

**Thematic Session  
Right to Housing**

**History and Reality of Jjokbang Villages  
(referring to a village of tiny one-room  
residences (jjokbang) in Low-income  
Neighborhoods) – Focusing on Seoul**

**LEE Donghyun  
[Activist, The Homeless Action]**

## **1. History of jjokbang**

- Jjokbang was recognized as the last resort of low-income households at around the time when Korea went through the Asian Financial Crisis. Its history, however, dates back to the era of urbanization derived from industrialization and even back to the time of refuge and relocation due to the Korean War. Seongkyu Ha et al.(2005) classified the formation of jjokbang villages as follows depending on their 'origination'.

- Transformation of sex trafficking hub: In 1961, then president Jeonghee Park banned prostitution in an effort to eradicate activities of social evil which resulted in the declining of brothel district. Therefore, the brothel businesses turned to accommodation businesses such as jjokbang concentrated in Doneui-dong, Changsin-dong, Yeongdeungpo-dong, and surrounding areas of Dongincheon and Busanjin Stations.

- Transformation of Yeogwan and Yeoinsook (Korean style accommodations, similar to inn or bed and breakfast): in 1986, as the national curfew was lifted, users of those types of accommodations decreased and the downtown of old cities declined as well. Additionally, with accommodation businesses going for high-end and large-scale trends, those Korean styled-accommodations turned into jjokbangs especially in Changsin-dong and Namdaemunro 5 ga-dong in Seoul, Deajeon and Daegu.

- Transformation of gosiwons, barns, and residential houses: gosiwon (single room occupancy designed for those preparing for exams), legally defined as industrial activity facilities, eventually were transformed into unclassified accommodation facilities. In some cases, abandoned stores, shut-down plants, and barns were modified and used as jjokbang, too.

- These jjokbangs are usually located in neighboring areas with high concentration of low-income labors such as surrounding areas of railway station and traditional market. Depending on the degree of density, the areas with jjokbangs could be divided into 'dense areas (5 major areas of jjokbang in Seoul, and Jeongdong in Daejeon)' and 'dispersed areas (near Busan Station to Seomyeon, Bupyeong-dong in Incheon).

- A survey was conducted to enhance understanding on the current status of jjokbang in Seoul in 1999 and jjokbang counselling centers were installed as a pilot project in 2 areas (Jongro-gu and Jung-gu) in Seoul and 1 area (Dong-gu) in Busan in 2000. Since then, 10 centers were additionally established in 2001. In 2018, the legal basis of establishing jjokbang counselling centers, originally included in the Enforcement Decree of the Act on the Welfare of the Homeless, was amended and elevated into

the law (newly prescribed as the Article 16.1.7). As of August 2023, there are 10 centers in operation across the nation.

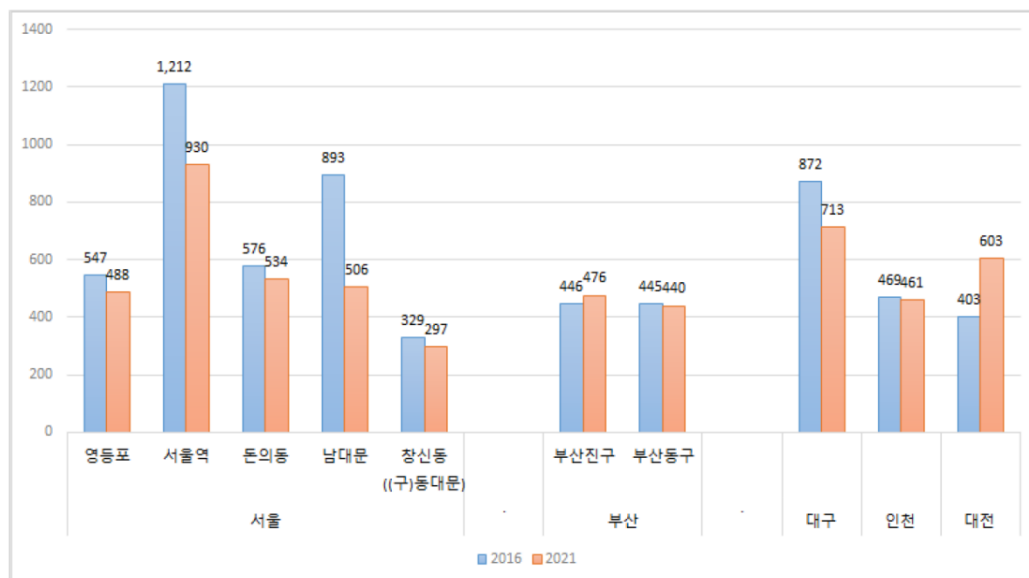
## 2. Current Status of jjokbang and residents

### 1) Status of jjokbang dwellers

- ‘Investigation on the Current Status of the Homeless and Others’ carried out every 5 years is the only nation-wide survey on the status of jjokbang residents held on a regular basis. According to the latest survey in 2021, there were 5,448 residents and the figure reduced by 744 from 2016 across the nation. Please, refer to [Figure 1] for the changes by areas.

