



# I don't want to bother anyone... The voices of the isolated people submerged in the city

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“The excluded and isolated layer have been made invisible, living quietly submerged in the lower levels of the city without anyone being aware of them.”

The phrase “loneliness and isolation” has often caught my eye since NHK (the Japan Broadcasting Corporation) produced a special edition on the *muen shakai* (a society where individuals are isolated and have weak links with each other). Ten years have now passed and there is renewed interest in the issue with the Suga Cabinet installing a “minister in charge of loneliness and isolation.”

As soon as attention turns to loneliness and isolation, there emerges, as if in a backlash, a discussion about reexamining the value of loneliness and isolation. In short, a discussion about the need to recognize the value of being alone. Possibly out of consideration for such opinions, the phrase “unwanted loneliness and isolation” has recently come into use, and there is also a tendency to limit the nature of the problem.

However, the problem of loneliness and isolation is not so simple that it is possible to categorize it by mental attitudes such as wanted or unwanted. For example, can we really understand the wish to be alone as a result of experiencing the bankruptcy of an employer, a divorce, or a betrayal by friends as wanted isolation?

In a society that emphasizes self-determination, there is a tendency to draw conclusions about the acceptability of some events based on the mental attitude of the persons involved. In such a society, people who do not try to speak up are often seen as passively accepting the status quo. This outlook is linked to a fundamental problem associated with loneliness and isolation, which is that it overlooks the people who need help, but do not ask for it.

Based on the results of a survey, this article explores the reality of isolated individuals and discusses the risk of reducing the acceptance or rejection of isolation to someone's mental attitude.



Prof. Ishida Mitsunori

## The Excluded Ones

As the social scientist Hashimoto Kenji points out, Japan has been plunged into a genuinely unequal society since the 2000s. As disparities widen, an underclass, which is both a new class and an excluded layer, has emerged in Japanese society

In this article, I will follow the lead of Hashimoto’s underclass theory to examine the underclass context (non-regular employees or unemployed people, unmarried women) and the excluded and isolated layer of people who have zero or one reliable friend or acquaintance. Specifically, I will describe the situation in the style of a monograph, which is based on responses to a written questionnaire about the kinds of homes where these men and women were raised, what their school life was like, and their current situation. The data was obtained from the 2016 survey of work, lifestyle, and community among residents in the Tokyo metropolitan area (lead researcher: Hashimoto Kenji), which was sent to 5,631 residents in the metropolitan area (2,351 valid responses).

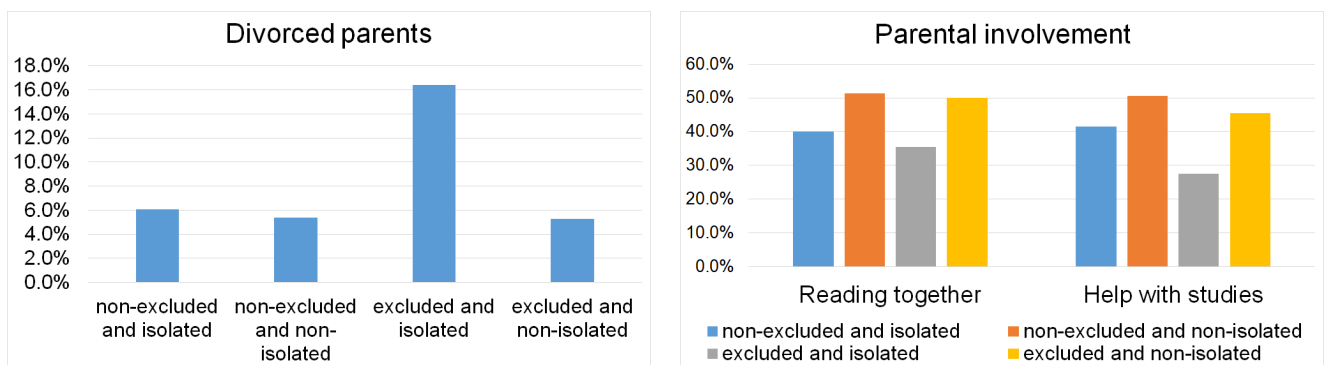
Moreover, as comparison, I will also describe the results of classifying the excluded and non-isolated layer, who have two or more reliable friends or acquaintances, but are still part of the underclass; the non-excluded and isolated layer, who have zero or one reliable friend or acquaintance, but are not part of the underclass; and the non-excluded and non-isolated layer who have two or more reliable friends or acquaintances and are not part of the underclass. The survey targets are in the 20 to 59 age group.

