

Envisioning a Safety Net from the Community Level: Insights from Homelessness Research

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Editors' note

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1. Safety net research is extremely policy-driven

I became aware of this issue in the 2000s. Since then, my research themes have consistently been related to the construction of a safety net, and I would like to present a view on this issue based on my own research trajectory on this theme. The safety net is extremely close to policy, and findings from a purely high-level observer research stance are not welcome in society if they diverge from what is being sought. It requires a very close relationship with the field, and because of this, it also has a social implementation aspect that is popular today. As a geographer, when I first

started to carry out the homeless survey in 1998, which made me aware of the issue of safety net, I felt that it had to be done in a very interdisciplinary way to address it as a regional issue.

To summarize briefly, regarding the social implementation of safety nets for the homeless, the emergence of the new category of “needy persons” (生活困窮者) has replaced the homeless as the main focus of policy. The KAKEN research reflecting this change is now clearly conducted by an interdisciplinary team. The team consists of researchers from social welfare, sociology, urban planning, and architecture. These projects are indeed concerned with the region, and I often use the terms such as “city” and “region”, but in terms of the safety net, what kind of practical application of urban and regional studies has the KAKEN research team come up with? In this paper, I would like to present the trajectory that led to it, which can be seen as a collection of good practices.

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2. The safety net-oriented research began with a survey of the homeless

Let us go back 25 years in time. It all started when Mayor ISOMURA Takafumi, who was a professor in the Faculty of Business Administration at Osaka City University before becoming the mayor of Osaka. He instructed Osaka City University to take the lead in conducting a survey of the homeless. At that time, the sociology and geography departments of Osaka City University and the labor economics and social welfare departments of Osaka Prefecture University were the main participants. There were very few studies in sociology that dealt with the homeless, and clarifying who the homeless people were was the essential starting point for understanding how to provide services to individuals. From the perspective of labor economics, the problem of homelessness was a problem of unemployment, and the urgent task was to figure out how to construct an unprecedented system for adjusting the demand for labor in response to the ups and downs of the economy. In addition, in the field of social welfare studies, homelessness was partly caused by the dysfunction of social welfare, and the question was how to make it work. From this perspective, these three academic fields were able to get to the heart of the problem because they were primarily concerned with people. There was a lack of prior research, and there were too many unknowns, so there was a great need for good practices that would lead to practical solutions.

However, the problem that geography faced in relation to the homeless problem was to provide knowledge on how to coordinate the use of space and to provide basic data for consensus building on the use of space (this is how I understand it now). Many homeless people spontaneously use and live in public spaces and other people's private spaces, and the issue was more about "eviction" than about coordinating the use of space. Many concerns were expressed, especially by the graduate students who

attended. While the other three academic fields were concerned with the structure of the system, geography, by its very nature, is good at observation, and we recognized that the problem was to clarify where the homeless were. Although people who could no longer live in the region became homeless, and the problem of homelessness is a problem of spaces related to urban parks, underpasses, station buildings, and riverbeds, there was no attempt to look at this problem as a regional issue.

Research in an area where there are many unknowns is required to find solutions and to contribute to the smooth implementation of policies based on the findings. This survey of homeless people faced such a very practical problem. At the time of the survey, around 2000, I was not really aware of it, but the survey leader, sociologist MORITA Yohji, was a researcher with a strong awareness of this point, and there was much to learn from his attitude. After that, young researchers in sociology, labor economics, social welfare studies, and geography produced results and were able to pursue careers as researchers, and it can be said that this was the result of providing clues and answers to the unknown things that were being sought. Looking back on those days, I think that the process and the results, including the various heated discussions that sometimes turned into arguments between the young graduate students and the faculty members at that time, are worthy of being called good practice.

3. Unknown research subjects are worth dealing with

At the heart of this search for the unknown was the need to clarify the role of work in helping the homeless find employment. While it was true that the majority of people lost their homes and ended up on the streets after losing their jobs, 70% of those living on the streets earned an average of 30,000 yen. They were found to be working in informal jobs, mainly collecting scrap and recyclable materials, living

in huts or tents they had built while working, and leading a lifestyle that was equivalent to an income of about 80,000 yen, as they had no rent or utility bills to pay and spent about 50,000 yen.

