 20,661 men, 749 women and 3,886 people of ‘unclear’ gender (reflecting sloppy counting practices, especially in Osaka). Homelessness remains a predominantly male phenomenon in Japan.

Trends in government homeless statistics do not necessarily have anything to do with trends in the actual number of homeless people. Until 2003 a large part of the statistical increase was directly attributable to more cities, towns and villages making counts; while the relatively small increase shown in the first unified national count in 2003 must be treated with scepticism, since the count was held in winter, whereas most of the cities had until then been counting in summer months, when warmer weather tends to swell the visible homeless population. Counting methods have not been consistent either. Note also that these statistics cover only narrowly-defined street homelessness, omitting the growing numbers living in shelters. Activists and social workers often say that a truer figure would be roughly double the official figure.

Recent developments in homeless policy

Launch of countermeasures; expansion of budget

The year 2000 saw a significant development as the Ministry of Health and Welfare announced a formal policy for the support of homeless people (*hōmuresu jiritsu shiensaku*), consisting mainly of a shelter construction programme and deployment of employment counsellors from the public employment exchange at the shelters. For the first time, too, a specific item on homeless support was included in the national budget. The policy continues to hold prefectures and the thirteen major

Table 10.1 Statistics on homelessness in Japan

<i>Location</i>	<i>1998</i>	<i>1999</i>	<i>2001</i>	<i>2003 (Jan/Feb)</i>
Tokyo (23 wards)	4,300 (Aug)	5,800 (Aug)	5,600 (Aug)	5,927
Yokohama	439 (Aug)	794 (Aug)	602 (Aug)	470
Kawasaki	746 (Aug)	901 (Jul)	901 (Jul)	829
Nagoya	758 (May-Jul)	1,019 (May)	1,318 (May)	1,788
Osaka	'8,660' (Not surveyed)	8,660 (Aug)	'8,660' (Not surveyed)	6,603
Sapporo	18 (Dec)	43 (Nov)	68 (Dec 2000)	88
Sendai	53 (Mar)	111 (Oct)	131 (Aug)	203
Chiba	104 (Aug)	113 (Aug)	123 (Aug)	126
Kyoto	200 (Mar 99)	300 (Oct)	492 (Jun)	624
Kobe	229 (Aug)	335 (Aug)	341 (Aug)	323
Hiroshima	98 (Feb)	115 (Nov)	207 (Feb)	156
Kitakyūshū	80 (Mar 97)	166 (Nov)	197 (Aug)	421
Fukuoka	174 (Oct)	269 (Aug)	341 (Aug)	607
Major provincial cities	288 (numbers and dates unclear)	706 (24 reports)	1,684 (38 reports)	1,476 (30 reports)
Other towns and villages	Not surveyed	1,119 (73 reports)	3,425 (347 reports)	5,655*
Total	16,247	20,451	24,090	25,296

Source: MHLW statistics.

Most recent surveys available on-line at: <http://www.mhlw.go.jp/houdou/2003/03/h0326-5.html>, accessed 28 June 2004.

Notes:

* The 2003 survey did not give this figure. It was generated by subtracting the other sub-totals from the grand total. Apart from major cities, the data was presented by prefecture.

metropolises designated as special cities (*shitei toshi*) responsible for their own homeless people, but guarantees 50 per cent of the necessary funding from the national coffer. Since then the policy has been expanded and budget appropriations have risen accordingly (Table 10.2).

The 2002 Homeless Self-reliance Support Act

The doubling of the budget in FY 2003 reflected another important development: the passing of the Homeless Self-reliance Support Act on 31 July 2002.³ This is Japan's first piece of legislation designed specifically to deal with homelessness. Officially entitled the 'Special Law on Temporary Measures to Support the

Table 10.2 National budget for homeless support measures (2000–2004)

FY2000	0.97 billion yen	–
FY2001	1.08 billion yen	+ 11%
FY2002	1.35 billion yen	+ 25%
FY2003	2.70 billion yen	+100%
FY2004	3.00 billion yen	+ 11%

Source: MHLW statistics.

Self-Reliance of Homeless People' (*Hōmuresu no Jiritsu no Shien na do ni kan suru Tokubetsu Sochi-hō*), it was drafted by a team of young Dietmen in the Democratic Party of Japan, submitted as a private member's bill, accepted by the governing coalition headed by the Liberal Democratic Party and passed unanimously on 31 July 2002 – the last day of the ordinary Diet session. It was promulgated a week later, on 7 August.

The key items in the new law are as follows:

- 1 The government recognizes that many people have become homeless through no fault of their own and that this is 'causing friction with local society' (Art. 1).
- 2 The act sets an objective of providing housing and stable employment to homeless people and those at risk of becoming homeless to enable them to maintain personal autonomy (Arts 3, 5) and pledges adequate funding (Art. 10).
- 3 People in charge of parks and other public spaces are empowered to remove homeless people's dwellings where 'appropriate use of the facilities is being obstructed' (Art. 11).
- 4 The government pledges to carry out a unified national census of the homeless population (Art. 14).⁴
- 5 All the provisions are temporary and will lapse after ten years.