## Family and School as the Point of Departure

Fig. 1 summarizes the family situation for each layer. The harshness of the point of departure for the excluded and isolated layer is revealed when we look at this data.

As many as 16.4% of the excluded and isolated layer have experienced the divorce of their parents. This figure is about 5 to 6% for the other layers. The excluded and isolated layer also had remarkably little experience of someone reading to them, or helping them with their studies in childhood. In particular, no more than 27.4% of the excluded and isolated layer had had the experience of a parent helping them with studies. This is in contrast to at least 40% for the other layers. While not included in the figure, the excluded and isolated layer also had little experience of being taken on trips.

**Fig. 1: Family situation for each layer**

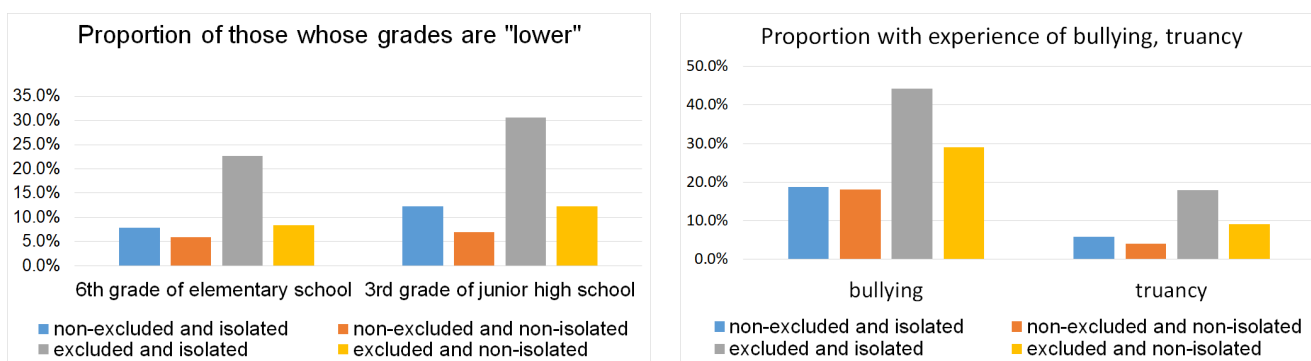


**Source:** All figures compiled by the author based on the 2016 survey of work, lifestyle, and community among residents in the Tokyo metropolitan area.

Inadequacies in the home environment are linked to failure to adapt to school. Fig. 2 shows the proportion of people in each layer who responded “My grades dropped” when asked to compare their performance in Year 6 of elementary school with Year 3 of junior high school, as well as the proportion of students who experienced bullying or truancy.

The proportion of people who responded “My grades dropped” to the question about their school performance is conspicuously high in the excluded and isolated layer. Moreover, the proportion of those who said their grades went down increased from 22.6% in elementary school to 30.6% in junior high school. In short, it became difficult for the students to adapt to the class work as they advanced through the grades.

**Fig. 2: School life for each layer**



Many people had also experienced bullying and truancy. In particular, 44.3% of respondents had had experience of bullying. Whereas the truancy experience is at the most 9% among the other layers, it is as high as 18% in the excluded and isolated layer. Understandably, this is the reason why the excluded and isolated layer leave school with a comparatively poor academic record (numerical value omitted).

Inadequacies in the home environment and failure to adapt at school carry over to the vocational career of the individual. As many as 37% of the excluded and isolated layer are non-regular employees in their first job. This figure is exceptionally high compared to 27% for the excluded and non-isolated layer, 14% for the non-excluded and isolated layer, and 13% for the non-excluded and non-isolated layer.

With an unstable home environment and parents who barely care for them, people in the excluded and isolated layer are also unable to adapt to school, and they do not build up a circle of friends and acquaintances. Since failure to adapt at school is linked to failure to adapt to the labor market, they are not given “good jobs” and they also face economic hardship. As a result, it becomes increasingly difficult for them to make friends and acquaintances. Rather than being part of an underclass, the excluded and isolated layer “lives a life that is cut off from society.”

### Emotional Distress in the Excluded and Isolated Layer

So, how does the excluded and isolated layer react to their harsh reality? Fig. 3 shows the sense of happiness, the economic situation, and the assessment of their future for each layer. Looking at this data, the emotional distress of the excluded and isolated layer stands out.

