

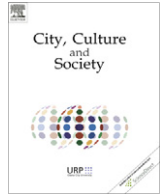


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## Homeless problems in Taiwan: Looking beyond legality toward social issues

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### ABSTRACT

Encouraged by the public policy, citizens in Taiwan have traditionally enjoyed a high percentage of home ownership. Therefore, it has been perplexing and enigmatic to witness the growing homeless population sleeping outside in public areas in recent years. Public actions have been called for to deal with the problem. However, the approach of these public actions has depended on how the problem of homelessness has been defined. This paper presents a historical context of how homelessness has been presented in policy discourses. Further, on the basis of a survey conducted in 2004, this paper describes the profile of the homeless and discusses why the homeless began sleeping on the streets. Finally, an outreach worker narrates his story about working with the homeless in Taipei City, the capital of Taiwan. The paper also includes policy implications in terms of appropriate public actions to be taken in response to the homelessness problem in Taiwan.

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Since 1965, Taiwan has maintained strong and rapid economic growth, which successfully transformed Taiwan from an agricultural society into an industrialized country. Taiwan became one of the fast-growing “four tigers” in the East Asia area (Dahlman & Sanaikone, 1997). Because of the economic success of the past few decades, the citizens enjoy higher household incomes and asset values than in the past. According to the [Construction and Planning Agency \(2006\)](#), the percentage of owned houses in Taiwan was 83.9% at the end of 2005, which was ranked as one of the highest in the world. However, at the same time, people in urban areas witnessed a growing homeless population wandering around and sleeping outdoors in some public areas. In contrast to the higher home-ownership rate, the phenomenon of homelessness is perplexing and enigmatic for the policy makers and the public to comprehend. Why do some people not share the economic success as other fellow citizens do? What does living on the street look like in practice? What kinds of factors account for people sleeping in the streets? The answers are important in taking down the problem in terms of the government adopting effective policy measures.

This paper first presents a historical context of how homelessness has been presented in policy discourse. Then, based on a 2004 survey, the paper describes the profile of the homeless and discusses the reasons why they sleep in the streets in the first place. Lastly, an outreach worker tells his story about working with the homeless in Taipei City, the capital of Taiwan. Policy implications are discussed in terms of premises and appropriate public actions to be taken in response to the homelessness problem in Taiwan.

### 1. A legal issue or a social issue?

Historically, the earliest homeless could be traced back to the new immigrants from Mainland China during the Ching Dynasty (Chen, 1995; Lin, 1995). At that time, the Restriction Sea Order was issued to allow only single males from specific coastal provinces of China to migrate to Taiwan with no family coming along. Many immigrants who lost their jobs in the new world soon became “liou min” (gangsters) and “luo han jiao” (vagabonds) due to lack of a safety net supported by families. They often engaged in illegal activities, such as robbery, armed conflicts, and murders to make ends meet. During the Japanese colonial time, the homeless were referred as “beggars” or “vagrants” who panhandled haphazardly and compellingly to ordinary people in the

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streets. The deviant behaviors they engaged in were considered a threat to the social order, in terms of public safety and work ethic. Therefore, homelessness was regarded as a legal issue in both of these epochs. Public actions in response to the problem then placed emphasis on the role of an enforcement system to adopt punitive arrests and involuntary shelter placement (Chen, 1995; Lin, 1995).

In the earlier days, the Baggers Shelter (Ai–Ai–Yuan), located in the Manka area of Taipei City was the earliest privately funded shelter for the homeless, who were brought there by the police (Chen, 1995). It was obvious that the government was reluctant to invest any public resources in the homeless issue at that time. In 1968, the first law, the Ordinance Against Homelessness, was passed to define homelessness and regulate the measures taken. In the Ordinance, the homeless were defined as “illegal residents with no identity documents, persons without any proper jobs, street children, or persons loitering and sleeping in the public areas.” Base on the Ordinance, the police could arrest anyone who fit the definition and imprison them into the semi-detention form of homeless shelters (Fang, 2001).

