The tackling against the homelessness in Japan has not led preventative measures but invited cruel and heartless business for the homeless people

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Abstract

The homeless provisions in Japan is only a tackling against rough sleeping at the public spaces such as parks, river banks, streets and stations. Although the formal number of rough sleepers is decreasing in 2003 and afterwards, those who live in temporary accommodations, such as those who pass by the Internet cafe, 24-hour stores (a restaurant, a bookstore, etc.), trains and so on, and the number of free or low fee lodgings is increasing. Although the number of public assistance receipt household is increasing every year, socially vulnerable groups' occupancy status has not improved. Although the focus of the homeless policy in the UK has shifted to preventive measures from the tackling against homelessness, the measure against the homeless in Japan did not bring about a radical effect, but the poverty business which used social security benefits as the guide overran it, and the homeless persons are content with the miserable life. Precious social resources are the present condition which was not utilized effectively but has repeated waste. This cause is considered through comparison with the homeless policy in the UK from the view point of cooperation with the homeless policy, the housing policy, and other policies, or cooperation of social resources.

Introduction

In UK, after the “Housing (Homeless Persons) Act” was established in 1977 and “Rough sleepers Initiative” were enacted in 1990, the number of the homeless who lived in temporary accommodations such as Bed and Breakfast increased. After the “Homeless Act” was executed in 2002, measures for the homeless began focusing on ways to help people from becoming the homeless. Although England, Wales, Scotland and North Ireland have their own characteristics of Acts related to the homeless with the impact from decentralization of authority, England, Wales and Scotland take basic measures to prevent people from becoming homeless. In Japan where the “Act on Special Measures concerning Assistance in Self-Support of the Homeless” was established in 2002, the official number of the homeless appeared to decrease from 25,296 in 2003 to 10,890 in 2011. The Act mainly focuses on addressing issues of homelessness, and now the number of the poverty business has increased.
This paper aims to contribute to solving the essential problems related to the homeless by discussing the factors why measures to prevent people from becoming homeless are not introduced in Japan while comparing the issues on the homeless in UK, if necessary.

**Growing poverty business**

We recognize that “public assistance” is the last safety net, and that “public assistance” provides relief, without discrimination or limitation, to anyone who happens to fall into poverty at anytime. However, “public assistance” has not been operating in adherence to the purposes of the Public Assistance Act, because young people have the capacity to work, and because the living conditions of these homeless are difficult to ascertain or it is difficult to contact these homeless people. Also, some of those in poverty have moved into regions where application to the public assistance is easily approved. After suits such as the Hayashi suit (1996) and Sato suit (1998), which confirms the right of the homeless to directly receive “public assistance”, the number of people who receives “public assistance” has increased by the tent village in Hibiya Park at the end of 2008. (The number of families receiving public assistance increased to 1,399,237 in 2010, after the number decreased to 686,000 (the public assistance ratio: 7.2%) in 1992. According to a quick estimation in February in 2011, the number of families receiving public assistance exceeded 1.4 million, and the public assistance ratio was 15.8 %.) Behind the increase of those who receive “public assistance” lies people’s desire to help the “temporarily-employed workers” who have suddenly lost their jobs and homes, instead of providing “public assistance” to the “chronically homeless”.

The number of the homeless in Japan steadily decreased with each survey since 2003. On the other hand, the number of people who lives in “free or low cost accommodations” which belong to the Class II social welfare services and “unlicensed facilities” has increased. Some free or low cost accommodations approach the homeless and insist that they apply for public assistances at the appropriate welfare offices before allowing them to live in the accommodations. Many of the people who live in the “free or low cost accommodations” receive public assistance, but they receive only about 20,000 yen after the amount of money equal to the “housing benefits” as rent is collected, although their room size is only about three tatami mats. Also, most of their livelihood protection subsidy is collected under the pretext of food expense etc and they are provided with only cup noodles and pre-made lunch. They cannot cover the cost for visiting companies for job application or going to job interviews, which results in keeping them jobless. The survey by Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare in 2009 revealed that there were 439 free or low cost accommodations nationwide, and the total number of person admitted to the accommodations was 14,089, and 12,894 of them received public assistance. The number of facilities where recipients of public assistance live and are not specified by any Act related to social welfare was 1,437, with the number of recipients being 12,587.

