

# Social Distancing from the Problem of Japanese Homelessness under Covid-19

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**Abstract:** *Of the many populations at risk in these corona times, the homeless are among the most vulnerable. Without shelter, having to do without personal protective equipment, often without health insurance and unable to limit contact with strangers, the risk of infection is very high. The emergency measures taken by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government included the closure of many public spaces, indoors and out, depriving them of access to the few spaces of survival. . This ethnographic article outlines how an older group of homeless men responded to the risk of infection and inconsistent government efforts to address this issue. Finally, we examine the response of civil society organizations to compensate for weakness of the government's response.*

**Keywords:** *Covid-19, vulnerable communities, homeless, CSO (civil society organizations)*

## Infection on the street

On an eerily deserted Saturday night in mid-March in front of Shinjuku Station, West Exit, I was talking to a tall thin man, with a ruddy complexion from too many nights sleeping on the street, forced to live above an air grate to keep warm or under an awning to keep dry. He was reading a discarded newspaper to a small group of other men. "It says that in order to avoid infection, we are supposed to stay home.... I wonder that means, for us? To stay

home?" It's a good question. When you are homeless, how do you 'stay home'?

Even under the best conditions, living homeless is a precarious proposition. Under Covid-19, it is a clear risk to one's life, a "pre-existing condition" that increases vulnerability as severely as any other factor. With no insurance, a lack of protective equipment, no access to reliable information, and no chance of getting tested all increase the risk of contracting the virus; and if one catches it, these circumstances increase the likelihood of serious consequences, including death. Many of the men we will discuss here live on the street, others sleep in net cafes or all-night restaurants when they have the chance. They have no way to create a secure boundary between themselves and the outside world, or even from each other. Even early on, the risk was clear; poverty "itself may be acting as a multiplier on the coronavirus's spread and deadliness" (Fisher & Bubola, 2020). Among the poor, homelessness is an even worse situation (Fabian, 2020), a "horror on top of horror" (Ellis, 2020). While the precautions that we are all asked to take are onerous and anxiety producing, for the homeless population in Tokyo, or indeed, almost any city in the world, these are impossible to follow, productive only of fear, not hygiene, resulting in exclusion not security.

They cannot practice proper social distancing due to the decrease in number of public spaces now available to them in this state of emergency. But even before the Covid-19 warning, many would rather stay relatively close together for fear of harassment or abuse

by those they call “regular” (*futsuu*) people the non-homeless population. You can ‘shelter in place’ only if you have a shelter. But even the ‘in place’ part of the directive is impossible for many homeless, because most are constantly on the move through Tokyo, some forced to walk across the city for a meal, or the chance of finding shelter for the night. Roused by security guards or maintenance staff when they do find some out of the way place, they seek some nook or cranny at least partially out of sight, the creases of public space left for them.

They do not have hand sanitizer or wipes, and often for long periods of time, they also do not have access to water, let alone soap. On this evening in Shinjuku, only about half of them were wearing masks, and many of the masks we could see were filthy, clearly used for days or weeks at a time. One man wearing a fresh mask he got from a volunteer group that morning, nodded at a group of other men, whispering that they picked theirs from trash. To be sure I understood, he reiterated, “they are wearing other people’s discarded masks.” One of these other men overheard us talking, and shouted back “hey, at least I got one of these,” as he took one of the rice balls we were handing out that night.

Tokyo’s homeless population has been under threat for the past few years, first by the Olympics (Kageyama, 2020), and now by Covid-19. Even before we understood the exact infection pattern or scope of the virus, it was clear that it would be a threat to the homeless worldwide (Admin, 2020). While metropolitan centers around the world braced for the slow roll of Covid-19 into their cities, most were taking preemptive action to protect their most vulnerable populations. Tokyo, on the other hand, waited until April to take any direct action, and even then, after having watched other metropolitan areas struggle, their response was weak, uncoordinated and largely incoherent—not so different from efforts in other parts of Japan. Even the Governor of

Tokyo, Yuriko Koike, who has been otherwise praised for her relatively swift response, did not produce a coordinated plan regarding homeless, and other displaced populations. This paper outlines some of the epidemiological risks of infection of living on the street, life challenges posed by governmental bureaucracy that neglects the vulnerable, and the efforts by civil society groups to address a problem that is larger than they can handle.

