

Homeless People and Civil Society in Urban Japan

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Abstract

In Japan, governmental actions for homeless people have been delayed in the late 90's, not only compared with European countries and the United States but also South Korea where the homeless problem has also worsened. Nonetheless, support activity in civil associations does not also show extension. Two implications are detected in these phenomena. First, government and citizens understand an occurrence of a homeless problem as that of an 'individual'. Second, they grasp them as a 'heterogeneous people in civil society' or socially excluded'. In this research, based on comprehensive interviews done by Osaka city government in the summer of 1999, the author clarifies the actual condition of homeless people, and tries to highlight the contained logic of 'social exclusion' that is rooted in Japanese urban society.

Introduction

First, this report will give a simple description of the actual situation of the street homeless (homeless people living on the street, in the park and on the riverbank) in Japan, and measures being taken by the Japanese government and Osaka City. The exclusion of the homeless from social security policy will be clear. Second, based on the results of a research on the consciousness of the citizens of Osaka city, it will clearly show how the citizens discriminate against the homeless. A strong feeling of "exclusion" will be seen here. What are the factors behind this situation? Clarifying this is the central focus of this report.

Finally, this report will examine whether the new policies being put forth by Osaka city are sufficient to solve the homeless problem. Also, it will show how assistance activities at the citizen level are breaking new ground.

1. Increasing Numbers of the Homeless and Government Measures

Since 1996 - 97, the blue tents lived in by the street homeless have become very noticeable in the parks and on the riverbanks of Osaka and Tokyo. Also, the homeless spending their nights on cardboard in major railway and subway stations are to be seen everywhere. For example, as shown in Table 1, the number of homeless people living in tents in the parks of Osaka has increased by 6.5 times during these four years. This situation is not limited to Osaka, but has spread to surrounding cities and towns. As shown in Table 2, according to a government report, in 1999 there were 16,000 homeless people nationwide, with most of them, 8,660 in Osaka. Now, it is estimated that there are 20,000 nationwide, with 10,000 in Osaka, and the tendency to increase is continuing.

The main cause of this increase in homelessness is job loss that the economic recession brought about, and job loss by day laborers in the construction industry has been very great.

However, insufficiencies of the social security system in Japan have also pushed them into homelessness.

In Japan, after the provision of the employment insurance has been exhausted, there is no welfare public assistance such as unemployment assistance. After savings have been used up, the only thing that can be done is to receive the welfare public assistance (livelihood protection). However, this protection is not sufficiently applied to the homeless. In Japan's social security system, this can be obtained for living in a residential home. But the local government in charge of carrying out this system proposes the condition. "In order to receive the livelihood protection, one must own a home." This condition effectively denies the livelihood protection to the homeless. Protection can be obtained in social welfare facilities, but, even if one has lived on the streets for a long time, he cannot obtain it unless his health has noticeably deteriorated.

Since the right of the homeless to live in a home is not recognized in Japan's social security system, the administrative organ neglects the homeless. In this situation, the homeless living on streets, in parks and on riverbanks continues to increase.

According to the results of a survey we carried out late at night in Osaka city in August, 1998, there were 2,253 persons living in tents in parks and on riverbanks (2,152 in parks alone), 607 sleeping on cardboard or cushions, 4,358 with only a sheet or blanket, 874 with nothing at all, and 568 moving around, for a total of 8,660.

Then, what are the causes of this situation in the cities of Japan? And, especially, how do the citizens of these cities view the homeless? I would like to examine these points below.

2. View of the Citizens - Exclusion and Compassion –

1) From the survey on the consciousness of the citizens of Osaka City

I will here introduce results of survey carried out in October 1998 by Prof. Mizuuchi, Prof. Nakayama, other professors and myself on the consciousness of the citizens of Osaka regarding the street homeless. These results are shown in Table 3. Since we do not have the results of similar research in foreign cities for comparison, they are rather difficult to evaluate, but it seems that the following can be said.

