

Homeless People in Thailand and the Philippines

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This paper presents basic information about homeless people in Thailand and the Philippines. It first addresses three issues related to homeless people in Thailand, namely how homeless people are referred to and defined, information gained through surveys and work with homeless people, and plans for conducting another survey this year. Next it addresses homeless people in the Philippines in terms of definitions and information gained through surveys of the homeless. Finally, it briefly compares some issues pertaining to homeless people in Thailand and the Philippines.

Homeless People in Thailand

How homeless people are defined in Thai language

There are three different terms in Thai language that are generally understood as referring to homeless people. The oldest and most widely used term, “*khonraeron*,” has a distinctly negative connotation and may also be translated into English as “vagrant.” The term “*khonraeron*” is frequently used in combination with two other words that underscore the highly negative attitude that most people in Thai society have toward the homeless: “*jonjad*” and “*khothan*.” When Thai people hear the words “*khonraeron jonjad*,” they think of vicious stray dogs that are constantly wandering around threatening people. The compound term “*khonraeron khothan*” is less dehumanizing, but still equates homeless people with itinerant beggars.

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The second of the three terms, “*khonraiban*,” which is a literal translation of the English word “homeless,” was introduced into the Thai language by the Human Settlement Foundation (HSF) in 2001 as an attempt to destigmatize the homeless and create a more humane understanding among the public that these were simply people who did not have a home.

The most recent term to enter Thai public discourse is “*pu chai chiwit nai ti satarana*,” which may be translated into English as “person living in a public place.” This term was first devised in 2013 by Issarachon Foundation, an NGO working together with Bangkok Friendly Home, a homeless center under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security. At first glance, it would appear that this term refers precisely to the homeless. However, according to the way it is defined by Issarachon Foundation and Bangkok Friendly Home, the term is actually much broader. According to their usage, it also includes groups of people who might be found in public places but may also have houses where they live, such as alcoholics, sex workers, and people with “sexual diversity.” In addition, according to their definition, the term also refers to a large group of people who do have houses and may not even spend much time in public places, namely slum dwellers. Indeed, the term “*pu chai chiwit nai ti satarana*” has given rise to much conceptual confusion. This lack of clarity is particularly problematic because the primary state agency within the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security with responsibility for addressing homelessness has adopted this concept as the basis for implementing a policy designed to solve the problem of homelessness. However, because the basic concept about who is included in the target group is so confusing and unclear, it seems that the policy will have little chance of actually being effective in solving the problems of the homeless.

Putting aside the term “*pu chai chiwit nai ti satarana*” because of its lack of analytical clarity, it still seems that almost all Thai people share a common understanding

about which group is being referred to by the terms “*khonraeron*” and “*khonraiban*.”

According to this common conception, homeless people are people who have no home and sleep in public places, such as on sidewalks or benches alongside the street, in parks, in front of shops or large buildings, in transportation centers such as bus or train stations, in public markets or under bridges. They are a distinct group separate from slum dwellers. Moreover, regardless of which term is used, public attitudes toward the homeless remain largely negative and there is little understanding about their actual situation.

Three sources of information about homeless people in Thailand

Overall, very little information has been compiled about the homeless in Thailand. The limited statistical information about the homeless that is available comes from three sources: the Bangkok Department of Social Development, Issarachon Foundation in collaboration with Bangkok Friendly Home, and the Human Settlement Foundation (HSF). According to the Bangkok Department of Social Development, staff in 2014 counted approximately 600-700 homeless people in the area in and around *Sanam Luang*, the public park across from the Royal Palace. They claim this number has not changed much in many years. However this number is limited and refers to only one specific area in Bangkok without covering the entire city. Furthermore, no formal enumeration was done, and the number 600-700 is purely an estimate based on visual approximation.

Based on a separate survey ostensibly conducted in 2013, Issarachon Foundation and Bangkok Friendly Home estimate the number of homeless people throughout the city in Bangkok to be 3,140. However, the accuracy of this statistic must be questioned, because it is unclear what methodology was used in Issarachon's survey.

For its part, HSF has attempted to collect information about the homeless that is as accurate as possible. It has collected quantitative data through three enumerations, the first

two of which were conducted in 2010 in Bangkok and Chiang Mai Municipality, and the third of which was executed at the end of 2014 in Khon Kaen Municipality. Moreover, HSF staff members have also acquired a great deal of qualitative information about the homeless through their direct work as community organizers with members of this group. HSF's definition of the homeless coincides with the common conception of Thai people stated above, but also includes four more groups of people encountered in the course of work: people who rent cheap rooms on a daily basis, people who live in abandoned buildings, people who live in *tuktuks* (motorized tricycles) or pushcarts, and people who live in homeless shelters. HSF counts people who rent cheap rooms on a daily basis as homeless because in practice, this group of people is continually recycling back into homelessness as soon as they no longer have the money to pay the daily rent (approximately US\$1 per day). As for the relatively smaller number of people living in abandoned buildings, they generally have to leave these places after a short period when the owner of the building discovers their presence and they then return to sleeping on the street.