- The area that has shown a significant change compared to the survey results of 2016 is Seoul with the decreasing number residents of 822 higher than the national total drop of 744. The downsize of jjokbang residents was mostly attributed to gentrification (near Seoul Station) and urban reconstruction (Namdaemun) and new town projects (Daegu).

- Most jjokbang dwellers are male accounting for 84.4% and female residents accounts for 15.6%. By age, residents in their 60s account for 37.7%, in 50s for 27%, and in 70s for 17.5%, modestly higher than the figures in 2016. Most jjokbang residents are single-person household taking up 98.1% of the total. 58.7% of residents are receiving livelihood subsidy from the government, 10.8% of them are registered as the disabled with 5.1% of them are physically disabled.



(Unit: number of person)

## 2) Living condition of jjokbang

- The national survey on the jjokbang current status by the Ministry of Health and Welfare does not deal with the living condition of jjokbang. Therefore, this study focuses on the results of the ‘Survey on the Status of Jjokbang Buildings and Residents in Seoul’ to look into the living condition of jjokbang inhabitants.
- The major materials of jjokbang buildings were concrete (29.3%) followed by wood (28.65), which makes the buildings more vulnerable to weather events. When it comes to heating, around half of them are based on LNG system, while higher number of jjokbangs are using electric blanket (15.2%), coal briquettes (11.3%), and electric panels (10.2%) which are poor in terms of efficiency and safety.
- The <Table 1> shows the status of facilities of jjokbang areas in Seoul. Less than half of jjokbangs provide facilities such as kitchen, laundry, and shower booth. Even with those facilities, most of them are run as public facilities, which makes the living condition of jjokbang areas much more inadequate.

Item		Number of buildings	Percentage
total		283	100.0%
Kitchen	Yes	91	32.2%
	None	192	67.8%
Washroom	Yes	247	87.3%
	None	36	12.7%
Laundry	Yes	123	43.5%
	None	160	56.5%
Toilet	Yes	228	80.6%
	None	55	19.4%
Shower booth	Yes	78	27.6%
	None	205	72.4%

Source: Seoul Metropolitan City, Dec 2022, p4

### 3. Agenda 1 on jjokbang: Development of jjokbang areas

- The history of jjokbang area development meant the destruction of jjokbangs and the resident-deprivation.
- According to an article tracking residents of jjokbangs in Yeongdeungpo, Seoul, destructed in 2003, 114 residents of 200 deconstructed jjokbang buildings were compensated. 101 of them were funded for the cost of moving while 13 were applied for the occupancy rights to the rental housing supported by the government. At that time, the compensation for moving cost was KRW 4.2 million per single-person household, while the downpayment for the occupancy right was approximately KRW 10 million. After the eviction, 90 left their jjokbangs were tracked in a survey. The results suggested that most of them forcibly moved to another jjokbangs within 1km away from their original places excepting the cases of 19 unidentified, 5 moving to public rental housings, 4 who ended up being the homeless, and 2 dead. As a result, the rental fees for jjokbangs around the region went up by KRW 30,000 ~ 40,000 in average with a growing demand. Please refer to the development history of jjokbang in Seoul.

Year	Area	Development projects	Destructed number of jjokbang
2003	Yeongdeungpo-gu Yeongdeungpo-dong 1ga	Urban Plan Infrastructure Project	≒200
2005	Jung-gu Namdaemoonro 5ga	Urban Environment Improvement Project	≒400
2006	Yeongdeungpo-gu Yeongdeungpo-dong 1ga	Urban Plan Infrastructure Project	≒80
2008	Yongsan-gu Dongja- dong	Urban Environment Improvement Project	≒100 (in-official jjokbang)
2016	Jung-gu Namdaemoonro 5ga	Urban Environment Improvement Project	220

- Recent development projects in jjokbang areas of Seoul whether by public or private sector both are implemented in a way to guarantee prior movement and virtuous cycle for jjokbang residents. It was partly backed by the public housing projects of the government in Yeongdeungpo area in 2020 but also seemed to be a result of movement led by civic organizations of jjokbang residents.