Reaction to the new law among homeless people and activists has been sharply divided. Some welcome the law as a long-overdue public commitment to act on homelessness; others condemn it as an underhand way of enabling the government to evade its constitutional duty to provide livelihood protection to all who need it. Critics point out that the cost of housing people in homeless shelters is far less than putting them on livelihood protection, which entails paying the rent on a small apartment and supplying cash for independent everyday living. Livelihood protection payments vary with individual circumstances and region, but usually a single person can hope to receive around 80–90,000 yen a month plus up to 40,000 yen in rent support – 130,000 yen a month is an often quoted all-in figure. By contrast, even if the government figure of 25,000 homeless happened to be accurate, the expanded budget of FY2003 works out at roughly 100,000 yen per capita – about 6 per cent of the cost of putting all those people on *seikatsu hogo*. So there is a risk that the new law could lower the bar as to what constitutes a 'minimum standard

of civilized living' in Japan. Article 11, on 'returning public spaces to their proper uses' is particularly hated, out of concern that it could eventually become a pretext for mass expulsions of people living in tents and shacks from parks in urban areas.

Against this, supporters of the law and neutrals argue pragmatically that the sad fact of the matter is that the national and local authorities simply are *not* going to put everyone on livelihood protection, and that under the circumstances as they are, the provisions of the new law are better than nothing.

Ultimately the positive or negative impact of the new law will depend on how it is implemented – and particularly on the entrance and exit strategies of shelters in the various cities. How many people, chosen on what basis, will be able to use, or want to use, the shelters; and where will they go after leaving the shelters? These key issues are discussed below.

National bureaucratic structures

The MHW was merged with the Ministry of Labour (MOL; *Rōdōshō*) on 6 January 2001, to form the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW; *Kōsei Rōdōshō*). In the long term this should be a good thing for homeless policy, since welfare used to be handled by the MHW and employment by the MOL, and these two central pillars of homeless policy are now handled by the same ministry.⁵ However, a look at how the budget for homeless support breaks down (Table 10.3) shows that a bureaucratic fault-line remains. Of the seven items covered, the first three are ex-MHW policies and the last four are ex-MOL policies. In terms of personnel, too, as of late 2002 there were nine MHLW officials detailed to homeless policy, of whom four were in the Regional Welfare Section of the Social Support Bureau

Table 10.3 Homeless support budget breakdown, FY2002 and FY2003 (Unit: millions of yen).

Item	FY2002	FY2003 (request)
1. General consultation	–	306 (382)
2. Self-reliance support	837	1,204 (1,035)
3. Emergency shelters	180	446 (983)
4. Activating homeless people's abilities	8	44 (44)
5. Employment counselling	114	– (206)
6. Training for day labourers, etc.	212	463 (463)
7. Test employment	–	240 (240)
<i>Total</i>	<i>1,351</i>	<i>2,703 (3,353)</i>

Source: MHLW home page available on-line at: <http://www.mhlw.go.jp/topics/2003/bukyoku/syakai/1-j2.html>, accessed 24 June 2004.

Notes:

- 1 In FY2003 the 'employment counselling' item was incorporated into the 'self-reliance support' item – hence the rarity of an allocation figure higher than the amount requested.
- 2 In addition to the above, 500 million yen was allocated to homeless policy in a supplementary budget for FY 2002: 300 million yen for emergency shelters and 200 million yen for 'emergency support enterprises' (*kinkyō enjo jigō*), defined as 'provision of everyday necessities to homeless people in a condition of deteriorating health'.

(*Shakai Enjo-kyoku Chiiki Fukushi-ka*; ex-MHW) and five were in the Planning Department of the Elderly and Handicapped People's Employment Countermeasures Section (*Kōrei Shōgaisha Koyō Taisaku bu Kūkaku ka*; ex MOL). There is a working group that combines members from both departments but it remains to be seen how effective this *cohabitation* will be. The restructuring of the budget in 2003, to shift employment counselling costs to the self-reliance support budget (Table 10.3 note 1) represents a first small erosion of the old bureaucratic barriers, with a traditional MOL item being moved to a budget sector associated with the MHW.

A second fault-line may be discerned within the ex-MHW part of the budget, between items 2 and 3 – which between them accounted for 60 per cent of the 2003 budget. Both items essentially are money for building and running shelters for homeless people, but 'homeless self-reliance support projects' (*hōmuresu jiritsu shien jigyo*) involve shelters which are supposed to be staging places on the way back to mainstream society, generally known as self-reliance support centres (*jiritsu shien sentā*; SSCs) whereas 'emergency shelter projects' (*hōmuresu kinkyū ichiji shukuhaku [sherutā] jigyo*) are supposed to provide temporary havens *in extremis*. These shelters are most frequently referred to as emergency temporary shelters (*kinkyū ichiji hinanjo*; ETSSs). Hence we have the germ of a two-tier system here. As we shall see, how in practice these two kinds of shelter should relate to each other is an issue now being contested in Japan's major metropolises.

Elsewhere in the budget, the new item for 'general consultation' means counselling to inform homeless people of the various services available to them, including an element of outreach work, a relatively new concept for Japan, though well established in other industrialized countries (Rowe 1999). Item 4, which translates in full as 'projects for activating homeless people's abilities' (*hōmuresu nōryoku katsuyō suishin jigyo*) means employment projects using task forces of homeless people to carry out tasks such as cleaning, weeding, recycling of magazines and so on. There were two such projects in operation as of July 2003, and three more were provided for in the FY2003 budget. Still, this important aspect of homeless policy looks remarkably under-funded at just 44 million yen, less than 2 per cent of the budget.