In 1989, the portrayal of homelessness shifted dramatically due to widespread coverage on the issue in the media. The homeless were described as miserable and unfortunate individuals who were cast out by the economic downturn of the time. Sleeping in the streets was portrayed as inhumane and unjust, so that effective public actions were called for. The favorable discourse on the issue of homelessness was reinforced in consonance with the high tide of the social welfare movement in Taiwan at that time. The Taipei City Government, therefore, first nominated the Task Force on Homelessness to investigate the living conditions of the homeless and discuss appropriate public actions. In 1991, the Social Affairs Bureau was officially assigned as the main unit to provide the needed welfare services to the homeless. By then, homelessness was no longer considered a threat to social order, but a problem of the destitute in need of social care (Chen, 1995; Fang, 2001; Lin, 1995). In 1994, the Central Government issued the Ordinance for Helping the Homeless.<sup>1</sup> The homeless were defined as “sleeping on the streets or in any public area, beggars, the physically and mentally disabled, and loitering persons.” According to the Ordinance, the Bureau should provide appropriate services for the homeless in need, whether transferred by the police or reported by anyone, such as food, bathing facilities, shelter, counseling, jobs, etc. (Xu, 1996).

In the past, Taiwan was famous for its fast-growing economy but notorious for its limited social contracts to provide an implicit social safety net for its citizens (Haggard, 2001). Moreover, in contrast to other welfare users, the homeless were marginalized as lesser welfare clients due to the government’s lengthy ignorance of the homeless social group and the absence of a rental housing policy. The Bureau took a passive approach to homelessness by simply notifying or reporting them to the proper authorities. The main strategy for handling the homeless was either to place them in institutional care or send them

back home to their families (Fang, 2001). As a result, the annual count of the homeless handled by the government has been between 2000 and 4000 since 2001 (Ministry of the Interior, 2008). Compared with the total population of 23 million in Taiwan, the number of homeless was relatively small to be noticed. In one survey, Lin (1995) suggested that the number of homeless in Taiwan was 14,072. He arrived at this number by averaging the estimated numbers from government officials, scholars and experts, media and journalists, legislators, and staff of welfare institutions. Obviously, there is a huge gap between the official figure and the estimated one, which might limit the government in allocating welfare resources to the issue.

In the spring of 2003, people in Taiwan were threatened by the outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). Everyone was afraid of contracting the disease due to the highly contagious nature of the virus. At that time, the loitering homeless were portrayed as high-risk carriers of SARS in the media. Effective measures were called for from the public to pressure the government to deal with the homelessness as a public health issue. The issue of homelessness became an important social issue again.

## 2. Living conditions of those sleeping on the streets

In 2004, the first author of this paper investigated the living conditions of the homeless in Taiwan conducted a cross-sectional survey. Multi methods of data collection, namely in-depth interviews and questionnaires, were used. Through referrals from shelter workers, 19 homeless people were interviewed in-depth in 2004. Among them, 7 (3 females and 4 males) were still sleeping on the streets, and 12 (3 females and 9 males) were living in shelters. A small amount of money was given to each to encourage their participation in the interview. The location of each interview was arranged to be a familiar and comfortable place for the subject. The length of each interview was about 40–80 min. The age of the interviewed ranged between 35 and 63. Except for two of them, who had graduated from high school, most of them had lower education levels. Half of them were single and half had previously been married. The latter group had children but left them with their ex-spouses. Three of them were from the local Taipei area, but the rest came from out of town.

Although each interviewee had his/her unique story of becoming homeless, each tended to share a similar life trajectory to sleeping on the streets. According to the in-depth interviews, the housing status of an individual changing from the housed to the homeless was not instantaneous, but an incremental shift. In my observation, becoming homeless was often the result of a series of adverse life events. At first, most of them experienced job insecurity or went through business bankruptcy; some suffered from mental illness and exhausted the care of their relatives; some underwent family disruption and were isolated from their family. Then they found themselves in precarious living situation, for example, staying with friends or relatives temporarily, unable to pay rent, constant moving, and, finally, they had no other option but sleeping in the streets. Once an individual had lived on the streets for a certain amount of time, together with an irregular and unhealthy

<sup>1</sup> Instead of applying for aid through the Social Assistance Act, which provided regular assistance to the poor, the homeless could use only the temporary resources provided through the Ordinance for Helping the Homeless. The shift to perceiving homelessness as a social issue in fact did not change the nature of homelessness.

diet, as well as alcohol addiction, he or she was no longer physically or mentally well and started to suffer from illnesses and syndromes. Given the unhealthy conditions, they were sent to hospitals or shelters for rehabilitation until they went back to the streets. It became a vicious cycle until they exhausted their lives. A life trajectory of those becoming homeless is constructed in Fig. 1, based on the life stories of the interviewees.

