



The reality of 1 million “middle-aged and elderly hikikomori” — The aging of hikikomori is a major issue for all of society

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At the end of March, the Cabinet Office announced the results of their first survey of “middle-aged and elderly hikikomori.” They visited a random sample of 5,000 men and women aged 40–64 from all over Japan. As 47 persons (1.45%) out of 3,248 respondents (65.0%) qualified as hikikomori, the estimated number became 613,000 out of the entire population. Of these, 76.6% were men. Divided by age, it was 38.3% in their 40s, 36.2% in their 50s, and 25.5% aged 60–64. About half had been hikikomori for at least five years. Some 29.7% had been hikikomori for more than ten years.

Professor Saito at the University of Tsukuba (Social Psychiatry and Mental Health) had worked with issues of school refusal and hikikomori as a psychiatrist for thirty years. He has written a number of titles, starting with *Social Hikikomori: The Never-ending Puberty* in 1998.



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A survey by the Cabinet Office has estimated that there are 613,000 hikikomori (people who live isolated lives with little or no social contact) in the age range 40–64 across Japan. This was the first survey to look at middle-aged and elderly hikikomori.

However, I estimate that the real figure is twice that. There are more than 2 million hikikomori in all of Japan and I am convinced half of them are in middle age or elderly.

The aging of hikikomori will put pressure on public assistance and the pension system, cause a rapid increase in lonely deaths, and otherwise have a considerable impact. This is an urgent issue for not only the persons in question and their families, but for all of society.

Minister of Health, Labor, and Welfare Nemoto Takumi has said that “Adult hikikomori are a new social issue,” but this is somewhat off the mark. I have been sounding the alarm about how the aging of hikikomori will create a terrible situation for some twenty years.

Hikikomori is frowned upon by society so the likelihood that a survey of sending out questionnaires to households and collecting them will yield honest responses is low. As such, the results become extremely conservative, so that we still get 613,000 means that we are talking about an immense number of people.

The fact that nearly 80% were men is another proof that the results do not reflect reality. There ought to be many more female hikikomori, but unlike men, they do not stand out so much even if they refrain from social activities. If the family responds “Our daughter is doing housework,” this is not easily counted as a case. Rather than concluding that there are few women, we should make the interpretation that this simply shows that it is more difficult to problematize women’s situations.

Are hikikomori self-accountable?

A survey about young persons aged 15–39 that was announced in 2016 estimated that there are 541,000 hikikomori across Japan. If we simply add the results from this year, it exceeds 1.15 million people. Some twenty years have passed since I estimated it to 1 million, but that is now confirmed.

This was the first national survey on middle-aged and elderly persons, but such surveys have previously been conducted by local governments. What is interesting is that the local surveys show much higher numbers.

For example, a 2013 survey conducted by a health care center in Machida City, Tokyo involved local residents aged 20–64. 5.5% responded that “I or a family member is in a hikikomori situation.” 23.7% responded that “I have a neighbor, relative, or acquaintance who is in a hikikomori situation.” If we add the 2.3% who responded “Both apply,” we get 31.5%.

A famous case is an all-household survey conducted by the Council of Social Welfare in Fujisato Town, Yamamoto District, Akita over one and a half years starting in 2010. Fujisato is a depopulated town at the southern base of the Shirakami-Sanchi. 1,293 persons out of about 3,800 residents were in working age 18–55 years. It was shown that 113 of them are hikikomori. That is actually 8.74%. If we apply this directly to the Japanese population as a whole, it slightly exceeds 10 million.

The survey also yielded serious results about the aging of hikikomori. In Fujisato Town, 52 of the hikikomori, which is almost half, were 40 years or older. A survey in Saga Prefecture showed that 71.3% are 40 years or older and a survey in Yamanashi 60.4%.

Every time I see results like this, I feel that the more detailed the survey is, the closer the results come to reflect reality.

This is why I estimate that there currently exist at least 2 million hikikomori, of which half are middle- or old-aged.

Let's take a more detailed look at the contents of this year's Cabinet Office survey.