For instance, 'Yangdong Urban Improvement Re-development Project' in jjokbang areas of Namdaemoonro 5ga initially had not included the resettlement plan for jjokbang residents and the construction of public rental houses. Rather, the City of Seoul had drawn a plan to have jjokbang residents move to inhabits similar to gosiwon by leasing and modifying some buildings of Yongsan-gu after having the 'Meeting on Reviewing Improvement Projects of Jjokbang Villages'.

Thus, 'Homeless Housing Team' started holding a survey on the current status of residents, resident seminars, meeting to collect residents' opinions, residential cultural events, and press conference to put pressure on Jung-gu and Seoul City. Based on the events and programs organized by residents for two years, 'Jjokbang Residents Organization' was set in June 2021. Since then, the civic group of jjokbang residents has kept on engaging in autonomy activities of residents.

Thanks to their efforts and activities, the urban plan was modified to construct public houses and social welfare facilities in the jjokbang areas in March 2021. Additionally, according to the amended plan, the city decided to help the jjokbang residents move to the new facilities in advance.

- One of major obstacles in resettling jjokbang residents is the measure of evicting jjokbang residents in advance. In order to get around the measures (public rental house, compensation for moving costs) that jjokbang owners need to take, owners and project implementing entities tend to evict jjokbang residents way before the initiation of development projects.

The area of Urban Improvement Development Project in Yangdong saw decrease in the number of jjokbang residents by half in just a year from 2019 to early 2021 from 400 in 455 jjokbangs to 230 in 324 jjokbangs.

In another development project in Changsin-dong, the number of residents reduced by 40% from 388 in 525 jjokbangs in 2020 to 235 in 374 jjokbangs in 2021.

Such a trend has been seen in development projects implemented both by public and private sectors. The number of residents in Dongjadong, where a development plan is scheduled, is expected to decrease from 1,063 in 2021 to 886 in 2022 down by 17%.

Currently, the owners of Dongjadong jjokbangs have induced their tenants to leave

the jjokbang requesting them not to report their moving in to the Community Service Center. Their request not to report moving-in information is a violation on the Act on Residents Registration but being implemented implicitly.

#### **4. Current issues of jjokbang 2: Definition of jjokbang and policy target**

- As mentioned earlier, a large number of jjokbang has disappeared due to urban development projects. At the same time, indiscriminate ‘recognition’ and ‘understanding of status’ implemented by Seoul City and some jjokbang counselling centers were utilized as an agent to artificially manipulate the scale of jjokbang.

For example, an annual survey conducted by Seoul included jjokbangs in Dongdaemun-gu Jeongnong1-dong in 2017 confirming 74 residents were living in 110 jjokbangs in 7 buildings, however, the survey in 2018 excluded those jjokbangs in that area without no reasons.

- In the past survey, Seoul decided to include new areas of jjokbang addition to 5 existing jjokbang concentrated areas in order to provide justification in review on expanding jjokbang villages and additionally installing counselling centers.

Therefore, the surveys in 2014 and 2015 included Yongju-dong and Jegi-dong addition to the conventional jjokbang areas, however, the areas have not been surveyed ever since.

- Also, there are many cases that were excluded and not considered jjokbangs even though they are similar to jjokbang or even worse than jjokbang condition.

Additionally, gosiwons in Yeongdeungpo-gu are not regarded as jjokbangs even though they are located in jjokbang areas, on the other hand, there are a number of gosiwons accepted as jjokbang in Jung-gu and Yongsang-gu.

Also, there are some buildings of jjokbang that are included as jjokbang after being excluded once in the system. Even in some cases, some jjokbangs were excluded from the system at the request of the building owners.

- Exclusion from the system means jjokbang residents are deprived of the support and services that have been provided by the government. Especially, the current municipal government of Seoul has taken ‘Accompanying the Vulnerable’ as policy catchphrase and implemented support policy for jjokbang residents.

Inaugurated in 2021, the city administration announced ‘3 support measures for the homeless and jjokbang residents’ including measures of distributing air conditioners, and providing meal vouchers and bath vouchers.

