

# [Being homeless in Khon Kaen amidst the COVID-19 crisis](#)

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Homeless people in Khon Kaen city are one of the most vulnerable groups among the urban poor, as a [2018 study](#) from Khon Kaen University found. How are these people dealing with the COVID-19 outbreak and what measures are the government taking to protect the most vulnerable members of society?

According to the Khon Kaen Protection Center for the Destitute, there are 83 homeless people in the city. But the coronavirus pandemic has pushed many people out of their jobs and onto the streets, making it difficult to estimate the actual number of homeless people. The Thai Chamber of Commerce predicted last month that the current crisis might leave more than seven million people unemployed.

“Homeless people are probably less at risk of COVID-19 infection than other groups of people because they don’t meet many people on a regular basis, and due to their personality. They don’t usually mingle with people,” says Nattawut Krompakdee, a coordinator at Friends of the Homeless, a charity group. “But if one of them gets infected, there is a high chance that the virus will spread among other homeless people.”

Friends of the Homeless, and various government agencies, such as the Social Development and Human Security Office in Khon Kaen and the

Khon Kaen Protection Center for the Destitute, have been distributing food and other necessities to homeless people and informal workers in the city.

The Khon Kaen railway station has become a gathering spot for many homeless people in the city. Many of them used to live in [slum communities along the railway tracks](#). But in 2016, the State Railway of Thailand (SRT) [demolished many of the houses](#) as part of the double-track rail project.

“Some of these homeless people used to live in the Thepharak community but had to leave when the government project started,” Nattawut says. “They lost their homes, but then returned to the area where they once lived.”

Unlike the middle class, the homeless and low-income groups often lack basic access to information on how to protect themselves amid a public health crisis, Nattawut notes.

“They don’t have access to tools that can prevent them from getting COVID-19, such as masks, hand sanitizer, clean water, and even a place to quarantine themselves,” Nattawut says.

Their lives have also been affected by the government’s measures to prevent the spreading of the virus. The Khon Kaen governor ordered a temporary closure of entertainment venues, schools, theaters, and other venues on March 18, bringing much of the city’s public life to a standstill.

“Flea markets, fresh markets, supermarkets, and small enterprises are a main source of income for homeless people,” Nattawut says. “When those places closed or cut jobs, informal and day laborers lost their income and ran out of food for themselves and their families.”



Members of Friends of the Homeless, along with local government officials, visiting homeless people in Khon Kaen city last week.

Another place where homeless people in Khon Kaen often spend the night is the city shrine in the city center. The area is illuminated at night, giving homeless people a sense of safety at night.

Sonsiri Wippraset, a 25-year-old native of Udon Thani, has been sleeping in the area since he was laid off from his job as an air conditioning technician in Bangkok's Lat Krabang area. He only had enough money for a train ride to Khon Kaen.

"Since I didn't have enough money to go home, I decided to become a homeless person and stay here," Sonsiri says.

He explains that he does in fact have a house in Udon Thani but due to family problems, he decided to stay in Khon Kaen where he has found a community of homeless people who share a similar fate.

"I had never heard of COVID-19 before. I just learned about it in the news

but I don't know what the symptoms are like," Sonsiri says. "I'm scared. I protect myself by wearing masks that are being handed out, but sometimes I don't wear one because it feels uncomfortable."

Despite becoming friends with other homeless people, Sonsiri still hasn't learned what aid the government is providing to those affected by COVID-19. Although he would like to register to receive the 5,000-baht compensation money, he doesn't have any information on how to do so.

"I don't have an ID card right now. I don't know how I lost it, and the homeless people in this area have not heard of this policy. Right now we want to survive by getting a job," he says.



Sonsiri Wipprasert (left) and a friend have been sleeping near Khon Kaen's city shrine.

Khon Kaen municipality has been working to address the needs of homeless people in the city for a few years. Pongsapat Saengpitoon, an

official of the Social Development and Human Security Office in Khon Kaen, says the city has a policy to look after vulnerable groups and make sure they are not left behind in the COVID-19 pandemic.

“We have a project in collaboration with the private sector called, “[\*Pun Kun Im\*](#), which brings high-quality, clean, and safe food to homeless people and those who have lost their jobs due to the coronavirus outbreak, to the homeless every Monday at the Khon Kaen railway station,” Ponsapat says. The project also uses this opportunity to provide them with information about COVID-19.

There are also two homeless shelters in the city. One is run by the Protection Center for the Destitute under the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security and another one is Ban Home Saen Suk, managed by the private sector and capable of taking in about 100 homeless people.

Khaek, a 52-year-old woman, is one of the residents of the shelter of the Protection Center for the Destitute. She used to live on the streets before the shelter took her in.

The center usually allows people to stay for no more than 15 days as it can only accommodate 10 to 15 people. But since Khaek is sick with breast cancer, she has been allowed to stay longer.

“I have to undergo treatment at Khon Kaen Center Hospital once or twice a month,” says Khaek, who asked to be identified only by her nickname. “There, I noticed that the staff were very strict in detecting COVID-19, so it has made me become more alert.”



Khaek trims grass in front of the Khon Kaen Protection Center for the Destitute where she has been staying for more than two months while undergoing treatment for breast cancer.

Currently there are eight people staying at the center, says Chansak Khukhirikhet, one of the shelter's staff. Residents are urged to wear face masks, maintain one to two meters distance from each other, and avoid touching in order to prevent the spreading of the disease.

"Our measures include cleaning facilities every morning and evening, and asking residents to use their own plates and cutlery," Chansak says, regarding the measures taken by the center during the COVID-19 outbreak. "We have handed out face masks and urged everyone to keep things clean."

Apart from local projects in Khon Kaen, the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security has implemented measures to help people affected by the virus outbreak under a program called, "[No Thai Left Behind](#)."

The program provides accommodation with free meals for people who are unemployed and have no place to stay, especially during the 10 p.m. to 4 a.m. curfew. Those wishing to use this service are encouraged to contact

1300 for more information.