

NATIONAL

As suicides rise amid the pandemic, Japan takes steps to tackle loneliness

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Japan is beefing up measures against loneliness, taking a first major step toward comprehensively tackling a pervasive problem in the nation that has again been thrust into the spotlight due to the pandemic.

Such is the urgency of the issue that the administration of [Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga added a minister of loneliness to his Cabinet](https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2021/02/12/national/loneliness-isolation-minister/) earlier this month, following the example of the U.K, which in 2018 became the first country to create a similar role.

Suga tapped minister Tetsushi Sakamoto, who is simultaneously in charge of combating the nation's falling birth rate and revitalizing regional economies, for the new portfolio.

With isolation tied to an array of social woes such as suicide, poverty and *hikikomori* (social recluses), the Cabinet Office also established a task force Friday that seeks to address the problem of loneliness across various ministries, including by investigating its impact.

Discussions around loneliness, and how it has been amplified during the pandemic, have been precipitated by the initiative that some junior lawmakers of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party took last month in forming a group to probe the issue. The subject subsequently made its way to discussions in the Diet, where it began to garner greater political attention.

But the move also appears to underscore Suga's dismay at a recent uptick in the number of suicides in Japan.

According to preliminary figures released by the National Police Agency, 20,919 people took their own lives in 2020, up 750 from the previous year and marking the first year-on-year increase in 11 years. The surge is largely attributed to a noticeable rise in suicides among women and young people.

In entrusting the position to Sakamoto, Suga expressed concerns that "more women are feeling lonely and prone to suicide" and instructed him to hammer out "comprehensive" policies against loneliness.



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Tetsushi Sakamoto (center, left), tapped to be the minister of Loneliness by Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga, discusses the issue with Yuichiro Tamaki (center, right), leader of the Democratic Party for the People, in the Cabinet Office on Feb. 15. | KYODO

This is not to say, however, it's just women and youth that the government has in mind.

While speaking to the Lower House Budget Committee earlier this month, Suga said people from all walks of life, including older people stuck at home and university students who aren't able to attend classes in person, are feeling increasingly isolated in the age of COVID-19.

"There are many kinds of loneliness" that need to be addressed, he said.

A global issue

The British government defines loneliness as "a subjective, unwelcome feeling of lack or loss of companionship."

"Loneliness is always an unwelcome feeling and an experience which leads to bad health outcomes," Ramona Herdman, head of tackling loneliness at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) in the United Kingdom, told a recent gathering of LDP lawmakers looking into the issue. She was speaking remotely from the U.K.



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Communications specialist Junko Okamoto, author of a book on loneliness in Japan, says the nation's corporate culture has left many middle-aged salarymen unable to foster new networks of relationships outside of organizational hierarchy. | TOMOHIRO OSAKI

Overseas, the detrimental nature of loneliness has been increasingly in focus. Multiple studies have shown — and raised awareness of — the extent that loneliness can take a toll on people's mental and physical health.

One of the most prominent is a 2018 report by global health organization Cigna that concluded loneliness “has the same impact on mortality as smoking 15 cigarettes a day, making it even more dangerous than obesity.”

Loneliness or blissful solitude?

What constitutes loneliness is a trickier question here, where the overarching Japanese term “*kodoku*” has been employed to describe both loneliness and solitude, essentially lumping them together.

This has helped give rise to the recent emergence of a trend toward casting the state of being alone in a positive light, or even “glorifying” it, as communications specialist Junko Okamoto put it.

Books framing isolation as proof of independence, constructive introspection and superiority to others — the most prominent example being 2018's “*Gokujo no Kodoku*” (“First-class Solitude”) by author Akiko Shimoju — have become bestsellers. The word *ohitorisama* (on your own) has also been popularized by the media to signal approval of someone independent enough to, among other things, shop, dine and travel alone.



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What constitutes loneliness is a trickier question in Japan, where the overarching term “kodoku” has been employed to describe both loneliness and solitude, essentially lumping them together. | GETTY IMAGES

Okamoto says such near-worship of solitude has overshadowed the other, and more dangerous, aspect of kodoku, making Japanese society rather oblivious to “the truly hopeless, excruciatingly painful nature of loneliness.”

Therefore, one of the issues going forward will be how the Japanese government will define circumstances under which one is recognized as struggling with loneliness and therefore in need of help, instead of simply enjoying solitude.

Isolation of salarymen

Among those often flagged as high-risk are older people and middle-aged men.

After all, Japan is notorious for *kodokushi* (lonely deaths) by those living alone and many others who for one reason or another wind up undiscovered long after they perished.

An international survey conducted by the Cabinet Office in 2015 showed that the percentage of those aged 60 or older who feel they have “nobody” they can turn to for help in a time of need was the highest in Japan at 16.1%, compared with 13% in the U.S., 10.8% in Sweden and 5.8% in Germany.

That Japan grapples with a high level of social isolation, particularly among men, was also clear in a 2005 OECD survey.

That probe found Japan was home to the highest proportion of men who “rarely or never spend time with friends, colleagues, or others in social groups,” at nearly 17%, far exceeding the OECD average of about 6%. In Japan, the gender gap was particularly large compared with other countries, with far more men than women found to be experiencing social isolation.

This can partly be explained by Japan's notoriously long working hours as well as the entrenched lifetime employment system that have blinded many of the nation's seasoned salarymen to the need to carve out lives for themselves outside of the corporate world.

"A generation of men brainwashed into working their butts off nonstop only have work to derive pleasure from, and base their identities on, and are often too busy to find themselves hobbies or new communities to be part of," said Okamoto, who is also author of the 2018 book "Sekaiichi Kodoku na Nihon no Ojisan ("Japan's Middle-aged Men — The Loneliest People in the World").

Lifetime employment also makes "kowtowing to superiors and pulling rank on subordinates" their default mode of communication, depriving them of an ability to foster new relationships outside of their organizational hierarchy, she said.

Risk factors for singles

Concerns are also growing over those living alone, a demographic prone to social isolation. In Japan, the rise in lifetime singles and a growing trend toward getting married later in life are estimated to push the percentage of those living alone to nearly 40% of all households in 2040, almost double the level seen in 1970.

A probe conducted in 2018 by a think tank within real estate advertising firm Lifull Co. pointed to pervasive isolation among single-person households in Japan, of whom an overwhelming 75.7% said they never or rarely communicate with their neighbors. This compared with 54.1% of households with two or more people.



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Manjo Shimahara, head of a Lifull Co. think tank, says those living alone in major urban cities are at a particularly high risk of developing feelings of loneliness. | COURTESY OF LIFULL CO.

This is partly because in Japan, good access to work and serene privacy often dictate where singles live, particularly in major urban cities, even if that involves moving into an area where they don't know anybody, the think tank's report said.

“Before the pandemic, the typical day for those living alone in urban cities would have looked like this: They work from morning to night, grab a few after-work drinks or dine out with friends and then commute back home. The only place where they buy groceries is perhaps a nearby convenience store, where they barely speak with anyone,” said Manjo Shimahara, head of the Lifull think tank.

“To them, home was simply where they would return from work to sleep.”

But the pandemic has changed this, with remote work significantly curtailing their interaction with colleagues — often the only network of relationships their lives revolve around — and in turn forcing them to spend the bulk of the day stuck in neighborhoods they have little emotional attachment to. This drastic change in lifestyle is now raising their risk of loneliness, Shimahara said.

“The coronavirus pandemic, I think, has driven home to many singles the reality of how they don't know anyone in their neighborhoods or have any local bars they can call their stomping grounds,” he said.

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