A new kind of homeless has hit the streets of Tokyo. They are no longer just in and near the major rail hubs of Shinjuku, Takadanobaba and Shibuya, but are now seen in small playgrounds in residential neighborhoods throughout Tokyo. There is no firm figure on the homeless legions of Tokyo. Official estimates are in the 3,000 range. Commissioner Ted Morris, the Salvation Army official who works with the homeless in Tokyo, says, "The number probably falls somewhere between 5,000 and 10,000." And the faces behind the numbers are constantly changing. A man I know as Tanaka-san, who worked for 35 years at a publishing company in Tokyo and now lives in Shinjuku Station, told me, "Every day you see new faces here."

The number of people on the street began to grow in 1990. That was the year the fallout from the bursting of Japan's asset-inflated "bubble economy" began to show in the joblessness rate, and opportunities for construction work also faltered. Men aged 50 and older were most seriously affected.

As recently as two or three years ago, mention of the word "homeless" in Japan immediately brought to mind the day-labor concentrations in Tokyo's depressed Sanya district, Kotobuki-chō in Yokohama and Kamagasaki in Osaka. Men migrated to these areas first because they could find work there, and most of the regulars had been in the neighborhood long enough to have formed some kind of relationship with each other, at least to the extent that they felt somewhat comfortable there. They would sometimes venture further to forage for food or personal needs in and near the major train stations, such as Shinjuku. Since the economic bubble burst, however, the makeup of the homeless population has drastically changed. Now there are down-and-out salarymen, and women are turning up on the streets too.

Tales of Despair

The stories the men tell are much the same. Some who now are day laborers were once office workers, with solid jobs, families and the trappings of mainstream society. But they had problems at work, or they had other problems that led them to borrow money they couldn't repay. Things gradually got increasingly out of control. For some from distant prefectures, Tokyo was a place to find work, from where they could send money back to the family. Eventually, that combination failed.

Some of the homeless are well-educated and have held good jobs, and they are not long-time street people. The Salvation Army's Morris, noting the pattern shift, observed, "If one were to plot a path from Shinjuku to Sanya, a marked difference in the literacy rate is quite evident. Moving in the direction of Sanya, the
literacy rate progressively decreases." In Shinjuku and Sanya, the homeless population ranges from those recently unemployed to those who have lost everything, including their hope. In Shinjuku, many of the homeless are those newly unemployed salaried who have become part of a phantom statistic that does not show up in Japan's still remarkably low 3.3 percent unemployment rate. There is obviously a need to verify how many of those former salaried are now on the streets. One of the other things that needs to be better understood is the social situation that contributes to the rise in homelessness in areas outside Sanya and some of the other long-time homeless habitats. There is no consensus; there are no statistics. The many forces that lead a person to the streets are, so far, poorly documented. In July 1995, the Tokyo Metropolitan Government issued its first-ever report on the homeless problem, but it was based on "previous research." Ironically, however, the government has never referred to the homeless as homeless, favoring instead "zoek-seikatsu Hosba," a term that equates to people who live on the street. One can only wonder, then, how a report on the homeless can be based on earlier research into something that officially has never been defined, let alone studied or described, and there are thus no official provisions to deal with the problem. The report leaves the impression that the homeless really have homes, but chose not to go to them, opting instead to live on the street.

What the report does not address is the question of why people do not want to go home. One answer, it seems, is that they feel that they have in some way failed their families or those who trusted them, and are too ashamed to go back. In contemporary Japan, society and its expectations apply pressures that can cause some people to break. This is especially true for those who have been brought up in a system of lifetime employment—a system that no longer prevails. Those who have broken and have been driven to a hand-to-mouth life on the streets are seen as an affront to the economic success that has marked postwar Japan.

The homeless sit in their personal spaces, quietly leafing through salvaged magazines and newspapers. They place their shoes neatly off to one side, in observance of custom. Their cardboard hovels can be starkly coffin-like, or almost
ornate, decorated with dolls or cast-off Christmas tinsel. For them, "home" is a cardboard community, wherever it may be in the urban sprawl. And these communities are literally along the path of tens of thousands of well-dressed office workers who hurry past every day. There is hardly any contact between these two worlds. Few see the fate of the people who populate the cardboard communities as a test of freedoms.