At the same time, a survey was conducted to interview the homeless in 25 counties in Taiwan. Fifty outreach workers were recruited to assist with the face-to-face interviews. They invited those homeless people who came for services or enquiries at their working sites (shelters, offices, streets, etc.) to participate in the survey. The interviewees were given a small gift as an appreciation for their participation in the interview. Finally, 187 valid questionnaires were obtained.

In the survey, the sampling ratio of shelters and street people was set at 1:3, which was based on Lin's survey in 1994. In the sample, 48 respondents were recruited from shelters, and 139 were street people. Among them, 94.1% were males and 5.9% were females. They were aged between 25 and 80, the average and median ages being 50.2 and 50.0, respectively. The largest age group was between 41 and 60, which made up 59.2% of the sample. The second-largest age group was below 40 years, making up 20.5% of the sample. The group of those aged over 60 only made up 20% of the sample. Regarding marital status, half of the respondents (57.8%) were singles. The divorced, widowed, and separated combined made up 28.9% of the sample. Only 13.4% were married or cohabitating, which is much lower than the percentage of respondents (34%) in Lin's survey in 1994. Regarding educational attainment, the highest proportion of the respondents were at the primary school level (46.5%), followed by the middle junior education level (23.5%), and then the high school education level (18.2%). Compared with the 12% high-school education level in Lin's survey, this paper's sample seems to have a higher proportion of high-school graduates.

Regarding living conditions, out of the 187 respondents, only 74 of them had once lived in shelters or similar institutions for the homeless, and four of them were directly transferred to shelters from medical settings. From the self-report, only 146 respondents indicated the duration of their homeless life, which ranged from one month to 300 months. The average duration was about 58.4 months (the median was 32 months). The highest proportion of respondents who had begun living in the streets within

the last year was 27.3%. The proportion who had been on the streets for one to 2 years was 18% and those on the streets from 2 to 5 years was 23.4%. All of these groups were categorized as temporary or periodic homeless, as suggested by Daly (1996). Those who had stayed in the streets for five to 10 years made up 14% of the sample, and 14% had been living in the streets for more than 10 years. These are the long-term or chronic homeless.

This survey also included questions about daily arrangements, and physical and mental conditions. The results indicated that only a few respondents (15.4%) could regularly access three meals per day, which implies that the homeless are constantly in a state of starvation. In terms of personal hygiene, only 25.5% of the respondents could manage to have a shower every day. The others could take a shower less than once a week or even more than a week. The dirty appearance of the homeless is what makes people see them in a stereotyping way, and why people link them to public health alerts. Due to widespread bathing facilities supported by the government or charity organizations, the respondents often use public bathing facilities (47.1%) or public toilets (46%) for personal hygiene purposes. Therefore, setting up more of these bathing facilities would be significant and helpful in changing the stereotypes of the homeless.

Regarding the questions about shelter experiences, only 57 of those 74 respondents who once lived in shelters indicated the frequency of their living in shelters. Among them, 36 lived in shelters at least once, and the others lived in shelters twice or more. This shows that living in shelters is not common or regular among the homeless. When asked about the ideal type of accommodation, nearly 70% of the respondents expressed living in their own house as the best choice, whether it was purchased (38.6%) or leased (29.9%). This information shows their strong preference for private housing over shelters, which might be a valuable reference for the government in formulating the relevant policies.