In line with the findings of these surveys, the central government (the then Ministry of Health and Welfare) introduced its first homeless policy in 1999, and local governments followed suit in 2000. The surveys revealed a picture of homeless people who worked, which was quite different from the situation in Europe and America, and the way to achieve the goal of eliminating homelessness as society demanded was to re-integrate them into the formal labor market, rather than the informal one. With the goal of moving into an apartment with a rental contract that is tied to formal employment, this was called “self-reliance through employment”, and the new facility called the “Homeless Self-reliance Support Center” was to be responsible for helping people in their early 50s, who were still in their prime, to return to the formal market. With employment support provided by the Hello Work employment agency, shared accommodation with meals was provided. As a result, around 40% of the people started out with the goal of “self-reliance through employment”, and around 40% of them achieved that goal in the short term. For those who found it difficult to return to the formal market with a focus on employment, the route to “welfare independence”, or becoming independent in an apartment by receiving public assistance, was explored while using the temporary shelters set up in parks, or shelters that could be used for one night or short-term stays. This route was improved in the direction of elderly people without an address receiving public assistance, and in the early 2000s, so-called “home protection” using public assistance housing assistance in the community rapidly progressed. Of course, the outreach work of private NPOs also played a strong role. In Osaka City, housing called “supportive houses” (so-called because they were modeled on similar projects in the US) were set up in converted simple lodgings, while

in the Tokyo metropolitan area and other areas, NPOs operated free or low-cost lodgings (multi-person lodgings based on the Social Welfare Law) that functioned as housing by guaranteeing temporary accommodation until people could move into their own apartments. We call this intermediate housing “transit housing”. The path to “self-reliance through work” and “self-reliance through welfare” - the path to ending homelessness - has been opened up through this intermediate housing.

The field of study has also shifted from homeless people living in public spaces and other outdoor living spaces to areas that offer apartment living, and to the broader category of precarious living as a resident. These apartments are typically small, low-rent dwellings in inner-city neighborhoods, and research has shifted to the study of housing, living arrangements, support systems, and work styles in areas where the real estate market is dominated by the use of underutilized resources such as employee dormitories, in other words, the safety nets of cities and regions. Of course, even with the introduction of such safety nets, there were various gradations of circumstances, such as those who could not cope well with them, those who moved back and forth between sleeping outdoors and informal employment, etc.

4. We focus on homeless self-reliance support centers and free low-cost accommodation

Research from the perspective of “transit housing” in the context of supporting the homeless was something new. Previously, shelters were the main form of housing for the homeless, but from the 1980s, temporary shelters were set up in large cities for people to spend the winter or the year-end and New Year period. These included rehabilitation facilities for unemployed people with injuries or illnesses that could be used within public assistance facilities, which could also be positioned as

transit housing. However, in addition to these, in the early 2000s, a series of homeless self-reliance centers were established under the jurisdiction of the government of designated cities in large cities as a new measure dealing with people living on the streets/homelessness. The operation of most of these hastily-built centers was taken on by a long-established social welfare corporation in the industry that operates the above-mentioned transit housing. In addition, as an outreach to people living on the streets, a system of mobile consultation was also established. This combination of the center and the mobile consultation room formed the core of official homeless measures.

What was unique was the background of the staff involved. As the operation of the interim housing was developed on short notice, some staff were seconded from the main corporation, but the majority were recruited through job postings at Hello Work and word of mouth. They did not necessarily have welfare-related qualifications. Therefore, the team was made up of a diverse group of people with a variety of career backgrounds who had entered the “industry” through changing jobs, and who were relatively strongly motivated to work on improving the homeless problem.