In Japanese culture, there is an aversion to pollution and to people who, for whatever reason, have drifted or fallen from the normal order of things. Even so, no one lives on the street by choice. The homeless of Tokyo have no option. They cannot go back. As described by Benedict Giamo, a Notre Dame University professor of sociology who has studied the homeless:

"Given the heightened sense of social uniformity in Japanese society, the public response to homelessness often expresses the strict bifurcation between order and disorder. The broader cultural meaning and social significance to the situation in the (United States) appears even more problematic in Japan. There seems even less tolerance or compassion for those who, for one reason or another, slip off the ladder of social obligation. To even hear about, let alone encounter, the homeless evokes a sense of fear and loathing. Such people are often regarded as the dregs of the economic miracle, the defiled ‘other’ threatening to pollute the entire social system."

Japanese society in general seems to fail to discern the degree of social despair or the process of entrapment of the homeless. The reaction is often disassociation—keeping separate the social categories of “them” and “us.” And it translates to action that seems intended on removing the homeless from sight, not helping them.

Like the United States, Japan is scarred by homelessness caused by the stresses of advanced development. However, this phenomenon is little discussed in a society that emphasizes its economic triumphs rather than those the miracle has trampled or left behind.

**A Sense of Order and Cleanliness**

Despite the extreme loneliness and isolation common among all homeless people, there are some distinct differences among the homeless in Tokyo and their American counterparts. Tokyo’s homeless rarely ask for money on the streets. They just sit quietly, resigned, quite unlike their American counterparts. Usually, unless a person is in a box or carrying bags of belongings, it is not easy to distinguish the homeless from others. For the most part, Tokyo’s homeless are careful about cleanliness, keeping their hands, hair and clothing as clean as possible. Perhaps this is a result of the fact that Tokyo has more public toilets than the United States. There is also an absence of drug abuse and physical violence. Most of the homeless clean up after themselves. When volunteers distribute food, the homeless will wait patiently, often for two hours or more, for their turn. The homeless may be disenchanted with society, yet they still seem to try to follow society’s rules as best they can. They are, however, generally strongly against revealing much about their personal lives, their past or what put them on the streets.

So why do most Japanese ignore them? In the United States, homelessness is a widely recognized and widely discussed social issue. In Japan, there is hardly anything written or broadcast about the homeless. As a result, in the United States, public attitudes about the homeless constantly shift from sympathy to
Women are still a small part of the homeless total, but domestic violence is contributing to an increase. Kimura-san's new shoes and neatly bagged belongings indicate that she is a recent arrival to the street scene.

Many homeless people have an aversion to being photographed, out of concern that their families or acquaintances will find out where they are. Ueda-san has been on the street for several years, and says he is resigned to his situation.
anger or fear. In Japan, the average citizen doesn’t know how to react, because homelessness is something they know next to nothing about. When the issue of homelessness comes up, it is usually related to an incident involving the homeless. The skewing of reporting events and providing limited background has resulted in little general understanding. Journalists say this is done to protect society. Still, the consequence is that tens of millions of Japanese, intellectually equipped with the same range of information and commentary from the same broadcast and print resources, go about their lives with the same set of facts, interests and opinions. They also share the media-created illusion that life in Japan is somehow apart from the problems of life in the rest of the world.

Sanya, in inner Tokyo’s Taito Ward, is the nearest thing the metropolis has to a skid row. Few people from the rest of the city know about it, and hardly anyone ever goes there who does not live or work there. This underside of Tokyo is thus a place largely inhabited by the cast-offs of society and ignored by almost everyone else, as defined by Roman Cybriwsky in *Tokyo, The Changing Profile of an Urban Giant* (1991).

Sanya has a population of about 35,000, most of whom are “normal working-class Japanese.” According to Mizuta Megumu of the Furusato no Kai volunteer organization in Sanya, “About 6,000 of these people are doya (flophouse) residents and people who live on the street.” This is skid row, a neighborhood of vagrants, alcoholics and day-laborers. Most of the occupants are men, most are middle-aged or older and many will be in Sanya for a long time, perhaps the rest of their lives.

These men who came from the countryside, whether from the Tōhoku region in the north, or somewhere in western or southern Japan, came to Tokyo for work, either because they did farm labor or other seasonal work at home, because economic circumstances forced them to leave, or because they were driven out of the family hierarchy as second or third sons when the eldest son of the family married and assumed the position of head of the household.

