

Strengthening "Connections" among Community Residents: Japan's Measures to Address Loneliness and Social Isolation

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Abstract: *The phenomenon of "loneliness and isolation" in Japan is a product of profound social structural changes over the past half-century, primarily manifested in the surge of people living alone, the alienation of interpersonal relationships, and the resulting serious social problems such as "lonely deaths." Japan has successively introduced corresponding systems and measures at both the national and regional levels to address these issues. "Loneliness and isolation" result from a loss of "connection" with one's surroundings. This article starts with policies related to "connection" among local residents, analyzing the importance of strengthening "connections" between local and community residents. Establishing "connections" between people is undoubtedly one of the important ways to solve the phenomenon of "loneliness and isolation."*

Keywords: Loneliness, Isolation, Alienation of people living alone.

1. INTRODUCTION

Japan is becoming one of the world's "most lonely countries." As early as 2020, the Japanese Cabinet Office conducted a survey. The data showed that over 25% of elderly people living alone in Japan "almost never interact with others." In comparison, the figure is about 14% in Sweden, less than 13% in the United States, and less than 7% in Germany.

This isn't just true for the elderly who are retired and staying at home; young people who are busy with work aren't much better off either. According to the Cabinet Office's 2018 "Survey on the Awareness of Young People in Japan and Other Countries," as many as 20% of young Japanese people "don't tell anyone about their troubles and worries," followed by South Korea at less than 13%, France at less than 11%, while the proportions in the UK, Germany, the US, and Sweden are all below 10%.

A recent survey released by Japan's Cabinet Office in 2025 shows that approximately 39% of Japanese people feel lonely to varying degrees. This indicates that the Loneliness and Isolation Countermeasures Promotion Act, implemented in April 2024, has not yet produced significant results. The Cabinet Office analysis suggests that with the continued increase in the number of people living alone, the number of people facing the risk of loneliness and social isolation in Japan may further increase in the future.

Since the 1970s, the proportion of single-person households in Japan has risen significantly, exceeding 34.6% in 2015, and is projected to surpass 44% by 2050. In 2025, approximately 77,000 people living alone in Japan died at home, of whom more than 22,000 were not discovered until more than eight days after their deaths, officially recognized as "deaths of loneliness."

There are many causes of loneliness, such as poverty, illness, unemployment, divorce or separation, loss of family members, and poor interpersonal relationships, to name a few. Loneliness should be a topic more relevant to the elderly, but in Japan, all age groups face this problem, and the Japanese experience a much higher level of loneliness than in other developed countries.

To address the growing problems of "dying alone" and social isolation, Japan has established a "public-private partnership" system centered on the Cabinet Office, in conjunction with the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, local governments, and numerous NPOs. Its core mechanism involves establishing a national platform to integrate government resources and private sector efforts, enabling comprehensive intervention from prevention to detection.

2. POLICIES ON STRENGTHENING REGIONAL "CONNECTIVITY" AND MUTUAL ASSISTANCE HAVE BEEN INTRODUCED.

Starting in the mid-1980s, the responsibility for implementation by the state was gradually transferred to local governments. Since the implementation of the "Law on the Preparation of Relevant Regulations for Promoting Decentralization" in 2000, the decentralization from the state to the local level has been more clearly proposed. The "Law on Promoting Decentralization Reform" passed in 2006 proposed that the state should focus on assuming the role it should play and delegate as much of the administrative work that is closer to citizens as possible to local governments.

The enactment of the Elderly Welfare Law by the Japanese government in 1963 marked a significant turning point in the welfare of elderly people in the community. This law stipulated that vulnerable members of society, such as the poor, disabled, and elderly living alone, could receive public assistance from social welfare corporations entrusted by the government, upon approval. This primarily involved centralized care in public nursing homes and daycare centers, with some regions also experimenting with dispatching domestic helpers to households.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, with the aging population, welfare-related "regional organization" activities, especially those involving non-profit organizations and volunteers, increased significantly. In 1969, the Japanese National Life Council issued a report entitled "The Restoration of Humanity in the Community—A Living Place," addressing various social pathologies caused by the decline of geographical and kinship ties and the resulting isolation of residents, which attracted widespread attention.

