

A Brief Discussion on Japan's Countermeasures to the "Kodokushi" (Solitary Death) Problem

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Abstract: Since 2002, the frequent occurrence of "kodokushi" (solitary deaths) across various regions in Japan has drawn widespread attention and public debate. As the phenomenon intensifies, anxiety and fear about the future have grown among solitary dwellers—people isolated for various reasons—as well as among the elderly. This paper introduces Japan's countermeasures against solitary death from the perspective of "public-private collaboration," covering national policies and regional support systems.

Keywords: Solitary dwellers; National policies; Regional support systems; Public-private collaboration

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1. Introduction

On April 26 of this year, Japanese media referred to data from the National Police Agency indicating that, in 2025, about 77,000 people who lived alone died at home in Japan, among whom more than 22,000 were not found dead for more than eight days and thus were classified as "kodokushi."

Due to the increase in the aged population, the Japanese government enacted the Act on Promotion of Measures to Deal with Loneliness and Separation in April 2024, starting to record the numbers of solitary deaths at home annually. A person is considered as "kodokushi" if the person dies without any company around and is found dead more than eight days after his death, which usually indicates that the deceased was socially isolated before his death.

According to the National Police Agency in 2025, 76,941 people lived and died alone at home in Japan, among whom 22,222, nearly 30%, were called kodokushi, showing an increase compared to the previous year. Regarding age, about 70% of the kodokushi victims were over 65 years old; regarding sex, males constituted about 80%.

The data indicate that in approximately 70% of kodokushi incidents, the corpse was found within one month after death, whereas in 208 cases, the interval was more than one year, indicating the long-lasting

social isolation suffered by some people ^[1].

To solve the increasing problems of lone death and social exclusion, Japan has established a “cooperation between government and private sectors” system under the leadership of the Cabinet Office, in conjunction with the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare, local administrations, and many NPOs. The main idea is to set up a national platform that combines governmental resources and the efforts of civil society, so as to provide a comprehensive intervention from the prevention stage to the detection stage.

2. The pace of national policy advancement

Japan possesses certain social issues such as an increasing population of the elderly and kodokushi. These phenomena are connected with the alteration in its demographic structure, resulting in more single elderly individuals and thus unreported deaths and delayed diseases.

Due to the aging problem, it is an important task to address this issue. After World War II, Japan attempted to establish a welfare society. The aging problem was detected in the 1960s, and several laws and measures were taken to safeguard the elderly’s rights and living conditions ^[2]. The first elderly welfare law, namely the Elderly Welfare Act, was issued in Japan in 1963. This law has been revised and improved continuously; a medical payment system for the elderly was set up in 1972 ^[3].

In 1995, the government enacted the *Basic Act on Measures for an Aging Society*, establishing a system to deal with the social problems related to aging. At present, both the national and local governments have implemented some preventive measures because of the rise in single deaths ^[4].

In September 2005, NHK aired a special program named “*One Room in a Single Residential Complex*,” which caused a great surprise to the viewers and promoted the measures against lonely death. This program revealed the real situation of kodokushi in the Tokiwadaira housing area of Matsudo City, Chiba Prefecture, as well as the actions taken by the local people since 2004 via the “Matsudo Kodokushi Prevention Center” ^[5].

From 2007, Japan began the “*Zero Solitary Death*” Project to avoid lonely deaths with a budget of about 107 million yen. In August 2007, a meeting called “Conference on Establishing Communities for Elderly and Others to Live Without Anxiety Alone” was held, and in March 2008 it presented a final report. The report indicated that, in view of the increasing number of “lonely” situations, in order to prevent the serious “lonely deaths,” it is essential to establish warm communities where people are linked, and all the members of a community, including the elderly, should participate in various networks to renovate the neighborhoods. According to both the concern for Tokiwadaira complex and the report, the present measures against solitary death are being taken as a regional welfare policy aimed at restoring “connections” among the local residents ^[5].

In February 2022, Japan officially established the “Public-Private Collaboration Platform for Loneliness and Isolation Countermeasures,” led by the Cabinet Office’s Promotion Office for Measures against Loneliness and Isolation and operated by the General Incorporated Association RCF, with the aim of breaking down barriers between administration and civil society.

- (1) Resource integration: The platform incorporates dispersed NPO support organizations, local governments, and enterprises into a unified network, facilitating information sharing and cross-regional collaboration to avoid fragmentation of support services.
- (2) Activity promotion: Through national seminars (including multiple sessions in fiscal 2025) and awareness campaigns, it disseminates pioneering case studies and academic research outcomes, raising public awareness of isolation issues.

- (3) Continuous updating: The platform regularly updates membership information and activity records, ensuring that measures can be dynamically adjusted in response to social changes (e.g., worsening isolation in the post-pandemic era).

3. Specific implementation measures by regional (local) authorities

The aim of regional welfare policies is to support the lives of all residents in need of welfare services, and also to assist people with various problems—not solely through professional staff, but through the activities of local residents. Through these activities, residents build “connections” and revitalize communities.

