

Low Birth Rate Problem of Japan:

Effects and Causes

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Abstract

The modern Japan, as one of the world's strongest economic entity, has facing a serious and emergent social problem, low birth rate. Such problem is leading to several negative consequences, including the lack of post-retirement care, shrinking child-related industries, lack of future labor force, aging society, etc. All these negative effects would cause serious problems in a variety of aspects of society and eventually lead to unstable society or even social collapse. So in order to figure out the possible solutions to the low birth rate problem as well as its co-producing social issues, it's necessary to find out the causes of such problem first. The original cause of the problem can go back to the post-World War II era when Japan experienced a population boom by lowering marriageable age and encouraging multiple birth to recover the loss of population during war time and to fulfill the lack of labor force. However, the birth rate gradually declines during the following years, eventually causing the problem of aging society and low birth rate. Other than the main cause, there are several other causes accelerating the process and make such problem more serious and urgent, including the economic issue, social stress, working women, and government policy. Throughout the investigation of causes of low birth rate problem, solutions are going to be concluded in the following paper by finding methods alleviating or eliminating these causes as well as learning from the experience of other developed countries facing the same birth rate problem.

Keywords: social issue, Japan, low birth rate, aging society

Low Birth Rate Problem of Japan

Effects and Causes

Low birth rate problem is one of the most crucial problems of modern society, which would lead to gradually declining population and could exert significant influence on both social structure and economic development. Such problem is pretty common in most developed countries, and Japan has the most severe situation among all.

Effects

Social problems can usually lead to other problems, and then these problems would result in a worse original problem. So does the low birth rate problem.

Short Term

In short term, low birth rate means fewer children. Education would be the first thing influenced by fewer children. Education Facilities from kindergarten to college, including public schools, private schools, and cram schools, would face great challenges with limited source of students. Also, teaching job opportunities would shrink drastically, and facing job crisis from both competition and abandon of facilities, teachers would more likely become estranged from students and have lower teaching quality.

Other than education, manufactures and producers related to children would be confronted with close-down crisis and keen competition. Industries like baby supply industry, toy industry, and children's books industry would be most significantly impacted. Other industries like dairy products industry would be less influenced and still have a chance to open up new markets in replace.

Long Term

In long term, low birth rate would have greater and worse impact on education. Lots of education facilities in communities with fewer newborns would close down, and school age children from those places have to attend schools in cities or larger communities. Since the whole family would usually migrate together, it can lead to the dramatical trend of migrating to cities and the abandon of villages and towns.

Labor force is the other one being influenced the most by low birth rate in long term. Obviously, low birth rate would cause lack of labor force, and significantly impact business and industries. Also, lots of work positions would be taken by people not qualified but compromised due to the short in labor force, and working quality would definitely decline.

Low birth rate doesn't only have negative effects in long term, but these positive effects only come after decades of negative effects. Low birth rate would lead to fewer population in long term, and with fewer population burdens on environment, resource, food, and land would all be significantly relieved. Social conflicts would be largely resolved, and elite education would be universal.

Causes

The origin of the low birth rate problem can go back to the Second World War time, when two population booms happened in Japan. According to the 2011 Japan Statistical Yearbook published by Japan's Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication in Jan. 2012, the two population booms took place during and after WWII in order to provide more population for the war and get back the population lost in the war. (See Appendix A for Actual Chart)

The low birth rate problem didn't become one of the most crucial problems of Japan only by the population booms. Instead, it's the result of many minor causes, which accelerate and worsen such problem. These minor causes of the low birth rate problem in Japan are pretty diverse, including social causes, economic causes, and political causes.

Social Causes

Population. The low birth rate problem is causing various population problems in Japan, and these problems are back accelerating the low birth rate problem. One main population problem Japan is facing is the other side of the low birth rate, aging society. As a society with huge portion of aged people, there are fewer young adults in the Japan society that are able to marry and give birth to children. The low birth rate problem itself is forming a vicious circle.

In additional to the lack of young adults, there's also a lack of reproductive women. According to the Japan population survey in 2014, Japan's reproductive women give birth to 1.4 children in average, while it was 8 after WWII and at least 2.07 is needed to maintain the current population. With fewer children given birth to, modern Japanese society definitely needs more reproductive women.

Gender. Like many other modern countries, Japanese women are gaining more and more rights compared to the past, with which Japanese women are gaining more dependency as well. There are less needs for them to find a man to rely on and form a family like in the past. According to Japan National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, around 90% of Japanese young women thinks that single is the best marital status. As they can live better as single, why do they have to find someone to marry with?

In contrast with the rising of women right, there is a trend in Japanese men called Soushokudanshi(草食系男子), being defined as young men who are not active as in the traditional male stereotype, and who may also be kind, co-operative and family-oriented. These Japanese males perform pretty passive in seeking girlfriends and marrying partners, and what is causing this is their lack of need or interest of marriage and dating.

