# Japan faces critical population decline with profound social and economic impacts



Japan is facing a significant demographic challenge with its population declining steadily over the past 15 years. The population decrease has reached a critical point, with last year seeing more than two deaths for every birth, resulting in a net loss of nearly one million people. Projections indicate that the country's population could shrink by half by the end of this century, presenting profound implications for multiple facets of Japanese society.

Taro Kono, a veteran parliamentarian and former high-ranking minister, who narrowly missed becoming prime minister in 2021, has highlighted the severity of the issue. Speaking to CBS News' 60 Minutes, Kono said, "There are less and less number of a young generation. And all the burdens are on the young generation. And they won't be able to sustain. So society is going to be breaking up. Economy is just going to stagnate." He outlined how the shrinking population touches every sector, including the economy, education, housing, national defence, and culture, emphasising the strain on the workforce. Notably, Japan's military succeeded in recruiting only half of its targeted personnel last year, underscoring the pervasive labour shortage.

Several social factors contribute to this demographic shift. A notable contributor is the increased participation of women in the workforce, which, coupled with Japan's demanding work culture and traditionally male-dominant societal norms, has made balancing career and family life particularly challenging. Roland Kelts, a Japanese-American writer, described what he termed an "implosion of marriage," referencing the cultural transition away from traditional arrangements such as omiai, or arranged marriages, that previously played a central role in Japanese matrimonial patterns. Kelts told 60 Minutes, "The corporate guys would marry the office ladies. And this was all set up. It's gone now. And the office ladies make more money than the corporate guys. So now, you have this shift in economics that has not been reflected in social norms." The Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare in Japan reported fewer than 500,000 couples married in 2023 — the lowest number since 1917.

In response to changing lifestyles, a growing number of Japanese businesses are catering to individuals living and dining alone. There are eateries designed for solo patrons, including ramen restaurants and standalone karaoke bars, as well as services such as solo weddings. Alternative romantic relationships have also emerged; one example is Akihiko Kondo, who married an anime character named Miku in a formal ceremony in 2018. Kondo explained his devotion and later served green tea during his interview with 60 Minutes, exemplifying the varied personal responses to Japan's evolving social landscape. Moreover, nearly half of Japanese millennials aged 18 to 34 report being virgins, a stark contrast to approximately 20% in the United States.

Government efforts aimed at boosting the birthrate and fostering relationships are underway. Tokyo's governor, Yuriko Koike, described initiatives such as the use of artificial intelligence in matchmaking through a dating app, which has seen demand three to four times greater than initially expected. Koike also noted the introduction of a four-day workweek for government employees, intended to support working mothers and encourage family growth. She remarked, "The longer we work, the less children we have. Demography is one of the biggest national issues that we have to tackle."

However, not all policymakers agree on the best solutions. Hanako Okada, a newly elected member of Japan's parliament and mother of two, believes that Japan's current policy framework is inadequate. She advocates for a fundamental shift in population distribution, urging people to move away from crowded urban centres toward rural areas. Okada recently relocated to her rural hometown of Aomori, a northern prefecture renowned for its apple orchards but at risk of significant depopulation by 2050. She explained to 60 Minutes, "The precipitous drop in population—and vitality—of this city is deeply troubling not just personally, but from a national perspective. If our regions collapse, it imperils our country's strength. I thought, 'We can't allow this situation to go on.'"

Okada aims to stimulate rural economies by encouraging the creation of well-paying, interesting jobs to attract young people. She emphasises how experiencing the spaciousness, slower lifestyle, and quality of life outside the cities may inspire people to settle down and raise families. She expressed optimism, saying, "The values of our younger generation are gradually shifting. Tokyo is no longer the be-all, end-all."

One poignant illustration of Japan’s demographic challenges is Ichinono, a village located about an hour and a half west of Kyoto, with fewer than 50 residents. Shinichi Murayama, a lifelong Ichinono resident, has sought to alleviate the village’s loneliness through the use of life-like puppets placed around the town to simulate human presence. Murayama noted, "Puppets are no substitute for people, of course. But making them cheers us up." The village’s playground, once filled with children, now hosts these puppets.

However, a beacon of hope comes in the form of the Kato family, who recently moved from city life to Ichinono. Toshiki Kato works remotely in IT, while his wife Rie, a midwife, plans to establish a local maternity ward. Toshiki shared, "We've got a mountain and a river to explore. We make our own toys and grow our own vegetables. For a kid, there's plenty of ways to have fun here." The couple hopes their young son, Kuranosuke, the first child born in Ichinono in over two decades, will have the opportunity to grow up among friends in their rural community. Toshiki remarked, "I want Japanese people to become more aware of this lifestyle, which is closer to our traditional way of living."

Japan's demographic trajectory poses complex challenges that intersect with cultural, economic, and social dimensions. The responses range from technological innovations and government policies in urban areas to grassroots revitalisation in rural villages. How these multifaceted efforts blend will shape the country's future population dynamics.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

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