Two further items reflect the close relationship between homelessness and the declining Japanese tradition of day labouring (*hiyatōi rōdō*). As discussed elsewhere (Gill 2001b), casual labour markets called *yoseba* have traditionally served as a last-resort place of employment preventing many men without regular employment from slipping into homelessness. In the last two decades, factors such as economic recession, the decline of the construction industry and increasing automation of work once done by unskilled labour have crippled the casual labour market, and the *yoseba* have gradually changed from 'workers' towns' to 'welfare towns' (Stevens 1997). In Osaka, Tokyo and Yokohama, many homeless shelters tend to be located near one of the three famous *yoseba* – Kamagasaki (Osaka), San'ya (Tokyo; see Fowler 1996) and Kotobuki (Yokohama; see Stevens 1997; Gill 2001b). Hence item 6: training for day labourers. The idea is to get men away from the uncertain lifestyle of the day labourer by imparting skills. As for item 7, early experiments

with putting homeless men in employment have often failed as a result of men inured to casual employment quitting shortly after starting a regular job. Hence the idea of paying employers to take a chance on such men for a trial period of employment.

Homeless policy as applied in major cities

We will now examine how various themes discussed above play out at ground level by taking a look at the operation of homeless support policy in the five major cities of Osaka, Nagoya, Yokohama, Kawasaki and Tokyo.⁶ The FY2003 budget statement called for increasing the number of homeless SSCs from eleven (with a combined capacity of 1,400) to sixteen (1,900); and for increasing ETSs from nine (2,500) to eleven (3,100). However, as of June 2004, there were only nine SSCs (944) and five ETSs (1,050) actually in operation (Table 10.4). These are early days, but so far bureaucratic inertia in some cities and intense NIMBY opposition from residents in all cities has kept actual provision lagging some considerable way behind the central government blueprint. The struggle to appease the citizenship has also led city governments to specify time limits for homeless facilities – three years in Osaka, five in Tokyo and Kawasaki, and ten in Nagoya. Osaka would actually have had to start *closing* shelters at the end of 2003 in order to keep that promise. In fact, when the deadline came, the city Welfare Office (*Fukushi Jimusho*) made an informal decision to keep the shelters open ‘for the time being’. According to a city official, consent was obtained from local citizens’ groups.⁷

Table 10.4 SSCs and ETSs operating and planned as of June 2004

Except for the SSC in Yokohama, all facilities are for men only.

Tokyo

<i>Location</i>	<i>Capacity</i>	<i>Status</i>
Self-reliance Support Centres (<i>Jiritsu Shien Sentā</i>)		
Taitō ward	104	Open since FY2001
Shinjuku ward	52	Open since FY2001
Toshima ward	80	Open since May 2001
Sumida ward	110	Open since March 2002
Shibuya ward	72	Open since March 2004
Emergency Temporary Shelters (<i>Kinkyū Ichiji Hogo Sentā</i>)		
Ota ward	300	Open since December 2001
Itabashi ward	100	Open since March 2003
Edogawa ward	100	Open since March 2004
Chiyoda ward	100	Scheduled to open FY2004
Arakawa ward	100	Scheduled to open FY2004

All Tokyo facilities are scheduled to close five years after opening.

continued

Table 10.4 continued

Osaka

<i>Location</i>	<i>Capacity</i>	<i>Status</i>
Self-reliance Support Centres (<i>Jiritsu Shien Sentā</i>)		
Ōyodo (Kita ward)	80	Open since October 2000
Nishinari (Nishinari ward)	100	Open since November 2000
Yodogawa (Higashi-Yodogawa ward)	100	Open since December 2000
Emergency Temporary Shelters (<i>Kasetsu Ichiji Hinanjo</i>)		
Nishinari Park	200	Opened December 2001
Osaka Castle Park	300	Opened November 2002

Another temporary shelter, in Nagai Park, opened in December 2000 and was closed in March 2003. All Osaka facilities were scheduled to close three years after opening, but when the three-year period for the SSCs expired in late 2003, the city government made an informal decision to keep them open 'for the time being'.

Nagoya

<i>Location</i>	<i>Capacity</i>	<i>Status</i>
Self-reliance Support Centre (<i>Jiritsu Shien Sentā</i>)		
Atsuta ward	92	Opened November 2002
Emergency Temporary Shelter (<i>Kinkyū Ichiji Shukuhaku Shisetsu</i>)		
Wakamiya Ōdori Park	150	Opened November 2002

Nagoya facilities are temporary structures but with no scheduled closing date. Theoretically they will last as long as the 2002 Homeless Support Law (10 years).

Yokohama

<i>Location</i>	<i>Capacity</i>	<i>Status</i>
Self-reliance Support Centre (<i>Jiritsu Shien Sentā</i>)		
Kotobuki-chō (Naka ward)	226 (206 men, 20 women)	Permanent facility opened May 2003, replacing temporary facility operational since 1993 with capacity of 204.

Emergency Temporary Shelters: None

Kawasaki

<i>Location</i>	<i>Capacity</i>	<i>Status</i>
Self-reliance Support Centre (<i>Jiritsu Shien Sentā</i>): None. One planned for FY2005		
Emergency Temporary Shelter Tsutsumine-chō (Kawasaki ward)	250	Temporary facility opened May 2004.

Administrative structures

This fault-line between housing policy and employment policy is also very much in evidence in local government: traditionally, housing and welfare have been handled by cities, but employment by prefectures. Communication does not appear to be very good. In Nagoya, for instance, Nagoya City Hall and Aichi Prefectural Hall are on opposite sides of the same road, yet a city official ruefully admitted that it was very difficult to get prefectural officials to pay much attention to what the latter tended to view as a strictly city issue.

