
Why Street Homelessness Has Decreased in Japan: A Comparison of Public Assistance in Japan and the US

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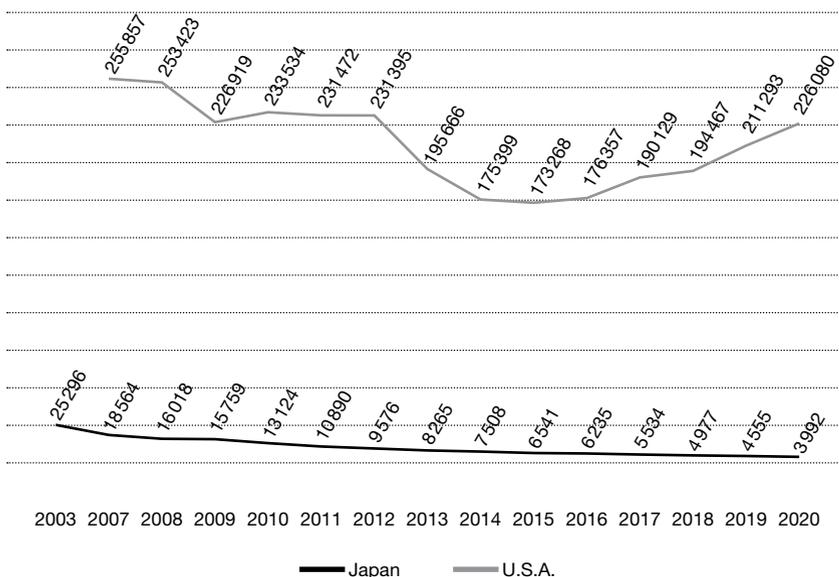
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- **Abstract_** *The number of people officially enumerated as living on the streets in Japan has been consistently decreasing since 2003. As of January 2020, there were 3992 unsheltered people counted on a single night, which is about 16% of the peak in 2003. In contrast, in the US 226 080 people were counted as 'unsheltered' on a single night in 2020 and this number has been consistently increasing since 2015. This paper will focus on one cause of this difference, the respective public assistance systems in the US and Japan. The main public assistance system in Japan, Seikatsu-Hogo (Livelihood Protection) is argued to be a major factor driving the decline in the number of people living unsheltered there. But the characteristics of the Livelihood Protection programme that have contributed to this decline in street homelessness have not been examined in detail. We argue that three characteristics of Japan's public assistance programme are at the core of its success in addressing street homelessness 1) generality, 2) comprehensiveness, and 3) expeditiousness. We also provide an overview of some important shortcomings of the programme. Clarifying how Japan has been able to reduce street homelessness provides insights for measures to address street homelessness in the US and other countries.*
- **Keywords_** *Homelessness, International comparison, Public assistance, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Seikatsu-Hogo (Public assistance in Japan)*

Background and Purpose of This Study

Addressing homelessness has become a common and difficult challenge for countries around the world. For instance, in the United States (US) around 580 000 people were counted as experiencing homelessness on a single night in January, 2020. Of these, around 226 000 people were unsheltered and this number has been consistently increasing since 2015. According to the latest statistics, the total number of people experiencing homelessness increased by 2% between 2019 and 2020, while the rate of homelessness (measured as the share of people experiencing homelessness as a percent of the total population) increased by 4% over this period (OECD, 2021). In contrast, in Japan, since the enactment of the “Act on Special Measures concerning Assistance in Self-Support of Homeless” in 2002, and the beginning of a nationwide survey of homelessness, the number of people living on the streets has been consistently decreasing. As of January 2020, there were 3992 people experiencing unsheltered homelessness, which is about 16% of the peak in 2003. Figure 1 shows trends in the number of people living on the streets in both countries.

Figure 1: Comparison of the number of people experiencing street-level homelessness in Japan and the United States (The US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) (2021) / Kousei Rōdō Sho (Japan’s Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare (2013-2020)).



If the reduction in the number of people experiencing unsheltered homelessness is to be taken as an indicator for evaluating policies addressing homelessness, Japan can be seen as a success story, whereas the US, which made significant gains from 2007-2015, has experienced a reversal of its success.