- 57.4% became hikikomori when they were 40 years or older.
- 36.2% gave the reason as “Retirement,” 21.3% as “Illness” or “Trouble with human relationships,” and 19.1% as “Didn't feel at home at work” (multiple choice).
- On the question “Who is the main income provider?,” 29.8% responded themselves, 21.3% their father, 12.8% their mother, 17.0% their spouse, and 8.5% “I receive public assistance, etc.”

The results demonstrated the seriousness of the “8050 problem,” where parents in their 80s take care of their children in their 50s due to the permanentization and aging of hikikomori.

Thirty years ago, about 80% of hikikomori had experience of school refusal, and I had never seen a hikikomori with work experience. There are many with experience of school refusal also today, but only just under 20% go directly from school refusal to hikikomori. The majority become hikikomori after first working outside in society.

There are those who resign from work due to becoming distrustful of other people at the workplace and then find it difficult to seek employment elsewhere or who give up on finding a new job when the economic situation makes mid-career hiring difficult. The longer the blank in social participation, the lower the rate of finding employment. If someone secludes themselves for two or three years, they gradually become listless and it becomes difficult for them to find a way out by themselves.

The definition of hikikomori is “whether or not one participates in society.” One is generally deemed to be a hikikomori if one does not go to school or work, does not have friends or a lover, and only interacts with family for more than six months. As such, they are not all shut away in their homes, but people who go outside by themselves can also be hikikomori.

It is clearly wrong to think that hikikomori are self-accountable. Long-term hikikomori is a phenomenon that is caused by a combination of various factors, such as family expectations, social pressures, and the suffering of the person in question, so it is not something actively decided by the person. Having researched this topic for a long time, I can say that only extremely few cases are families with special circumstances, such as abuse. This is a phenomenon that can occur in any family, at any age, and to anyone, so I hope for society to become more tolerant.

About half of middle-aged and elderly hikikomori spend their days doing nothing. They lie in their beds or sit on their sofas. They are thinking about so many things and are struggling, so they do not feel bored. It is easy to think that they are all shut away in their rooms absorbed in the web or games, but that is actually a minority. People who are hikikomori apparently blame themselves and do not believe themselves to have the right to have fun. Some even come to suffer from depression as a result of brooding too much.

Concerns over “caregiver abuse”

The greatest supporter of the hikikomori is their family, but in nearly all cases, their relationship is complicated. The reason is that the words of family members tend to become harsh, along the lines of “When will you start working?” or “You should become financially independent.” It is a completely valid sentiment to criticize them, but since the hikikomori themselves are aware of that validity, they come to feel that their existence is wholly repudiated, which makes them hurt or angry. Meanwhile family members think what they are saying is right, so this deepens the antagonism.

Middle-aged and elderly hikikomori face other problems as well. If the mother tends to corner the child with euphemisms and the father is always at home after retiring from work, knocking down the child with fair arguments, this will lead to tremendous stress for the child and frequently cause them to reverse night and day to avoid seeing the parents.

Something else to be concerned of is caregiver abuse. Let us say a parent living together with their child comes to require nursing care. In most cases, the child will look after them. That is because a hikikomori does not want helpers or other outsiders to come into the home. In such cases, it sometimes happens that the hikikomori remembers all the harsh words from the parent when dealing with their unreasonable requests, which makes them angry. This has to be termed a dark component of the future of hikikomori as they become older.

I tell parents that “It’s better if you don’t expect your child to look after you in your old age.” I suggest them to “Secure funds to live out your lives in peace and consider moving to a home at an early stage. Use the remaining money to look after your hikikomori child.” Their desire to leave money for their child by sacrificing their own lifestyle often backfires.

In this survey, the following responses were given to the question “What are you worried about when it comes to your life today or the future?”

“I am worried about living by myself in my old age.”

“What do I do if I become sick? What do I do if I become alone?”

“I don’t have a spouse, so I think I will be lonely once my mother passes away. But I think I’ll just have to deal with that then.”