Tokyo has a unique administrative structure: since 2000, homeless policy has been handled by the city's 'Special Ward' (*tokubetsu-ku*), sometimes called 'the 24th ward of Tokyo'. This is a kind of 'virtual ward' – it has no geographical existence, but manages facilities that are the responsibility of the wards but are too large and expensive for each ward to have one of its own. The twenty-three wards have been divided into five blocs, and each bloc is supposed to have one SSC and one ETS. Every five years both types of facility are supposed to be closed and replaced with equivalent facilities in another ward in the same bloc.

A second important feature of regional homeless administration – one shared with many other branches of welfare provision – is the apparently universal practice of farming out projects (*itaku jigyo*) to 'external organizations' (*gaikaku dantai*). These are usually Non-Profit Organizations (NPOs), funded by the city and/or prefectural government but not technically part of the government. Most of them have the status of *shakai fukushi hojin* ('social welfare juridical person'). Some have surprisingly long histories: management of the Nishinari SSC is entrusted to Osaka Jikyōkan, a sizeable welfare corporation with ninety years of history that also runs a dozen other welfare facilities. The Yokohama SSC (called *Hamakaze* – 'Yokohama Breeze') is run by an NPO called the Keiseikai, which was founded in 1918, initially to help out down-on-their-luck sailors, and which also runs a range of welfare institutions. By contrast, the Nagoya facilities are run by a brand-new NPO – the Hōryū Welfare Association – established for that particular purpose.

Arrangements that seem similar at first glance often prove to be very different on closer inspection. Thus, for example, the other two SSCs in Osaka, and both the ETSs there, are run by an NPO called the Miotsukushi Welfare Association (Miotsukushi Fukushi-kai). Many members of this NPO's staff are serving or retired members of the city government. The Nishinari ETS has a staff of fifteen, of whom four, including the director, are on secondment from the city government's Public Welfare Bureau (*Minseikyoku*), one is recently retired from the same bureau, and the other ten are temporary staff (*rinji*), hired from the general public through recruitment advertising. Hence it is really only on paper that the city government is entrusting management of the shelter to the Miotsukushi-kai. In fact there is not a single officer of that welfare corporation on the staff, which instead consists of present and former city officials and temps hired from outside the Miotsukushi-kai. The latter appears to be providing little more than a cost-saving flag of convenience.

The extensive use of NPOs has many advantages for regional governments.⁸

- 1 Their staff need not be paid as highly as government officials, nor need they be given the same job security, pension rights, and so on. Hence NPOs are a cheaper and more flexible way of providing welfare than direct government provision.
- 2 Sometimes the NPO can be jointly funded by city and prefecture, neatly hopping over the bureaucratic rift mentioned above.
- 3 If anything goes wrong, blame can generally be attached to the NPO, and the government can respond by canceling the contract and getting a new NPO to take over the project.
- 4 The NPOs often have more specialized know-how in their field than government officials, who are often moved to totally different responsibilities in personnel reshuffles before they have a chance to build up experience.
- 5 Since they are not officially part of the government, the NPOs are slightly less bound by the formal rules and informal customs that hamper much government activity.
- 6 The NPOs can in some cases be a useful source of *amakudari* and secondment postings for retired or surplus government officials.

The two-tier system

The bipartite system of Self-reliance Support Centres and Emergency Temporary Shelters seems to be a fairly recent development, although a similar pattern may be observed in other branches of welfare policy, such as treatment of single-parent families and victims of domestic violence.

Self-reliance Support Centres

'Self-reliance support' (*jiritsu shien*) has become a popular welfare buzzword in Japan in recent years. The term is included in all government policy documents on homelessness and in the title of the new homeless support law. It has a pleasantly progressive ring to it, implying that recipients are not hopeless social failures but are merely in need of a helping hand to regain their self-reliance. At the same time it creates a third conceptual category, in between the traditional ones of 'self-reliant' (with a living income) and 'dependent' (in need of livelihood protection payments), which may have ominous implications depending on how it is interpreted in practice.

The first SSCs opened in Osaka in autumn 2000. Tokyo followed suit in 2001 and Nagoya in 2002. The Yokohama shelter opened in May 2003 is officially designated an SSC today, although its predecessor had opened in 1993 before the term had been coined. The shared objective of all SSCs is to take homeless people off the street, sort out their health and hygiene problems, restore a spirit of self-respect, and help them to return to mainstream life: through employment and independent living where possible; by arranging livelihood protection payments where that is not possible.

The Nishinari SSC in Osaka is a two-storey brick building (formerly a nursing home) on the outskirts of Kamagasaki, surrounded by a high wall with three strings of barbed wire above. The only door in the wall is permanently locked and access may only be gained by requesting admission through an interphone linked to the shelter's office. The shelter's name is written in tiny characters on a small card pinned to the door.

The Nishinari Centre has eighty beds and a full-time staff of eight supplemented by two part-timers. Twice a week three employment counsellors come to the Centre from the nearby public employment exchange. There are also weekly visits from nurses and legal advisers. The former conduct examinations for a range of health problems, of which tuberculosis is the most feared and alcohol disorders the most common. The latter provide legal advice on debt rescheduling and declaration of personal bankruptcy for those who have got into financial trouble, often with *sarakin* loan sharks.