There are various factors behind the increase and decrease in both countries in the number of people who experience homelessness, including the roles of private support (family), labour market trends, the amount of affordable housing, and the existence of support groups such as NGOs. This paper will focus on one factor, the public assistance system. Reforms to the main public assistance system in Japan, “Seikatsu-Hogo” (Livelihood Protection), have been argued to be behind the decline in the number of people experiencing street homelessness there (Yamada, 2009). However, which characteristics of Japan’s public assistance have contributed to the decline have not been examined in detail.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss what features of Japan’s public assistance system have contributed to the decline in street homelessness, comparing it to the public assistance system in the US, where the number of people experiencing homelessness, especially street homelessness, is increasing. Clarifying how Japan has been able to reduce homelessness could provide suggestions for homelessness measures in the US and other countries.

As a side note, in the US, the situations of people experiencing homelessness and the content and operation of support systems differ from state to state. The number of people experiencing street homelessness in Japan also varies from region to region, and as we will discuss later, the amount of public assistance provided also varies from region to region. Therefore, in this paper, taking into account the size of the population, the number of people experiencing homelessness, and the size of the city, a comparison will be made between Los Angeles, which has been called the “homeless capital of the US” (Dozier 2022: 2), and Tokyo (23 wards), which has the largest number of people experiencing unsheltered homelessness in Japan.

Why Focus on Street-Level Homelessness? An Overview of Homelessness in Los Angeles and Tokyo

As mentioned in the previous section, we focus our analysis on the decline in street-level homelessness, rather than on all people experiencing homelessness more broadly defined. The reason for this is that the way homelessness is defined under Japanese law is limited to street-level homelessness.

The act passed in 2002 in Japan defines homelessness as follows. “The homeless are those who reside in facilities such as urban parks, riverbanks, roads and railway stations for no valid reason and conduct their daily lives there.”

Applying this definition to ETHOS (European Typology of Homelessness and housing exclusion), which is often referred to when discussing topics related to homelessness and includes four conceptual categories (Roofless, Houseless, Insecure, and Inadequate), Japan’s definition falls into the “Roofless” category. This is operationally defined as “people living rough”.

From this perspective, it is clear that the definition of homelessness in Japan is narrow.¹ In this sense, the decrease in street-level homelessness in Japan does not, of course, directly imply a decrease in the overall number of people experiencing homelessness. In fact, a recent survey of 50 000 people over the age of 18 living in the 10 prefectures with the highest number of people experiencing street-level homelessness in Japan found that as many as 6% experienced street-level homelessness, “houselessness,” or “insecurity” as defined by the ETHOS conceptual categories (Zenkoku Hōmuresu Shien Network, 2020). Therefore, it is also necessary for Japan to expand the perception and legal definition of homelessness to match the actual situation, and then to consider how to deal with the problem. However, given that data available since Japan’s homelessness measures are limited to street-level homelessness, and given that the US is struggling to reduce street-level homelessness, the analysis here will consider a reduction in street-level homelessness as one tentative outcome of homelessness measures.

Figure 2 shows the overview of homelessness in Los Angeles (County) and 23 wards of Tokyo. Similar to the national level comparison seen in Figure 1, Los Angeles is on the rise, while Tokyo is on the decline.

¹ The same point is made in the discussion by Iwata (2021a) and Kakita (2020). Iwata points out the following. “It is important to examine why Japan’s homelessness policy has focused only on people sleeping rough and has proposed individual’s independence through employment as a solution, rather than conceptualizing homelessness from the structural perspective of ‘secure and adequate housing’ being threatened.”

Figure 2: The number of People Experiencing Unsheltered Homelessness in Los Angeles County and the 23 wards of Tokyo (2016-2020) (Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority Homepage / Kousei Rōdō Sho (Japan’s Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare (2013-2020))).

