



ACTIVE AGING CONSORTIUM ASIA PACIFIC



Depopulation, Population Aging and Fertility Decline: Potential Strategies for Japan and Korea

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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

We hope to see you in Fukuoka, Japan in March, when ACAP celebrates its 20th anniversary. In addition to learning from each other, we look forward to expanding and deepening our friendships across the region. By working together, we can change the world!

Meanwhile, please enjoy this special issue of the Bulletin edited by Cullen Hayashida. It presents thoughtful information and opinions on addressing the anticipated depopulation of Japan and Korea over this century.



Kathryn L Braun, DrPH
Professor, University of Hawai'i
President, ACAP

JOIN US FOR OUR **UPCOMING CONFERENCE!**

The 20th Anniversary Active Aging Conference in Asia Pacific

TOWARDS GLOBAL ACTIVE AGING: LESSON LEARNED FROM FUKUOKA



17-19 March 2025

Fukuoka International Convention Center, Fukuoka, Japan

The Active Aging Consortium in Asia Pacific (ACAP), which was born in Fukuoka City in 2005, will celebrate its 20th anniversary in 2025. For the first 16 years, we met in person in various countries. During the pandemic, we engaged with each other through online webinars. Now we are coming together again in Fukuoka for the 20th Active Aging Conference in Asia Pacific, titled "Towards Global Active Aging: Lesson Learned from Fukuoka."

In 2015, Fukuoka City held a convention to commemorate the 10th anniversary of ACAP and co-hosted a symposium by the Japan Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare. That meeting sparked "Fukuoka 100," which featured 100 initiatives to prepare the city for an average life expectancy of 100 years.

Countries around the world are all facing the aging of their populations, and Japan is the most advanced country in terms of population aging. Fukuoka City has embraced active aging, known as SHOGAI-GEN'EKI in Japanese. This means "creating a society that is active throughout life." We invite you to Fukuoka to learn more about the city's active aging initiatives and to celebrate 20 years of ACAP.

小川 全夫

Takeo Ogawa, Ph.D., Chairperson
The Fukuoka Action Committee,
20th Anniversary ACAP



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The Depopulation of Japan: Reviewing Strategies and Policies to Address this Crisis



Cullen Hayashida, Ph.D.

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Japan is depopulating. A few years ago, former Prime Minister Kishida stated that the next 7 to 8 years present a window in which Japan can reverse this trend.

Japan had a population of 128 million in 2010. But, it is expected to decline to 62 million by 2100. Instead, the government hopes the population will stabilize at 100 million



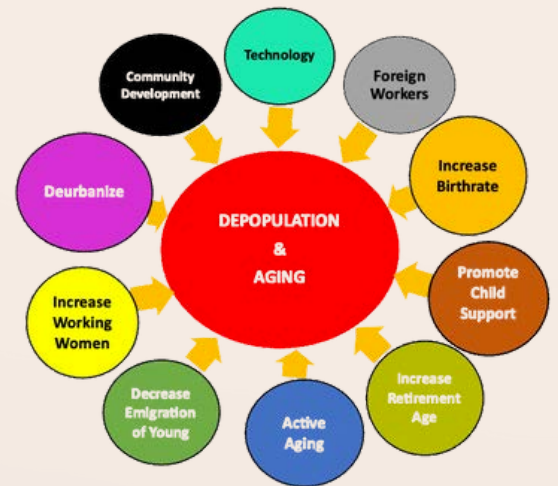
This challenge is not just an issue for Japan. There are about 40 other countries experiencing this trend, including Korea. Some have argued that, given global warming and climate change, depopulation may be considered a welcomed relief. That might be the case if the population pyramid were to maintain a sizable young cohort relative to a manageable and smaller older adult generation. The threat today stems from the lop-sided inverted pyramidal structure, with a large population of older adults and a small population of young people.



Depopulation resulting from population aging and low fertility poses a serious existential challenge that may one day threaten the sustainability of Japan and other countries. There is a pressing need for immediate attention to this from all corners of the globe. What can we do?

Ten strategies to reverse or moderate depopulation are noted below:

- Increase the reliance on technology to increase workforce efficiencies.
- Admit more foreign workers to the country.
- Increase birthrates.
- Promote more childcare support measures.
- Increase the retirement age.
- Promote active aging.
- Decrease the emigration of the young.
- Increase the use of women in the workforce.
- Promote deurbanization.
- Develop the age-friendliness of communities.