The data for this paper was largely, but not exclusively, collected by revisiting the men we got to know during previous research (Slater & Ikebe, 2020),<sup>1</sup> usually by meeting them either at Shinjuku Station or St. Ignatius Church in Yotsuya. Quotations are the result of face to face conversations during and after volunteer efforts as the Covid-19 lockdown unfolded. No names are being used and some of the details of the men’s situations have been obscured to ensure their privacy.

## Homelessness before and now

While not as large as in other countries, since the 1992 economic recession in Japan, the homeless population has increased, typically in larger cities such as Tokyo and those in Osaka prefectures (Hasegawa, 2005). The latest statistics from the government indicate that there are 4,555 homeless people throughout Japan (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2019) and 1,037 homeless people within Tokyo (Tokyo Metropolitan Government, 2019). But counting a fluid population always on the move is notoriously difficult in any city, including Tokyo (Citizens, 2019). In most counts, “homeless” is legally defined as rough sleepers who live in public spaces such as urban parks, next to rivers, on side streets, in station buildings and other facilities (MHLW, 2002). The consensus of most supporters is that this group is getting smaller as the older men die off. Although the number of homeless people by this definition has been decreasing, it is

estimated that there are at least 4000 people without stable housing in Tokyo (Tokyo Metropolitan Government, 2018). Some of them are known as “net-café refugees” (*netto kafe nanmin*) who sleep in 24-hour operating facilities such as coffee shops or fast-food stores.

The Japanese government offers Livelihood Protection (*seikatsu hogo*, public welfare) which guarantees a minimum standard of living for all citizens. But in fact, many of those who need this money do not get it. Most of the homeless men report that the offices that handle welfare payments are often unresponsive to their questions about the byzantine process and elaborate rules. These rules often result in disqualifying them for some infraction or missing piece of paperwork, and often force them to give up on their applications. Many describe this process as a humiliating interrogation filled with insinuations and prejudicial disapproval. Some are dissuaded with questions such as whether they are sure that their family cannot take care of them. Most of the men left their families many years ago and now live with little contact. They often report that their families do not know where they are. For fear of being recognized or having the welfare office contact their families, many give up their application (also see Kim, 2015:18-19).

Other men report that even if they are eligible, the support that they get is not enough to survive, even on the street. The continual efforts to reduce welfare benefits, including those for homeless people in Tokyo, have been going on for some time (Makeuchi 2016), resulting in a progressively more desperate situation for many. Most of the men we know dislike being lodged in temporary housing (*muryo teigaku shukuhaku-jo*) available to those who qualify. These facilities are usually shared by multiple people, are always dirty and noisy, and thus something avoided by most except in the coldest or wettest times. But the

poor quality of support is not the only reason one might not take welfare. Many, even though they are eligible and entitled to welfare support, object for ethical reasons: they are against the idea of taking money from the government. As one man who had been living for years in different train stations around the center of Tokyo explained to us, “I have never taken things from the government, and I do not want to do it now.” Many point out that others are in just as desperate a situation as they are, maybe more desperate, so they do not feel they should accept any support from the government. One explained, “I understand that some other [homeless people] might need to take money—that is their choice. But that is not for me. No matter what. I could not handle that.”

Most of the men work in some way (Gill 1999) but almost all in what has been called “shadow work” (Snow & Leufgen 2007), off the books in marginal, poorly paid jobs where they do not sign a contract or pay taxes. Besides picking up bottles or cans, participating in surveys (where they might get a small reward), and positioning themselves where free food or merchandise might be given out, some of the men also work for the city or ward, sweeping and cleaning public spaces within the city. They register to work on rotation—which usually ends up being not more than a few times a month—getting paid a minimal amount. Others do “*narabi*” (lining up) work, where they are paid by agents to stand in line to buy popular items at promotional sales that the agents then resell at full price. There is almost no begging in Japan, but today it is not uncommon to see homeless foraging for food in trash bins or outside certain restaurants where just-expired food might be discarded. Under Covid-19, there is less foot traffic and thus less discarded food to be had.