There are some cases where young part-time workers and dispatched workers hired by the day who cannot acquire stable jobs stay at internet cafes for sleeping and to search for their next job (According to “Net café homeless people” Survey 2007 by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, the number of net café refugees (they sometimes live in net cafes because they lost their houses and they work at part-time jobs.) is about 5,400, and the number of people who stay at net cafes during more than half of the week is about 21,400.) Accommodation fees of net cafes are about 2,000 yen per night, adding up to about 60,000 yen a month, exceeding normal room rentals. To conclude a contract for a house for rent, deposit, key money and guarantor are generally required. However, for low-income unstable part-time workers, it is difficult to prepare the amount of money equivalent to six months’ rent as deposit, key money and commission for concluding the contract. Furthermore, the workers have no one to act as guarantor because of lack of interpersonal connections. Recently, houses for rent targeting low-income, unstable part-time workers that do not require deposit, key money or guarantors, known as “zero zero houses” have become popular. In these cases, a lease agreement is not concluded for a room but for a “key”; therefore, when residents fall behind in their house payment, keys for the house are immediately changed and the residents are made to vacate. Also, real estate
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agencies recommend tenants who cannot get a guarantor to contract a guaranty company and “evictor” who forcefully and illegally expel defaulting tenants from their houses when the rent is in arrears is also prevalent.

Thus, people become homeless or poor regardless of their intention and a “poverty business”, which targets the homeless or the poor has spread.

Methods of escaping from homelessness and housing poverty

Methods of escaping from homelessness

Measures to support people who have lost their houses include the “Public Assistance Act” and the “Act on Special Measures concerning Assistance in Self-Support of Homeless” established in 2002. The “Act on Special Measures concerning Assistance in Self-Support of Homeless” categorizes the homeless into the following three types, and determines how they should be supported: “those who should be housed at welfare facilities due to their health problems and ages, etc.”, “those who can be self-supporting through being employed, as they are physically and mentally healthy”, and “those who reject social life”. The basic concept of supporting the homeless is being “self-supporting through being employed”. It is determined at a “shelter” whether each of the homeless is physically and mentally healthy enough to be employed, then jobs are introduced to them at “self-support centers” when they are in physically and mentally healthy and they can pursue a course towards self-support by being employed.

For support based on the “Public Assistance Act”, the homeless are generally assessed at the “relief facility” whether they have a viable living in a house. When it is determined that they have a viable living in a house, they are allowed to live in a house for rent at a livelihood protection subsidy rate. While they are being assessed, they have to stay in a facility where they share a room with other homeless people, without any privacy and with strict rules on drinking and curfew. Staying in such facility makes it difficult for the homeless to receive public assistance.

The “Local Homeless Life Transition Support Program” carried out by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government aims to help people to escape from the homeless state by a “housing first” approach, which differs from the traditional measures of the employment first approach, by supplying housing at a welfare facility (Michiko Bando, the “True picture of an apartment with the “Local Homeless Life Transition Support Program” ‘Shelter-less’ No.26, 2005). Rent for the housing is not expensive, only 3,000 yen a month, but the problem with the Program is that the lease period is limited to two years.

In this method to escape the homeless life, the people can live at the free or low cost accommodations; however, as stated before, the accommodations soak up the “livelihood protection subsidy”, leading to poverty business where the people cannot achieve prospects of self-supported living conditions.

Poverty housing

The “poverty housing” is categorized into the following three categories: Unstable residency mainly “vagrant sleeping”, “defective low rent house” which is not offered in the housing market, and “house” traded in the housing market. Unstable housing includes securing residency such as staying in a “free or low cost accommodations” by receiving “public assistance” or staying in a “flop house, net café or company dormitory” by having unstably daily employment or dispatch employment, all of which are closely related to “public assistance” and “employment”. Many of the low rent house which can be covered by “livelihood protection subsidy”, is aging or is located in inconvenient areas. These factors make it difficult for them to obtain employment. Without more stable “employment” and
“livelihood support”, stable “residency” cannot be obtained. Also to obtain residency, a “guarantor” is necessary.