There are probably many other strategies that are worth exploring based on what has been attempted elsewhere in the world. But first, we need the following:

1. We need to acknowledge that there is no known combination of effective strategies at this time, and there has been little or no effort to coordinate a complex combination of strategies.
2. We need to convene international symposia on the strategies identified and others that still need to be identified. International experts for each strategy need an opportunity to share their perspectives with representatives from government, business, academia, and non-profits affected by this impending trend.
3. We need to systematically inventory all initiatives and projects related to each strategy and other emerging ones.
4. We need to evaluate the effectiveness of each of these strategies and their interactions with other strategies and determine their implementation potential and challenges. Recommendations to facilitate policies and programs that promote their increased effectiveness should be encouraged.
5. We need to establish a coordinating research and policy center to monitor, evaluate and provide policy recommendations to facilitate the reversal of the workforce shortage and depopulation trend. With funding, this center can support a research agenda of the most promising strategies or the combination of strategies and their coordination.

Japan's Depopulation Challenges: Additional Strategies



Masateru Higo, Ph.D.

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Dr. Hayashida's thesis focuses on discussing strategies to address Japan's depopulation challenges. It is not only a timely study; it also a case for urgent and coordinated efforts from various academic and professional communities.

Some of the strategies Dr. Hayashida has proposed may have adverse effects on others. For example, increasing childbirth rates may negatively impact women's labor force participation. Additionally, deurbanization could conflict with promoting healthy and active aging, as rural areas face chronic shortages in medical and long-term care resources.

Nevertheless, each strategy proposed by Dr. Hayashida is worth serious consideration. His discussion also includes unique ideas that have not received much attention in existing literature or public discourse to date, such as promoting later-life emigration and imagining measures to prevent long-term emigration among younger people.

This commentary aims to bolster Dr. Hayashida's working thesis by proposing 3 more strategies:

- Reform public pensions.
- Implement nationwide intergenerational support programs.
- Provide systematic longevity education for all ages.



First, Japan's public pension program needs substantial reforms. Japan's pension has operated in a traditional mechanism since 1961, where current workers support retirees (a PAYG-DB model). Although the pension has undergone numerous reforms over the past 4 decades, those reforms have been cautious and slow, with small adjustments to the eligibility age and the amount of monthly premiums. An alternative approach could be to adopt or emulate the model adopted in Sweden (a NDC model), where the benefit amount upon retirement is largely determined by the number of years an individual has contributed premiums to the program.



Second, the government and local communities across the country need to work together to create a nationwide program that supports sustainable intergenerational relationships between older adults and young children. In recent years, an increasing number of cities and communities have organized for older adults, especially retirees, to care for and spend time with pre-school children in their communities. These arrangements have been largely successful in assisting working parents with child-rearing and in keeping retirees socially active and healthy. These community-based initiatives should be expanded into a national program to have a similar impact on a larger scale.

Third, education is crucial not only for addressing the country's depopulation challenges but also for sustaining these efforts and their outcomes for future generations. This strategy requires collaboration between the government, industry, and academia to effectively reach out to citizens of all ages, raising their awareness and knowledge about how to lead longer and healthier lives. A nationwide, systematic longevity education should also be integrated into the existing education infrastructure to continue nurturing future generations who are more health-conscious. These efforts may help increase healthy life expectancies, thereby contributing to reducing the overall public health burden in the long term.

Proposition for Japan's Population Crisis: Integrating Cultural Compatibility with Domestic Support



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Interests: Information technology, agricultural technologies, and finding solutions to complex world issues

To address Japan's population decline while also protecting its cultural identity, a dual strategy is proposed: the implementation of new but selective immigration policies grounded in sociocultural compatibility, and incentivizing native Japanese to expand their families. This might enable Japan to manage its demographic shifts more effectively while preserving the core values that define its society.

The following ideas are intended to be considered only after reasonable efforts by the Japanese government to increase the effective utilization of technology and automation to mitigate issues associated with Japan's declining population.

However, since strategies excluding the acceptance of foreigners are likely already being developed and refined by the Japanese government (and with greater public support), this proposition will omit those approaches and instead focus more on methods to facilitate immigration in a way sensitive to the customs and expectations of Japanese culture. Thus, immigration should remain a last resort, and intelligent methods of conducting immigration that do not result in a breakdown of Japan's high-trust society should be thoroughly considered in critical comparison and contrast with the failures, as well as successes of strategies, implemented across Europe and the West.

1. Selective Immigration Anchored in Cultural Compatibility

This strategy refers to the hypothetical adoption of Regional Immigration Schedules (RIS), which could enhance Japanese society through strategic planning or management of communities via the intentional introduction of high degrees of linguistic and cultural background variation among immigrant groups themselves.