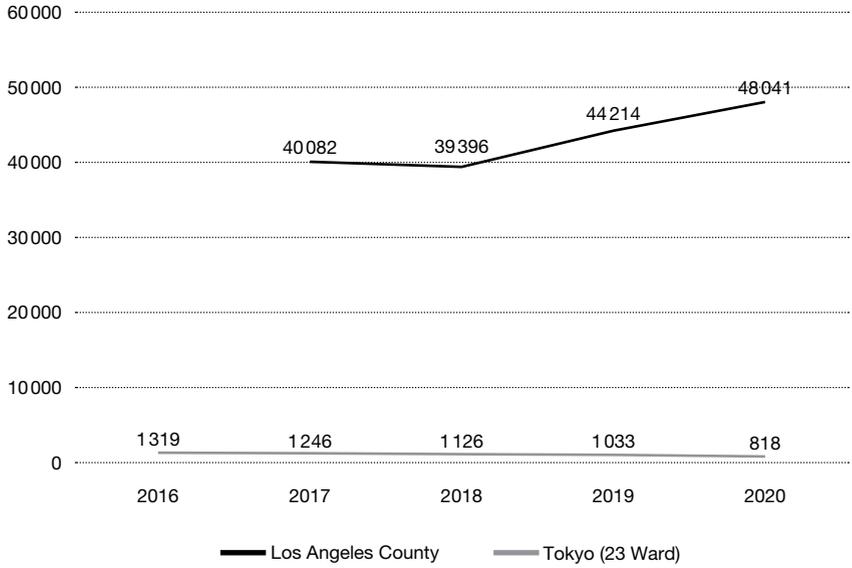


Table 1 shows the demographics of unsheltered homelessness in Los Angeles and Tokyo in 2020. Here, we focus on gender, age, length of homelessness, and health and disability status.

Table 1. Demographics of Unsheltered Homelessness in Los Angeles County and the 23 wards of Tokyo (Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority Homepage / Kousei Rōdō Sho (Japan's Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare (2013-2020) / Tokyo-To Fukushi Hokenkyoku (Tokyo Metropolitan Bureau of Social Welfare and Public Health (2019)).

	Los Angeles (County)	Tokyo (23 Wards)
People Experiencing Unsheltered Homelessness (2020)	48 041	818
Gender (2020)		
Male	72.3	96.5
Female	26.0	3.5
Gender Non-Binary	1.4	N/A
Transgender	0.3	N/A
Age (From here, Los Angeles [County] (2020) / Tokyo data from 2016, n=367)		
Under 18	3.6	N/A
18-24	5.2	N/A
25 and over	91.3	N/A
Under 40	N/A	1.4
40-49	N/A	10.4
50-59	N/A	28.7
60-69	N/A	41.3
70 and over	N/A	18.0
HOUSEHOLD COMPOSITION		
Individuals (those not in family units)	93.6	100.0
CHRONIC HOMELESSNESS		
Percentage of total unsheltered	47.5	87.3
HEALTH & DISABILITY		
Substance Use Disorder	31.0	N/A
HIV/AIDS	1.9	N/A
Serious Mental Illness	25.3	N/A

In terms of gender, in Los Angeles, around 70% of the population experiencing unsheltered homelessness is male and 26% female, while in Tokyo, 95% of the population is male (in Japan, the survey was conducted visually and data on non-binary gender were not collected). As for age, in Los Angeles, the age categories published at the county level are very large and difficult to compare, so we also look at data from the City of Los Angeles (Table 2).

Table 2. Age of People Experiencing Unsheltered Homelessness in the City of Los Angeles, 2020. (n=28 852)

Under 18	2.9
18-24	5.6
25-54	63.6
55-61	16.8
62 and over	10.9

In Los Angeles, the majority of the population is in the adolescent to middle-aged age groups. In Japan, however, the proportion of elderly people aged 60 and above is high at just under 60% of the total. The percentage of people who have experienced homelessness for more than one year is around 50% in Los Angeles, but around 90% in Japan, indicating that the situation in Japan is more serious in terms of prolonged homelessness. In terms of health status and disability, the percentage of Los Angeles' population experiencing unsheltered homelessness with substance use disorders and serious mental illnesses is around 30% each (with some overlap). We do not have similar data from Japan. However, according to a survey conducted in one of Tokyo's 23 wards, 50 out of 80 people living on the streets were reported to have some symptoms of mental illness (Morikawa et al., 2011). In that sense, it is expected that there is a large percentage of people experiencing unsheltered homelessness that have symptoms of mental illness in Japan. However, these data were collected through a questionnaire called the Mini-International Neuropsychiatric Interview (MINI), which was developed to screen for psychiatric disorders broadly. In our interview and ethnographic research on homelessness in both countries, fewer people have reported or displayed symptoms of severe mental illness in Japan. This is likely due to much higher rates of institutionalisation for severe mental illness in Japan (Marr, 2015).

