

SOCIAL SECURITY POLICY AGAINST POVERTY AMONG ONE-PARENT FAMILIES: TREND AND ISSUES IN JAPAN



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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to clarify the trend and issues of social security policy related to one-parent families in Japan. The official poverty rate among one-parent families in Japan is much higher than within other social groups and is one of the worst instances among Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, exposing a malfunction of social security systems originally formulated through economic developments after World War II. Recognizing it as a social and political problem that needs to be solved, numerous attempts to implement social programs have not led to a significant improvement in economic conditions among the families. This is because some issues persist, which include an unstable labor market, the fragmentation of social programs, gaps in community social resources, the malfunction of the last-resort safety net program, and a lack of policy perspectives for asset building, many of which are related to wider social norms and the more fundamental system of economy and politics.

Keywords; *poverty, one-parent families, social security policy*

INTRODUCTION

It had been believed that Japan had become an affluent society through rapid economic growth during the 1960s and is sometimes regarded as a successful model in Asia. In reality, some economic indicators such as gross domestic product in Japan do not show a low level compared to other countries, ranked third in the world in 2020, according to the World Bank (World Bank 2022). However, the economic recession that started around the 1990s had highlighted economic disparity and poverty among people in Japan. The first undeniable observable fact was spreading homelessness in major cities after the late 1990s. This classic mode of poverty should have been resolved by the economic development and the social security system of the “Welfare State” including the national minimum program, but homelessness had proved it was just a myth that poverty had been eradicated in Japan. During the 2000s, the “working poor” and social disparity became social issues, and an anti-poverty movement arose all over Japan. The financial crisis in 2008 and the subsequent economic downturn reinforced such trends, featuring as issues not only in the political domain but also in emergent social media. Since then, the government has not been able to ignore such public matters and created anti-poverty programs, yet the situation has not yet dramatically changed (Iwata 2017).

Among the topics of poverty discussion that arose in society, child poverty was the major one. Since children are not responsible for their economic condition, the policy targeted for them could obtain broad support from various sides. In such issues, poverty among one-parent families was the most serious and is an unavoidable topic (Abe 2008;2014). This paper aims to clarify the trend and issues of social security policy related to one-parent families in Japan.

First, the “poverty” formally defined by the government and the overall picture of social security policy related to poverty in Japan are clarified in this paper. Second, trends of one-parent families and social security for them are explained. Third, some issues causing problems relating to social security are discussed.

Poverty Rediscovered and Social Security Policy in Japan

1. Official poverty rate

After the financial crisis in 2008, poverty finally became a political issue even during the national election. Even after the regime change, the new government focused more on combating poverty than before. Measuring poverty to confirm the trend by the government itself was the first step forward in the battle.

The poverty data shown by the Japanese government is the “relative poverty rate” which was originally devised by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), for an international comparison of economic conditions among member countries. The measurement set the threshold, denoted as the poverty line at the half of median income in each country for the specific year, as the agreed indicator. Based on this, the Japanese government has made public the poverty rate since 1985 every three years accordingly for the official measurement for people’s income (ref. MHLW 2019, Table 1).

Table 1. Relative poverty rate in Japan, 1985–2018

		1985	1988	1991	1994	1997	2000	2003	2006	2009	2012	2015	2018
		%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Relative poverty rate		12.0	13.2	13.5	13.7	14.6	15.3	14.9	15.7	16.0	16.1	15.7	15.4
Rate of children		10.9	12.9	12.8	12.1	13.4	14.5	13.7	14.2	15.7	16.3	13.9	13.5
Households of the working generation with children	Total	10.3	11.9	11.7	11.2	12.2	13.1	12.5	12.2	14.6	15.1	12.9	12.6
	One adult	54.5	51.4	50.1	53.2	63.1	58.2	58.7	54.3	50.8	54.6	50.8	48.1
	Two or more adults	9.6	11.1	10.8	10.2	10.8	11.5	10.5	10.2	12.7	12.4	10.7	10.7

Data are drawn from Outlook on the Comprehensive Survey of Living Conditions in 2019 (MHLW 2019:14)

The poverty rate shown by the government emphasized child poverty, as not highlighting the rate among older people, meant that the result received marked attention socially and politically (Noda 2015). The trend in the child poverty rate means that one in six or seven children are living in poverty. To make matters worse, just over or around half of one-parent families struggle with their finances, which is one of the worst levels among all OECD countries (OECD 2022).