As many as 44.3% of people in the excluded and isolated layer responded that they are “not at all happy” or “not very happy.” In the excluded and non-isolated layer, the figure was 30%. In the non-excluded layers, the figure declined even further to 16% for the non-excluded and isolated layer, and 9.3% for the non-excluded and non-isolated layer.

When people in the excluded and isolated layer were asked if they thought they were poor, 56.4% said that “they are poor” or “probably poor,” which is a big difference with the excluded and non-isolated layer (40%).

Possibly a reflection of their situation, these people also have an extremely bleak view of the future. The percentage of respondents in the excluded and isolated layer who said that they were “very worried” about their future lives stood out at 65.5%. The figure for the excluded and non-isolated layer was fairly high at 45.5%, while the figures for the non-excluded and isolated layer and the non-excluded and non-isolated layer were fairly low at 26.8% and 23.3% respectively.

In addition to economic insecurity, the people in the excluded and isolated layer are neither happy nor do they have friends or acquaintances to rely on. In such a situation, it is unreasonable to tell them not to worry about the future. If we include the people who said that they are “fairly worried” about their future, 86.7% of people in the excluded and isolated layer are worried about their lives in the future.

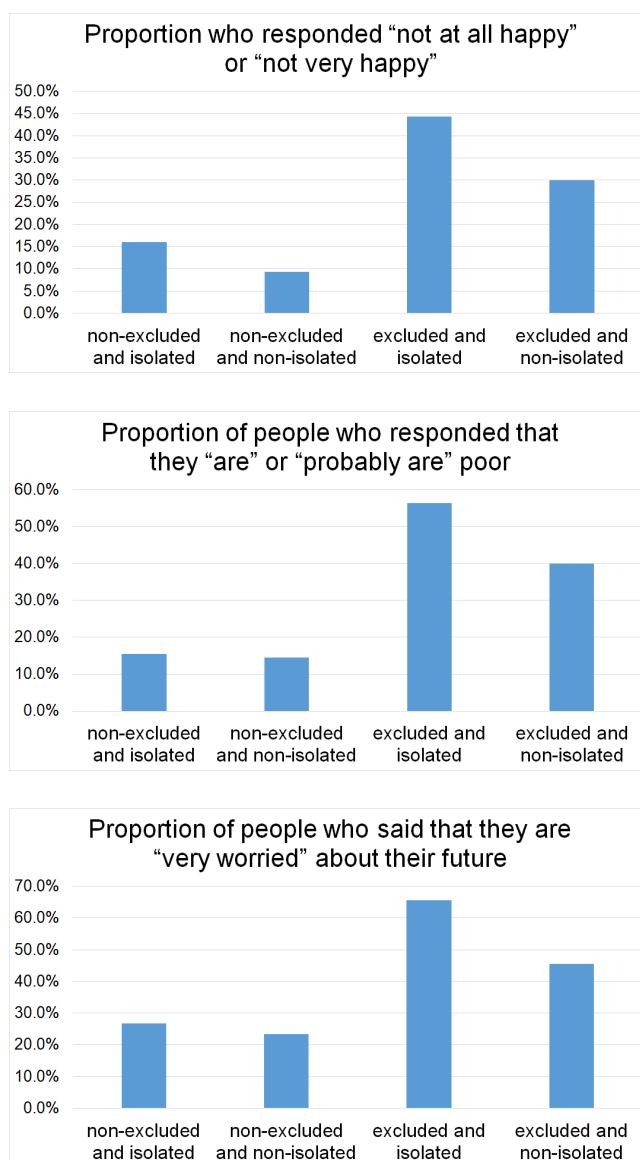
Naturally, their emotional state is not good, and 26.7% of them have experienced depression or other forms of mental illness.

### Gratitude to Parents in the Excluded and Isolated Layer

I suppose few readers feel a sense of surprise at the severity of the situation revealed by the results of the analysis so far. Therefore, I would like you to look at Fig. 4. This figure indicates social awareness in each layer.

The responses to the statement on the far left, “Anyone can become wealthy if they make some effort,” are not so surprising. The excluded and isolated layer have little faith in making the effort, whereas the non-excluded and non-isolated layer strongly believe in making an effort. It is no use telling people in

**Fig. 3: Recognition of current situation for each layer**



the excluded and isolated layer, who have encountered misfortune since childhood, and subsequently faced hardship during their school years and in the early part of their working life, to “believe in making an effort.”