Rent is not expensive for the “defective low rent house” which is not on the housing market, but the house is old or is distributed within limited human relationships. Hence, it is difficult for a third person to stay there. For example, many of the houses in urban districts which collapsed during the Great Hanshin Earthquake belong to this type of houses. Many people had lived there for low rent over a long period, even since after the World War, but with the house collapsed, or when people found it difficult to live in the house because the houses were falling apart from old age. The earthquake rehabilitation public houses were built for the earthquake victims, but rent was several times more than that of the previous rents, and the houses could not be the basis of the living of the former residents. To make it possible for such people to pay for rent from the houses offered in the housing market, it is necessary to dramatically increase these people’s income.

The standard of living of those in the “houses” offered by the housing market improves according to the increase of income, and most of the houses are the subject of the various measures for houses. Improvement of the standard of living depends on economic growth, price increase of land and houses, seniority payment and life employment. As these conditions improved, the standard of living rose during the high economic growth period.

The subjects of measures for supporting the homeless are only the homeless people and those who stay in welfare facilities, dormitories and flophouses are excluded from the subject. Measures for supporting the homeless are taken mainly by welfare departments in conjunction with labour and house departments, but measures on houses are taken by mainly house departments, and there is a lack of collaboration with labour and welfare departments. In addition, gaps between the vagrant sleeping and the housing market are large. Political measures lack collaboration with each other and there is no measure which prevents people living in houses offered in the housing market from becoming homeless. For example, to receive “public assistance” which is called the last safety net, all assets have to be utilized.

Measures to support making the homeless to be “self-supporting through being employed”, obtaining houses by utilizing payment obtained through employment and improvement of the standard of living are being developed. Still, there is no measure to prevent people from becoming homeless.

**Measure resources that do not meet the demands**

The reason why measures to prevent people from becoming homeless cannot be developed is that the demand and measure resources are not in balance with each other and many people have to figure out their own salvation. As shown in the Table 1 below, the number of the homeless has decreased nationwide after peaking in 2003, but the number, still, exceeds 13,000 in 2010. The resources to support the homeless, as of February 2010, were 46 shelters with a capacity of 2,028 people, 25 self-support centers with a capacity of 2,136 people and itinerating consultation at 36 areas. If all of the homeless were forced to live in buildings, the homeless would have to change facilities to stay every 2 months. The physical and mental conditions of the homeless have to be inspected within 2 months to determine whether they are in good enough condition to work. Then, when they have achieved a satisfactory condition, they are forced to move to a self-support center, or to a welfare facility. The homeless are people who have lost their jobs due to the decrease in the application ratios because of their aging and the state of the society. Hence, job hunting is not easy for them, and thorough care is required even after they are employed to achieve self-supporting through being employed. There are too few shelters and self-support centers in comparison to the actual number of the homeless. In addition, the living space for one person is only three tatami mats, and there are many regulations in the shelters and centers. As it is insufficient for maintaining dignity of life, many of the homeless refuse to live there.
As of 2008, Japan had 300 protection facilities with a capacity of 20,483 people (shelter, rehabilitation center, medical facility for persons requiring public assistance, vocational facility and accommodations). Considering the number of the homeless and people who stay at free or low cost accommodations, unlicensed facilities and net cafes, the resources that can support people who have lost their houses is insufficient.

Table 1. Transition of the number of the homeless (nationwide)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>The number of the homeless</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>24,090</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>25,296</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>18,564</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>16,018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>15,759</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>13,124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>10,890</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare survey

Decreasing low rent houses

Second, what we want to bring attention to is the decrease in low rent houses, which are used by low income people to prevent them from becoming homeless. The decrease in low rent houses could be caused by a decrease in low rent houses offered by private real estate agencies, increase in construction of luxury housing, decrease in public houses, decrease in houses supported by various private enterprises, such as company houses and company dormitories, which used to play an important role as a springboard to having one’s own house.