To begin ascertaining the extent of homelessness in Bangkok, HSF conducted a homeless count and survey from 6:00 to 9:00 pm on the night of 17 January 2010 covering all 24 sites in various parts of the city where it was certain that at least one homeless person was staying. The count and survey was undertaken by 17 teams consisting of three to four people each. The 55 people in total who took part included NGO staff, homeless people, and slum dwellers, all of whom were provided rudimentary training by HSF on how to conduct the count and random paperless survey.

During this activity, 1,093 homeless people were counted, of whom 922 were men, 141 were women, and 30 were children. Twenty-five families were counted among the 1,093 people. In terms of age, the majority of the 1,093 homeless people were between the ages of 30 and 55. A majority also reported having some level of primary education, while no

respondent reported having graduated from university. Most respondents also suffered from physical or mental illness, including tuberculosis, diabetes, high blood pressure, HIV, joint ailments, and alcoholism. Nonetheless, they rarely saw a doctor and went to the hospital only in very extreme cases. The majority of respondents had jobs in the informal sector, with the most frequently reported ones (in order of frequency) being collecting recyclable goods, day laborer, and small-scale vendor.

In September 2010, HSF staff, together with some trained homeless people and slum dwellers carried out an enumeration and survey of the homeless in the 21 sites in Chiang Mai Municipality where homeless people were known to be. They counted 166 homeless people, of whom 152 were men, 13 were women, and one was a male child. These 166 people included four families. Of the survey respondents who provided information, 45% had been homeless for less than 5 years, 29% had been homeless from 5-10 years, and 26% had been homeless for more than 10 years. The occupation reported most frequently by respondents who provided information was recyclable collector, at 38%. Thirty-five percent of respondents who provided information had no national identity card. Those surveyed came from all regions of the country, but the large majority (45%) came from Chiang Mai Province itself.

At the end of 2014, HSF and its collaborators, totaling 20 people, conducted a count and survey of the homeless in the 20 sites in Khon Kaen Municipality where homeless people were known to be. Unlike the earlier Bangkok and Chiang Mai counts, the five survey teams deployed in Khon Kaen surveyed every homeless person they counted using a questionnaire with 30 questions. They were able to do so because HSF had been working in the area for three years already and had already established a relationship with almost all of the homeless there. In the enumeration they counted 136 homeless people. Of this number, 111 were men and 25 were women. No children were found. The age group with the largest representation

was 31-50 years old, with 56.6% of respondents falling in this range. In regard to educational level, the largest number of respondents (46.3%) reported having some primary education. In terms of source of income, 32.3% of respondents reported working as a day laborer, 19.1% reported being unemployed, and 14.7% reported working as a collector of recyclables.

Through its organizing work with the homeless over the last 14 years starting in Bangkok and extending later to Chiang Mai and Khon Kaen, HSF has found that there are generally five types of problems experienced by the homeless. First, at the most basic level, homeless people have difficulties in their everyday life such as not having a place to bathe, wash their clothes, go to the bathroom, sleep, or take refuge from the sun or rain. The physical and mental hardship posed by these problems on a daily basis result in a very large number of the homeless having physical and/or mental health problems. Second, most homeless people are unable to access basic state services such as healthcare or welfare benefits for the elderly or handicapped because they do not have current valid national identification cards. Third, because they generally do not have national identification cards and therefore cannot file complaints with state agencies, homeless people are unable to defend their own rights or seek protection by the state. Fourth, homeless people have insecure occupations that yield low and uncertain income. Most homeless people earn their living by collecting recyclable goods, which is an occupation held in very low esteem by Thai society. Fifth, homeless people are rejected by society and therefore lack social and economic opportunities because they are usually judged by their outward appearance, which may be dirty or disheveled. As a consequence of this repeated social rejection, homeless people often feel a lack of emotional security, which can manifest itself in a variety of psychological complexes.

Furthermore, HSF has found that family conflicts arising from several issues are often the immediate cause giving rise to homelessness. Sometimes, simple conflicts between

family members that are not resolved result in one person seeking escape by leaving and becoming homeless. Other cases are more complex and include, for example, handicapped people, people living with HIV, unemployed people, elderly people, mentally ill people, or people released from prison being viewed by their families as an unnecessary burden and therefore pushed out. At the same time, because social institutions have become weaker and no longer have the capacity to provide support to these groups, those who have been pushed out by their family end up having to live on the streets. Viewed in this way, it may seem that the cause of homelessness is personal weakness or failure. However, if the matter is examined more closely, there is almost always an element of underlying economic pressure playing a role that becomes visible.