In principle users are allowed to stay for three months, extendable to a maximum of six or occasionally seven. Getting the extra months is conditional on finding regular employment: the idea is to use the three months to recover one's health, composure and appearance, attend job interviews and get a job. Then one can stay three or four more months, commuting to work from the SSC, in order to earn and save enough money to leave the shelter and move into an apartment. One culture-specific aspect of homelessness in Japan is the high cost of rejoining mainstream society: the need to pay roughly six months' worth of rent upfront means that there is usually a considerable time lag between finding employment and being able to move into an apartment. The time schedule at the Nishinari SSC reflects this fact of life.

One of the Tokyo SSCs is Taitōryō, located very close to Ueno Park, facing the famous Kan'ei-ji temple. It has 104 beds and an annual budget of 180 million yen. There was powerful NIMBY opposition to opening the Centre. Consequently it has no nameplate to reveal its function, is surrounded by fences, and outside stairs are concealed behind plastic covers. As one of the staff dryly remarked, people do not want to be reminded of gloomy matters like homelessness when attending funerals at the temple.

There are two crucial differences between this SSC and its counterparts in Osaka. First, the permitted stay is shorter: two months in principle, and a maximum of four if work is obtained (against three and six in Osaka). Residents are strongly encouraged to attend job interviews in their first three weeks at the Centre, which assists by keeping a wardrobe of interview suits and an ironing board for loan, and by taking photos to put on job application forms. The aim is to get the resident in a job within a month or so, leaving three months to build up savings.

The second crucial difference is that SSCs in Tokyo provide a considerable amount of financial support to residents who get jobs and move into apartments. On receipt of a letter confirming employment the SSC will pay 31,000 yen to buy work clothes and tools; the SSC will also pay half the initial costs of moving into an apartment (key money, deposit, realtors' fees, etc.), up to a maximum of 139,200 yen; plus 19,800 yen to buy a futon and 25,000 yen to buy household necessities.

The men also get a modest allowance of 400 yen a day while they are still in the Centre. To the best of my knowledge no other city will hand over sums of cash, large or small, to homeless people. The Taito SSC staff estimate that even with this assistance, the project of rejoining mainstream society requires the man himself to save at least 300–350,000 yen.

Officials spoken with in Osaka were deeply sceptical of the Tokyo approach. Homeless men were generally irresponsible with money, and handing them cash was only likely to cause more trouble – like giving booze to an alcoholic. The men would be better off with the extra time in the SSC, which was the advantage offered by the Osaka system in lieu of the Tokyo cash handouts. Tokyo officials admitted that there had been quite a few cases where the cash handouts had been abused, but pointed out that they maintain a strict one-chance-only policy: people who squander the goodies from the SSC are not allowed to use the SSC a second time. The restriction is resented: on 9 April 2003, a coalition of homeless support activists submitted a petition to the Tokyo authorities whose demands included permission for repeat visits to SSCs.

The newly opened SSC at Atsuta in Nagoya is based closely on the Osaka approach; the Yokohama SSC, named *Hamakaze*, resembles the Osaka model in having a six-month maximum stay and not providing financial support, but should properly be regarded as a hybrid institution, including some elements of the ETS (see below). It is located in the middle of the Kotobuki yoseba, and there is a pragmatic recognition that many homeless men are career day labourers who are unlikely to settle down in permanent employment. Many men cycle between the SSC and the street at intervals of about one month – the maximum stay if one does not find employment – and this is tolerated. If a man does succeed in getting a job, he is transferred to a different room on the top floor of the seven-storey building and his stay is extended to six months.

Nearly all homeless shelters in Japan are male-only institutions, reflecting the overwhelmingly male homeless population. However, *Hakamaze* does have twenty places for women. Elsewhere, women tend to be categorized outside the homeless care system – as single parents if they have children, or as victims of domestic violence. Also women tend to be far more successful than men at applying for livelihood protection: a homeless woman is viewed as considerably more shocking than a homeless man, and so patriarchal attitudes tend to work in women's favour in this particular instance.

Emergency temporary shelters

The emergence of the ETS as a bureaucratic category stemmed from the success of the first of its kind, opened in Nagai Park, Osaka in December 2000 and closed in March 2003. In what will be called the 'Osaka Model', the SSCs are classified under 'Self-reliance Support Centre Enterprises' (*Jiritsu Shien Sentā Jigyō*), and the ETSs under 'Park Normalization Policy' (*Kōen Tekiseika Taisaku*). This two-sided policy reflects the contrasting concerns of homeless people and non-homeless park-users respectively.

Over the last decade, large shanty-towns have developed in major metropolitan parks around Japan. The one in Nagai Park had 458 assorted shacks and tents in it when the ETS opened at the end of 2000, and by August 2002 only eight tents and shacks were left.⁹ These impressive figures encouraged the Osaka authorities to open the Nishinari and Osaka Castle Park ETSs, and Nagoya followed suit.