But the other two results are surprising. You may not notice it at first glance since the middle graph in Fig. 4 shows small differences between the people who answered “yes” to the question “those who do not respect or feel gratitude to their parents are awful.” Among the people who agreed with this statement, the highest number is in the excluded and isolated layer (38.7%). The difference with the other groups is about five percentage points.

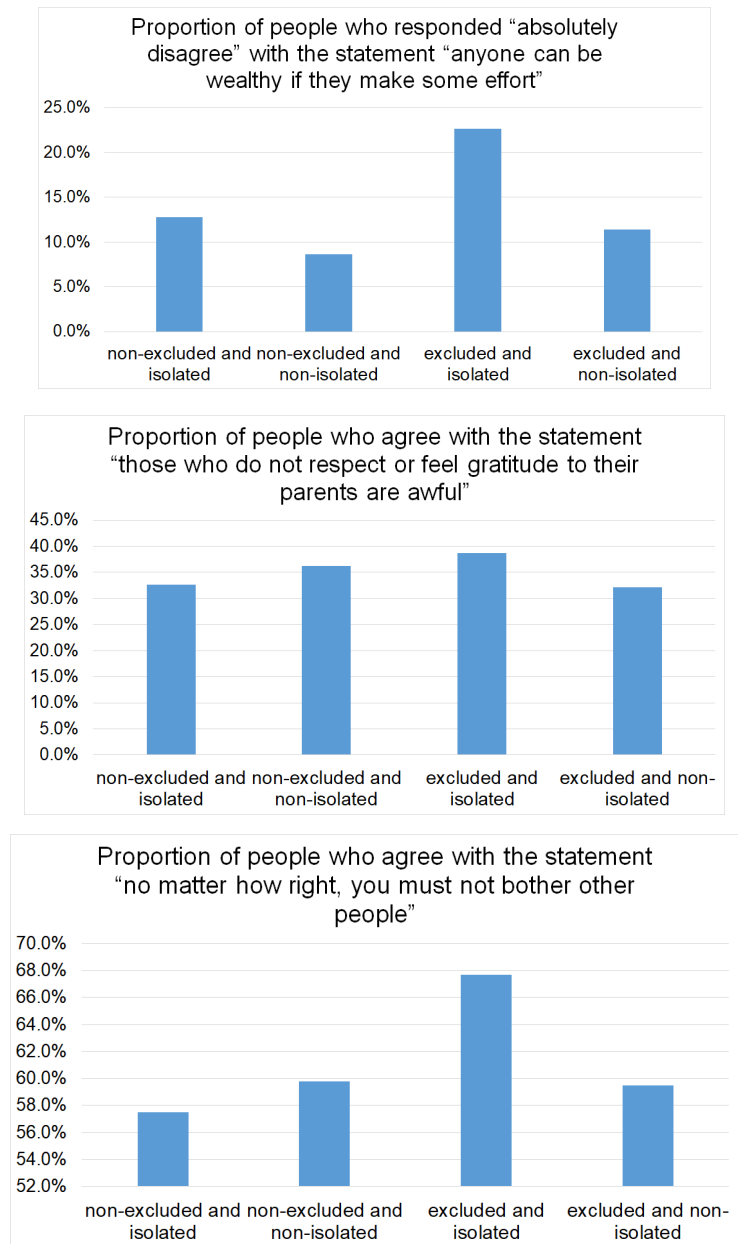
However, let me remind you. As shown by the analysis of family situations, most of the people in the excluded and isolated layer come from a broken family environment and have not experienced much parental care.

One might assume that someone who grew up in a broken family environment and hardly experienced parental care would not feel much gratitude and respect for their parents. Nevertheless, similarly to other groups and perhaps even a bit more, the excluded and isolated layer believe that they should feel gratitude and respect for their parents. This attitude, which demands gratitude and respect for parents without any consideration of one’s own troubles, reflects the difficulty of the problem of loneliness and isolation.

The attitude of not complaining about one’s own hardship is expressed more clearly in the answers to the statement “no matter how right, you must not bother other people.” Among people in the excluded and isolated layer, a little below 70% said that they agree with this statement. This figure is nearly ten percentage points higher than the other groups. In short, the excluded and isolated layer feel more strongly than others that they must not bother other people.

Another surprising point is that compared to the other layers, the excluded and isolated layer have lived in their present place of residence for a long time. Half of the excluded and isolated layer have

**Fig. 4: Social awareness in each layer**



lived in their current home for more than twenty years. On the other hand, a little less than 20% of the non-excluded layer have lived in their present home for more than twenty years. Fewer than 40% of the excluded and non-isolated layer have lived in their current home for more than twenty years, so the long-term residence of the excluded and isolated layer stands out.