Alternatives. Japan is famous for both its adult industry and ACGN(*Anime, Comic, Game, Novel*) industry, which are both providing alternatives to dating and marriage. Adult industry provides attractive partners that are usually beautiful or handsome to fulfill the sexual needs of young adults, and ACGN industry provides ideal characters with all kinds of appearance and good points that are impossible to exist in the real world. More than that, these virtual figures are easier to deal with to most young people compared to real people.

Even within those groups not interested in virtual love, there is a great portion of them preferring “Fast Food Love” to normal dating and marriage. “Fast Food Love” is a modern word in Japan that describes love forms that are tasteful but unhealthy just like fast food. It includes one-night stand and short-term dating, and also various Japanese unique dating types like rental girlfriend and boyfriend. For a lot of Japanese young people lacking interest in marriage, fast food love is usually their favored option.

Physiology. During the ISPOR 18th Annual International Meeting in May 2013, statistics show that among Japanese males there is an erectile dysfunction rate of around 40% due to both physical and psychological factors. No matter it caused by biological issue or living pressure, such high ED rate does address part of the low birth rate problem among married people.

Economic Causes

Financial Pressure. Japan has an unfriendly economic environment for those who want to form a family and give birth to kids. First, Japan has just passed its economic growth peak, which means that even though its economy is still growing, it's slowing down. As a result, most young generation of Japan, who were born in a rich environment with fast-growing economy, don't think they can achieve better life quality when they start living by their own. The lack of financial confidence makes them less likely to consider marriage rather than maintaining life quality. Secondly, the economic bubble happened in the 90s and the several natural disasters happened after 2000 gave another punch on the face of Japan economy. Even decades after, Japan is still working on recovering its economy today. So most young people are more interested in working on a better future rather than marrying early. Third, Japan has World's second largest urban to rural population ratio right after Great Britain, another island country. With a urban population taking 78% of the total population, Japan has a serious problem of high city life cost and low income in contrast. While income is already insufficient to support a better life in cities, young people living in cities are definitely less likely to get married or give birth, which are both going to add extra burden on living cost.

Work Stress. Due to both Japan's traditional "Artisan Spirit", which promotes hard work for better service or product, and economic recession, Japan is facing World's highest rate of overwork and highest rate of death from overwork. Work stress is such a universal problem in Japan that people are less likely to consider giving birth no matter since they are already exhausted after work or since a newborn would add even more stress both in life and cost.

Japan has a tradition of after-work drinking. It's mainly office workers go drinking at bars with co-workers and sometimes with boss after hard work of all day. The bar activity

usually lasts till late in night and people usually get pretty drunk to relieve the pressure from day work. Thus, you cannot expect a tired worker who comes back home really late in night and even drunk to still struggle on giving birth.

Office Lady. Talking about office ladies, what comes to most people's mind first is their attractive appearance instead of their difficulty at work. Regardless of the discrimination Japanese female workers are facing, for those who want to reach higher position, they would lose their chance of promotion in most companies once if they get married. The reason behind is that most companies are worrying about putting too much responsibility on a married woman who can take test at any time once pregnant. Some companies even refuse to hire unmarried women since it's possible for them to get married and get pregnant shortly after. Such latent rule stops lots of women who want to have their own job from marrying or giving birth. Many of those are willing to or have to give promises to their companies for promotion opportunities.

Political Causes

Coerciveness. In Japan, marriage and reproduction are both private things that even if government have policies on them, they can not be mandatory. Instead, Japanese government only has the right to encourage people to marry or reproduce to solve the low birth rate problem rather than forcing.

Voters. Japan is currently facing a severe aging society issue, which results in a large portion of aged voters among all the voters. Since that most policies established would focus on welfare of aged people, and candidates working on welfare of aged people would be elected. So that more resource of government would be put on aged people instead of young people, while

low birth rate is a huge problem of young people, and lots of problems of young people are the causes of low birth rate problem.

Migration Policy. Migration is a good solution to the low birth rate problem. In first place, it can increase the overall population of Japan and provide more newborns. Also, it provides labor force that can help with the labor shortage and economic recovery. However, Japan is a country that doesn't welcome migration. The current law of Japan is super strict on migration and lots of differences are made in law between dealing with domestic people and migrants. So, while US is using migration to solve its population problem significantly, Japan's refusal on migration just worsen its low birth rate problem.

Conclusion

In order to solve or at least optimize the low birth rate problem, three ways of action can be taken based on its causes, social, economic, and political. For social issues, nothing can be done about it in short term. They are rooted so deep into the society that even in long term they are hard to be changed, and even being changed they can easily get into another undesired state. For economic problems, Japan government is currently focusing on it, which has already done a good job on recovering the economy a lot and will have more improvements. For political difficulties, they are as hard to be changed as social issues, and a reckless policy can make the problem even worse. No matter what kind of action is taken in order to solve the low birth rate problem, the complexity of the causes of such problem and the consequence of reckless moves should always be considered thoroughly.

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Appendix A

Japan Population by Age 1920-2010 with Projection to 2060