Due to increase in rent, the number of the low rent houses has been decreasing in the mid urban areas. According to “Retail Price Survey” from 1995 to 2008, the average rent per 3.3 square meters fluctuates but gradually rises. Rent has decreased in some of the capitals (Saitama City 92.7%, Chiba City 77.0%, Gifu City 95.5%, Kobe City 96.7%, Fukuoka City 95.7% and Nagasaki City 97.6%). Still, rent has risen in Takamatsu City with 145.7%. From “Housing and Land Survey”, the average rent (not including less than 50 yen) nationwide rose from 50,863 in 1998 yen to 54,527 yen in 2008.

The rising rent for houses offered by private real estate agencies could be due to dismantlement of the old low rent houses with urban redevelopment and construction of luxury houses and multi-storied apartment buildings. Especially, after the collapse of the bubble economy around 1990, limitations of urban planning at specified areas at the center of urban areas was released, and the small bubble phenomenon occurred, resulting in an increase in land and house prices.

In addition, it became time to rebuild the public houses which were built from 1960’s to 1970’s. In the middle of 2000’s, the proportion of houses to be rebuilt to newly built houses exceeded 80% and the number of public houses did not increase, causing a reduction in the number of public houses from 2,182,600 in 2003 to 2,010,400 in 2008 (“Housing and Land Survey”). The application ratio to public houses increased from 2.6 (nationwide average) in 1997 to 9.4 (nationwide average) in 2003 (“White paper on Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism, 2008” by National Land and Transportation Ministry, 2009). This shows the high demands for low rent houses.

Private enterprises, in order to reduce costs to overcome global competition, have relinquished their own company houses and dormitories which were owned for the use of their employees. The “Housing and Land Survey” showed that the proportion of the company houses decreased from 7% in 1963 to 2.8% in 2008.
On the other hand, the Japanese economy after the collapse of the bubble economy has floundered and absolute income has started to decrease. The “Comprehensive Survey of the Living Condition of the People on Health and Welfare” by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare revealed that the average income per family continued to decrease from 6,552,000 yen in 1998 to 5,562,000 yen in 2007. In elderly households, the average income decrease from 3,355,000 yen in 1998 to 2,989,000 yen in 2007. The tendency of decrease of income brings about the state of family finances opposite to those during the high economic growth period. Decrease of income year by year increases the proportion of housing cost in disposable income, taking away economic allowance, and increases pressures which lower living space and quality. That is, it adversely affects the standard of living.

For instance, the decrease in the number of the low rent houses and the decrease in income have brought about a phenomenon that free or low cost accommodations and unlicensed facilities for the elderly are used by people who have lost their houses, or who have difficulties living in their previous houses.

As stated above, a decrease in the number of low rent houses and a decrease in income create low standards of living, which foster an environment for the poverty business.

**Downscaling measures that support the poor and increase poverty - Measure background**

Thirdly, the environment of the measures that were offered through the high growth economic period has changed. Changes in the population structure and the end of the high growth economic period contribute to downscaling measures that could solve the housing poverty and increasing the subjects of the measures. The high economic growth period in Japan was from the 1960’s to 1973, when the first oil crisis occurred. The total unemployment ratio during that time was about 1% (“Labour Force Survey” by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications). After 1976, the total unemployment ratio exceeded 2.0%, reaching to 2.8% in 1986 after a gradual increase. However, the bubble economy lowered the ratio to 2.1% in 1990. The depression after that increased the total unemployment ratios to 5.0% in 2001 and 5.4% in 2002. It decreased to 3.9% in 2007 once, but rose again to 5.1% in 2010.

When we look at the number of completely unemployed people, the number was 730,000 until 1974 at most. After the late 1970’s, it exceeded 1 million, exceeded 2 millions in 1995 and finally exceeded 3 millions in 1999. From 2005 to 2007, the number was less than 3 millions at one point, but it increased again from 2009, exceeding 3.3 million people.