An Overview of the US Public Assistance System: Why Focus on SSI?

In the US, various cash benefits programmes are available to people experiencing poverty and homelessness, such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Supplemental Security Income (SSI). Also, some states have General Assistance or General Relief (GA or GR), a modest cash assistance programme for nonworking adults who are not otherwise receiving SSI. The names of these programmes vary from state to state.

About 37% of people experiencing homelessness in the US have serious physical or mental health problems (HUD, 2010). As shown in Table 1, the percentage of people with serious mental disorders among the unsheltered in Los Angeles is 25.8%. In addition, among people experiencing homelessness in Los Angeles, including those on the streets, the number of people over the age of 65 is expected to increase 2.5 times between 2017 and 2030 (Culhane et al., 2019).

Among the cash benefits mentioned above, those eligible for SSI are the elderly aged 65 and above and those with disabilities as defined by the Social Security Administration (SSA). In addition, as will be explained later, the benefit level (approximately \$1 000 per month in California) is considerably higher than the level

of GR provided in Los Angeles (\$221 per month). In that sense, it can be said that SSI is one of the most important programmes to help people get off from street in the US. TANF (or “CalWORKs” in California) is comparable to SSI in terms of benefit levels, but this programme is designed for households with children and is only applicable to a small percentage of people experiencing unsheltered homelessness, which is mostly single-person households. In addition, SSI is administrated under the responsibility of the Federal Government. Noda (2007) has pointed out that this system is similar to that of Japan’s public assistance.

In the following section, we compare SSI with Japan’s public assistance programme, Seikatsu-Hogo (Livelihood Protection), and analyse which characteristics of the Japanese programme are likely to have been most effective in reducing unsheltered homelessness in Japan.

Comparison of SSI (Los Angeles) and Livelihood Protection (Japan)

Table 3 shows a comparison between SSI in the US and “Seikatsu-Hogo” (Livelihood Protection) in Japan. The comparison here is made from three perspectives. The first is eligibility requirements, the second is benefit level and relationship with other systems, and the third is time for certification.

Table 3 Comparison of SSI (US, Los Angeles) and Livelihood Protection (Japan, Tokyo)

	SSI (US, Los Angeles)	Livelihood Protection (Seikatsu-Hogo) (Japan, Tokyo)
Eligibility requirements	Attribute	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In poverty – below a particular income level (provided based on a requirement that a person who is living in poverty shall utilise his/her assets, abilities and every other thing available to him/her for maintaining a minimum standard of living.)
	Assets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be either a US citizen or national, or a qualified alien. • Reside in one of the 50 States, the District of Columbia, or the Northern Mariana Islands. • Not be absent from the US for a full calendar month or 30 or more consecutive days. • Age 65 or older or Blind/Disabled.
	Exclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has limited income. • Has limited resources.
Benefit level and relationship with other systems	Benefit level (Los Angeles and Tokyo) (compared to the relative poverty rate level)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If the disability is based on alcoholism or drug addiction alone. • Any month in which you're in prison or jail, have an outstanding warrant for a violation of a parole or probation order, or are a fleeing felon. • After you are outside the country for more than 30 days
	Provision for other needs (housing, medical and others)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • \$ 954 for a disabled person 18 or over • 89% (Relative poverty level in the US In 2020 = less than \$12 760 per year)
Time for certification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • \$ 727 (single individual at Tokyo) • 75.7% (Japan's relative poverty level in 2018 = less than \$11 513 per year) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-discrimination and equality
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SSI recipients automatically qualify for Medicaid. (Medicaid eligibility varies by state) • More than 60% of SSI recipients receive SNAP (food stamps) and about a quarter receive housing assistance • In some cases, people are receiving SSI while living on the streets. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If necessary, • Housing assistance (upper limit: \$487 in Tokyo/single household) • Medical assistance • Other assistance • Housing is automatically provided (if someone who is unsheltered gets public assistance).
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Average 166 days (2016-2021) and complicated application process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Within 14 days in principle and simple application process