However, a look at the official data for the Nagai Park shelter reveals some underlying problems. In the twenty months from December 2000 to August 2002, 206 men entered the shelter, of whom 184 exited, leaving twenty-two still in residence at that time. Clearly then, not all the 450 tents and shacks were vacated because of the shelter. Out of the 184 who left the shelter, some 45 per cent went into livelihood protection institutions, 20 per cent went to an SSC, and 10 per cent into hospital. Only 7 per cent exited to jobs, while 18 per cent voluntarily discharged themselves (*jishu taisho*), probably to return to homelessness. In short, three-quarters left the shelter only to enter some other welfare institution. Ironically, people who had been living self-reliantly – often in quite well-constructed shacks, some with petrol-driven electricity generators, often with incomes from recycling tin cans or magazines – emerged from the shelter to state-dependent lifestyles in various welfare institutions.¹⁰

The figures for the Nishinari Park shelter are rather different. By the end of October 2002, after nine months of operation, 142 tents and shacks were still standing in the park out of the 251 counted in December 2001, and the shelter was more than half empty, with just seventy-five men in residence. Just eighteen men had used and then left the shelter in those nine months, and half of them were voluntary discharges. By the end of April 2004, the city government still counted ninety-six improvised dwellings in Nishinari Park.¹¹

This is hardly surprising if one looks at the situation in Nishinari Park. The makeshift dwellings of the homeless people are shabby but sometimes quite comfortable-looking. Many of the men there have pet cats or dogs, and have acquired quite a large collection of personal possessions over the years. Moving into the shelter means abandoning communal park life and a lot of the possessions and animals. In exchange you get 2 *jō* (6.6 square metres) of personal space in a bunk bed, which you are supposed to vacate after six months.¹² Moreover, unlike the SSC where you get three meals a day, at the shelter you get just the rice for the evening meal – you must supply your own accompanying dishes, and all the food for breakfast and lunch. This aspect of shelter life, particularly resented by residents, is supposed to point up the strictly temporary nature of the accommodation. Nor are there any legal or employment counsellors at the shelter.

On the other hand, the shelter is extremely clean and hygienic; showers and laundry are free; there are plenty of televisions; and there is no ban on drinking. This last, along with the non-enforcement of the six-month limit, is on the initiative of the director, who has also thought up several modest income-generating schemes for residents. Even so, the question of what happens after you leave the shelter remains without a convincing answer. The director tends not to refer them to the Nishinari SSC because he feels that their background and personality would make it difficult for them to fit in with the more controlled regime there. He points out

that the shelter's proximity to Kamagasaki, the great Osaka yoseba, means that a lot of hardy men, used to periods of unemployment and homelessness, are sleeping in the park.

The Nagoya ETS is closely modelled on the Osaka pattern, being located inside a major city park, and with a very similar regime, including the provision of just rice for the evening meal. In Tokyo, by contrast, the ETSs are formally portrayed as feeder institutions for the SSCs. They are not located in parks; they supply three meals a day; and conduct regular assessments of the physical and mental condition of inmates, before deciding whether to pass them on to an SSC, put them on livelihood protection, or send them to hospital. The stay is limited to one month in principle and two months at most. Only three of the five planned were actually open at the time of writing, however, in Ōta, Itabashi and Edogawa wards. Of these the one in Ōta ward (called Ōta-ryō, or Ōta Lodge) is by some way the biggest homeless shelter in Japan, with a capacity of 300. It has an annual budget of 480 million yen, and is run by a welfare corporation called the Yūrin Kyōkai. Before the launch of the homeless support policy, it had been used for twenty-five years as a temporary shelter for San'ya day labourers during the New Year holidays (when conventional welfare facilities are closed). It is located on a large piece of otherwise unused land in a warehouse district far from any residence, factors making this a natural site for the shelter. Whether it will really be relocated to affluent Setagaya ward in five years as planned under Tokyo's bloc-rotation system is rather doubtful.

Staff at Ōtaryō say that in practice roughly 50 per cent of residents exit to SSCs, 25 per cent to livelihood protection, and 25 per cent fail to make progress and go back to the streets.

Another variation in ETS management emerged in May 2004, when the city of Kawasaki finally opened its *Wan Naito Sherutā* (One Night Shelter), after a lengthy battle against NIMBY-minded citizens. This shelter uses a registration system; men who register can apply every night for permission to use the centre, being admitted at 6 p.m. and expelled at 6 a.m. This seems to be the first case of an American-style night shelter in Japan. A month after opening, the shelter had 140 registered users, of whom roughly half were sleeping there on the average night.¹³

Entrance and exit strategies

Getting In

One of the key differences between ETSs and SSCs is in admission policy. In the park-based ETSs of Osaka and Nagoya, anyone showing a willingness to abandon his shack or tent can be admitted to the ETS, and indeed easy admission is part of the park clearance strategy. By contrast, people cannot enter an SSC without a referral from the local welfare office (*fukushi jimusho*). Usually this is obtained by the homeless person visiting a welfare office and persuading a caseworker that he would be a suitable candidate for an SSC. In addition some referrals are made by outreach workers who tour homeless districts looking for suitable people.

The situation in Tokyo is rather different. In theory at least, ETSs are supposed to lead to SSCs, and SSCs to a job or livelihood protection. Hence getting into the system carries rather more significance – especially in view of the tempting cash benefits available to those who can last the course. The downside of this is that wards are reluctant to refer people to the SSCs, since they know from experience that few of them will get a job and many will end up on livelihood protection – part of the costs of which must be borne by the referring ward. Hence Tokyo SSCs are often operating well below capacity, and those who do get referred tend to be ‘elite homeless’ with a better than average chance of getting employed. Even the ETSs operate a referral system, reflecting their feeder role for the SSCs and their geographical distance from homeless districts.

Getting out

As mentioned above, the Osaka and Nagoya ETSs have no clear exit strategy, which is a major disincentive to abandoning an ad hoc residence in a park to enter one. In Tokyo the ETS is supposed to lead to the SSC, then – perhaps via a third institution, the ‘group home’, a shared group residence in which lifestyle skills and employment training are provided – to independent living and a steady job. A simplified version of the Tokyo government’s flow diagram is shown in Figure 10.1; unfortunately, at the time of writing the ‘group homes’ still do not physically exist¹⁴ and the final transition to independent living is proving hard to make. The missing arrow – from the SSC to livelihood protection – in fact accounts for many real cases.