In the proposed concept, the children of immigrants are distinct from each other, but they all attend local Japanese schools. As such, each member of these immigrant micro-groups may be able to avoid being marked as an "exclusive other" in their respective neighborhoods or towns around Japan, as so few of the invited immigrant-groups would, ideally, have sufficient cultural/linguistic overlap with each other to foster a sense of "stereotype" among native Japanese. This way, the immigrant groups would lack sufficient commonality to form an "opposition identity" within Japan that could perhaps disturb public order.

The model also proposes strategic placement of immigrants from backgrounds with higher cultural affinity to Japan to act as Facilitators of Assimilation (FoA) for migrants who come from origin countries more dissimilar to Japan. Certain types of immigrants - Taiwanese, Tamilians, Singaporeans, Sri Lankans, Koreans, Tibetans - could all function as sociocultural buffers to immigrants from environments known to have completely different cultural standards, such as Brazil, Eritrea, Germany, Madagascar, United States, Mauritius, etc., when they are perhaps incentivized to form small but diverse migrant communities in predominantly Japanese environments.



These RIS schedules may be time-adjusted to account for labor shortages in specified areas, cycling perhaps every 5 years or so between the types of immigrants offered incentives in a specified region. For instance, when a mid-sized town in Tochigi prefecture faces staffing shortages in care facilities for older adults or other industry, the municipal government could prioritize migrants from 2 distinct origins - both in terms of language and religious proximity to each other - such as Vietnam and Germany, followed by Singapore or Sri Lanka in the next cycle, then perhaps New Zealand and Indonesia subsequently.



These two sets of migrant groups, hence referred to as Intermittently Permitted Distinct Sociocultural Pairs (IPDSPs), could operate with regions generally reopening to immigrants of similar origin only after 15 years, sufficient time for any children born to have been raised in alignment with Japanese values with little incentive to self-segregate. While migrants of course retain the freedom to move elsewhere within Japan once established, this RIS framework could avoid directly incentivizing subcultural pooling and self-segregation while addressing the effects of a declining native population.

Through this carefully managed approach to demographic diversity, newcomers could be encouraged to contribute to and assimilate within their host communities in Japan more rapidly, creating an environment perhaps more conducive to natural assimilation, rather than coalescing into distinct and separate communities due to in-group similarities in language, religion, and culture among immigrant populations in specified regions.

2. Community Planning to Disincentivize “Perpetual Outsider” Formation

To prevent social fragmentation, Japan could promote policies that encourage those immigrants having proper qualifications (with language ability, educational background, and secularity being among the most important criteria) to view Japan as a long-term home, thus fostering a shared sense of national belonging. If Japan’s migrant laborers are only seen as “temporary guests” for extended periods of time, then they may feel disconnected from Japanese society, potentially leading to increased social tension as seen in parts of Europe. By encouraging long-term residency for immigrants who demonstrate a willingness to assimilate, Japan may be able to avoid the societal divisions that have emerged in other nations with isolated migrant communities.

As well, educational background as a requirement could potentially be expanded, perhaps introducing a “middle-skilled” classification, where the screening focus is on exceptional language proficiency in Japanese, as well as cultural compatibility assessed via contextual examinations provided by the Japanese government or approved agencies.



3. Cultural Education Programs to Foster Assimilation

Japan could model assimilation programs on Germany's "integration courses" which are designed to help immigrants acquire language skills and understand local social norms. These Japanese-language and cultural etiquette courses would cover practical matters like onsen customs, noise expectations in public spaces, and general behavioral norms, and could even be used as one of the stringent requirements for preferential permanent residency (PR) as a "middle-skilled" individual. Such education would generally not seek to impose Japanese aesthetic values (particularly those not universally understood in modern, secular societies - such as preferred cuisine or hairstyles) but rather seek to ensure that immigrants have a strong understanding of what is seen in a positive or negative light within Japanese society, thus easing their transition and promoting mutual respect. There should also be sections dedicated extensively to the most basic legal expectations in Japanese society, to provide newcomers a reasonable basis for compliance.



4. Reforming the Koseki System to Address Citizenship Limitations

The Koseki family registry system bases citizenship eligibility on ancestry alone, is excessively exclusionary and perhaps in modern contexts, illogical, as it leaves many long-term residents, such as Zainichi Koreans, in a state of legal and social limbo. Adhering strictly to Jus Sanguinis (citizenship by blood), the Koseki system generates "perpetual outsiders" who, even being culturally and linguistically oriented as Japanese, are denied full rights in their place of birth. Reforming the Koseki to account for cultural assimilation and social contributions, rather than ancestry alone, might allow these residents an improved pathway to full citizenship, thus reinforcing Japan's social fabric.