Eligibility requirements

As mentioned previously, the eligibility requirements for SSI are that the person must be 65 years old or older, or have a disability as defined by the SSA. If you are 65 years old or older, it is relatively easy to receive SSI because you are exempt from the certification of inability to work. This may be one of the reasons why until recently few people over the age of 65 lived on the streets in the US, a trend that is weakening due to increased housing costs. However, it has been pointed out that other eligibility requirements, like whether or not a person matches the SSA defini-

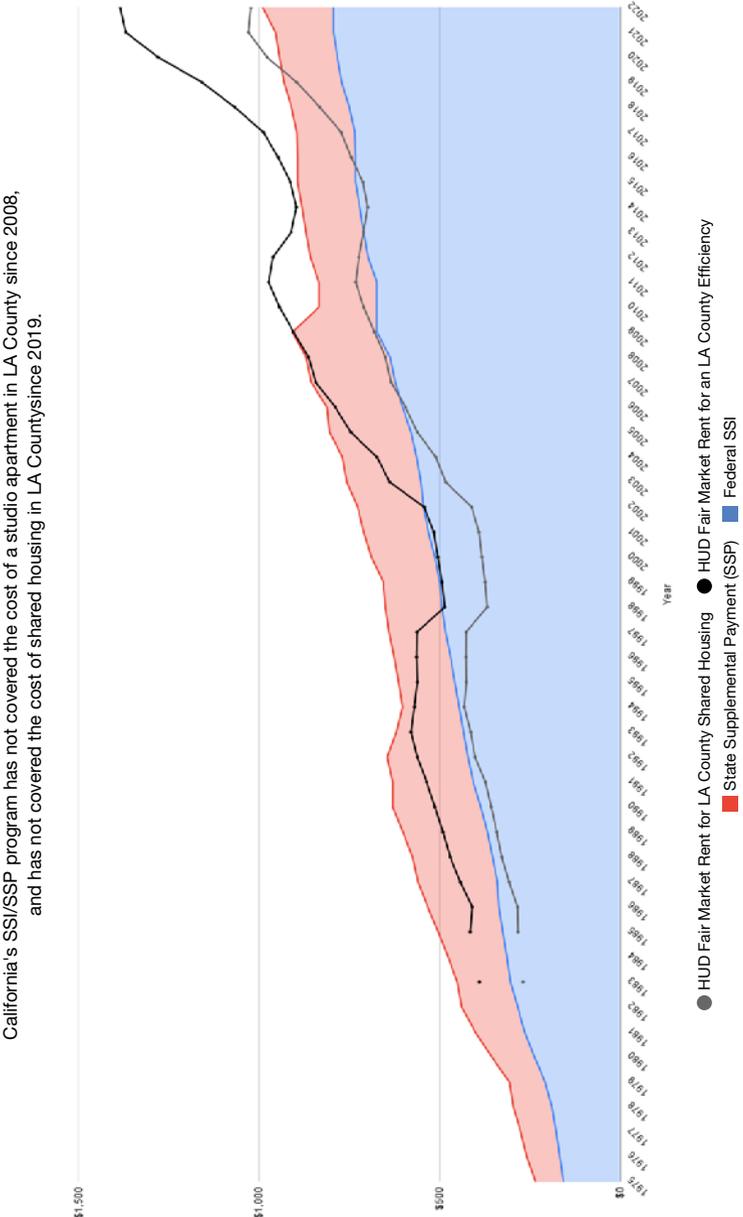
tion of disability, are becoming stricter every year (Erkulwater, 2006). According to Dennis et al. (2011), 32% of adult applicants overall between the ages of 18 and 65 were awarded benefits, while only 10-15% of adult applicants experiencing homelessness were awarded benefits. In addition, SSI has a provision that excludes benefits to those who do not comply with warrants for serious crimes and those who violate various conditions required by probation. In the US, and especially Los Angeles, there is a movement to criminalise homelessness, critiqued as a 'police first' approach (Marr et al., 2009). If this movement is thoroughly implemented, the number of people excluded from SSI may increase. The SSI system was also revised in 1997 to exclude people whose disability is based on alcohol or drug dependence, and this has resulted in the exclusion from SSI of a large number of people experiencing homelessness (GAO, 2000). Considering that 31% of the people experiencing unsheltered homelessness have substance use disorders, this requirement may result in a significant number of people with disabilities who are not eligible for SSI.