The reason I continued to be involved with self-reliance support centers was the aftercare project started by Director YAMAMOTO of “Oyodo”, a self-reliance support center. The project was made possible through private funding via an NPO with which the director was involved. The project entailed helping the former residents to find jobs and apartments to live independently after leaving the center. The apartments were conveniently located, had low rent, and were close to places of employment, and were scattered all over Osaka City and beyond. When it comes to whether or not the local community can support single men living in apartments, the fact that they have lived there for a short time means that their ties to the area are weak, and in the absence of ties to their families, the center becomes their lifeline. As

the center staff members take on the role of family, and through repeated home visits and safety checks, it becomes clear that the unintentional monitoring of local real estate agents and the presidents of small and medium-sized companies also plays a significant role.

In addition, free or low-cost shelters developed in metropolitan areas that were institutionally underutilized have been discovered by NPOs as a way to house such individuals. This is done by using public housing subsidies as rent to help people get out of homelessness. Rather than approaching it as a “poverty business”, we obtained cooperation from several NPOs to investigate how the transit housing functions as a safety net. This involved using idle former employee dormitories in local regions to provide private rooms and meals in a dining hall, with the goal of achieving “employment self-reliance” and “welfare self-reliance”. It became part of the support for overcoming homelessness using public assistance, serving as either a final residence or temporary transit housing. The passionate commitment of the young staff, most of whom had changed jobs, was truly impressive.

The significance of post-use local residence, place, and regional built environment - such as centers and accommodations - has grown stronger as social infrastructure. From this perspective, the work has become meaningful in terms of social implementation in these regions. In this way, since the late 2000s, homelessness research has shifted from focusing on homeless individuals living on the streets to studying those who have lost their connection with a home while residing in housing. This has led to nationwide research on transit housing and apartments.

5. What is the state of the safety net for the homeless in East Asia?

In 2001, overseas research was started in East Asia, in South Korea, Hong Kong and Taiwan, with a survey of the homeless, and the reason

why the research was continuously adopted was due to the synergistic effect of the research in Japan and East Asia, where the situation of the homeless in Japan and the development of a safety net for them were progressing in parallel. I have written elsewhere about how I started to work on the issue of homelessness in East Asia, which was completely unrelated to the flow of research in Japan (Mizuuchi 2017). I consciously planned a survey that focused on location, built environment, and regional relations. This involved focusing on intermediate housing in urban areas, such as shelters, homeless self-reliance support centers, hostels, lodgings, and simple lodging facilities. As this is a project relatively new in terms of policy, it has also been largely ignored by academia, and there is almost no prior research, so we carried out a series of joint surveys with translation.

Geerhardt KORNATOWSKI, who was a research student who participated in the East Asia survey from the beginning and ended up writing his doctoral thesis on this theme, reflects on the expansion of the survey to include the region in a retrospective essay on his master's thesis, which dealt with homeless support in Hong Kong:

From a geographical perspective, it is inevitable that the commonalities of support centers and services in inner cities stand out, and it was clear that the relationship with the unique housing and labor markets was decisive, not just the geographical convenience of the support services. For the time being, in my master's thesis, I focused on the fact that support groups have a high level of pride in the areas where they operate. These groups can make use of the unique characteristics of these areas in their support activities. In conclusion, I stated that the high motivation for providing support services and the social identity that is based on the location have formed another social movement. (Kornatowski 2022: 117)

In his master's thesis, he focused on the bases of activities of homeless support groups from

this perspective and proposed the concept of "place-based". Furthermore, in his doctoral thesis, he examined the popular urban theories of the time, such as revanchist city and gentrification, which were gaining popularity in the radical geography community, and examined whether they were applicable to Hong Kong:

Although the poor housing and homelessness issues and incidents of removing the homeless from public spaces certainly fitted well, the movement to strengthen support for the homeless, including the injection of public funds, the persistent support activities of NPOs in inner city areas, and the construction of new transit housing, called for a different theory. (Kornatowski 2022: 118)

At the time, we were running a Global COE program, and our goal was to pursue the establishment of the "East Asian Inclusive City Theory". This was in line with the "Another Approach to Inner City Regeneration through Homeless Support in East Asia" project, which was approved as a Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (A) from 2010 to 2012. Here is the outline of this project:

The recent ten years of new homeless support initiatives in East Asia (Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong) have given us an insight on its achievements. Homeless support has produced an alternative rehabilitation-based regeneration model, in which energetic NGOs have filled the gaps of residual welfare and housing policy shortcomings. We have analyzed projects on local safety-net rebuilding and unique transitory housing initiatives. These projects have added an extra dimension of housing and job support to the existing welfare schemes. By means of organizing international workshops every year, we have also formulated suggestions for enhanced social policies.