Inhabitants dwelling in jjokbang but excluded from the system could feel a sense of deprivation when finding themselves left in the blind spot of support system. Also, when they fail to be accepted as jjokbang residents they could be excluded from public housing projects and measures for jjokbang residents in urban redevelopment projects as well.

- There are a plenty of jjokbangs not accepted as jjokbang across the nation. It was the result shown in a survey by the Association of National Jjokbang Counselling Centers (2017) that was conducted on 200 people dwelling in similar housings to jjokbang in Gwangju, Ulsan, and Gyeonggi-do (Uijeongbu, Seongnam).

A research of the Korea Center for City and Environment Research also suggested that there were jjokbangs in Jeju Island, Gyeonggi-do (Siheung City, Bucheon City), and Jeonbuk (Jeonju city).

Daegu Jjokbang Counselling Center continuously includes new jjokbangs to their monitoring system. It also carried out the current status of non-official housing similar to jjokbang but not registered in the system in 2022. As a result, the center found out that those types of residence were slightly better than jjokbang in general functions. However, for some part of functions, they were poorer than jjokbang, or they put more burdens of living costs on residents which makes the quality of life in those residence worse than that in jjokbang.

In terms of subject recognition, the Survey on the Current Status of Residence by the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transportation found out that 20.1% (74,258 households) of respondents recognized their habitat as jjokbang.

- The existence of non-recognized jjokbangs is attributed to a lack of determination to take measures by the central and Seoul Metropolitan governments and the absence of appropriate 'definition' of jjokbang. What makes matters worse is that support for jjokbang residents is provided on the basis of the Act on Welfare of the Homeless.

The Act only prescribed the function of 'Jjokbang Counselling Center' through the Enforcement Decree without providing the determination of jjokbang's concept.

In 2018, the amendment elevated the basis of establishing the counselling center into the law, still, there is no definition on jjokbang in place.

At the moment, only 'policy' and 'delivery system' are determined without setting 'target' of the policy. Eventually, the local government has shown a lukewarm attitude in accepting residence with poor condition as jjokbang and considering the issue in their budgeting as well.



## **5. Policy Proposal on Jjokbang**

### 1) Improving living condition in jjokbang villages

- There are many jjokbang areas that have not gone through urban development projects and their condition inevitably worsens as time goes by. Small scale repairing projects that implemented so far have limit in improving overall living condition and are not continuable because those jjokbangs' ownership is privately held.

We need to take a look at overseas cases. For instance, The Housing Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS) of the UK and the Uniform Physical Condition, Standard (UPCS) of the US set specific quality standards for housings and relevant regulations are implemented accordingly. Under the system, lease could be limited or even the houses could be ordered to shut down.

Also, the UK runs the lease registration and permission system for HMO (Houses in multiple occupation) and imposes fine on the case in which HMO is run without permission.

As such, Korea also has to come up with such standards and draw relevant regulations. At the same time, such a project of purchasing and remodeling old gosiwons conducted by Seoul City and the central government need to further expand. In the project, the government directly purchases old gosiwons and supply them after renovating to meet certain standards.

Also, those types of housing need to be used as resources for the project of supporting costs for temporary housing under the Act on the Welfare of the Homeless.

### 2) Unwavering implementation of public housing project and providing adequate residence

- The public housing project in Dongjadong jjokbang areas that should have been completed in 2021 has not shown any progress.

The government needs to accelerate the project to make sure the rights of housing of the poor not to be beaten by the house owners' greed.

- Indeed, the housings to be newly provided under the public housing project and urban redevelopment project are too tiny.

According to a research to estimate an adequate area of housing based on the needed space, the minimum area for one-person household is 32m<sup>2</sup>.

Therefore, the government's goal should be to provide an adequate condition of

housing not just a better space than jjokbang.

Definition of jjokbang and expansion of target jjokbang for support

- The necessity of definition of jjokbang has been an emphasized agenda since the early 2000 when jjokbang was included as a policy subject.
- When defining jjokbang, the basic principle needs to lie in 'inclusion' not 'exclusion'.

The jjokbang definition needs to be used in identifying people in need of services because of vulnerability and providing them with adequate services.

Characteristics of jjokbang, including areas, existence and condition of facilities, whether the housing meets the minimum criteria, level of rental costs and downpayment, types of leases, the existence of agreement, and density could be considered just one of traits making up jjokbang condition but should not be considered essential elements.

In conclusion, we need to define jjokbang and jjokbang dwellers by combining those elements and residential characteristics and assign required services accordingly.