In contrast, Japan's public assistance has no requirements other than financial need (a 'general assistance principle'), and people of any age with or without disabilities are eligible to receive it. In addition, involvement in crimes such as those mentioned above does not result in exclusion (a 'non-discrimination principle'). According to previous studies, about 30-40% of adults experiencing homelessness in Japan have criminal records (Kakegawa, 2020).

Benefit level

In 2020, the prescriptive SSI benefit level for a person with a disability over the age of 18 in California was \$954/month. But this amount depends on household composition, type of disability, and so on. The maximum SNAP (food assistance) benefit for a single-person household, which 60% of SSI recipients are said to receive concurrently, is \$194/month. If we look at the relationship between SSI and the US relative poverty standard for 2020 (half of the median disposable income), SSI alone in California covers about 89%, and if we add SNAP, the figure would be about 107%. This means that it is possible to get an amount above the official US poverty line. However, the national poverty threshold does not adjust for regional cost of living differences, and California in particular has experienced significant housing costs increases. As shown in Figure 3, SSI payments (combined state and federal shares) have been losing ground to housing price increases, and indeed have fallen below the fair market rent for an efficiency apartment in LA since 2015, when unsheltered homelessness also began to rise. This indicates that, because of the decline of affordable housing, even people who receive SSI are often unable to get out of homelessness.

Figure 3 California's SSI/SSP programme has not covered the cost of a studio apartment in LA County since 2008 and has not covered the cost of shared housing in LA County (United Way of Greater Los Angeles, Home for Good Initiative. The Older Adult Strategy: A Roadmap of Strategic System Investments to End Homelessness Among Older Adults in Los Angeles, September 2021).



Source: United Way of Greater Los Angeles, Home For Good Initiative. The Older Adult Strategy. A Roadmap of Strategic System Investments to End Homelessness Among Older Adults in Los Angeles, September 2021

In Japan, public assistance provides \$727 in cash benefits for a single person (assuming the age of 40-59) in a high-cost city (like Tokyo). So, public assistance alone covers about 75% of the relative poverty line. However, public assistance in Japan includes eight forms of assistance, including housing and health care. We refer to this as a 'package system'. If you need to pay for housing, in addition to living expenses, it will be provided from within the same welfare system. When a person experiencing street homelessness receives welfare, housing costs or facilities are automatically provided. If we add housing assistance to the cash benefit (with an upper limit of \$487), which is almost automatically granted to unsheltered people who receive public assistance, the benefit level is 126% of the relative poverty line. This high level of benefits was noted in a study that showed that Japan had the smallest difference between the minimum wage (full-time work) and the total amount of social assistance plus housing assistance in OECD countries (Yamada and Komamura 2018). Japanese public assistance's inclusion of housing assistance closes a major part of that gap. In contrast, in the US, while SSI comes with guaranteed health insurance (Medicaid), it does not come with housing assistance. Only about 25% of SSI recipients receive housing assistance (in the US housing assistance is not an entitlement), which is administered by a separate federal agency under a separate application and eligibility process (US HUD 2021).

Time for certification

According to data published by the SSA, the average number of days from the time of application for SSI to the time it is adjudicated is 166 days (average for 2016-2021). As mentioned earlier, SSI's accreditation rate is not high, but even if an applicant is not accredited, they can reapply within 60 days. However, the average number of days it takes to adjudicate that reapplication is also 103 days (average for 2018). According to interviews with people experiencing homelessness and their advocates, people often have difficulties applying for SSI and some may be incarcerated for minor offenses during the application process. The lack of immediate access to psychiatric care after release from prison, which is necessary to prove disability, has also been pointed out as a problem. Also, for people on the street, especially those with severe mental health issues, it is difficult to attend meetings and keep documents, a situation that is likely worsening with increased sweeps of tents and encampments in US cities. These difficulties contribute to rejections of applications and a longer time to get approved for SSI benefits.