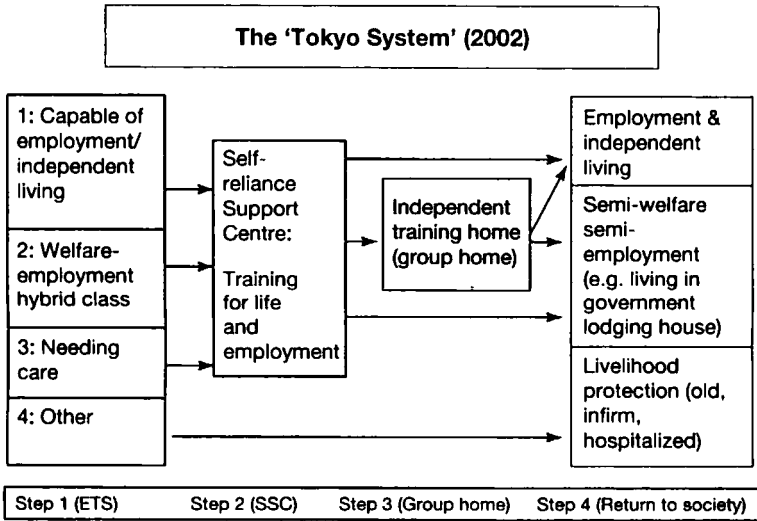


Figure 10.1 The ‘Tokyo System’ of homeless governance.

Note: Simplified translation of Tokyo Metropolitan Government Welfare Dept. press release at http://www.fukushi.metro.tokyo.jp/press_reles/2002/pr0221.htm, accessed 24 June 2004.

Formidable barriers face formerly homeless people seeking employment. With unemployment around 5.5 per cent there are plenty of non-homeless people ahead of them in the queue. Social prejudice is strong, and the question of how honestly to answer questions on application forms about 'current place of residence' is a tricky one since admitting to living in a shelter will often ruin one's chances of being taken on. Inevitably the kinds of job that ex-homeless people do acquire tend to be tough and badly paid, making it very hard to stick at it, especially if one has been away from regular employment for many years, as with many of the day labourers in the Yoseba districts. Men used to earning their living by the day are often habitually or even ideologically disinclined to work regularly or save money, yet the 'return to mainstream society' requires them to do just that. SSCs attempt to overcome these problems through employment and lifestyle counselling, but seldom with much success.

For example, in its first twenty-one months of operation (to the end of August 2002) the Nishinari SSC 'graduated' 356 men (it is a male-only institution). Of those 356, 140 (about 40 per cent) got jobs, fourteen went into hospital, thirty-four entered other institutions (mostly livelihood protection hostels), and 168 were listed as 'other', which SSC staff said generally meant they had failed to get work and gone back to the street. Unfortunately, as SSC staff themselves admit, the true figure for successful employment is nowhere near the 40 per cent officially claimed. Men are listed as entering employment on their own say-so, and many who really do get work are known to quit very quickly. The one method used to confirm continued employment is the sending of a questionnaire a few months after the man has departed. Further inquiries are ruled out on privacy grounds. Staff tentatively stated that no more than 30 per cent of the cards came back. Similar admissions were heard of gross discrepancies between statistics and reality at SSCs in Tokyo and Yokohama.

Role of the private sector

With a total capacity of around 2,500, the system is clearly inadequate as it stands – an inadequacy that represents a business opportunity for private enterprise. The biggest and most notorious 'homeless business' is SSS (Social Security Service), which is now housing far more formerly homeless people in the Tokyo area than the public system.

The SSS approach is very simple. The firm – officially a non-profit organization under the 1998 NPO Law – contracts with a homeless person to supply an apartment or at least a bed in some shared accommodation, along with meals and other daily necessities. Once the homeless person has moved in, SSS helps him to apply for livelihood protection. Now that he has a *bona fide* permanent address, the homeless person tends to succeed. Once the payments start coming, SSS charges the person a monthly sum that amounts to almost the entire livelihood protection payment, to cover rent, meals, utilities, and so on. The man is left with a token amount of pocket money. SSS is based in Tokyo, where it is said to have over 100 hostels and apartment buildings, housing some 3,000 people, and is moving into other areas with varying degrees of success.

SSS and its activities provoke very mixed reactions from activists and social workers. On the one hand, they strongly suspect that this organization that enjoys NPO status is in fact making profits out of the welfare payments of people who are often poor and weak. On the other hand, there is no denying that without SSS there would be several thousand more homeless people on the streets of Tokyo. Essentially, SSS and similar outfits are forcing city governments to meet their constitutional obligation to provide livelihood protection payments to those who cannot support themselves – an obligation that the emerging public shelter system sometimes seems designed to evade.

Hence some activists are trying a new approach to housing homeless people that may briefly be described as ‘SSS minus the exploitation’. An early pioneering example is the Tabidachi no Ie (Journey’s Start House), a communal dwelling at Chigasaki, Kanagawa prefecture, run by a Christian NPO that has rented a disused company dormitory to house forty formerly homeless people.¹⁵ It assists in making livelihood protection claims, and leaves them a much larger proportion of the monthly payment after deducting rent and other expenses. It opened in 2002 and has had a successful first two years. A similar enterprise in Ichikawa, Chiba prefecture, is also up and running. A hospice recently opened in San’ya using the same principle (*Mainichi Shinbun*, 3 June 2003). In the long run, projects like this may prove very significant for homeless people in Japan.