“In the end, I’m worried about my finances.”

“I read in a book that it’s a mental illness. I found a job but had trouble fitting in with the others and had the sad experience of being told not to come in tomorrow. My parents have told me many times to go and get a book I like since I like reading. I go to the convenience store to get things I want. It’s because I don’t have to talk to anyone. I know that I’ll be burdening my parents if it goes on like this, but I don’t have the courage.”

Comments worrying about the future and especially about finances stood out.

In 2012, I had a book published together with the financial planner Hatanaka Masako. It is titled *What Happens to the Hikikomori’s Life Plan after “the Death of Their Parents.”* We recommend parents to concretely show their child that “We only have this much money.” That is, they should tell them the truth: “If you use 1 million yen a year, then we can continue to live like this for five years. Beyond that, you have to receive welfare yourself. You have to live with public assistance.”

One of Hatanaka’s ideas that I thought was wonderful is to gradually suggest employment by saying, “If you earn 30,000 yen a month, that’s an extra 5 million yen, and we can live together for another three years. If you earn 100,000 yen a month, we can live together permanently.” In most cases, both the hikikomori and the parents think there are only two options, “not work or work full-time,” but there’s so much middle ground when it comes to employment, including earning some pocket money online and working part-time just once a week.

A first step is the desire to “consume”

In Japanese households, talk about money and death are consistently taboo. However, this means treating the children as immature. One major cause of hikikomori, I think, is that the parents cannot stop treating the child as immature. If the child is adult and you live together, the household finances should be made clear. Even if you are parent and child, when it comes to money, it is healthier to have a contractual relationship. This also helps prevent a hikikomori situation.

However, the majority of parents threaten their children with vague words like, “We don’t have any more money” or “We can’t continue living like this forever.” I think this is because they hope they will start working if they become worried, but this usually fails.

What made one male hikikomori start working was that his father told him, “We still have money, so don’t worry.” He says that “That gave me the security to start working.” As you can see in the responses above, hikikomori are constantly full of worry. If their parents then instigate worry, they become further immobilized. If their footing becomes unstable, they are likelier to stay put than to jump. By contrast, if their footing is stable, they can take a step forward by using that foothold.

The keyword is “security.” If their family makes them feel secure, they come to have the desire to be acknowledged and come to turn outward. It is wrong to worry that “If I make my child feel secure, they will become comfortable and seclude themselves even more.” Once you become a hikikomori, time for that person stops. Even if they had been able to work for a time, they “retrogress” to become a child again, falling into a state of immaturity. In order to help them turn their attention outward, it is important to give them security rather than make them worry about their livelihood.

I think the goal of the hikikomori is to acquire a feeling of self-esteem. As long as they have that, they do not mind being hikikomori. However, there are very few people who can feel self-esteem while being hikikomori. Most people gain self-esteem by working. This increases if they get married and have children. As such, we may regard work as a substantial goal, but it is really about saying “If you can accept yourself, that’s your goal” while still leaving the person in question the freedom of choice.

The first step to breaking free from being a hikikomori is consumption. Being a hikikomori for a long time leads to a loss of desire, bringing down consumption activities to a zero. If you do not have any desire, you also do not have any motivation, so the possibility of finding employment disappears. The patients I examine generally live on 1 million or less a year. They do not indulge themselves and do not eat out. That is why I encourage them to use as much money as allowed.

If the incentive for working is obligation or wanting to be acknowledged by others, it is not easy to take the step to find work. They are likely to cave under the pressure. The best incentive is wanting something and working because you need money to buy it.

Prevent the mass outbreak of “lonely deaths”!

As indicated by the inclusion of the entry “hikikomori” in the Oxford English Dictionary, hikikomori is thought to be an issue that originated in Japan. However, in recent times, it has become known that it also occurs in other countries. It is extremely common in South Korea, and is increasing in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. The common feature is a Confucian culture and an affluent society. In other words, we may hypothesize that there are more hikikomori in modernized Confucian countries. In Europe, it seems they are the most common in Italy and Spain. They are familialistic countries in the Catholic cultural sphere. Japan, South Korea, Italy, and Spain have in common that more than 70% of young people live with their parents. There are many hikikomori in countries where it is thought natural for families to take care of children if they are unable to participate in society.