As indicated in the transition of the total unemployment ratios and the number of completely unemployed people, the Japanese economy achieved adequate employment throughout the high economic growth period. Support for the unemployed was temporal and unemployment was not a general issue. Accordingly, measures to support the poor were downscaled, such as reduction of public assistance ratios and a decrease in shelters. Currently, contrary to the direction of measures, those below poverty level have increased, because of the transformation of industrial structures and the aging of society.

The Table 2 below presents the average area of houses. From the Table 2, we can see that the housing size was expanded with the economic growth from 77.14 m$^2$ in 1973 to 94.85 m$^2$ in 2003 and the standard of living was improved. However, the housing size fell below the previous one in 2008 for the first time. This indicates that standard of living has deteriorated with the recent economic depression. The Japanese have improved the standard of living by having their own houses throughout the high economic growth period (the average area of privately owned houses is 125 m$^2$ and that of rented houses is 45 m$^2$), but now even improving the standard of living by having private houses would be difficult. The housing measures which were expected with the trickle-down theory, where providing high level houses improves the standard of living of the poor, do not work any more. The
Japanese Government expected people to be self-supported by having their own houses through the high economic growth. The aging society and unemployment due to the transformation of industrial structures, and an increase in low income population have inhibited people from being self-supporting.

Table 2. Transition of the average floor area of houses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Average floor area (m²)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>77.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>80.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>85.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>89.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>91.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>92.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>94.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>94.13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“House and Land Survey” “Housing Survey” by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications

Public houses had been constructed for people who could not secure houses offered in the general housing market. According to a survey by the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism, at the end of 2003, out of 2.19 million public houses, 940,000 of them (43%) had been built over 30 years ago. These are needed to be rebuilt due to physical aging, narrowing and obsolescence of the facilities, and it had become difficult to build new public houses. After the end of 2000, rehabilitation ratios of public houses made up 80% or more of public houses. As the public house is into a physical and social rehabilitation period, new investments cannot be made in public houses.

Public houses cannot be increased, even though the economic growth has come to an end, the amount of unemployed people and families who receive public assistance have increased, housing size has decreased and the necessity for public houses is extreme.

Awareness of the causes of housing poverty

Fourth, let us discuss awareness of the responsibilities of residency. Discussion on measures for the homeless needs to focus on the cause of people becoming homeless. Is it the social structure or individual ability, behaviours or judgment? In European countries, including UK, it is recognized that the changes of society, economy and politics, and divorce or bereavement of their partner in life, mental diseases, alcoholism, drug dependence, and life experiences in welfare facilities, can contribute to people becoming homeless. In Japan however it is recognized that acquiring houses is an individual responsibility and is the fruit of employment. Major differences in houses between Europe countries and Japan seem to be affected by who took the lead in the restoration process after World War II. After World War II, Japan was restored by the construction of private houses, but UK was restored by the construction of public houses. Accordingly, in Japan, it could be generalized that a houses is recognized as an individual responsibility and as private property.

It is not generally considered to be a disadvantage to recognize a house as an individual responsibility, and it is considered that this individual responsibility could be maintained by working. This is because the employment rate of almost 100% could be achieved during the high economic growth period after the War, and the economic growth improved the standard of living. There are large differences in the standards of privately-owned houses (the average area of 125m²) and rented houses (average area of 45m²) and it is necessary to have a privately-owned house to have better residency. This condition makes people work harder to improve their standard of living. In Japan, there are not many public houses, the stigma becomes stronger, and the homeless are seen as lazy people who do not want to
work, and the homeless view themselves as applicants for employment. Hence, it is important to focus on “whether people are employed or not”.

Acquiring houses and the ability to keep a house depends on the economic trends and the housing poverty issue has been brought to the surface by the low ratios of opening jobs for the elderly and an increase in a lack of stable employment for the youth.