Conclusion: everyone’s problem, no-one’s problem

What does the case of homelessness policy tell us about governance in Japan? First of all it sheds light on relations between central and local government. In contrast to the highly centralized, top-down style of governance described in many studies, this case shows a negligent central government, keen to leave the issue to the regions but reluctantly drawn into the fray as the issue escalates. Even now, the national policy largely boils down to providing matching funds for local initiatives – which vary considerably across the country.

Second, the administrative structures implementing homeless policy appear not as a smoothly contoured chain of command but as a threadbare patchwork of systems, with responsibility contested, divided and diffused at every level – between ministries, between bureaux, between prefectures, cities and wards, and between welfare officials and park/public space officials at every level. The net result is to make it radically unclear who is in charge. Here Japan may have something to learn from the British experience, where the Blair government’s 1999 appointment of Louise Casey as ‘homeless tsar’ appears to have been quite effective in reducing homelessness (Casey’s Rough Sleepers’ Unit claimed on 3 December 2001 to have reduced the number of people sleeping to about 550 from 1,850 in 1998). At any rate in Britain it has been possible to answer the question ‘who is in charge?’ with a single person’s name, whereas in Japan the same question can only be answered by a lengthy academic paper like this one. Prime Minister Koizumi Junichirō has shown some interest in the concept of policy tsars in other fields, and perhaps something similar would be effective here.

Third, any analysis of governance in action must take account not only of the big administrative structures but also of the individual personnel who work within those structures and the processes by which they are appointed, rotated and promoted. My impression is that the officers who deal directly with homeless people, such as the managers of shelters, are often seasoned veterans with a good understanding of the issue. By contrast, those based higher up the chain of command, in city halls and the MHLW, tend to be relatively young and inexperienced men who will be switched to some other appointment before they can acquire much experience dealing with the issue. Indeed, one official at the MHLW told me that his introduction to homeless policy had taken the form of a couple of hours' conversation with his predecessor.

Japan is in urgent need of bold thinking that can rapidly translate into action. The present system of governance holds out little prospect of such a thing happening. The ultimate answer to the question in this chapter's title is that right now, while homelessness may well be 'everybody's problem' in a philosophical sense, it is not clearly any particular person or organization's problem in the sense of administrative responsibility. Ironically, cities that make an effort to combat homelessness attract more homeless people, while those that shirk their responsibilities are rewarded with smaller homeless populations as those at threat move away to cities with better provision.¹⁶ Clearly this is one social problem that needs to be tackled at the national level.

Notes

- 1 An earlier version of this Occupation-era law was passed in 1946. The 1946 version excluded applicants deemed able but not willing to work, those who had people (e.g. spouse, parents) responsible for their welfare, etc. These exclusions were removed from the 1950 version.
- 2 For example, a May 2004 search of the Amazon Japan home page found sixty-five books with the word *hōmuresu* in the title, of which thirty-six had been published in the three years from April 2001 to April 2004. Documentaries about homeless people have become a mainstay of early evening TV.
- 3 An unofficial English translation of the law is available on-line at: http://member.nifty.ne.jp/nojuku/english/eng_idx.html, accessed 24 June 2004.
- 4 This was duly carried out in Jan/Feb 2003, generating the figure of 25,296 mentioned earlier.
- 5 Another branch of the central bureaucracy is also concerned with homeless people in a different way: the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport (*Kokudō Kōsūshō*), which is in charge of policy on national parks and public spaces. For the MLIT the *ad hoc* dwellings of homeless people represent an obstacle to running parks for the general public.
- 6 The field-trips were made to Osaka and Nagoya in October 2002, Tokyo in November 2002, and several in Yokohama up to June 2004. A total of five shelters have been visited and numerous local and national officials interviewed.
- 7 Telephone interview with Yamada Yoshiro, Homeless Independence Support section, Osaka City Welfare Department, 10 June 2004.
- 8 See Nakamura (2002) for a perceptive account of the tactical game between NPOs and government in another welfare field – provision of services to deaf people.
- 9 By the end of April 2004, the number of improvised dwellings had crept back up to 20.

- 10 Note, too, that Nagai Park had one exceptional factor at play – the use of the stadium located in the park as the venue for several matches during the 2002 World Cup. Concern to avoid football fans from around the world seeing the Nagai Park shanty town may well have encouraged the local authorities to accept applications for livelihood protection from the Nagai ETS.
- 11 Available on-line at: http://www.city.osaka.jp/kenkoufukushi/sonota/sonota_20.html, accessed 24 June 2004.
- 12 In practice the six-month rule is not enforced, in view of the low level of demand for places in the shelter, but even so the prospect of the shelter being closed after three years means that life there is still correctly viewed as temporary.
- 13 Telephone interview with Inoue Hideomi of the Kawasaki City Regional Welfare Bureau, 10 June 2004.
- 14 Two group homes, each with twenty places, are planned. Formally they are called 'self-reliance training homes' (*jiritsu kunren hōmu*).
- 15 The facility opened in November 2001. Available on-line at <http://www.cam.hi-ho.ne.jp/noguchi/tabi.html>, accessed 24 June 2004.
- 16 The situation in the Kansai is a good case in point. Kyoto's relatively small homeless population partly reflects the fact that Kyoto provides very poor services for homeless people, who therefore tend to drift to Osaka with its gradually expanding system of shelters, employment programmes, etc.

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