Article 4 of the *Social Welfare Act* designates “local residents” and “persons involved in social welfare activities” as the main agents of regional welfare promotion. Meanwhile, the “*Discussion Report on the Future Blueprint of Regional Welfare*” emphasizes the need to “focus on residents seeking support in the community and rebuild connections among local residents (e.g., mutual support activities).” The countermeasures against kodokushi align precisely with these regional welfare objectives^[5]. Specific support measures include the following:

- (1) Establishment of regional councils: Each municipality is required to form a “Regional Council for Loneliness and Isolation Countermeasures” composed of NPOs, medical and welfare institutions, businesses, etc., responsible for local planning and resource coordination.
- (2) Cultivation of “connection supporters”: Community volunteers, shop staff, postal carriers, and others are trained as frontline observers who regularly visit solitary dwellers and report any abnormalities to comprehensive support centers in a timely manner.
- (3) Construction of a multi-layered support system: Integrating community welfare commissioners, regional comprehensive support centers, and livelihood support institutions for the needy, a “one-stop” comprehensive consultation window (e.g., the “Anshin · Tsunagari Project” in some areas) is established to eliminate consultation barriers.
- (4) Cross-departmental information sharing mechanism: With the consent of individuals, administrative bodies cooperate with “peace-of-mind partner organizations” such as power, gas, postal, and pharmacy services to share data on living indicators of solitary dwellers (e.g., prolonged non-payment, uncollected mail), enabling early warning of loss of contact.

4. Support for the “Muen Shakai” (unconnected society) population

According to a 2024 Cabinet Office survey, about 39.3% of Japanese people (aged 16 and above) reported feeling “varying degrees of” loneliness, a rate largely unchanged since 2021. Among those who use smartphones over eight hours daily, 13.3% said they “often or always” feel lonely. The main reasons for loneliness include “death of a family member,” “living alone,” and “serious physical or mental health problems.”

Data from 2020 show that the proportion of Japanese with “reliable friends” is less than 20%, far below the figures for the United States, Germany, and Sweden (all over 40%). This objective lack of social support exacerbates public concern about loneliness.

In January 2011, the Japanese government established a special task force for “a society that includes everyone,” and in May of the same year issued the *Basic Policy for Promoting Social Inclusion*, followed in

August by the *Emergency Policy Proposal on Social Inclusion* ^[6].

Japan's support policies for the “muen shakai” (unconnected society) population—defined as those lacking blood ties, regional ties, or social ties, and thus at risk of solitary death, poverty, and social isolation—are implemented through multiple dimensions, including legal protection, employment and self-reliance support, community rebuilding, and emergency livelihood assistance, with the aim of alleviating new forms of poverty and isolation.

- (1) Legislation and administrative support: In 2002, the government enacted and implemented the *Act on Support for Self-Reliance of the Homeless*, bringing street dwellers—previously hard to cover—into the relief system and encouraging administrative agencies to actively assist them in applying for minimum living security. In addition, the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare coordinates social welfare, while the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport, and Tourism cooperates in statistical surveys, ensuring multi-sectoral collaboration.
- (2) Employment and self-reliance centers: For isolated individuals willing to work, specialized self-reliance support centers and employment support centers for the homeless have been established. In 2022, the Employment Stability Bureau of the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare launched a special initiative that, in addition to regular employment support, provides psychological counseling, job experience programs, and special skill development to help “invisible homeless” (e.g., internet café refugees, daily-wage workers) reintegrate into society.
- (3) Community mutual aid and rebuilding “connections”: In response to the elderly's concerns about a “muen” (unconnected) society, civil and community-based remedial mechanisms have emerged spontaneously. For example, retired seniors organize salon activities and dining tables for the elderly to address meal needs; vacant houses are utilized to organize children's activities in cooperation with schools; and parenting salons are established to foster neighborhood exchanges. These initiatives aim to bridge social alienation by rebuilding regional and social ties.
- (4) Emergency assistance for the “new poor”: For those whose incomes are slightly above the minimum livelihood protection threshold but who still face difficulties—such as having housing but being unable to pay utilities or rent—NPOs play a vital role. For instance, Tokyo-based “Toimikke” has set up 67 support points offering “emergency aid packs” containing food and accommodation vouchers; the “Self-Reliance Support Center Moyai” distributes food regularly, and in early 2026 the queue numbers hit record highs, reflecting the pressing need to respond to soaring food and living costs.

5. Conclusion

The frequent occurrence of “kodokushi” (solitary deaths) in Japan is the cumulative result of multiple long-term factors, including super-aging, declining birthrates, the disintegration of family structures, and social disconnection. Preventing solitary deaths cannot rely on national and regional welfare policies alone; it is also necessary to strengthen solitary dwellers' own awareness of social participation and mutual assistance among neighbors. In the current era of rapid technological advancement, where the ideology that “one can live a fulfilling life alone” is becoming more prevalent, we must not forget that the “connections” between people are a vital pathway to addressing the “muen” (unconnected) phenomenon.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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