## Incomplete information

Beside the immediate viral threat, a full understanding of the virus is lacking among the homeless population, just as it is among the general population. I was standing with two men outside of the station, one of whom was about 40 years old, wearing a long scarf fashioned over his mouth, using it in lieu of a mask. He was explaining to an older man one of the many sets of fragmentary guidelines floating around, often passed out by volunteer support groups. The older man was listening with a puzzled expression. "Haven't you heard about this sickness?" the younger man demanded. While many of the men sleeping rough will do so close to each other for their own protection, they can go for days without having an extended conversation with anyone. Coupled with the fact that there are also fewer volunteers distributing food and daily necessities, many were unaware of Covid-19, knowing only that it is a "sickness" or "germ" (one man using the word, "baikin"). The older man dismissed the danger of the virus. "This has nothing to do with us. Actually, this is *their* sickness, the "regular" people's, not ours. If we all keep to ourselves, we will be fine." There is some truth to this—that Covid-19 (or corona, as we were still calling it at that time) did not come from the homeless population—but they are uniquely vulnerable to it. The homeless population in Tokyo is not large in proportion to the metropolitan population and they do not use drugs, in general. But they are overwhelmingly male, and older, with an average age of above 60, and often in poor health, all negative indicators for infection. But few of these facts are known to the men I spoke to.

There are not so many women on the street, but one of them, Marion, as she called herself, was reading handwritten notes about the virus. She and the man she was with had left a small plate in front of their sitting area for any money that passersby might want to contribute. "But there are so few people these days, that this does not add up to much." They say that they

rarely get any money from Japanese. "Tourists give sometimes... but there are not many of those now." She paused for a moment. "Are the tourists sick now, too?" The man was explaining that the virus is transmitted through any touch or by contact with an object, even money. As I was getting up to leave a young foreign woman dropped some change in Marion's plate, putting her hands together as if to pray for Marion, which made Marion smile. As she was reaching for the money, she stopped for a moment, caught the man's eye, and dramatically froze, as if to say, "should I touch it?" She then cackled and picked it up, putting it in her pocket. (Of their survival strategies, black humor is as important as any other.) For most homeless people, the possibility of being infected by some virus you cannot see, that may or may not be present, is not enough to pass up an opportunity for extra cash, however little. That is too much of a luxury for people who live off the street. But the danger of transmission is real. So, in an ironic way, the fact that so few of the homeless do ask for money from the public might prevent some of them from getting sick.

## Social Isolation and Exclusion

Other homeless people are more cautious, even frightened. As we were handing out the last of our rice balls, a young man emerged from behind a concrete column—a much coveted safe and dry sleeping place. He asked us, "what happens if I get sick?" As I handed him the information sheet I had picked up, I noticed that most of it was full of phone numbers to call, stating "do not come directly to the hospital—call first." But without a cell phone, this information was of no use. He did not even look at it. "Nothing. We can do nothing. You think that they will bring us into a hospital if we get sick? That would never happen." In fact, the lack of available tests was widely reported in the news, even in the face of other reports



that all of the hospital beds in Tokyo were overflowing (Shirakawa 2020). And this was for “regular” people.

One effect of not knowing what is happening is a tendency to simply avoid situations, or people, you are unsure about. Normally, the homeless people around Shinjuku Station are ignored, even invisible to the “regular” population. But at times like this, the sight of a homeless person can provoke anxiety among others. With fewer commuters the homeless men at the station stand out more, and pedestrians keep their distance, even jumping out of the way to avoid contact with the men, as if they were the source of contagion. Likewise, some homeless are increasingly fearful of contact with these pedestrians. One of the most debilitating features of Covid-19 fear is the fear of each other that has spread among the homeless population. For fear of infection some homeless people report being afraid of other homeless. While there is no *cora-hara* (harassment of those who might have corona, Shokuba, 2020) we know of among the homeless populations, at least not yet, dependence upon each other is a key feature of many homeless communities around the world as it is in Tokyo. Sharing of information, food and other resources, not to mention kindness, is one of the most important street survival strategies, but some homeless men think twice now before making this contact.

“Some [homeless men] avoid others, but living ‘solo,’ all by yourself on the street is much harder. It used to be just the grumpy ones or the arrogant ones or the crazy ones who would be that way. Now, all of us are thinking that maybe this is the best way, the only safe way. That would be a shame, and lonely too.”