**Standard of living**

Fifth, as the government’s responsibility to stabilize residency is unclear, measures to maintain and improve the standard of living cannot be established. In the Meiji Era, the concept, “Rivers and roads first, houses last” was presented in the urban plan, resulting in creating a state where public interests exceeded human rights, and the Japanese government did not attempt to construct a system that would produce proper houses. Although the standard of living was set, it was set by the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism, not “a standard to maintain wholesome and cultured living”. Residency is an individual’s issue and it is assumed that guaranteeing proper residency is not the government’s responsibility. Therefore, no clear (binding) standards were created. As there is no guideline to realize proper residency, overcrowded and inadequate houses are produced. As for the government support for residency of the weak (the physically-challenged, children, the elderly, allergic people, people with intractable diseases), those people are mainly housed at hospitals and institutions. It is not considered necessary that they live in individual houses, and there is no standard for the standard of living for the weak. Regulations and guild lines regarding barrier-free buildings have been established to a greater degree than previously, due to an increase in the physically-handicapped elderly in this aging society, as well as the establishment of ADA in 1990, but there is no law set for residency, and no system has been created to maintain and improve their standard of living.

Housing supplements depend on the market, while the government is an enabler, and the community, businesses and relatives should help support adequate residency, in cooperation with each other. Public supports for houses are supplied in some special cases, but the amount of supplied houses is small, and the term limit of the house is limited in most of cases. Accordingly, housing investments are idling, trickle-down effects do not improve the worst standard of living, although new house construction is twice what it is in the U.S.A. and four times that of Europe, so that, with the economic slowdown there is a lowering of the standard of living.

Japan seems to be unresponsive to the international awareness that the house is a basic human right, and society organizes the foundations of society as seen in the social rights of the International Covenant on Human Rights and “Workers’ Housing Recommendation” issued by the ILO in 1961.

**Cooperation with other measures**

Sixth, there is no cooperation and harmony with other measures on residency. The housing allowance is regulated depending on the region. Houses whose rent can be covered by the allowance are located at suburbs or areas with transportation difficulties and it is difficult to manage life because of transportation difficulties. Even if issues, such as additional subsidies for livelihood protection, or the problems with guarantors are addressed separately, these will not have a beneficial effect to improve the lives of the people in need, unless it is all organized. To constitute proper residency, cooperation with urban planning, education, medical services, public welfare, commerce and employment, and integration with measures mainly on residency, are needed. Trying to cope with issues separately cannot solve the basic needs of the homeless, and measures to prevent more people from becoming homeless will not be established.
Conclusion

In summary:

First, the current state of society and economy in Japan differs from that during the high growth economic period. Economic growth and the standard of living are sluggish, social resources such as public houses have decreased, the number of unemployment has increased, and the number of families who receive public assistance has increased.

Second, comprehensive measures which address issues related to the homeless through maintaining and improving their standard of living have not been developed. As measures and those in charge of each stage are not connected or integrated, it is difficult for the process to smoothly take place. For example; the stage where the homeless move to living in facilities, to the stage where they move out of the facilities to living in low rent houses, and the stage where they can move out of low rent houses to a house offered by the housing market.

Thirdly, the house is generally recognized as a private asset and people have to work to have, maintain and improve their houses.

Fourth, as the house is recognized as a private asset, there is no system or standard to obtain proper residency. As a result, the social function of the house recognized in other countries has not been realized in Japan.

Fifth, there is no set standard of living for the weak including low-income persons, the elderly, the physically-disabled, persons with intractable diseases, and victims of domestic violence. If they have any problem in their life, they can easily become homeless.

The Great East Japan Earthquake occurred on March 11, 2011, and as of June 11, 2011, almost 100,000 people live in evacuation centers. If cooperation with urban plans, education, medical services, public welfare, commerce and employment, as well as an integration of measures focusing on standard of living are not addressed while the house is recognized as a social asset, many problems as mentioned below will arise: Problems on securing residency after the two year limit on temporary houses, problems with double loans, and problems that will arise from a lack of guarantee after a term limit of 20 years for public houses that are rented by private real estate agencies for the Hanshin Awaji Great Earthquake victims. The elderly victims of the Great East Japan Earthquake are likely to become homeless, as they may lose their houses as well as having lost everything that they ever possessed.