In 2010, the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare issued a document requiring all regions to develop "Regional Welfare Plans." These plans included information on elderly people requiring care and potential social isolation among the elderly, and required sharing with relevant departments. Simultaneously, the government introduced technology-based care and promoted the "ICT (Information and Communication Technology) Hometown Revitalization Project," emphasizing cooperation between prefectures, municipalities, and NPOs or third-party organizations to cultivate NPOs closely connected to the region, particularly training them as ICT professionals to promote the application of technology in elderly care services.

In 2011, the government launched the "Regional Business Revitalization Subsidy Scheme," aiming to support local business development (such as supermarket delivery and shopping buses) through financial subsidies. This was combined with the "Shopping Vulnerable Groups Support Handbook ver 2.0" to alleviate shopping difficulties for the elderly and other disadvantaged groups. In the same year, the "Social Inclusion One-Stop Consultation and Support Program" was launched, aiming to provide diversified services. This program authorized the elderly to provide information to community service commissioners and shared relevant information with electricity and gas companies.

In 2012, the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare implemented the "Information Unification System," requiring welfare departments in all municipalities to establish a unified information receiving system to integrate information on elderly people in need of assistance, including details such as the number of people, their risk status, the support they require, and factors contributing to their isolation.

The Loneliness and Isolation Countermeasures Promotion Act, which came into effect in April 2024, is a piece of legislation in Japan specifically addressing the issue of loneliness and isolation. It clarifies the responsibilities of the central government, local governments, and various social organizations, and proposes measures such as establishing a "local government-civilian cooperation platform for loneliness and isolation countermeasures," cultivating talent, and promoting public understanding.

3. REGIONAL WELFARE SYSTEM

In 2026, Japanese society will have entered a deeper stage of becoming a "super-aged society," with the proportion of the population aged 65 and over continuing to rise, accompanied by a declining birth rate, the nuclearization of families, and the weakening of the functions of traditional local communities (such as neighborhood associations and self-governing associations). Traditional family care functions are becoming unsustainable, and large-scale elderly care institutions are facing operational pressures and staff shortages. Against this backdrop, local welfare is not only a technical adjustment to social welfare, but also a social project to reconstruct social capital and rebuild

interpersonal connections.

The legal foundation for regional welfare in Japan is the Social Welfare Law, which explicitly stipulates the obligation of municipal governments to formulate "regional welfare plans," requiring local governments to assess residents' needs based on local conditions and allocate welfare resources in a coordinated manner. These plans are typically linked to the "Long-Term Care Insurance Program" to ensure seamless integration of medical, nursing, preventative, and life support services.

The implementation of regional welfare in Japan relies on three key pillars:

Administratively-led resource integration: Municipalities establish "Regional Support Centers," composed of public health workers, social welfare professionals, and senior care support specialists, responsible for comprehensive consultation, rights protection, and assessment of preventative care needs. These centers serve as the central nervous system connecting residents with professional services.

Standardized services from professional organizations include visiting care, day care centers, and short-term stay facilities. These services are paid for through long-term care insurance, ensuring accessibility and quality control.

Life support and mutual aid networks: This is the most distinctive aspect of community well-being. It doesn't rely on professionals, but rather on volunteers, NPOs, and neighborhood mutual aid organizations providing non-medical services such as shopping assistance, companionship, and simple household chores. This "informal care" fills the gaps in formal institutions and enhances community resilience.

4. THE IMPORTANCE OF ESTABLISHING "CONNECTIONS" AMONG LOCAL RESIDENTS

The tragedy of dying alone, often discovered days after death, is devastating for both family and neighbors, and threatens human dignity. Furthermore, the reason solitary death is considered problematic is because it stems from a life of isolation, a rejection of connection with one's surroundings. Today, the phenomenon of a "socially isolated society," cut off from family, community, and workplace, has become a significant social issue.