Impressions of the appearance of the homeless were "dirty" and "unhealthy". Their attitude to life was considered to be "lazy", "without ambition" and "loners". A surprisingly large number of the citizens expressed "fear" of the homeless. Favorable evaluations, such as "honest" and "making efforts" were very few.

To the question in the survey, "Do you think it would cause problems if homeless people lived in your neighborhood?", 49% answered "yes". Concretely, they felt that the homeless would be nuisance and cause damage, making it difficult to keep the streets clean and to use public spaces, such as parks.

Collating these citizens' opinions, we find they can be placed in three categories: <dirty - unpleasant> <unstable - fearful> <nuisance - damage>, and their strong minus images were: <lazy - no ambition>.

2) Discrimination by Citizens - from a Report-

Next, I will introduce a report on the homeless written by one of my students. I think that this student has been very straightforward in writing of her feelings of discrimination toward the homeless, and which most people feel without acknowledging it.

Many homeless people can be seen in Kyoto in the underground passage between *Shijo-Kawaramachi* and *Karasuma*. There are a number of supporting pillars in the center of this passage, and many homeless people have made their "rooms" of cardboard in the spaces

between the pillars. Others merely lean against the wall, and some of them spread cardboard on the exit stairway. Honestly speaking, when I walk through there I don't know which way to look. Not only that, I must also be careful not to step in their "personal space", not to look directly at them, and to maintain an attitude of indifference. They are sleeping, reading newspapers, or eating meals.

I feel sure that, on their part, they do not gaze at passers-by with interest, and certainly don't have any intention of attacking anyone or preventing their passage. However, they seem "different" to me, and I always thought that it would not be a desirable "happening" if they looked up from the low places where they are sitting or lying and exchanged glances with me, or spoke to me.

Then suddenly one day they weren't there any more. Between the pillars pieces of art had been placed to interest passers. The "rooms" against the walls and on the stairways had disappeared. I was surprised, and then relieved. Then I realized that in my heart I had been "excluding" them.

Living in cities, the citizens and the homeless are sometimes in close proximity. However, they have no real contact, and from their viewpoints the other side is only part of the "scene", so "peace" is maintained. But most citizens continue to look upon the homeless as "different" or in need of "exclusion".

Most of the homeless feel that they must bear the public eyes to their private lives, and since they cannot take pride in their lifestyle, many blame themselves and feel tormented. Also, many of them, realizing that other citizens want them excluded and think they are "reaping what they have sown", become resigned to discrimination, or else lose interest in attempting to improve their lot. Most of them do not consider the citizens their enemy, nor do they beg from them. This feeling of "not wishing to appeal to the public for help" might be said to be a special characteristic of the homeless in Japan. But this doesn't mean that there is no effort on the part of the homeless to improve their lot.

For these reasons, on the surface it seems that Japan has peaceful, orderly urban societies. However, this is not to say that Japanese society is a "good society". Rather, has this situation not resulted in a society of people who, seeing others among them living in misery, can be indifferent to it and do not (perhaps cannot) recognize it as "a problem for our society". Not only are the homeless excluded from the social rights of home life and the guarantee of employment, they must live in enforced exclusion. Within Osaka city alone, about 200 homeless persons die on the street every year. Either the citizens or government agencies, however, do not recognize this, as an important problem.

Does not this neglect of the homeless in city spaces and underground passages force them in ever-deeper exclusion?

The student who wrote the report on the homeless, seeing that they had been forcibly removed from the underground passage, only felt relief that the "different" people were no longer there, and could walk along the passage without worry, so it was no longer necessary to think about the homeless, or exclusion. In other words, although the student at first had some sense of "a social problem", once the homeless disappeared, there was only relief.

3. The Roots of "Exclusion"

Behind the problem of increasing homelessness in Japan are increasing job loss due to the economic recession, the loosening of family relationships, and the increasing tendency to remain unmarried. Also, since the end of World War II the social security policy of Japan has been based on the family unit, meaning that single homeless persons are neglected. Therefore, the

causes of increasing homelessness are mainly the economic and social system. However, these facts have not been generally spread to the public. As a result, the homeless are judged by their appearance, and the reasons are sought within the homeless persons themselves.