HSF recognizes that a great deal of basic information about the homeless in Thailand is still missing, including quantitative data measuring the extent of homelessness. Therefore, HSF plans to join with homeless people, state agencies, academics, and other civil society organizations to carry out an enumeration of homeless people in all areas of Bangkok where homeless people are known to stay before the end of September 2015. Because of the multi-stakeholder collaboration in the survey, HSF expects the enumeration results to be accepted by all parties. The enumeration will be done together with a survey that will gather relevant qualitative information from a significant sample of homeless respondents. HSF plans to use the quantitative and qualitative information gathered to engage in more effective policy advocacy together with the homeless people with whom it is working. More importantly, however, HSF hopes that bringing more information about the homeless to light will enable the public to gain a greater understanding of who the homeless are and what needs to be done to ensure that they are able to overcome their problems.

Homeless People in the Philippines

How homeless people are defined in the Philippines

In the Philippines, the term “homeless people” is used widely to include both slum dwellers and street people. For example, members of the Philippines Homeless People’s Federation are people living in slum communities (VMSDFI 2001; Yu and Karaos 2004; Teodoro 2009). They are not living in public spaces, but they are called “homeless people.” Therefore, it is easy to get confused when discussing “homeless people” in the Philippines. For example, newspapers have reported that “Metro Manila has the highest homeless population in the world” (Clapano, *The Philippine Star*, May 6, 2014). Actually, the report refers to people residing in slums in Metro Manila. Another group of “homeless people” who are often featured by the media is the group living in North Cemetery in Manila City. A 2005 report states that about 200 families are living in this area (www.asianews.com). Another website referred to the approximately 10,000 people living in North Cemetery (www.odditycentral.com). Many of them earn income through jobs related to the cemetery, such as decorating tombs or driving tricycles for visitors. They have lived in North Cemetery for a long time and some people are already second-generation residents. All Together in Dignity (ATD) Fourth World Philippines is an NGO working with the villagers in North Cemetery to present their problems to the United Nations. However, both slum dwellers and the villagers in North Cemetery are different from homeless people, who live in public spaces.

In addition, people living under bridges, such as on Quirino Street, are considered to be homeless people too. They receive assistance from the same government office as those who are considered “homeless street families” (<http://www.atdphilippines.blogspot.com>). They are in between slum dwellers and street people. On the one hand, their makeshift houses

are of lesser quality than houses in slum communities. On the other hand, people living under bridges have more sense of occupying a place than do street people.

When people in the Philippines want to refer to people living in public spaces specifically, they use the term “street dwellers.” For example, Corazon Soliman, Secretary of the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), estimated in 2003 that there were 30,000 “street dwellers” in the National Capital Region (NCR), or Metro Manila (Crisostomo 2003). In 2010, DSWD launched a policy to support “homeless street families.” This term is used officially to refer to families with children living in public spaces, such as on the sidewalk, in parks, under bridges, and in port areas.

Referring to the homeless today as “street dwellers” has a positive connotation and is different from the past, when people loitering in public places were called “vagrants” or “*bagansya*” in Tagalog. Vagrancy used to be a crime under the Philippine Penal Code and those found guilty of it could be put in jail (Manila Times December 10, 2010). However, the law has now been changed to decriminalize people living in public spaces. In contrast, the term “street dweller” just refers to a person’s physical situation, implying that the person is impoverished and the government needs to support them.

Information about homeless people in the Philippines

The Philippine government through DSWD conducted surveys of street dwellers in 2010 and 2013. Since the media and public were concerned about street people, the government had to expand its services to cover them. A DSWD document pertaining to the 2010 survey does not explain the methodology used. However, it does reveal that the survey covered all public areas in Manila City, and that all five districts were surveyed. Results from major areas are included in the report. DSWD conducted another survey in 2013 to register homeless street families. One of the authors of this paper (Visetpricha) had direct experience

with the survey while living on the street at that time. DSWD officials and their outsourced staff looked for street families in the public spaces where they assumed that they could be found. DSWD also contacted officials from the relevant *barangay*, the smallest local government unit, to ask where the street people were. The survey in 2013 took one week, but it focused only on homeless street families. Street people without children were not interviewed or counted.