It has also been pointed out that people who are homeless often use drugs and alcohol to cope with their situations (National Coalition for the Homeless 2009). As mentioned earlier, SSI can be denied if the disability can be attributed to alcohol or

drug dependence. Thus, a prolonged period for SSI adjudication due to homelessness can be argued as increasing the risk of SSI denial due to an increased risk of substance use.

Japan's public assistance on the other hand is basically ruled upon within 14 days, with a maximum of 30 days. Also, since the only requirement for receiving welfare is financial, very few cases are not approved if the applicant is living on the streets and is willing to move into shelter or housing introduced by the welfare office. For example, according to statistics from the Shinjuku City Welfare Office (2020), which has the largest number of people experiencing unsheltered homelessness in Tokyo, all 924 applications for public assistance submitted by people staying on the streets were approved. Of these applicants, 829 people moved into Single Room Occupancy (SRO) units, 33 to welfare facilities (shelters), and 62 to hospitals.

Discussion – Three Characteristics of Welfare in the Context of Declining Street-Level Homelessness in Japan

Based on the above comparison, the characteristics of Japanese public assistance that contribute to a reduction in street homelessness can be summarised in three key words: 1. Generality, 2. Comprehensiveness, and 3. Expeditiousness.

Generality

'Generality' refers to the fact that Japan's public assistance is targeted at a single, broad, and inclusive category of the needy, rather than by multiple, narrow, and exclusionary categories as in the US. To put it succinctly, the system is designed so that anyone in need can use it. Needless to say, the concept of homelessness refers to a condition. As we saw in Table 3, those experiencing homelessness are a diverse group of people, and if the system is designed according to categories, as is the case with public assistance in the US, some people will be left behind because of the need to match these requirements in order to be able to access the system. Therefore, to reduce street-level homelessness, it would be preferable to design a system without limiting the categories (according to the 'general assistance principle') as in Japan.

Comprehensiveness

The 'comprehensiveness' of Japan's welfare system means that it combines various types of assistance that can address multiple aspects of poverty in addition to living expenses. As mentioned above, Japanese welfare is a combination of cash benefits from livelihood assistance and, if necessary, housing and health care. Therefore, if someone living on the streets receives public assistance, housing assistance is also

automatically provided. When considered in the context of reduced homelessness in Japan, the inclusion of a housing assistance mechanism in the public assistance system is extremely significant.

Expeditiousness

'Expeditiousness', as the name implies, means that the time from application to adjudication is extremely short compared to SSI in the US. This reduces the possibility of prolonged homelessness, as well as the associated deterioration of physical and mental health, and police citations, arrests, and incarcerations.

Which factor has been most important in driving the decline?

The three features of Japan's welfare system that we have described above were built into the system from the time it was established in 1950. In spite of this, street-level homelessness rose dramatically in Japan during the 1990s. This is because the generality of the system was not properly applied in operation. During the recession at this time, middle-aged and older unemployed men at risk of homelessness, many of them day labourers, were effectively excluded from the welfare system through street-level bureaucracy (Lipsky, 2010). Unemployed, able-bodied men of working age seeking aid at welfare offices were generally told by staff to look for work, or that they needed an address for benefits, going against the spirit of the law that created the programme. Many of these men internalised the sentiment that they were not eligible because they were physically able to work and refrained from pursuing benefits.

From the perspective of contributing to the reduction of homelessness at the street level, it is important to note that generality has changed significantly at the operational level since this time. In response to the increase in the number of people experiencing homelessness and groups advocating on their behalf in the early 2000s, the application of public assistance to working-age people was gradually liberalised at the operational level. Furthermore, the Lehman shock in 2008 (the 'Great Recession') increased public concern for contract workers who would become suddenly unemployed, triggering an extensive review and reform of the operation of public assistance. This has made it possible for people of working age to receive the benefit more readily.