**Hope for a Second Chance**

For the day laborer it is a refuge—a symbol of defeat, to be sure—but at the same time a cradle of opportunity that holds the possibility, however slim, of a second chance in a society that Edward Fowler, author of “Scenes From Life at the Margins of Japanese Society,” as published in *The Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan* (1991), characterizes as being most stingy with its second chances. A man I know as Matsui-san, a long-time Sanya resident, told me:

“Yoseba areas such as Sanya are inhabited by two distinct populations; local merchants and low-income families and people who commute to work and a population of day laborers and homeless people who reside in doya when they have money or on the street when they don’t.”

Contracts negotiated on illegal terms with *tebaishi* (labor recruiters) or small subcontracting firms offer day laborers none of the fringe benefits and bonuses that supplement the earnings of ordinary salaried workers. In addition to acting as labor recruiters these often gangster-linked agents are also operators of *hanba*, construction camps consisting of temporary barracks attached to construction sites, where men are escorted, occasionally by force, by low-ranking thugs to live for the duration of a job. Completely at the mercy of supply and demand, no day-laborer is in a position to find employment on every working
Although often thrown into close proximity, the homeless and their better-off fellow citizens of Tokyo seldom acknowledge each other. Indeed, mainstream society seems at a loss as to how to react to the homeless and the circumstances that led them to their plight.

day of the month. Men are at the mercy of these agents, and they are known in the jargon as *yachimbo*, or standing men, and are regarded as prostitutes.

Common jobs are unskilled manual labor—digging ditches, spreading asphalt, chipping rock—where the labor remains disposable at any time. There are also some *tobi* laborers who have specific skills—putting up scaffolding, steel erecting and bridge-building. The daily wage ranges from approximately ¥14,000 to ¥15,000, depending on the type of work, with the tehaishi's cut hovering around 20 percent, but often more. The money the day laborers make goes quickly for food, alcohol, a night's lodging, gambling or an occasional prostitute.

Manual-labor day jobs blossomed just before the 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games. The city was in a face-lifting frenzy of highway construction, stadium-building and general sprucing up before displaying its rebuilt self to the rest of the world. During the pre-Olympic building boom, Sanya had as many as 15,000 day laborers as residents. Those still in Sanya more than three decades later are those who couldn't live anywhere else or do anything else, which explains why so many of them are in their 50s and 60s. The Tokyo Olympics were the core of the problem. Then, there was so much work that people were absorbed. They did not go back home.

As the economic pace and other social circumstances prevail, the outlook is for increasing hardship and demoralization for the mass of day laborers. One can still see amid the misery, the darkness and the dankness, the behavior of individuals who consider themselves integrated in a wider society; there is in fact no exit for most of them, as Saskia Sassen describes their situation in *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo* (1991). The distance between the world of the day laborer and the rest of society, the world of regular, full-time jobs, has grown immensey. This is a world far removed from the image of Japan that prevails in the West. It is neither the old, foreign culture nor the new, modern Japan. It is a place of no name, with no image to call forth.

Sanya in Tokyo and Kamagasaki in Osaka, in particular, have seen a gradual
shift in the past two decades of upgrading of many of the doya to what are known as business hotels. Doya, mostly older wooden buildings, offer little more than a dark, tiny enclosed space, as small as one meter by two meters. Business hotels are newer ferroconcrete buildings with rooms that may have a television, a heater-air conditioner and other amenities.

This trend, generally supported by local merchants and the city governments, represents a kind of environmental cleanup that has led to a significant reduction in the number of cheap lodging facilities available for day-laborers.

Although much more directly connected to economic conditions and exploitative labor practices, the relationship between day-laborers and homelessness in Japan is similar to the affinity between the extremely poor and the homeless in the United States. Giamo sees both the day-labor in Japan and extreme poverty in the United States as "resulting grounds" for the homeless.

Ultimately, those who become too old or too frail to work at day labor jobs will become homeless. As the job market decreases and the cut-off age for day-labor is usually 55 (pensions are paid from age 65), these men are caught in a 10-year income dilemma. The problem is made more complex by the arrival of many Peruvian and Colombian laborers, most of them ethnic Japanese, who are younger and stronger, and who thus get most of the few jobs that are available. Some of the older men fight among themselves because they are angry and frustrated that they could not find work. Tension is high in Sanya, where there are an estimated 5,000 men looking for work daily, compared with 8,000 three years ago.