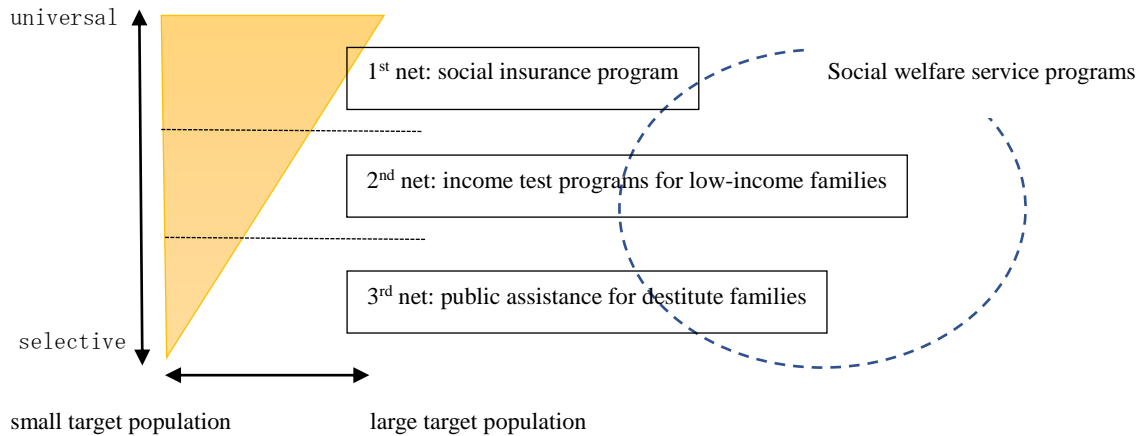
2. Three layers of anti-poverty measure

The public assistance program, social welfare services for poor people, and social insurance programs were created as the main programs of social security policy after World War II. As society began to develop economically, social insurance programs such as a public pension, medical insurance, unemployment insurance and workmen’s accident compensation insurance became elements in a universal system covering all people in Japan. As a guard against poverty, public assistance is expected to rescue people from poverty, while on the other hand, social insurance prevents them from becoming financially damaged in the first place. It was expected that the role of public assistance should have been a limited one if social insurance fully worked to reduce the risk of becoming poor.

The poverty rediscovered in recent years meant the poverty prevention of social insurance had not been properly functioning. The government in Japan then tried to ease some requirements for covering a broader spectrum of part-time workers, who were previously excluded from social insurance. On the other hand, the government hesitates to make the public assistance overly

generous because it would ruin the social norm of self-reliance or independence, which is the base of the capitalistic market order. Instead of opening the door to public assistance for more people, the government set up a series of special programs for low-income families as the second safety net program to prevent them from becoming destitute. The second safety net system includes mainly consultation services. By the mid-2010s, the social security policy in Japan against poverty had three layers of measurement (Figure 1).

Figure 1. The Social Safety Net System in Japan



※Quoted from Noda (2018:87) and revised

III. Trend of One-Parent Families and Social Security

1. One-Parent Families in Japan

Historically, families with dependent children have faced risks of becoming needy after they lose the main breadwinner. After World War II, single-mother families who were bereaved during the war and who could not access the help of their relatives became destitute and were a target for some social welfare programs (Hayashi 1992).

Over time, the number of divorces has increased, which impacted the number of one-parent families. The National Census of 2020 showed the number of fatherless households to be about 650,000 and motherless households to be about 70,000. The first reason for the two types of households (fatherless/motherless) was “divorce” (79.5% and 75.6%, respectively). “Bereavement” was the third reason for fatherless (or single-mother) households (8.0%) and the second reason for a motherless (or single-father) one (19.0%). Moreover, the divorce rate in 2018 was around 1.69%, which was actually somewhat lower than many OECD countries (MHLW 2021).

Regardless of reasons for becoming one-parent families, single-mother families cannot avoid social disadvantages to having decent lives. There are some structural causes for this. First, despite the labor market in Japan demanding work-ready adults under the trend of shrinking population, the mode of employment which does not need advanced knowledge and skills is becoming unstable. Mothers find it more difficult to obtain sufficient wages unless they are highly educated or have special vocational skills such as in medical fields. In addition, single parents need to spend more time on childcare unless formal or informal support is provided, so working time may be cut, acting to decrease the wage further.

As for childcare, not all single parents can resort to getting help from their relatives whenever and wherever they need it, since the young families live apart from their parents and other relatives in the original community and the mutual aid among relatives is less likely. Generally, apart from

routine housework, young parents are expected to deal with childcare by themselves. Therefore, childcare services are necessary for working parents not to leave paid work. However, some areas provide insufficient services, especially for infants. Because some welfare services including childcare were marketized under neoliberal policies, richer families can afford to take advantage of private childcare services and work longer. In contrast, lower-income families cannot, so they have no choice but to spare more time for childcare by themselves, reducing working time or engaging in unstable (short-time) work unless public services at a lower fee and informal support from relatively more affluent relatives are provided.

In addition to these common causes, some problems cause or trigger marital separation. Among these problems, domestic violence is the second most common reason for the divorce in Japan, and has been a major social issue, with cases of public consultation services increasing for years and reaching nearly 120,000 a year in total in the fiscal year of 2019 (Gender Equality Bureau, Cabinet Office 2021). Physical, mental, financial, and sexual violence cause the victims, including the children, serious damage physically and mentally, depriving them of their power to live with children independently. When the victims have a disability, sickness, or another social barrier, such as being a linguistic handicap, their vulnerability would become deeper.