Apart from their living experiences, the survey asked the homeless what factors initiated their sleeping in the streets in the first place. A list of choices was presented to the respondents for selection, as indicated in Table 1. More than three-quarters (77.4%) of the respondents said long-term unemployment was the primary reason for their becoming homeless; 43.5% thought that being unable to pay for the rent of accommodations was the reason; the other initiators were so-called personal (39.7%) and family (31.5%) factors. This scenario seems to correspond with the

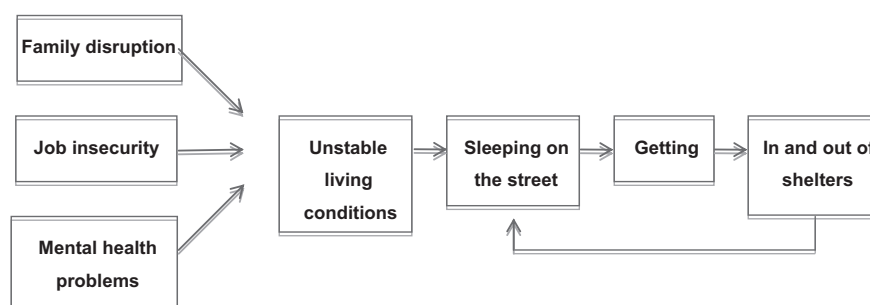


Fig. 1. The life experience of becoming homeless.

**Table 1**

The attribution of what causes homelessness by both the homeless and public workers.

The perspective of the homeless	N = 187	N = 23	The perspective of the personnel
Long unemployment	137(74.5%)	18(78.3%)	Difficult job switching and searching
Unable to pay rent	80(43.5%)	4(17.4%)	High rent
Personal maladjustment	73(39.7%)	19(82.6%)	Not working hard
Disharmonious family relationship	58(31.5%)	23(100%)	Family dysfunction
Unable to pay medical fees in case of illness	52(28.2%)	12(52.2%)	Inadequate medical facilities and services
Single, no social network	17(9.2%)		
Others	15(8.2%)	12(52.2%)	Inadequate social welfare policy
Traffic accidents		8(34.8%)	Social inequalities
History of imprisonment		2(8.7%)	Demolition of illegal structures
Business failure		2(8.7%)	Gambling

high unemployment rate for the past decade in Taiwan because of the macro economic downturn trend in recent years. In addition, the survey also asked public workers handling homelessness affairs in 25 counties to choose the factors that they perceive as leading to homelessness. After weighting the importance of the listed choices (see Table 1), they all agreed that “family dysfunction” (100%) was the primary factor causing people becoming homeless, followed by the item of “not working hard” (82.6%), and then the structural factor of so-called “difficult job switching and searching” (78.3%). Only a few workers selected the item “unable to pay rent” (i.e. expensive rent or housing price), which was listed as the main reason for the growth of the homeless population in the United States (Anderson & Christian, 2003; Daly, 1996; Jencks, 1994). The results indicated an obvious gap in the attributed factors of initiating homelessness between the homeless and the public workers. Since the perceptions of what causes homelessness are relevant in formulating policies (Gaubatz, 2001; Neale, 1995), the individualistic approach taken by the public workers in Taiwan might explain the marginalized and limited nature of public actions in response to the problem.

Furthermore, people often think that the homeless are unproductive and doing nothing every day on the streets. Yet the survey told another story. Table 2 shows the employment experience of the respondents. Most of them once had jobs and earned a living (82.4%). Seventy-six respondents said that they had received some earned income in the previous month. Their monthly earnings ranged from NT\$86 to \$21,000. Among them, 35 respondents had incomes of below NT\$2000 per month, while 19 respondents earned between NT\$2000 and NT\$3000. Only

seven of them received income over NT\$10,000. The average income in that month was merely NT\$4280, and the median was NT\$3000, both of which are even lower than the minimum wage of NT\$15,840 set by the Labor Committee in Taiwan. Obviously, it is difficult for the homeless to sustain a decent living with such a small amount of earned income. As for job types engaged in, most of the respondents engaged in odd jobs (59.9%), cleaning jobs (25.1%), festival parade for temple gods or goddess (22.5%), garbage collection (16.6%), or leaflet delivery (11.2%), or one of a few other job types (6.4%), e.g. printing, security guard, rehabilitation work). Most of these jobs were characterized as non-skilled and low-paying work.

