

Homelessness: a Slowly Dawning Recognition

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Everyone agrees that homelessness is a problem in Japan today. Nevertheless, there is no consensus on such fundamental issues as how many people are homeless, whether or to what degree their numbers are rising, or even what constitutes homelessness. There is a similar lack of consensus as to the processes by which people become homeless and how one might go about addressing the problem. This is one area of welfare policy that is still in its infancy.

Until quite recently, there was no official central government policy on homelessness. In theory, no-one could become homeless and destitute in Japan because every citizen was either (1) a person capable of self-support or a dependent of such a person; or (2) not capable of self-support, in which case one was eligible for social welfare payments (*seikatsu hogo*, sometimes literally translated as 'livelihood protection'), under article 25 of the Constitution, which guarantees a 'minimum standard of civilized living for every citizen.' In fact this logic has never really worked, because most local authorities refuse many welfare applications. There are two principle reasons for rejecting welfare applications: (a) the applicant has no fixed address; (b) the applicant cannot demonstrate that they are too old, ill or injured to work. These conditions have been established by bureaucratic fiat, not law. At the same time, some people (whose numbers cannot even be guessed at) decline to apply for welfare out of pride, ignorance, fear of the bureaucracy, and so on.

People caught in this poverty trap - unable to support themselves but outside the welfare system - constitute most of today's homeless population. They survive by foraging for scraps, and on handouts from charities or local authorities. The latter is known as 'extra-legal assistance' (*hōgai engo*), meaning that local governments have no legal obligation to provide it. Unlike livelihood protection, which is mainly funded by central government, extra-legal assistance is entirely funded by local authorities. There has been wide variation in how each city has dealt with the problem and policy-making has been at best patchy and ad hoc. Today the central government is only just beginning to get started on a nationwide response to homelessness.

Counting heads

One of the first steps to formulating a homeless policy is to get a grasp of the numbers involved. In October 1999, the Ministry of Health and Welfare released the first ever national survey of homelessness. It generated a headline figure of 20,451 homeless people across Japan, of whom 17,174 were in the five major cities of Tokyo, Yokohama, Kawasaki, Nagoya and Osaka. Eight other large cities accounted for 1,452 people, 23 prefectural



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capitals for a further 706, and 74 smaller towns for a total of 1,119. These figures should be viewed as the absolute minimum when estimating Japan's homeless population. This was not a comprehensive, nationwide survey. Surveys were carried out by different groups - usually NPOs commissioned by local authorities - using different methods and surveying at different times of year. The marked concentration in the five major cities partly reflects a tendency for homeless people to gather in urban centers, where there may be safety in numbers and better access to services. But it also reflects the fact that homeless people in these places are simply easier to count. The question of how many homeless people there may be living in rural or suburban areas, alone or in small groups, is unfathomable.

The figures, moreover, contained some clear anomalies; for example, the fact that Sapporo was the only major city to count its homeless during the winter months when it is well known to have a much bigger homeless population in the summer. Even so, a general increase between 1998 and 1999 suggests that the problem may well be worsening across the nation. Apparently no government surveys were made in 2000, incredibly enough, but I understand from interviews with officials at the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW), that a new nationwide survey is planned for FY2001.

Budgeting for homelessness

In FY2000, an item for anti-homelessness measures was included in the national budget for the first time. The amount was modest: 972 million yen, rising to 1,080 million yen in the FY2001 budget. The FY2001 allocation covers two main items: 'Strengthening projects for the support of homeless people's independence' (790 million yen) and 'establishing temporary shelters' (220 million yen). The former consists mainly of the costs of running four existing shelters and related medical, nutrition and employment services. The latter principally covers construction costs for two new shelters, one each in Tokyo and Osaka. When completed, there will be six government-run homeless shelters in Japan: three in Osaka (in Oyodo, Yodogawa and Nishinari wards; total capacity 280 people), two in Tokyo (in Shinjuku and Taito wards; 200); and one in Yokohama (Naka ward; 204).