It was truly a rebirth as a study of the concept of a regional safety net.

6. The nationalization of survey that leads to a comprehensive safety net concept has been conducted

In the East Asia survey, the focus shifted from inner-city regeneration to urban theory in the 2010s. As an overseas research project, the primary objective was not to implement social measures to create safety nets in each region. However, the Japanese survey was more about tackling the unknown aspects of the homeless problem than about pure research, and this led to the clarification of policy issues and the creation of a mechanism that mobilized and motivated actors to tackle these issues.

Clarifying the importance of aftercare became the most important issue for the unknown. This is because it was related to how successfully people who had left homelessness could live in the region. In the 2000s, the number of welfare recipients in Nishinari Ward, Osaka City, who were the target of such aftercare, increased dramatically. In 2005, we conducted a survey of 1,249 people at the request of the ward office. In 2006, we conducted a nationwide survey of people who had moved into apartment living through homeless support groups across the country, with the cooperation of 63 groups from as far north as Asahikawa to as far south as Naha. This “Another Homeless Survey”, which was conducted as an alternative to the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare’s nationwide survey, was a groundbreaking survey in terms of building a nationwide network for supporting the homeless. It was commissioned directly by a Democratic Party of Japan member of the House of Councillors at the time. Firstly, during the survey, we were able to work together with well-known social activists from Nishinari, Kamagasaki, San’ya, Shinjuku and Kitakyushu, and through our visits to NPOs providing support across the country, we were able to create opportunities to bring together organizations that had previously been working more or less independently. This meeting

between social activists and NPOs led to the establishment of the “National Homeless Support Network” in 2007, with OKUDA Tomoshi of Kitakyushu at the center, and directly led to the official establishment of the NPO in 2008.

Coinciding with the time, the bankruptcy of the Lehman Brothers and the subsequent organization of the “Tent Village for Jobless over the New Years Period” (年越し派遣村), a tent village for newly unemployed homeless individuals, marked the beginning of a rapid development in research and safety net policy formulation. In the midst of Prime Minister KOIZUMI’s “trinity reforms”, the safety net component, aside from the heavy public assistance sector, began to be formalized in the mid-2000s as being entrusted to private NPOs. Following the “Tent Village”, it became a natural course for private NPOs to take on policies related to the last line of safety nets.

The “Cabinet Office Special Mission Team for a Society that Includes Each and Every Person”, which was established in January 2011 under the leadership of YUASA Makoto, who was the leader of the “Tent Village”, combined with the recovery from the Great East Japan Earthquake that followed, decisively set the trend towards social inclusion, with private sector NPOs playing a leading role. In order to do this, it is necessary for the private NPOs themselves to clarify the actual situation and initiatives on the front line, and the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare has begun to support surveys through a subsidy system called the Social Welfare Promotion Project. The aforementioned NPO National Homeless Support Network was also commissioned a survey project through a selection process and has been conducting it continuously since 2010, while I served as the head of its survey committee.

The immediate goals were to formulate emergency support for the precariously housed, to promote residential welfare, and to establish

personal support and accompaniment support to provide concrete aftercare. As a result, the support for the homeless, which had been called “residual welfare”, was formally included in the welfare system with the enactment of the Act for Supporting the Self-Reliance of Persons in Need in 2015. One of the free low-cost accommodation facilities for the homeless, which had been criticized for being a poverty business, was rebranded as a social welfare housing facility, and the personnel costs for providing support were finally institutionalized as daily life support housing facilities. In addition, the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism has also promoted housing welfare policies based on the establishment of housing welfare corporations, with the aim of evolving the Housing Safety Net Act in the form of housing security for people with special needs.