The inappropriate living conditions on the streets usually worsen the physical and mental conditions of the homeless in the long run. In this survey, 28.5% of the respondents indicated that their health conditions were very bad, 45.5% said that their health conditions were fair, while only 15.4% claimed that they enjoyed good health. Among them, 87 respondents had stayed in the hospital due to some illnesses: 34 stayed in the hospital once (20.6%), and 27 stayed in the hospital twice or more. In addition, 40.1% of the respondents had physical dysfunctions (e.g. physical impairment, visual impairment, hearing impairment, stroke), a relatively high proportion. Of the respondents, 71.5% were heavy smokers; 39.2% were alcoholics; and 19.3% had the habit of chewing “betel nuts” (19.3%). Regarding their mental health, this survey also measured the degree of depressed mood among the respondents using a Chinese version of the 21-item Beck Depression Inventory (Lu, Che, Zhang, & Shen, 2002). The results showed that 40% of the respondents were within the normal range (score 0–16), 30.9% had mild depression

**Table 2**

Paid jobs, earned income, and job types among the respondents.

Variables	Proportion	Variables	Proportion
Have paid work ever?		Types of employment	
No	33(17.6%)	Odd jobs	112(59.9%)
Yes	154(82.4%)	Cleaning job	47(25.1%)
Income earned last month: (NT\$)		Festival parade for temple gods or goddess	42(22.5%)
No job	111(59.4%)	Garbage collection	31(16.6%)
Below 2000	35(18.7%)	Leaflet delivery	21(11.2%)
2000–5000	19(10.1%)	Others	12(6.4%)
5000–10,000	15(8.1%)	Second-hand sale	9(4.8%)
Over 10,000	7(3.7%)	Waiter/waitress	8(4.3%)
Average: 4280		Temporary actors	4(2.1%)
Median: 3000		Not applicable = 33	
Range: 86–21,000			

(score 17–22), and 14.2% had moderate depression (score 23–30). However, what was most worrisome was that 19.9% of the respondents met the diagnosis of severe depression. The finding implies that street life is very stressful. More accurate diagnosis instruments and ongoing treatments will be needed for future study.

### 3. A story about working with the homeless in Taipei

The second author of this paper worked in the Bureau of Social Affairs of the Taipei City Government for several years. Here, he tells the story of his working experiences with the homeless. “I” is used to refer to the storyteller.

When I first worked for the Taipei City Government back in 1997,<sup>2</sup> I was the only outreach social worker assisting homeless people all over the city. It was not easy to assist the homeless, linking them to the services or aids for the needy at that time. I had to explore diversified services and develop new skills to assist them. For example, in October 2003, I created a leaflet with information on the possible harmful risks of living in the streets so the homeless would know. In 1998, in response to public complaints, the Bureau of Social Affairs was determined to solve the homelessness problem and created the Homeless Work and Living Rebuilding Project. With the project funds, I was able to use the money to pay for the homeless to go home, maintain a minimum standard of living, rent temporary houses, find work, etc. So, the senior homeless could have temporary rental houses in which to live. I could then create some temporary job opportunities for them to work based on their old work skills, for example, painting, wood-working, English translation, hair cutting, etc. Once their residence stabilized, I then linked them to long-term welfare subsidies for a sustainable living, so they could eventually depart from street living. For those able-bodied homeless, my main task was to link them to public assistance and employment aids. I would refer them to the Job Search Station run by the Labor Department of the Taipei City Government to match them with appropriate jobs. During job searching, I could use the project’s funds to pay for their transportation and meals. However, given the lower education level and lack of job skills, they could only find low-paying jobs, such as cleaners or security guards. Even so, the homeless could not retain these jobs for long due to unstable residence.