2. Social Security Policy for One-Parent Families

Social security policy is comprised of numerous kinds of programs (MHLW 2021). The programs against poverty among one-parent families can be categorized into four groups, based on the coverage (families with children in general or targeting one-parent families) and the requirement (non-means tested or means tested) (Table 2). In general, programs for families with children are designed to cover one-parent families as well, many of which are social security programs as listed above (Figure 1), with cash, in-kind, or service benefits. Apart from the common programs, some programs target only one-parent families or single-mother families, while others limit the coverage to one-parent families with special needs.

The ministry in charge summarizes the information regarding social services for one-parent families, which can be read and downloaded on the formal website (MHLW 2021). As for cash benefits, it is obvious that fewer direct cash benefits are limited than microcredit programs, which users are obliged to pay back within a certain number of years. The special child allowance is the only direct cash benefit for one-parent families, but it sets an income test, and the amount of benefit is designed to complement earned wages. Their entitlement would be withdrawn after 5 years unless they work or have any special reason not to work. There are more consultation services listed for promoting independent lives, including work support consultation services or vocational training programs.

Table 2. Main social security programs for one-parent families in Japan

	General	Targeting
Non-means tested	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social insurance (survivor's pension, medical insurance, unemployment insurance) • Childcare service • Women protection consultation • Temporary protection (shelter) • Social services for the independence of people in need 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mother and child/father and child supporter consultation for independence • Daily living support for one-parent family and other programs • Child living/learning support program • Maternal and child living support facility • Child rearing temporary support program • Supports provided by Public Employment Security Office • Work/independence support for single-mother's family and the other program (including the child

		support program)
Means tested	Job seekers' support system Livelihood protection program School attendance support Living welfare fund credit Housing benefit Public housing Child allowance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Special child allowance • Mother and child/father and child/widow welfare fund credit • Housing support fund credit for one-parent family • Developing independence support for mother and child/father and child program • Independence support education and training cash benefit • High-level career training job training promotion benefit • High-level career training promotion fund credit for one-parent family program • Support for passing high school equivalency examination program

※the programs are based mainly on the government report (MHLW 2021)

Why Does the Social Security Policy Not Work?

Despite many social security programs being expected to ameliorate poverty among one-parent families, financial destitution among them has not changed dramatically. There are some problems related to the broader background of the policy.

First, it is the basic policy that families in Japan cannot live separately from the labor market. The programs encourage them to work and earn more wages or acquire the vocational skills necessary to be more productive in the market. This basic principle is consistent throughout all programs. It means that the financial status of single parents depends on the quality of the labor market. However, as discussed above, stable work opportunities to earn decent wages are not guaranteed in any family.

Second, fragmentation and the complicating conditionality of social programs cause more administrative burdens for one-parent families. As the programs by the ministry in charge show (Table 2), there seem to be many programs implementing them all over Japan. However, the requirements and documents necessary to prove their status, the appreciation schedule, and the divisions in charge in the local government differ between programs. Such procedures require people to have high cognitive abilities and be able to spare sufficient time to take advantage of them. Families who are desperate for work and childcare daily or suffer trauma caused by violence have additional administrative stress imposed on them. As a result, some cannot make the best of benefits available to them.

Third, the community gap of social resources cannot be ignored. In general, while public services have been privatized gradually under the neoliberal regime, decentralization of authority has proceeded. Local governments are mainly responsible for many of the social security programs and are left to decide whether they provide the services or not. Indeed, not all programs listed by the ministry are implemented in all communities. This means that one-parent families may or may not have access to services depending on where they live, which suggests that social rights related to such social services are not always established on a local basis.

Fourth, poverty could be reduced dramatically if the last-resort safety net program functioned substantially despite the other programs which do not work well. The safety net program is designed to provide a national minimum standard of cash and in-kind benefits for all needy people in any area in Japan. However, it has strict income and asset limit requirements for the applicants

and receivers. In addition, people have a sense of shame or stigma using this program, even though it is based on the social rights of people formally enshrined in the Constitution of Japan.

CONCLUSION

Poverty is regarded as a chronic disease in capitalist society, and social security policy aims to minimize the contradiction related to capitalism, leading to the integrity of the society. In point of fact, poverty is a shadow side of a so-called economically developed country, because it implies that the affluence of society would be partial or limited to richer families. One-parent families are at high risk of living in poverty in Japan, even though numerous social security programs, which should improve poverty, are created and implemented. To make it better, some problems rooted in the wider social and political context, such as the unstable labor market, the fragmentation and administrative burden of the programs, the community gap in social resources under decentralization policy, and the malfunction of last-resort safety net programs, should be tackled as a step toward eradicating poverty in the future.

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