By contrast, it is taken for granted that you leave the house when you become an adult in individualistic countries like the United Kingdom or the United States. Unless you work, you will end up homeless. The homeless population of Japan is the smallest among advanced nations, and is estimated to be slightly more than 5,000 people according to statistics from the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare. At the same time, there are thought to be 260,000 young homeless persons in the United Kingdom and more than 1 million in the United States.

That is, the hikikomori problem should not be understood as having to do with Japanese culture but in a framework of familialism vs individualism. The difference is only about whether young persons with no place in society end up “in the home or on the street.” Also looking globally, I believe there are only two ways in which young people are excluded from society: as hikikomori or as homeless.

The difference is what happens after that. The living conditions of homelessness are harsh and many do not survive the winter, so the average life span is about 50 years. Meanwhile, since hikikomori live in a favorable home environment, their average life span likely exceeds 80 years. The number of homeless persons will not increase above a certain level, but the number of hikikomori will just keep rising.

I have been sounding the alarms for quite some time, saying that “the age of the hikikomori longevity society is coming in 2030.” This is because all the 10,000s of hikikomori in their mid-50s now will start receiving their pensions at once then. By that time, their parents will probably have passed away and those worried about their child’s future will likely have kept paying their child’s pension premium until they die. When those children start receiving their pensions, will the pension system be able to pay out?

Moreover, half of pensions are financed by taxes, but middle-aged and elderly hikikomori would not have paid any income tax. I am very much worried about the risk of “hikikomori bashing” from the general population with the argument “It’s unfair that they receive pensions when they haven’t paid any taxes.” The same goes for reliance on public assistance. I worry that the idea that “You are responsible for becoming a hikikomori, so it can’t be helped if you die” will become mainstream in society.

Something that I am equally concerned about is that more than half of hikikomori may not apply for a pension or public assistance. It might be that they lack the lifestyle skills to complete the paperwork at the public office, but my biggest concern is that most will not apply because they feel it is shameful. In that case, there is nothing left but a lonely death. Eventually, I fear an age of mass lonely deaths will come.

If we estimated the current hikikomori population to be 2 million, it will likely rise to 3 or 4 million in a decade. Since Japan’s total population will shrink, the hikikomori ratio will increase even more. Either the financing of pensions and public assistance will break down or there will be a mass outbreak of lonely deaths. Either way, the future does not look bright.

In order to avert such a situation, we have to improve the support systems. Hikikomori Local Support Centers are being set up in all prefectures and in selected cities, and institutions are being improved, but it is far from sufficient. There is an urgent need for a support system that can guide

them to start working, without forcing them, before their parents die, and it should start with home visits.

Something you hear a lot about in recent times is how a helper may go to the home of an elderly and find that their adult hikikomori grandchild lives there. Yet the helper's job is taking care of the elderly, so they cannot care for the grandchild. In such situations, perhaps we need to adapt and create an arrangement where both can be cared for as a set. If there are people there who require help, then the authorities ought to respond flexibly regardless of jurisdiction.

I hope that this year's survey will become a turning point for the government to start dealing with the hikikomori problem in earnest. The current hikikomori population of 2 million remains a size that you can willfully ignore. They do not leave their houses so they stand out even less. However, by the time we can no longer ignore them, their number may have increased to 10s of millions.

How will the Japanese government provide for them in the near future? The survey results are asking this pressing question.

Translated from "Chukonen hikikomori" 100 man-nin no genjitsu — Hikikomori no koreika wa shakai-zentai no daimondai da (The reality of 1 million "middle-aged and elderly hikikomori" — The aging of hikikomori is a major issue for all of society)," Bungeishunju, June 2019, pp. 176–183. (Courtesy of Bungeishunju, Ltd.) [July 2019]

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