While trying to link the homeless to the welfare benefits for the needy, I found the rule of the Household Register was always getting in the way. Every citizen in Taiwan must have a household location registered with the government; this is the “Household Register.” In an agricultural society, such as Taipei in the early days, people were not mobile as often as they are nowadays. The household location was the same as the address of the residing home. When society industrialized, many people migrated to the city for better jobs and salary. Due to the consideration for property rights, they maintained the household register in their original

places, although they resided in other places for work. However, government policies, such as voting, taxation, social welfare and service provision, were all based on the citizens’ household registers, instead of their residing addresses. Most homeless people I worked with had been detached from their original household register for a long time and lost their identities. Thus, they were often denied or rejected for the welfare benefits they needed due to the absent household register. Therefore, I would spend quite a lot of my working time reinstating their household registers for them to be entitled to welfare benefits from the city. Usually, I would assist them to find rental places first. I would persuade landlords to allow the homeless to register a household’s location as the current address. Once registered, I could then link them to the public assistance for the needy and social services from the city.

Besides the City Government, there were a few non-government organizations (NGOs) or institutions also providing certain services to the homeless. They were good partners. Table 3 shows the list of agencies and their assistance activities for homeless people.

During my working career, I found the toughest task was to fight with the deeply stigmatized attitude against the homeless from the community. Several of the listed agencies were once asked to move out the community, as the residents feared deterioration in public health and estate values. For example, local residents constantly requested that Peace Station, the Salvation Army, and Friendship Methodist Church move. Also, in 2008, the Bureau of Social Affairs of the Taipei City Government planned to renovate an abandoned public house into an emergency shelter for the homeless. Community residents heard about the project before the official announcement. They organized large-scale protests against the project in a very short period of time. Finally, the project was put to an end. Worst of all, some local residents even tried to advocate that their neighbor landlords quit renting their houses to the homeless or agencies.

My first thought was that it would be a good start to keep the homeless clean in their appearance as a way of de-stigmatizing. As a result, the Bureau and the agencies set up six public bathing facilities for the homeless in the city. When they looked clean and tidy, the homeless did feel more comfortable on an interpersonal level. I also hired a homeless person who was once a hair stylist to give haircuts to those who were bathing. This altruistic act did enhance the stylist’s self-confidence and reduce the antipathy among the homeless. Moreover, I used the project’s funds to pay some elderly homeless people to sweep streets and parks for the community. This service action had two intentions. The first was to encourage them to work regularly. The second was to portray an altruistic impression of the homeless as serving the community, in hopes that the community residents could foster a more favorable attitude toward the homeless and the tension between them could be softened. Furthermore, I organized a puppet show group consisting of only the homeless to encourage them to voicing their experiences to the community. The group members participated in puppeteer training and story workshops to compose the show. After one-and-a-half years of training, the participants were able to tell the stories of their past and present through the puppets in hand.

<sup>2</sup> After the Ordinance for Helping the Homeless was issued in 1994, the count of homeless gradually increased. The public urgently demanded specialized workers to deal with the issues of the homeless. There was no not-for-profit agency interested in providing services to the homeless. The Taipei City government decided to hire its own outreach worker in response to the urgent public call in 1997.

**Table 3**  
NGOs assisting the homeless in Taipei City and Taipei County.

Name	Service area	Services given	Founded
Taipei County Volunteer Association	Taipei County	outreach services, shelter	2003
The Salvation Army, Taiwan Region	Taipei City	outreach services, shelter, free meals	2000
Peace Station	Taipei City and Taipei County	outreach services, shelter, free meals	1991
Peace House	Taipei City	shelter, follow-up services	1992
Friendship Methodist Church	Taipei City	outreach services, shelter, free meals	2005
Living Spring Church	Taipei City	outreach services, shelter, free meals, religious meetings	1991

Because they were lacking information and legal knowledge, the homeless were sometimes exploited to engage in illegal activities. For example, they would lend their identification to people who used it for gainful tax returns, the household register, mobile phone purchases, or illegal marriages in exchange for some cash money reward. Thus, it is very important to teach the homeless how to safeguard their rights and safety. In 2003, I helped to publish a newsletter issued by that Taipei City Government, titled “Taipei Peace” (tai bei ping an bao), the main function of which was to inform the homeless about the available resources and alert them about the risks of living on the streets. The newsletter sometimes invited the homeless to write their own stories or help to circulate the newsletter to other street people.