There are other broadly articulated social processes at work in Japanese society that point to other routes to homelessness that bypass the yoseba system. Such processes have to do with advanced age, social drift, the speed and pace of socioeconomic change, corporate restructuring, and social disintegration which have weakened the mutual support systems of traditional institutions, such as the family, schools and the workplace. Just how these processes and conditions lead from order to disorder to literal homelessness is largely uncharted and

Depending on the location, the cardboard community can be brightened somewhat with planters and found items, as in this man's quarters in the inner passages of Shinjuku Station.
poorly understood. However, in acknowledging various contributing social and economic forces, Japanese society, as U.S. society, seems to suggest that the problems of the homeless are inseparable from the broader distress affecting the nation as a whole, as seen by Giamo, and described in a paper he wrote in 1994, “Order, disorder and the homeless in the U.S. and Japan.”

The situation in Shinjuku illustrates a larger, more complex set of problems that make the homeless a more pressing social issue. Here, the homeless are often former white-collar workers or those who worked in or even owned small businesses that failed in the economic decline of recent years.

Shinjuku Station is one of the great sights of Tokyo in itself. The busiest railway station in the world, Shinjuku handles 1.5 million riders a day. This human Niagara has many tributaries, one of them being the long, clean, brightly lit, ventilated passageway leading to Nishi-Shinjuku, with its cluster of skyscrapers, high-rise hotels and office buildings towering over what was once a cluster of huge gas storage tanks and a reservoir for Tokyo’s water supply. In the otherwise squeaky clean passageways is an underground hobo jungle, where a band of homeless have taken up residence.

Each winter, the Tokyo municipal government pays to put up a temporary barracks in its bayside Ōta Ward to house the homeless. People are put up for about two weeks during the year-end to New Year holiday period. Reports of homeless people freezing to death or being burned by fires they use to warm themselves are not uncommon during the coldest months. In 1994, after some merchants in the area complained, the police came to the cardboard community of Shinjuku, destroyed or folded up the makeshift houses and moved out all the residents. The events were reported and broadcast as being a transfer of these people to shelters by the city and police. What was not reported was that the homeless shelters are always built, and are always temporary.

In the winter of 1994, public response to the homeless in the Shinjuku area of Tokyo spoke directly to the relationship between social problem and cultural meaning: Officials from the Bureau of Construction and the Bureau of Social Welfare joined off-duty police and shopkeepers to patrol the subway station, prodding the homeless to wake up and move on. In place of the cardboard community, the city put up an iron railing and metal gates. The message seemed clear: to dispel disorder and reclaim a sense of cultural authority, harmony and beauty. In this way, the distinction between order and disorder in Japanese life finds its “resolution.” Such “resolution,” however, leaves something to be desired.

Shinjuku Showdown

Homeless people have been at odds with the metropolitan government since February 1994, when authorities evicted them from underground passageways near Shinjuku Station. At the end of 1995, the metropolitan government said it would install two 200-meter moving walkways along each side of the passageway. The moving walkways, built at a cost of ¥1.3 billion, are intended to help the elderly and physically handicapped who pass between the station and the Tokyo Metropolitan Government’s office towers, officials said. But the walkways only move toward the government complex in the morning, and only toward the station in the evening.

Before construction of the moving sidewalk began late in January this year, the municipal authorities gave the homeless an ultimatum to move, saying their pres-
ence along the public passageway was a nuisance to nearby businesses and pedestrians. There was a standoff, and the showdown turned violent in the early hours of January 25. Then, an estimated 820 police, security guards and city officials packed up the cardboard dwellings and belongings in the passageway as the homeless and about 200 supporters pelted the procession with eggs and bottles, sprayed them with fire extinguishers and locked arms to keep from being removed from behind barricades of boxes and ornamental plants.

Many of the homeless had voluntarily left the passageway before the eviction. When the showdown ended, the passageway was closed while workers cleaned up the mess and dozens of guards kept watch. These homeless have since set up camp about 50 meters or so away from the passageway.

**Truly Temporary Solution**

The metropolitan government built a temporary facility in Shibaura, Minato Ward, to provide the homeless with free housing, food and clothing and offer them job counseling and medical treatment. It was a spare operation, with no alcohol permitted and a 5 P.M. curfew. The building, designed to house 200 people, was dismantled two months later. About 75 homeless went to the facility, which, designed to house 200 people, refused to accept any more temporary residents after an official deadline of January 29, 1996. More than 10 people who hoped to move in were rejected on the grounds that they had not lived at the cardboard community in Shinjuku.