The budget is operated by the MHLW, which was formed out of a merger between the Ministry of Labour and the Ministry of Health and Welfare in the central government reorganization of January 2001. The old ministerial divide still lingers on in the division of labor within the MHLW: the building and operating of shelters is handled by a staff of seven officials at the Regional Welfare Section of the Social Security Bureau (*Shakai Engo-kyoku Chi'iki Fukushi-ka*; ex-MHW), while employment programs for homeless people are operated by a staff of three at the Planning Section of the Elderly and Handicapped Persons Employment Countermeasures Department of



the Employment Stability Bureau (*Shokugyô Antei-kyoku Kôrei/Shôgaisha Koyô Taisaku-bu Kikaku-ka*; ex-MOL).

The latter has a budget of 89 million yen this year, up from 80 million yen last year, representing just under 10% of the total homeless budget. This modest funding pays the salaries of 17 employment counselors, who are based at government employment exchanges in big cities, from which they visit homeless shelters and attempt to find steady employment for those deemed capable of it. This scheme is still in its infancy, but MHLW statistics state that in the first year of operation - the year to April 2001, and bear in mind that the program did not get properly started until well into the year - these counselors dealt with 682 job-seeking homeless people, and succeeded in placing 388 of them in permanent employment and eight more in temporary employment. Most of the jobs are in unskilled occupations such as cleaning work and construction site security. The figures look good, although officials admit that follow-up studies will be needed to see how long these jobs last.

Turning now to the much larger operation of the Regional Welfare Section, as the name suggests this is a part of the ministry that chiefly supports regional initiatives. On November 13, 2000, the head of the Social Welfare Bureau sent out a directive (Social Welfare Directive 2500) to prefectural governors and mayors of major cities, encouraging them to build homeless shelters in those areas where there are 'substantial numbers' of homeless people - a number later defined as 200 or more. The MHLW provides subsidies for the construction and maintenance of these shelters designed to cover 50% of the costs. This approach effectively gives financial rewards to cities and prefectures that take positive steps to deal with homelessness.

The directive also specifies rules for the design and running of shelters, of which I will briefly summarise the most important:

1. No charge for use.
2. Clients can use the shelter for up to six months, or longer in exceptional circumstances. Repeat visits are not prohibited.
3. Clients are to get food, regular baths, enough money to buy underwear and other necessities; and should be given regular medical check-ups and medical treatment where necessary.
4. The will to work is to be nurtured in clients and job introductions supplied where possible.

One of the most important points is the question of who exactly gets to use the centers. The directive defines the target population as 'those among the homeless who have the will to work (*shûrô iyoku*) or the ability to work (*kadô*)



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nôryoku). In this the ministry is following a long tradition, by no means unique to Japan, of seeking to differentiate between the worthy and unworthy poor. An internal document, drafted by the old MHW in May 1999 during the planning stage of the new homeless policy and subsequently modified, refines the concept somewhat, dividing the homeless into three categories:

Type 1 : 'People who have the will to work but no job.' Through counseling, temporary shelter and healthcare etc., they are to be found jobs and their independence thereby restored.

Type 2 : 'People who require medical or institutional support.' These people too will have their independence restored, but through welfare systems, including hospitals, old people's homes, and livelihood protection payments etc., rather than employment.

Type 3 : 'People who refuse to take part in society.' These people are to be given 'departure guidance' by the operators of institutions, which appears to mean putting them back on the street, where they are to be given counseling by patrolling welfare caseworkers, local public bodies and the police, who will also administer 'crime prevention guidance.' This is called 'promoting a social response.'

Clearly, the effectiveness of the new policy will depend largely on what proportion of homeless people is deemed to fall into each of those types, and whether local officials will be able to draw the line between differentiation and discrimination in applying the policy.

For further information

This article was based mainly on interviews with MHLW officials TANAKA Daisaku and SATO Michio. For more on day labourers and homeless, see my book, *Men of Uncertainty* (New York: SUNY Press, 2001). Additional information on homelessness policy in Japanese may be found at these URLs:

http://www1.mhlw.go.jp/houdou/1203/h0308-1_16.html

(outline of government policy on homelessness, with brief international comparisons)

http://www1.mhlw.go.jp/houdou/1112/h1217-1_16.html (national survey data).

The MHLW homepage can be searched at

<http://www1.mhlw.go.jp/search/topj.html>.