In recent years, I have dedicated more time to managing a positive impression of the homeless through the media. I thought the media might be a good channel for the public to know the homeless better in terms of stories about their becoming homeless and the possibility of them becoming productive citizens again. Here, I present two successful stories reported by the media, which drew much public attention. The first one is about a homeless man who was once a famous cartoonist. After the media wrote about his story of becoming homeless, he picked up his brush again and drew about his street life. He is now making a living selling his paintings and maintains a stable life (see Fig. 2).

The second story is about a homeless woman who once owned a curry shop. I asked her to cook a lunch box with curry flavor for me to give out to her fellow homeless at

Taipei Train Station. Then I held a press conference for her and talked about her story of being such a popular chef among the homeless. She was later offered quite a few jobs (see Fig. 3).

The Salvation Army set up an online news program titled “News on a Vagabond Life” (Peopo, <http://www.peopo.org/homelessnews>) in 2007. The program aims at providing news and information about street life, providing a platform for the homeless to express their opinions, and inviting the public to know more about the homeless, their experience living on the street, and their difficulties in society (see Fig. 4). Each time, I invited a homeless person to host the show so they could connect with the public and speak up for their own rights. The Friendship Methodist Church also plays an active role in providing the homeless opportunities to “join” society and participate in some activities for disadvantaged groups. These programs and activities have also obtained some positive feedback and recognition from the public. Therefore, it is certain that the public and society are more willing now to include the homeless and them opportunities. Yet, I sincerely hope that some day in the future, the whole society will have a more open heart to people who sleep in the streets!

In my opinion, no one wants to be homeless. There must be some reason that makes someone eventually lead this kind of life. The reason is sometimes expected, sometimes unexpected; sometimes they become homeless by choice, sometimes it is out of their own control. They are the deepest poor in a society with no one to seek help from. From my many years of working with the homeless, I know that if



Fig. 2. A cartoonist, an ex-homeless, portrait homeless life as floating grass (China Times, March 19, 2004).



Fig. 3. Homeless woman makes lunch boxes for free meals; street people enjoy eating them (China Times Express, May 14, 2004).



Fig. 4. Homeless become newscasters; they describe their street life (China Times, October 28, 2007).

given the chances and resources, they would try their best to make a change in their lives. However, we live in a divided society. Most people do not know the homeless well and hold an unfriendly and stigmatized position against them. For example, for a long time, the community had rejected the establishment of any homeless service centers or rental houses. This is something difficult that I still need to fight in the future. Taiwan is a democratic society that values their people's self-determination to become anybody they like. We cannot stop people from becoming homeless and we cannot make them disappear in the city without their willful consent. However, we, the social workers and agencies, can work together to provide job opportunities, resources for the needy, and supportive relationships by including them in the society as a first step. I hope that someday my neighbors will no longer exclude the homeless and develop a reciprocal relationship with them. I think I should be more patient for the day of coming peace.

#### 4. Conclusion

In contrast to the rapid economic development over the past decades, together with the overall improvement in the standard of living in Taiwanese society, sleeping in the streets is indeed a perplexing social phenomenon

in Taiwan. In-depth interviews indicated that the homeless are not a homogeneous social group, but are going through a similar trajectory of street life. Face-to-face questionnaire interviews provided information about what living on the streets looks like, what kinds of difficulties the homeless experience, and what factors initiated their homelessness in the first place. However, the most troublesome finding in this survey was the inconsistent perceptions about what initiates sleeping in the street between the homeless and public workers. According to Gaubatz (2001) and Neale (1995), the service providers' attribution model for the causes of homelessness would have an impact on policy formulation and program design. If a more individualistic approach to the problem is taken, the workers tend to adopt the attitude of "victim-blaming" to intervene in the problems of the homeless for whom they work. They also tend to take a strict, limited, and punitive approach to handling the problems of the homeless. This is why the official number of homeless according to the government was only 3000 persons, while a survey in 1994 indicated a higher number when actually counting the homeless. It is clear that passive measures did not help the long-term homeless depart from street living.