## State response

While many other cities around the world have introduced provisions for the homeless, so far,

it is difficult to find any evidence of these on the streets in Tokyo. Some cities in Japan are making consultation and health checks available to the homeless, through NPO groups such as [Tenohashi](#), but none of the 50 or so of the men we spoke to had heard of any place to get tested. One man said he called a hotline number he found on a flyer but could not understand the information he heard on the recording. On April 3rd, homeless support groups including Homeless Consulting Network and [Big Issue Japan](#) requested that the Tokyo Bureau of Health and Welfare provide more support for those who are living in the street (Chiba, 2020b). On April 6th, the Tokyo Metropolitan Government announced the allocation of 800 million yen for more hospital beds, testing and other support for those who have lost their jobs, although exactly how these funds would be distributed was not clearly laid out in any written form and appeared vague to most activists. Kato Ayumi is a long-time activist and advocate in Tokyo currently serving as the Director of [Moyai-NPO](#), one of the leading groups in Japan that support homeless and otherwise disenfranchised people. She noted that these initiatives might provide 400 beds for the homeless which is certainly a step in the right direction but still falls far short of the needs of the people.

Part of the struggle is that there are different groups of people with different problems, and thus require a solution that suits their specific needs. The governments’ early response rhetoric centered on “net café refugees,” and others who have lost their regular housing. On April 7th, Prime Minister Abe announced 1.2 billion yen in aid for displaced people (Japan Press Weekly, 2020). Again, while the details were unclear when it was proposed, early news reports suggested support would include the use of large public spaces such as gymnasiums and unused business hotels as temporary housing. The news reports also suggested possible expansion of emergency welfare measures. However, implementation has been

inconsistent. In response, on May 8th, [Tokyo Challenge Net](#) another collaborative organization made up of different homeless advocates, delivered a request to the Tokyo Metropolitan Government (Chiba, 2020b). Their request demanded more open distribution of information, more flexible application processes and deadlines, and a review of the quality of the existing facilities. They also called for clearer reporting of the practices and results of the government's efforts because at that time (and since) it is quite difficult to confirm specific details of how the funds have been and/or will be used.

If the plans and their implementation have been difficult to document, the on-the-ground effect has been even less clear, with many fearing that those most in need, the chronically homeless, are often the ones least served. Initially in some cities, it was unclear if or how the homeless would be eligible for the 100,000 JPY cash payouts. For most people residing in Japan, the application is sent to the head of the household, however this only works if you have a home address registered with the Ward office. Other benefits are also difficult to secure, even in person, a problem that started with the failure to staff the ward offices sufficiently in anticipation of the increased flow of applications as corona began. Kato-san explains two cases from her front-line work that point to problems with implementing support measures for displaced people. One man explained to her that "when I heard that we could apply to be put into a business hotel, I applied for it, but I was rejected. I was sent away." He stated that he was not provided with any explanation or reason as to why he was rejected or how to make a successful application. Another man explains the trouble encountered in applying for benefits at the welfare office. He said, "they did not even let me apply. I was told to go to [Hello Work](#)," (a public job placement office), which is the equivalent of saying 'go get a job.' While the consequences of this sort of treatment are

particularly harsh while many are suffering the effects of Covid-19, as noted above, it is not an unfamiliar response for most of the men with any experience at the welfare offices. The casual disregard, the humiliation and lack of cooperation lead many homeless people, victims of domestic violence and others in need to forgo even applying for the benefits to which they are legally entitled. Today we see a renewed call to examine the fraying safety net, as witnessed in the increase in articles pointing out the struggles of many of these vulnerable populations even in the mainstream newspapers. If there is one positive aspect to the pandemic, it is that the fraying net is made all the more obvious in the face of Covid-19. The collective threat faced by both the men and those organization who attempt to support the homeless, seems to have stimulated activists to work together more closely. In an unusual alignment of NPO support groups, coming together across their often very specific missions, we have seen some of the highest profile activists calling for review (Chiba, 2020a), including the [Tsukuri Tokyo Fund](#).