In January 2000, a report from the Private Advisory Group of the Social Assistance Bureau of the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, entitled "The Ideal State of Social Welfare for People in Need of Social Assistance," identified social isolation and loneliness as new targets of social welfare. Specific issues included dying alone, suicide, and abuse. Furthermore, current welfare policies, particularly regional welfare policies, have begun to address the problems of social isolation and loneliness.

Community welfare has two objectives: one is to support all community residents in need of welfare services so they can live in the community; the other is to support these people not only through professionals but also through the activities of community residents. The currently much-discussed countermeasures against solitary death align particularly well with the second objective. One direction for countermeasures against solitary death, a symbol of social isolation, is to build "connections." Especially for those at high risk of solitary death who are prone to isolation, the geographical connections formed through the activities of community residents within their shared living area are easier to build compared to other connections. Furthermore, the activities of community residents also promote community revitalization, which is why promoting community activities as a countermeasure against solitary death is a key reason.

Article 4 of the Social Welfare Act designates "local residents" and "persons participating in social welfare activities" as the main entities for promoting local welfare. Furthermore, the "Report on Discussion of Future Regional Welfare Blueprints" also points out the need to "pay attention to residents seeking support in the local community and rebuild connections among local residents (such as residents supporting each other)."

5. STRENGTHENING "CONNECTIONS" BETWEEN NEIGHBORS

5.1 The Establishment of Neighborhood Mutual Assistance Networks

The modern urban communities that emerged after Japan's social transformation have seen a decrease in

commonalities and an increase in heterogeneity among residents, making it difficult to achieve uniformity and a shared consciousness within the community. Therefore, cultivating residents' sense of ownership, paying more attention to individual needs, and developing personalized organizational life at the community level to construct a public community life have become increasingly urgent. Building a harmonious and fulfilling community life requires not only the assistance of traditional local organizations such as "town associations/self-governing associations (equivalent to residents' committees)," but also the active participation and cooperation of residents themselves, such as spontaneously formed neighborhood mutual aid networks. These groups, after recruiting volunteer members, further organize and rationally allocate human resources, thereby forming a new interpersonal network and promoting the optimization of community organizational structure.

On April 28, 2025, the Cabinet Office of Japan launched the "Neighborhood Mutual Assistance Network Plan," establishing mutual assistance platforms in 500 communities. In 2024, a pilot program was launched to help 100,000 residents, with a community participation rate of 80%. This reflects the innovation of Japanese society in strengthening community cohesion.

5.2 Neighborhood Mutual Assistance Practice Case

5.2.1 HITOTOWA Neighborhood Design Project

Initiator: HITOTOWA, founded in 2012 by Masafumi Arara, focuses on "neighborhood design" community building.

Core Model: Intervening in the early stages of residential planning, by reserving public spaces, training community builders, and establishing a sustainable funding chain, laying the foundation for mutual assistance among residents in advance.

Implementation Scenarios: Activities are carried out in three dimensions: disaster prevention and mitigation, mutual childcare, and elderly life support. For example, using gamification to teach children disaster prevention knowledge and opening community public rooms for families with children to communicate.

Practical Results: In the Hamakoshien community in Osaka, a community with a 50% elderly population living alone was transformed into a closely connected mutual assistance community, significantly reducing the loneliness of elderly people living alone.

5.2.2 LIVE&LIVE Intergenerational Mutual Assistance Elderly Care Project

Initiating Entity: Tokyo NPO LIVE&LIVE

Core Model: Matching elderly people living alone in Tokyo with vacant apartments with university students facing high rent burdens, achieving intergenerational mutual assistance between young and old.

Operating Rules: Both parties pay small membership and monthly fees to maintain operations. University students rent at low rates and provide companionship and basic daily care services to the elderly.

Practical Results: This model has solved the problem of high risk of loneliness and death among elderly people living alone, while also alleviating the housing pressure on university students in Tokyo, creating a win-win mutual assistance model.

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