Since the 1980s, the extent and severity of homelessness have increased due to a mix of structural and individual



factors in the United Kingdom and the United States (Anderson & Christian, 2003; Daly, 1996; Fitzpatrick et al., 2000; Jencks, 1994). The battle to tackle the problem is still going on in the two countries, but their valuable experiences and knowledge are worthy of study. Although the two countries have shared no common welfare ideology or policy values, they both added a common element of providing housing to the homeless in formulating their homelessness policies (O'Connell, 2003). The United Kingdom has emphasized placing the homeless in social housing projects before providing social care service provisions, while the United States has proposed "continuity of care," consisting of permanent housing and case management services to meet the complicated welfare needs of the homeless. The homelessness policies in these two countries started with providing stable housing, and then followed with psychiatric treatment or employment counseling. In contrast, the homelessness policy in Taiwan focuses on the transient services of providing food, bathing, and emergency accommodation (Fang, 2001; Lin, 1995). Without stable housing, any provision of transitional support services (welfare application or employment counseling) seems not effective in encouraging the homeless to leave their street life. In conclusion, the premises and principles for formulating policies for homelessness need to be changed in tackling the problem effectively.

The following premises are suggested for homelessness policy:

- (1) Under economically driven welfarism, the problems of homelessness are not merely the effect of personal dysfunction; they also create a speed bump for future economic development. Thus, the active intervention of the government on this issue is important.
- (2) The experience of street sleeping is not merely unfavorable to personal physical and mental health, but it is also a dead end for public hygiene. Thus, to tackle health problems among the homeless depends on the health care system joined up to provide clinical services in the streets.
- (3) The problem of homelessness is not merely the result of personal maladjustment to matters of risk in society; it also reflects the structural problems of economic inequality. Homelessness policy should focus on both practical solutions for the individual homeless and the overall economic structure and dynamics.
- (4) In regard to the provision of social welfare services, the problems of homelessness are not only the responsibility of local governments; they also require a broader and integrated national approach and system, as well as the cooperation of inter-county governments to address the problem of the household registry.
- (5) In formulating social policies, the issue of homelessness is a problem of housing shortage and social imbalances. Thus, the government must adopt integrated and comprehensive homeless welfare policies.

Since becoming homeless is not an overnight process, homelessness policy should be comprehensive, both preventive and accommodating (Cunningham, McDonald, & Suchar, 2008, chap. 1). Our suggestions and directions for

future policy measures (in both the short and long term) are as follows:

#### 1. Short-term strategies

- (1) *Setting up more homeless agencies and providing transitional services:* There is still a shortage of service agencies specialized for the homeless to access services for the needy in the community. After reaching out, the workers can provide transitional services, such as bathing, food, jobs, medical care, street-wise living information, etc.
- (2) *Providing stable living and case management:* In this approach, the government should provide the homeless with stable housing first – affordable housing or rental housing. After getting people settled, the workers can introduce some supportive services, such as maintenance of a tidy home and some guidelines for domestic work, to assist the homeless to have a household life and break away from the habits of street sleeping. Then, the workers can suggest other associated services of case management, such as physical or mental treatment, employment counseling services, and building social networks and support.

#### 2. Long-term strategies

- (1) *Building of a preventive service network:* We suggest setting up a referral system for individuals before they become homeless and sleep in the streets. For example, when a person is discharged from a hospital, nursing home, prison or corrective institution, or other agency, the associated agencies should make an assessment of that person in terms of his or her family background and employment history, and any risk of becoming homeless.
- (2) *Advocating full employment and a social housing policy:* We suggest that losing jobs and inadequate affordable housing are two main reasons for the growth of the population of male homeless adults in Taiwan. However, through an overemphasis on economic development, the government in Taiwan maintains a limited social contract with its citizens. In terms of democratic development in Taiwan, social groups and welfare organizations have long played an important role in advocating for social policies for disadvantaged groups. Organizations working for the homeless should work together with other social welfare groups to advocate that the government develop policies for full employment and social housing.
- (3) *Developing a homeless information system and services:* Along with the increasing importance of performance pledges and efficiency, the central government should develop a national information system about the use of welfare services by the homeless. Such a homeless information system could trace and develop information about how the homeless use welfare services over the long term. This information could then be analyzed and the findings used for the improvement or modification of homeless outreach work and accommodation services, as well as for the formulation of future policies.

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