If part of the problem is the inability to respond to the urgent needs of the homeless, another part is that what counts as a "response" is often insufficient. Even if a homeless man does succeed in getting support, and is able to enter one of the shelters, these locations are often a threat in and of themselves. Many of the shelters here are filthy; they are large rooms that house many without a partition between them, a situation Kato-san suggests could lead to increased infection. Being cooped up in a shelter with poor ventilation next to others who may be sick is never ideal but now it might be life threatening. One younger man explained that, "you cannot breathe in those places." Another man noted, "I do not like being in those places anyway. But now, with the sickness, it is even more dangerous."

Under the current emergency measures, conditions outside of the shelters are not much

more viable. Many of the ways men once made a bit of money have dried up or are at least greatly reduced under calls for home sheltering. The city jobs that many men did were canceled in the state of emergency. But even the more “shadow work” sorts of labor are largely gone. The *narabi* work, lining up for promotional goods, is gone, “because we are not supposed to line up,” explained one man laughing. He lamented that “it’s a shame, because with so few people [lining up], we could have been in and out in no time.” More fundamentally, as the city entered shutdown, it sought to clear out the many public spaces, thought to be a breeding ground for infection. For homeless people, this closure erased the only places that they can exist. Clearing out public spaces means, literally, clearing out homeless who have no other place to go. “We cannot stay in parks anymore—most have been cordoned off—but also libraries or other public buildings are now off limits.” These places provide warmth but also water and temporary respite from the threat of infection. “Where are we supposed to go now?” This is not so different from what has happened previously to the homeless population in preparation for Olympics all over the world, except now, there is a pandemic.

### Whither Civil Society?

Rather than the state, the primary care for homeless and many other disenfranchised people in Japan falls on CSO, or civil society organizations, the community and support networks. They are usually not run by the city offices but more often by churches, mosques, or other local civic groups. Despite their lack of funding, organization and influence, these usually small organizations with few members, working off shoestring budgets, and dependent on the heroic efforts of a few committed volunteers are somehow expected to support a great number of people. During emergencies,

the CSO’s are expected to do even more. To the historical markers of 1995 (Great Hanshin Earthquake) and 2011 (the triple disasters of earthquake, tsunami and nuclear meltdown in Tohoku), we will now add 2020, for the Covid-19 epidemic. These are all pivotal moments when we most clearly see the inner workings and the inability of Japan’s civil society to fully compensate for the lack of a coordinated and sustained state response. But this time the story is quite different and worse. In both 1995 and 2011, we saw a huge outpouring of volunteerism that for some offset the state’s mismanagement of these crises (see Avenell, 2013 for a more detailed discussion). This allowed both activists and optimistic commentators to see some silver lining in disaster; the reinvigoration of the grassroots and the revitalization of civic minded citizens engaged in meaningful volunteer work. So far, in 2020 we have not seen a similar volunteer response, for a variety of reasons, including fear of infection and lack of safe opportunity to volunteer. Instead, what we are seeing is the closing of many small groups, and the crippling of even larger ones. It is an open question how many will survive the state of emergency in some functioning form.

In most support groups, Covid-19 has had terrible effects as volunteering has plummeted, budgets are exhausted and programs are stripped down or collapsed, if they are still open at all, due to lack of volunteers. Many volunteers simply stay home. Usually there are as many as 20 different *takidashi* soup kitchens each week within walking distance in central Tokyo. (What counts as “walking distance” for a homeless man varies, but many men think nothing of walking several hours from Shinjuku to Akibahara or even Sumida and back in a day.) One man we have known for some years, explained that most soup kitchens are now closed or barely functioning. Lack of food is a problem. To compound the problem is a lack of confidence among the homeless for some of the sources of food that remain. As one man from

Ibaraki explained about a local soup kitchen he used to go to, "I would not go there even if it opened up now." He explains that "I appreciate the volunteers, but you never know [about infection]." "I only eat things that are wrapped, like in plastic... like from the convenience store— that is the only safe food." I pointed out that already a couple of convenience stores in Tokyo were forced to close down due to infection. "I don't know about that," he said.

