

New York University,
School of Professional Studies

The Hidden Faces of Homelessness in Japan:
A Critical Examination of Government Statistics and Social Realities

Hanna Yoshida
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Professor Sonja Ryst
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In the spring of 2024, the Japanese health ministry published a survey report that stated that “the number of homeless people in Japan fell 8.0% as of January [2024] from the year earlier to 2,820, the lowest level since data began in 2003” (“Number of Homeless in Japan Hits Record Low”). The ministry appeals that the improvement is “due to the success of related support measures” (“Number of Homeless in Japan Hits Record Low”). However, this number does not take into consideration the current issue Japan has with homeless youth who live in hostels, temporary housing, and even internet cafes. Japan also has a syndrome called “jyohatsu,” where individuals suddenly disappear without leaving a trace. These individuals exist under the radar of government paperwork, unable to be found, but still exist somewhere in society.

When defining the concept of “homelessness” as “not having an official place to go home to,” the number of homeless people in Japan can be thought of as higher than what the government presents to the public. This paper will go into detail about the different forms of non-stereotypical homelessness that exist in Japanese society and unravel the situation these individuals face. The reality of homelessness in Japan is much more dire than the promising numbers the government announces.

According to the formal definition of “homeless” in Japan, “the homeless are those who reside in facilities such as urban parks, riverbanks, roads and railway station for no reason and conduct their daily lives there” (Iwata 98). The situation is defined as “the current state in which a large number of people exist who, despite a will toward independence, have unavoidably become homeless and cannot maintain a wholesome and cultured standard of living, coupled with frictions arising with local society” (Iwata 98). These definitions come from the “Act on Special Measures concerning Support of the Independence of the Homeless’ (the Homeless Independence Support Act),” established in August 2002 (Iwata 98). This definition of

homelessness defined by the legislation is quite narrow and does not take into account the individuals living in unstable conditions. On the other hand, according to the United Nations, "homeless" is "the inability of people to enjoy a permanent accommodation" (Salcedo). Compared to the United Nations' definition of homelessness, Japan's definition does not take into account the wide range of individuals that do not have permanent living conditions.

One example of a population without permanent living conditions is the "Toyoko kids," the youth that reside in the Shinjuku district of Tokyo. Shinjuku "is a vibrant business and entertainment district" that has recently become a hangout spot "for the 21st century street children of Tokyo - the Toyoko Kids" (Inoue). These kids are composed of a mixture "of permanent runaways and those seeking community" and "have formed a unique youth subculture based around shared neglect, internet-driven popularity and a distinct fashion sense" (Inoue). Many of these youth make a living, often illegally, in the nightlife scene and sex industries, which unfortunately expose them to "issues such as drug misuse" (Inoue). To address the situation, grassroots organizations and local governments have increased assistance for the Toyoko kids by offering safe spaces, cooked meals, or even simply by lending an ear (Inoue). While recent crackdowns on prostitution and the government's strong agenda to show a "clean Tokyo" have made it seem as if the number of Toyoko kids has decreased (Inoue), the problem persists as these kids have just found new areas to survive. Some stay in internet cafes or hotels provided by their prostitution clients (Inoue). Others, with some girls as young as 10, engage in street prostitution, taking in multiple clients a day (Inoue), not only to make ends meet but also to secure temporary places to rest. Because these children do not have permanent housing, they are considered homeless according to the definition of the United Nations. Yet, under the Japanese government's definition, since these children do not consistently live on the streets with

no reason and even have ways to make an income, whether illegal or not, they are not included in the numbers of the Japanese homeless population.

Another example of a group that is not included in the Japanese homeless population are the “evaporated” individuals, otherwise known as “jyohatsu.” These individuals cannot be found as they “voluntarily disappear without leaving any trace,” usually due to “dementia, people fleeing a difficult family situation, and people who decide to cut ties with the past” (Mottes). In fact, between 80,000 and 100,000 people every year, with two-thirds being men, fall under this population (Mottes). Yet, this number may be even greater, as “there is no official registry of missing persons [in Japan], and many families don’t report disappearances simply because they are ashamed” (Mottes) in accordance with traditional Japanese culture. Within this population exists a subpopulation called “yonige,” which literally means “to disappear in the night” (Mottes). These individuals, even entire families, vanish overnight, sometimes using specialized agencies such as overnight moving services, which are often run by those who have “evaporated” in the past (Mottes). Privacy regulations in Japan “deny the ability to track anyone using their personal information,” including their ID card, Social Security number, credit cards, and any other financial instrument (Mottes). In addition, “individual territorial administrations are not interconnected, so if someone deletes themselves from one constituency and then registers at the other end of the country, there’s no way to know” (Mottes).

To conclude, the current formal definition of “homeless” in Japan is limited, excluding many individuals who live in unstable conditions. The Japanese government does not officially count these groups as homeless, despite fitting broader definitions of homelessness, such as those of the United Nations. This discrepancy highlights the need for a more inclusive and accurate understanding of homelessness in Japan to be able to increase support for these individuals. By

acknowledging and increasing awareness of the current situation, external organizations will be able to organize assistance catered to the needs of each homeless group.

Works Cited

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