From this perspective, of the three characteristics mentioned above, generality seems to be the one that has contributed the most to the reduction of street-level homelessness in Japan. Implementing generality enabled the other two components of Japan's system to have positive impacts on a broader population. Considering the comparison with the US, it seems that generality is the key to expand eligibility to include most people who are experiencing homelessness; that expeditiousness makes it possible to access the benefit quickly; and comprehen-

siveness enables people who are experiencing homelessness to get access to necessary housing assistance. Together these appear to be the necessary and sequential elements of the public assistance system in Japan that has reduced street homelessness there.²

Lessons and Remaining Issues

The three working components of Japan's "Livelihood Protection" public assistance system suggest specific ideas for reforming SSI that could contribute to durable, long-term decreases in street homelessness in the US. First, the principle of generality suggests that SSI should be made to be needs-based and not based on categories like disabled and elderly. Basic income programmes are being implemented in US cities and could lay the groundwork for a more generally applied SSI benefit. Second, SSI should be made more comprehensive and inclusive of an adequate housing benefit that is useful in skyrocketing rental markets. This is especially important since an aging population in the US is becoming more vulnerable to homelessness due to the affordable housing crisis. Also, housing benefits as applied in supportive housing programmes have already demonstrated success in the US. Third, expeditiousness in processing applications and allocating benefits is necessary to avoid prolonging homelessness. There have already been hard-earned gains in reducing time to adjudication for SSI applications, but efforts need to be made to redouble them. All of these approaches would need substantial federal, state, and local investment. However, they would work in a complementary fashion, with generality reducing the complexity of proving eligibility, and expeditiousness increasing the effectiveness of comprehensive approaches including housing subsidies, for example.

This study discusses the decline in the number of people experiencing street homelessness, focusing on the Japanese public assistance system and how its features contribute to exits from street homelessness. However, it is also necessary to discuss the decline in the number of people who experience homelessness from a preventive perspective (i.e., whether the number of people who become newly homeless is increasing or decreasing). As we have discussed in this paper, the welfare system in Japan is a comprehensive system that combines various kinds of assistance. However, because it is allocated based on demonstrated need, it can only be used after income and assets are almost gone. In this sense, it is weak as a system to prevent people from becoming homeless. In recent years, from this perspective, some have advocated the 'dismantling' of the welfare system (Iwata,

² See Kitagawa (2021) for a more critical analysis of how punitive measures like evictions have worked alongside the public assistance system in the decline of street homelessness in Tokyo.

2021b). This approach proposes that the eight types of assistance included in Japan's welfare system be incorporated into a variety of existing social services to secure a minimum standard of living. From the perspective of preventing people from becoming homeless, such a shift would change our assessment of the features of the Japanese welfare system described in this paper.

Japan's welfare system has two other glaring issues that demand mention in the context of addressing homelessness. The first is stigma. In Japan, there is a strong stigma against receiving public assistance due to a high expectation for self-reliance, especially for people experiencing homelessness (Goto 2010). This is very important because when people apply for public assistance, their relatives (usually parents, siblings, and adult children, but also possibly including even cousins) are contacted to inquire about their support. As a result, the take-up rate of welfare in Japan is reported to be around 15-20%. Some people experiencing homelessness do not apply for welfare to avoid this aspect of the system (Inaba, 2021).

The second is about appropriate housing. Some of the shelters introduced by welfare offices upon application or operated by private organisations who bring unhoused people to offices for application are inadequate in terms of the living environment and the support provided. These shelters are sometimes mocked as the 'poverty industry.' The decline in street-level homelessness in Japan includes many cases of people receiving public assistance and transitioning to these facilities. If we apply this to the ETHOS context described in section 2, we could say that Japan has just moved people from Roofless ('People living rough') to Houseless ('People in accommodation for the homeless') or Inadequate ('People living in unfit housing') statuses. Thus, the decline in street homelessness in Japan that we have discussed does not mean a decline in the overall number of people experiencing homelessness defined more broadly. In this sense, the policy evaluation about a 'decline' in street-level homelessness described in this paper has possibly different connotations. A remaining challenge for researchers and practitioners in Japan is to examine and address these issues. Also, comparative research on public assistance systems outside of the US could further reveal characteristics of Japan's public assistance system associated with reduced street homelessness.

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