However, in an August 1999 survey, 672 homeless persons were interviewed to determine their actual living conditions, and Table 4 introduces that 80% were able to find enough work to bring in a little income. To obtain living resources, they worked at night or early in the morning gathering empty cans, still useable discarded items, cardboard, etc., and for the amount of work they did were able to receive only a small income, averaging only 1,000 yen per day. Living in such rigorous conditions, they made continual efforts.

84% of these homeless people desired to get higher paying employment. However, even if the homeless have the strength and ability to work, not having a permanent address (or a home) is a wall making it extremely difficult to find employment.

However, when citizens usually see them in the daytime on the streets, in parks or other public areas, spending time purposelessly, or sleeping, they think the homeless are “lazy” or “have no will to work seriously”. But one reason they sleep in the daytime is that at night there is greater danger of being attacked, and it is safer to sleep in the daytime. In fact, in the *Naniwa* and *Chuo* districts of Osaka 42 attacks on homeless persons were recorded in the five months from March to July (“*Yomiuri Newspaper*”, 4 August, 2000).

Also, their unkempt clothing and uncared-for bodies make them seem unclean and unsanitary.

As a result of this, most citizens look upon the homeless as <unclean - unpleasant>, <unstable - fearful>, <nuisance - dangerous> and <lazy - without ambition>, and try to exclude them. For these reasons, the citizens do not think of offering them assistance, and in extreme cases they even petition government authorities to adopt a policy of exclusion rather than of assistance.

In a public opinion survey taken in October 1998, about 2/3 of the public agreed that temporary shelters should be built for the homeless, but most did not want such facilities to be built in their own neighborhoods.

4. Countermeasures by the National Government and Osaka City

To solve the problem of homelessness it should be necessary to provide living quarters and guarantee employment opportunities. Those who have lost the ability to work should be given welfare public assistance and placed in social welfare facilities.

The Japanese government, together with the five main local governments, held a “Conference Regarding the Homeless Problem” in February 1999, and produced a report, “Urgent Measures for the Homeless Problem” in May. In this report, they proposed the establishment of Independence Assistance Centers, and carrying out health examinations, establishment of identity, livelihood consultations and employment introductions, in an attempt to assist people to become independent through employment. Also, they proposed that welfare facilities and nursing homes for the elderly would be enlarged in need of them. Plans are also made to secure housing for the homeless, so that they no longer need to live on streets, in public parks, or other public areas.

However, this report does not touch on the provision of employment opportunities, nor was a system established to give livelihood protection to the homeless. In this sense, the measures are insufficient.

On the other hand, though it is sought to establish Independence Assistance Centers, but the scale is not sufficient. In the case of Osaka city, it is planned to build Independence Assistance Centers in three locations this September. However, their personnel capacity is only

280 persons. Besides this, construction of temporary shelters is also planned. At present, 25,000 people have signed a proposal presented to the Nagai Park urging the removal of tents, and construction of rooming houses with a capacity of 480 persons is now being planned. However, each building will house 32 persons sleeping on double-deck beds and living together, and it is said that only one meal a day, and that of dry bread, will be served.

Since there are about 420 homeless living in Nagai Park, they can all be housed, but they will be living with only a bed, and privacy cannot be assured. Though they have been living frugally in tents for many years, not a few of them have household furniture. It is not known what will be done with such furniture. They have been living on about 1,000 yen per day gathering empty cans and such, and it doesn't seem as if these plans are going to be an improvement for them. It is said that plans are to place them in the Independence Assistance Center in the future, but it is not known when that will be. So there are no clear future prospects for the homeless, and from the standpoint of human rights, can it be permitted to chase them out of their narrow dwelling area?

Several lawsuits are in the courts for application of welfare public assistance (=livelihood protection) to housing, and those for whom this is being applied are gradually increasing. However, there are still many problems regarding the policies of Osaka city. Even so, compared to other cities, Osaka city has carried out more projects. Nagoya city, for example, is doing nothing at all.

Although the administration has begun several new strategies, still there is strong argument for exclusion.