This is in contrast to the ironic perception of Brazilians of Japanese descent who, by the doctrine of Jus Sanguinis, are granted citizenship status despite often having less in common with native Japanese, both linguistically and to some extent culturally, than many of the Zainichi Koreans living in Japan. This acceptance of the dissimilar, and rejection of the similar, based on blood alone is likely going to be an obstacle to Japan's long-term growth, unless the country radically enforces childbirth, with government support. It should also be noted that prior to the development of the Koseki system, and prior to the Sakoku Period, it was possible for outsiders especially those from geographically nearby Asian/Polynesian countries to enter Japan. This means that the identity construction of who is "Japanese" based on having a Koseki, is a purely temporal rather than genetic matter. Essentially in the Koseki system, the moment when one's ancestors arrived in the archipelago is given extreme importance, despite the ironic sociopolitical promotion of the blood-relationship being a key determinant of "Japaneseness." In this sense, Tibetans and Zainichi Koreans/Chinese are about close to Japanese as you can get in terms of immigrants, yet they would also not be accepted into the Koseki system. This seems to be contradictory.

5. Youth Education to Build Empathy and Global Awareness

To foster empathy and a nuanced understanding of immigration, Japan's educational system could incorporate lessons on global immigration trends and Japan's own historical diversity which includes such groups as the Jomon, Yayoi, Ainu, and Ryukyuan of Okinawa. This, in addition to more ancient genetic ties to the people of Tibet, as well as the Andamanese could be taught. This education might help young Japanese contextualize the concept of *ibasho* (a sense of belonging) as they come to understand the ways Japan's fundamentally non-homogenous heritage has also shaped its identity. Through exposure to the contributions of various cultural groups, young Japanese would ideally learn that diversity, when responsibly managed, can enhance societal unity rather than disrupt it. The notion of "becoming homogenized" may also be of importance in education, as this seems to be what occurred in Japan over thousands of years, leading to modern perceptions of being a single ethnic group. With enough time, under the right conditions, most populations will either become homogenized in close proximity, or they will begin to perceive themselves as homogenous.

6. Incentives to Support Native Family Growth

To address population decline domestically, Japan should implement policies that provide tax incentives and support for multi-generational households, or encouraging the development of multigenerational share houses that are perhaps similar to the one establishments started by Yoshihiro Shuto. This measure would not only support traditional family structures but also reduce the need for foreign caregivers by promoting a “Japanese family-centric approach to care.” Reducing reliance on outside assistance, Japan can help retain cultural cohesion within family structures while also alleviating some of the burdens on its healthcare system.



7. Selective Dual Citizenship to Retain Skilled Human Resources Abroad

In addition, we should consider dual citizenship for individuals with exceptional Japanese ability, including those of Japanese descent who demonstrate strong ties to Japanese culture and society. Naturally, this would also apply to Nisei, Sansei, etc. Like Germany’s model, which allows dual citizenship under specific circumstances, selective dual citizenship could help Japan retain skilled individuals from the Japanese diaspora. This policy would enable Japan to benefit from their global contributions while maintaining some degree of cultural integrity, as applicants would be chosen based on their cultural familiarity and commitment to assimilation, as well as prerequisite inclusion in Japan’s systems of taxation (even if they live abroad).

This outlines one of a few strategies for Japan to manage demographic issues via policies that support cultural compatibility, assimilation/homogenization, and native family growth. With this approach, Japan can build a sustainable demographic future while preserving the social harmony which defines its identity.

Korean Perspective of Japan's Depopulation Challenge



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The situation in Korea can provide an important basis to better understand the challenges related to aging and depopulation in Korea and Japan using OECD data. With regards to Korea, the following fact help put depopulation in context.

- Both Korea and Japan are examples of economic success stories.
- Both countries have also experienced rapid population aging affected by below-replacement-level fertility rates (Korea = 0.72; Japan = 1.37) in 2023, along with increases in life expectancy.
- Older Korean workers' labor force participation rate is higher than Japan's and has increased since 1990. Moreover, its older men have the highest labor force participation rate among OECD countries.
- Nevertheless, Korea's older adults have a high poverty rate in comparison to other OECD countries, and it is significantly higher than Japan's poverty rate for older adults.
- Koreans over 70 years of age have the highest relative suicide rate in Asia and significantly higher than Japan. This pattern has been consistent since 1990.
- Both Korea and Japan have direct benefit pension plans, but the coverage is higher in Japan. In comparison to Direct Contribution national plans, the Direct Benefit national plans are vulnerable to population aging, since they are dependent on younger workers, who are declining in number.
- Japan is faced with a serious urgent need for healthcare insurance and pension reforms to address its growing debt and the crushing burden on the next generation.
- Active Aging will be an important strategy for both Korea and Japan to increase productivity and improve fiscal sustainability.
- While Korea's challenges persist, it has recently announced the creation of a new Ministry of Low Fertility Responses to address this impending national emergency.