7. A safety net concept that is inclusive and built from the region

As the author, I have referred to the last safety net as the “basal safety net” that functions in any region, and our research team has continued to be involved in the establishment of this formal welfare system. While repeating nationwide surveys, I was able to gain the rare experience of being involved in the process of enacting this law. Thanks to this experience, a series of Challenging Exploratory Research Projects were adopted to contribute to the safety net concept by tracking down the diverse groups of people living in precarious conditions in the region.

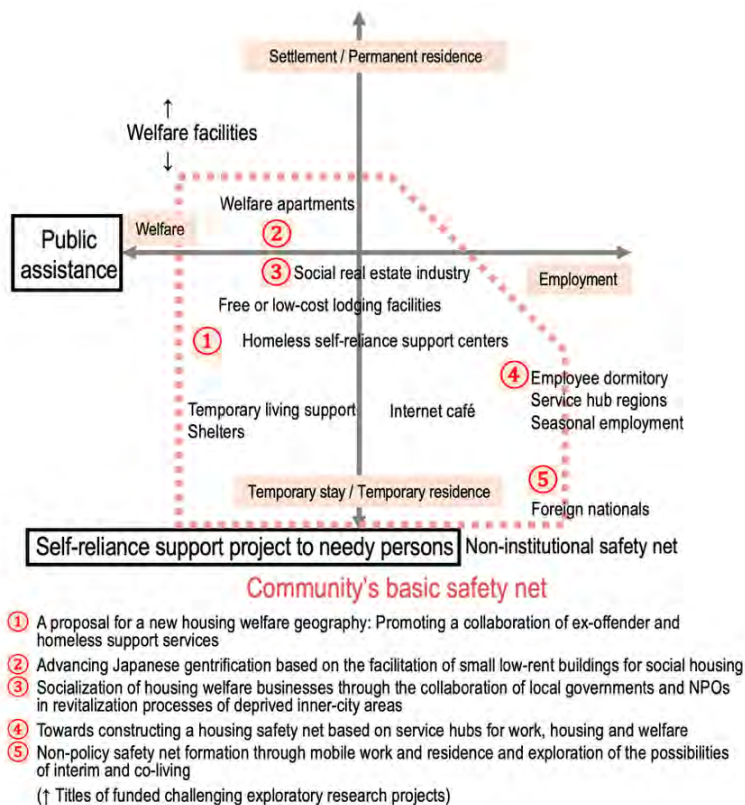


Figure 1: Schematic diagram of the community's basic safety net

Finally, using Figure 1, I would like to explain how the topics of the Challenging Exploratory Research Projects have been involved in the safety net that is being constructed from the region.

Items ① to ⑤ in Figure 1 are research topics for Challenging Exploratory Research, which have been adopted every three years since 2010. In contrast to the traditional safety net, which has been covered by institutional welfare, the basic safety net of the public assistance for the self-reliance of the need persons has started to function, particularly at the homeless self-reliance support center, temporary living support, and shelters. And from there, or directly through the use of public assistance, many needy persons have begun to live in the regions, with free or low-cost accommodation and welfare apartments being mediated by the social real estate industry. The three themes of the challenging exploratory research ①, ②, and ③ are precisely those that deal with such themes, and in terms of the relationship with the community, the small, low-rent housing became “social housing” (which refers to housing that utilizes public housing assistance in the form of public assistance, as opposed to public housing). The mechanism of revitalizing urban areas in need from the viewpoint of residential welfare began to work as a result of the accumulation of these housing units. This was supported by NPOs whose main purpose was to provide residential welfare.

Recent research (④ and ⑤) has focused on the way in which these dormitories function as a non-policy, yet substantive safety net that does not rely on private-sector systems, providing a set of housing and work. The scope of research is expanding to include dormitories for temporary and contract employees, seasonal workers, and even foreign nationals. In

particular, in terms of regional relations, the survey makes visible what is difficult to see in terms of regional concentration of dormitories for employees and seasonal workers, and it is also easy to see the areas where foreign nationals live in concentrated numbers. Amidst the declining population and the mismatch between labor supply and demand, the need for foreign nationals is increasing greatly. The residential welfare safety net is essential as an infrastructure that enables everyday coexistence in the regions.

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