5. Activities of Citizens for Solidarity

What is the level of activities by citizens? In the *Kamagasaki* district, with many day laborers in the construction industry, Christian church groups have long been giving assistance to day laborers and the homeless. And day laborers' unions have worked for themselves. Then, several of these organizations produced an NPO on the homeless in May 1999. Also, *Rengo Osaka* (Osaka Local of Japanese Trade Union Confederation), organized a research committee, which carries out activities requesting measures by negotiating with Osaka city and Osaka prefecture. Then, the *Buraku Liberation League Osaka* (the Osaka Prefectural Association for Liberation for the Outcast Communities) has taken this as its theme for fighting discrimination. *The Kinki Lawyer's Association* (in Osaka Prefecture and neighbors' Prefectures) has become very active in sending proposals to the national government and local governments from the viewpoint of human rights. There are also the organizations of the homeless themselves, for example, *Homeless Network* and *Osaka Jo Tomo no Kai* (Friendly Association of Osaka Castle Park), etc..

In this way, several groups at the citizen's level have been formed with the aims of independence assistance for the homeless and social solidarity. It is to be hoped that in the future these activities will help solve the homeless problem and eliminate the idea of "exclusion" which has been imbedded in Japanese society.

Table 1 Changes in the Number of Tents of Homeless Persons in several Parks within Osaka city

(number at July 1996 =100)

Park	July 1996 2000	August 1998	August 1999	February
Osaka Castle Park	37(100)	261(710)	448(1210)	
Nagai Park	538(1450)			
Nishinari Park	30(100)	159(530)	328(1090)	
Kema Park	422(1410)			
Sakuranomiya Park	78(100)	252(320)	263(340)	
Others	260(330)			
	12(100)	89(740)	82(680)	
	111(930)			
	217(100)	687(320)		1,031(475)
	1,093(500)			
Total	374(100)	1,452(390)		2,152(580)
	2,424(650)			

Data from Direction of Administration of Public Area Osaka city.

Table 2 Number of Street Homeless (Nationwide)
march 1999

City	number	City	number	City	number
Osaka City	8,660*	Kobe City	229	Naha City	63
Tokyo	4,300	Kyoto City	200	Sendai City	53
Nagoya City	758	Fukuoka City	174	Sakai City	48
Kawasaki City	746	Chiba City	104	Others	295
Yokohama City	439	Kitakyushu City	80	Total	16,247

* Numbers for Osaka City are from an August1998 survey.

Conference Regarding the Homeless Problem, “*Urgent Measures for the Homeless Problem*” in May 1999.

Table 3 The Image Held by Osaka Citizens of the Street Homeless
(%)

Item	Yes	No	N.	Item	Yes	No	N.A
fearful	33.1	65.6	1.3	Pitiful	28.2	70.4	1.3
Dirty	66.6	32.1	1.3	Loners	40.4	58.2	1.3
Lazy	50.3	48.4	1.3	Enjoying Life	25.7	73.0	1.3
No Ambition	40.7	57.9	1.3	Free	19.1	79.6	1.3
Unhealthy	66.7	32.0	1.3	Sad	20.9	77.7	1.3
Should Find Work	26.8	71.9	1.3	Honest	3.0	95.6	1.3
				Making Effort	6.1	92.6	1.3

The sample number for the October 1998 survey was 1,643.

Osaka City University, Research Committee on City Life Environment Problems, “*Analysis of the results of a questionnaire survey on citizens' awareness of the problem of homelessness*”, 1999.

Table 4 Job and Income of the Street Homeless
(persons) (%)

The Homeless having Job	Collection of unwanted articles	Under 30,000yen/month Over 30,000yen/month Not Clear	245 164 59	36.55 % 24.4% 8.8%
	Other		69	10.3%
No job Homeless People	No job, but job seeking		53	7.9%
	No job, and no job seeking		77	11.5%
	No job, not clear about seeking job		4	0.6%
Not Clear			1	0.1%
Total			672	100.0%

Osaka City University, Research Committee on City Life Environment Problems, “*Oral Survey of Homeless Persons*”, 1999.