Why must facilities for the homeless be so transient? The site, a former bus depot surrounded by canals near the eastern exit of the JR Shinagawa Station, clearly indicates that what the metropolitan government intends not so much to solve the problems of the homeless but to get them away from Shinjuku and out of the shadow of the metropolitan government's headquarters.

Putting the homeless out of sight temporarily is an affront to human dignity that does nothing to resolve a growing social problem. Government entities must do more to develop and work together with nongovernmental organizations to help provide needed social programs. Compassion without condescension is the only path to alleviating a problem that will surely get worse before it gets better.

The failure of Japan to keep social security and social welfare services at a level commensurate with economic development is closely connected with the ie system and with the patterns of mutual neighborly assistance in villages and urban neighborhoods. It was taken for granted that the aged were to be looked after by the eldest son or adopted successor to the head of a household. When poverty and hardship were alleviated by kin or by the help of neighbors, social welfare was not a serious problem. In the villages it was thought a matter of shame to have a relative—even a distant relative—who was receiving public assistance. Even in the towns to be registered as a public assistance cardholder was seen as proof that one had fallen to the status of the poorest of the poor—joining the "card class" was something that happened only to the dregs of society, according to Fukutake Tadashi, author of *The Japanese Social Structure* (1989). The idea that one might seek assistance "as a right" was totally absent. There was no concept of social welfare as a basic human right.

The limited social welfare system came about when the priorities were directed at economic expansion, and when there were few beneficiaries because most
of the population was young and at work. The government has since sought to instill the idea that government welfare is not the desired path, and that individuals should have the pride and sense of responsibility to look after themselves. Older people have been urged to work to stay active and healthy, and families should pitch in, with the children looking after their parents, siblings and grandparents. This new age is to be one of “self-help” and “self-reliance.” That concept was introduced by the 1983 and 1984 white papers of the Ministry of Health and Welfare and expanded upon thereafter.

Under the current system, if an applicant for public assistance is lucky or desperate enough to receive the ward office’s initial approval, a thorough investigation of family assets and savings follows. Counselors often visit relatives to confirm that there is no one who can help. Many homeless are so worried about their families finding out about their situation that they will flee hospital beds or shelters before the application process can be completed. “I don’t want my family or community to know where I am. I don’t want to bring any shame to them. That’s why I don’t want to apply for public assistance,” said Sakurai-san, who has been on the streets for 10 years.

The Livelihood Protection Assistance is available from the central and city governments, but certain procedures severely restrict the range of recipients. To be eligible, one must have little or no income, must prove being unable to work because of illness, with supporting evidence from a hospital, and must present documents such as family registers and residence certificates.

It is not an encouraging approach to solving the needs of a growing segment of the nation’s population. Japan’s economic picture has darkened at a time when its population is aging rapidly. By the year 2000, one-fourth of the nation’s expected 128 million people will be 65 or older. To finance the huge costs of supporting such a large proportion of elderly people, the government is gradually raising the age at which individuals can qualify for a full public pension to 65. It also wants
older people to work longer. But that is proving difficult because corporations are cutting labor costs and, in some cases, striking the lifetime-employment contract they made implicitly when they hired young workers out of college. In addition, the net worth of Japanese households has been falling for the past six years. Cast adrift from a system they worked so hard to help create, Japan's aging population may still have a paycheck, but without something meaningful to occupy the hours. Eventually, they take early retirement or resign and lose everything. Some will no doubt join the ranks of the new homeless.

Meanwhile, dealing with the homeless is a problem without a solution, and the stories of the homeless are sad, made more sad by the likelihood that the problem could lead to a multigeneration culture of poverty. This possibility could provide a rare instance of Japanese social breakdown, which is in its way as instructive as the nation's many and more obvious successes.

Homelessness entails more than simple measures for dealing with people who live on the street. People in the mainstream must drastically change the way they think and learn to accept these fringe members of society. As Takahashi Jirō, a 53-year-old homeless man and sometime poet, wrote before he died of cirrhosis of the liver in December 1995:

Autumn's blossom,
the Chinese bellflower has bloomed
To bloom and fall in underground passageways
is commonplace in the world of people.