Korea's Population Challenge: Low Birth Rate and Potential Solutions



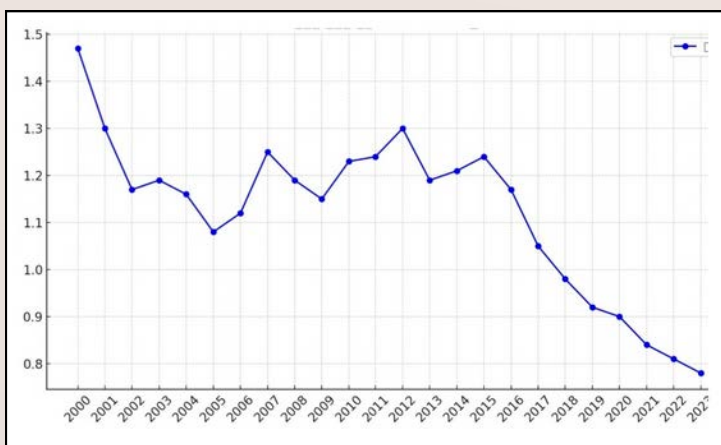
Dr. Meeryoung Kim

President of Golden Age Forum

Emeritus, Professor Daegu University

Korea has been concerned about rapid aging. Recently, due to the rapidly decreasing birth rate, voices of concern have grown louder, and more attention has been paid to resolving the low birth rate.

Over the past 20 years, the government has administered 200 trillion won in various areas to resolve low births. But the cost of budget related to childbirth has been relatively low, and the birth rate has continued to decrease. The birth rate chart for each year is as follows (Statistics Korea).



The birth rate was 1.47 in 2000, but it has been maintained at 1.05 in 2017, and has continued to fall below 1.00 since then, reaching 0.78 in 2023, the lowest among OECD countries. This low birth rate is further accelerating the aging process. A decrease in the productive population can worsen the competitiveness of the entire industry due to a labor shortage, slowing economic growth.

The causes of low birth rates are diverse and complex, but the following can be considered.

- The cost burden of childcare, such as childcare and education, is too high.

- The disadvantages of career breaks and promotions when women give birth to children are significant.
- The burden of childcare is large because it is difficult to balance home and work.
- Social values have changed significantly toward individualism, and there is a high tendency to pursue personal life rather than childcare.

The current policy is to provide parents with a lump sum and monthly childcare allowances to provide financial support. In addition, male childcare leave and maternity leave are being expanded, but this is not enough. We need to create an environment where women can have and raise children in various ways.

To solve the low birth problems, various and flexible work styles are needed, such as flexible work systems, telecommuting systems, and shortened work hours, so that young people can raise children and work. A family-friendly work environment will greatly contribute to increasing the birth rate. For example, workplaces could open daycare centers within the workplace. Thus, parents and children can both have stable daily lives by commuting to and from work and daycare together.

To prevent women from having career breaks in the workplace and to prevent them from being disadvantaged during the gap period due to childbirth, additional strategies are needed. For example, men's parental leave and childcare leave should also be made easier, and there is a need to conduct campaigns to improve social awareness of the need for children in the family. In addition, in a super aged society, jobs and incentives should be provided to grandparents who are still active and want to work to care for their grandchildren, thereby solving the problem of job creation and childcare.

Since women have a large burden of childcare from birth, a gender-equal childcare culture should be established socially. A housing stability policy is also necessary. Housing support policies or loan policies that are advantageous to single-person households should not work against dual-income couples.

Recently the Korean government has established a low birth rate chief as a national priority policy to prevent serious low birth rates and has proposed various low birth rate resolution policies. As a result of these efforts, the birth rate has been rising again recently. We need additional policies, such as those presented above, to increase the birth rate even more.



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ACAP's Mission Statement

ACAP is dedicated to empowering older adults and advocating for communities to maintain the physical, social, psychological, civic, economic, and environmental well-being of all people. This way, older adults can continue to contribute to their families, communities, and to society at large. Achieving an active aging society requires a partnership of individuals, families, and social policy leaders. Specifically, individuals and families must prepare for old age and adopt positive practices for long life. Social policy must offer protections, encourage participation, promote lifelong learning, and build age-friendly environments. As individual behaviors and social policies change, so will societal norms about the value of aging and older adults.

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