Results from the survey of street dwellers in 2010 indicate that there were 1,476 street dwellers in Manila City, of whom 411 were adult men, 291 were adult women, 706 were street children, and 68 were infants. Among the 1,476 street dwellers were 155 homeless street families. However the DSWD 2010 survey also included some groups that should not be counted as homeless people, such as 71 people who were members of the *Badjao* community. *Badjao* is an ethnic group that has migrated from the southern Philippines to Manila. Stereotypically, they beg on the street to survive, but they can afford to rent accommodations. They do not live on the street. Nevertheless, the DSWD wants to support them to change their livelihood and has put them in the same program as street dwellers. Their way of life is quite different from other groups of street people, as can be seen in the fact that they still have a community. Actually the DSWD 2010 survey covered all 17 cities of Metro Manila, but the authors only have access to the information on street dwellers in Manila City.⁴ According to a DSWD-NCR document about an assistance program for homeless street families, there were 1,745 homeless street families in Metro Manila in 2010.⁵

Recently, DSWD director for the National Capital told the media that DSWD estimated there were 3,500 street-dwelling families in just the two cities of Manila and

⁴ Manila City is only one part of Metro Manila. The other cities in Metro Manila are all urbanized and have homeless populations too, such as Quezon City and Pasay City.

⁵ This number was calculated based on the report that “196 or 11.23% of HSFs [homeless street families] are headed by a solo parent.”

Quezon City alone (Philippine Daily Inquirer May 9, 2015). This estimate is quite high compared to the 2010 survey. It raises questions about how this number was derived.

It is not possible for the authors to evaluate the reliability of statistics at the Metro Manila level based on their own independently gathered data, because Visetpricha's fieldwork was undertaken only in Manila City. Therefore, the authors can only analyze information about homeless people in Manila City counted in the DSWD 2010 survey,

First, the number of street dwellers counted in the 2010 survey (702 people, excluding children) in Manila City seems to be too low. Visetpricha conducted intensive fieldwork with homeless people in the center of Manila City (not covering all areas) for 14 months in 2013 to 2014. Although he employed qualitative research methods (participant observation), he also tried to estimate the number of homeless people. He went to almost all the soup kitchens (27 places) in Manila and estimated that about 500 homeless people were surviving by getting food at these soup kitchens and doing odd jobs at the same time. Aside from these 500 people, there were also many homeless people who rarely came to the soup kitchens and relied on their odd jobs alone to survive, such as collecting recyclable items, selling things on the street, etc. The latter group consisted of at least 1,000 people. Therefore, Visetpricha estimates that there are at least 1,500 street dwellers in Manila City, not including street children.

Second, the ratio of homeless women to men in the DSWD 2010 survey was quite high, at 291 adult females (41.45%) to 411 adult males (58.54%). Visetpricha randomly counted the number of attendees at several soup kitchens and found that women generally comprised around 25-30% of the total number of service users. Further investigation is needed to explain why the DSWD survey identified a higher percentage of homeless women than ascertained through Visetpricha's count.

Third, the DSWD presentation proposed that street dwellers who were originally from Metro Manila had become homeless because their houses in squatter areas had been demolished. Hideo Aoki also makes the same assumption based on an analysis of documents, but the assertion has never been verified factually (Aoki 2008). Visetpricha conducted life history interviews with 100 homeless people and failed to find anyone who had become homeless because their house had been demolished. Visetpricha's research consequently does not support the argument that housing demolition directly creates street homelessness.

Nonetheless, it is not possible to say that Visetpricha's findings are correct and DSWD's are wrong. Perhaps DSWD's informants came from a broader range of backgrounds than Visetpricha's. The homeless people whom Visetpricha studied did not have regular jobs and rarely had connections with their families and communities. They were street people ("*taong kalye*" in Tagalog). In contrast, many other people might sleep on the street due to different reasons. For example, they may be displaced people from slum communities who find that it is too difficult to commute back and forth from their distant relocation sites every day (Jung 2014). These people might sleep on the street, but still have a connection with their families and have regular jobs. They might rarely go to soup kitchen and Visetpricha might not have encountered them. Nevertheless, this assumption needs further investigation.

Comparisons relating to homeless people in Thailand and the Philippines

First, in terms of language, it is less confusing in Thailand to talk about "homeless people" than in the Philippines. In the Philippines "homeless people" has a broader meaning. Consequently, the Philippine government uses the term "street dwellers" or "street families" to make it clear that it is referring to people living in public places.

Second, the Philippine government has conducted surveys on a large scale to gather information about homeless people. In contrast, in Thailand, it is NGOs that have tried to do

surveys and collect information from homeless people. However, the information about homeless people in both Thailand and the Philippines still needs to be improved to become more accurate.

Third, although we cannot know accurately the exact number of homeless people in Metro Manila and Bangkok, the estimated number of homeless people in Metro Manila (30,000 persons) is much higher than the estimated number in Bangkok (on the order of few thousand persons). The populations of these two cities are almost the same, with Metro Manila having 12 million residents and Bangkok 10 million, but the geographical size of Metro Manila (638.6 km²) is only 40 percent the size of Bangkok (1,569 km²). The number of homeless families in Metro Manila is also far greater than in Bangkok. The reasons behind these significantly different numbers should be investigated further.

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