St. Ignatius Church in Yotsuya has been serving curry for more than a decade, and it appears to be an exception to the pattern above. *Curry no Kai* (Curry Meeting) is an event every Monday morning where volunteers prepare curry for between 100 and 150 homeless, almost all men. The Church suspended all larger meetings as a precaution and so *Curry no Kai* had to close their dining room. But quickly, they adapted to this new situation and began to repackage the curry into *bento* lunch boxes that the men could take with them. The Director, Iwata Tetsuo, explained that they now offer a lunch of curry and rice, one banana or other piece of fruit, and one bottle of tea. This method of distribution protects the men because they do not have to be in the dining room to eat (although on this rainy day, many men expressed disappointment that yet another indoor space was no longer available to them). This method also reduces the risk of infection in the preparation of the curry, protecting the volunteers, because fewer volunteers are required. On the other hand, it is more expensive because disposable containers for the curry and plastic bags have to be purchased. Although *Curry no Kai* does not get any funds from the Church, they do benefit from free use of the space and a strong volunteer foundation associated with the Church. Not many groups have this luxury or can as quickly and effectively shift gears to adjust to the emergency situation as Iwata-san did. It is hardly surprising that these days, they are serving more than 200 *bento* each Monday.

On one cold, wet Monday morning, as we were handing out curry *bento* over the tall fence that surrounds the perimeter of the Church. As we hand out bento on this rainy day, many men report that this is the only meal they have in the day or even over a two-day span. I talked with Iwata-san and one other volunteer. Iwata-san explained that one reason they had been able to survive was because they do not have any "volunteers" at *Curry no Kai*, a perplexing claim since the two of us handing out bento in the rain at the time. . He went on:

The English word 'volunteer'... its sort of a bad word. This word means someone who helps out when they have some free time, when it is convenient for them. Too many people in Japan just volunteer when it suits them, but they seem to forget that the people who need help, their needs continue regardless of our schedules... The people working here at *Curry no Kai* are not like that.

I tell him it is not only in Japan, and he waves me off. "I don't care about that. I only care about the situation here. We are all responsible for each other here, even if it is inconvenient sometimes." I have known Iwata-san for 6 or 7 years now, but I am unsure if this sentiment is more Christian or socialist in origin—perhaps a combination of both. "What is shocking to me is to see how many soup kitchens just folded up when people started to worry about corona." He went inside to get another round of curry *bento* for us to hand out.

### Are we more prepared for next time?

Many have said that Japan lucked out, for reasons that at the time of this writing are not altogether clear. They had relatively few cases and deaths, despite the lack of systematic testing and uneven prevention practices (Rich & Ueno, 2020). If that is the case, the homeless population, with multiple pre-existing health risks and an inability to protect themselves



from infection, was even luckier. We must ask what we have learned from this outbreak, how we have responded and what sort of measures we have put in place to reduce the loss of life, of home and of people's livelihood in the event of a future pandemic. Watching this situation unfold and the safety nets unravel over the past few months must frighten anyone contemplating the possibility of a second wave in the fall or at any point in the future. But this sort of pessimism does not permeate the homeless population itself. "There is no benefit to worry about the future—we have to think about now." One of the men explained that despite everything, "we are just trying to survive day to day."

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Please also read our previous special **Pandemic Asia** on the impacts of COVID-19 in the larger Asia-Pacific region, edited by Jeff Kingston, delivered in [Part 1](#) and [2](#).

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**David H. Slater** is professor of cultural anthropology at Sophia University. He has worked on youth and labor, capitalism and urban space. Since 2011, he has been working on oral narrative, first of disaster and survival in [Voices from Tohoku](#), then of mothers displaced from Fukushima, of youth activists and of homeless men in Tokyo. Currently, he is working on a related project, *Voices from Japan*, focusing on foreign refugees seeking asylum in Tokyo through the collection of oral narratives and support efforts through the [Sophia Refugee Support Group](#).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Slater began integrating volunteer work on homelessness into his required course work in 2013. He began teaching a class on oral narrative of homelessness, and from 2016 began focusing on the work history and survival strategies of the men who attended the soup kitchens “Curry no Kai,” at St. Ignatius Church in Yotsuya, Tokyo. Ikebe led one of the research groups in 2017 and has been working on these topics since. In what started out as a volunteer effort at the nearby soup kitchen grew into a research project that collected more than 150 hours of digital video interview data with the men, making it one of the largest archives on homelessness of its kind in Japan that we know of. Some of the quotations about the general situation of homelessness in Tokyo are drawn from this earlier research.