This is an unusual result considering how relationships are formed. Normally, if someone lives in the same area for a long time, they develop strong links to the area. However, long-term residence does not lead to relationship-building for people in the excluded and isolated layer. The excluded and isolated layer in urban areas do not complain about their hardship to other people; they simply live quietly and submerged in the lower levels of the city without bothering anyone.

Let me sum up the findings so far. The excluded and isolated layer have lived in broken situations since childhood, they have little sense of happiness, and they feel a great deal of concern about their future. Frequent hardship robs them of the energy to make an effort.

Even so, the excluded and isolated layer do not express resentment. Rather, a considerable number of people in the excluded and isolated layer think that they should feel gratitude and respect for their parents. They also strongly feel that they must not bother other people. This is why the excluded and isolated layer slowly withdraws from the networks of people.

The excluded and isolated layer do not speak up. They may live in an area for a long time, but they live so quietly that no one notices them. We must not under any circumstances forget about these lives.

## **Reframing the Issue of Loneliness and Isolation**

Approaching the issue of loneliness and isolation from a mental attitude of wanted or unwanted pushes out of sight the people who have passively withdrawn from relationships, and who would not bother others regardless of their troubles.

With its emphasis on individual will, modern society has, for better or for worse, placed the concept of self-determination at the heart of the principal values that govern our conduct. The idea that the state of loneliness and isolation can be categorized according to the wishes of the person concerned is an extension of this line of thought. However, loneliness and isolation cannot easily be categorized as wanted or unwanted.

Seen objectively only, we may determine that the people in the excluded and isolated layer discussed in this paper experience unwanted isolation. However, if we delve deeper into their consciousness, it is clear that the loneliness and isolation is tolerated such an extent that we cannot say that it is unwanted. It is accompanied by something that resembles resignation. The government is utterly powerless in the face of these people.

Supposing that a person is, objectively speaking, trapped in a state of unwanted isolation. If the person in question proactively asks for support, the government can take action. However, it is difficult for government services to reach people who do not speak up and do not try to change their present circumstances. For the unwanted isolation to be recognized and to receive assistance, the person in question must say that the isolation is unwanted.

However, it is unfair to ask the excluded and isolated layer to speak up for themselves. If they had had the will to speak up to start with, they would hardly have stayed in the excluded and isolated layer. As confirmed by the analysis so far, more than others, the excluded and isolated layer feel gratitude and

respect for their parents even if they find themselves in a harsh environment, and they do not want to bother others. This is precisely why the excluded and isolated layer have been made invisible, living quietly submerged in the lower levels of the city without anyone being aware of them.

## **A Society that Factors in Bothering Others**

In the process of modernization, everything that was dealt with by human relationships has now been entrusted to social security, or to goods and services provided by the market. The system where we can live alone without human relationships has reduced the semi-compulsory social bonds that held people together in the past. As a result, maintaining and building human relationships has fallen into the categories of self-determination and choice. The means of sustaining life are procured within the capitalist system rather than within relationships.

Under such circumstances, dependency on relationships is interpreted as abandonment or negligence of individual effort, labelled as “lack of self-reliance” and “bothering others.” This is how individuals are forced to voluntarily withdraw from personal relationships for the negative reason of not wanting to bother others. A stratified society that emphasizes self-help creates a structure where people in more difficult circumstances are less likely to speak up and ask for support. Due to the current COVID-19 uproar, people are out of their comfort zone and there is an ever stronger tendency to denounce people who bother others.

To make sure the excluded and isolated layer are not abandoned by society, we need a social mechanism that does not allow their lives to become submerged. There is not space to discuss this issue here, but for the time being, I would like to call for a transition to a society that factors in people who bother others, and understands that it is not only about holding them accountable. There is no such thing as an individual who can live his or her life without bothering others.

### **Reference:**

Hashimoto Kenji (2018), *Shin Nihon no kaikyū shakai* (The New Japanese Class Society), Kodansha Gendai Shinsho

*Translated from “Hito ni meiwaku wo kaketakunai ..... Toshi ni Shizumiyuku Koenaki Koritsushatachi (I don’t want to bother anyone... The voices of the isolated people submerged in the city),” Chuokoron, July 2021, pp. 32-39 (Courtesy of Chuo Koron Shinsha) [September 2021]*

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