The Changing Transition to Adulthood in Japan

Current Demographic Research and Policy Implications

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PREFACE

In Japan, young people have rarely been the subject of demographic research. As the trends toward low fertility and later and less marriage have become more pronounced, however, a research framework that encompasses life course events during the transition from adolescence to adulthood has grown more important.

“The transition to adulthood” is a concept that comprehensively covers the process of the shift from childhood to adulthood in the course of life. Landmark life course events during this process include the school-to-work transition, home-leaving and independence from parents, partnership behaviors (including sexual relations, cohabitation and first marriage), and first childbirth. Migration accompanying these behaviors has also attracted attention. The transition to adulthood covers the teenage years to the early 30s.

Research using this framework has been conducted widely in Western countries. At the International Union for the Scientific Study of Population (IUSPP), the Panel on Transitions to Adulthood in Developed Countries operated in two stages: between 2003 and 2006, and between 2006 and 2009. In Japan, however, demographic research on the life course of adolescents and young adults has been limited. The National Institute of Population and Social Security Research therefore decided to carry out a project on “demographic research on changes in the transition to adulthood as factors behind low fertility” over a three-year period from fiscal 2008.

In recent years, the transition to adulthood in Japan has changed greatly. Changes such as later and less marriage, low fertility and the destabilization of youth employment have attracted attention and have been recognized as serious problems facing Japan. In the mid-1970s, Japan’s total fertility rate (TFR) slipped below the replacement level of about 2.1, which is required for the maintenance of population size, and continued on a long downward trend. In 2005, the TFR hit a record low of 1.26. It increased slightly in 2006 and has remained above 1.3, which is still far below the level of 1.5, which is considered the borderline between moderately low fertility and very low fertility.

The phenomenon of later and less marriage is a combination of the rising average age at first marriage (later marriage) and the rising percentage of people remaining unmarried for life (less marriage). The average age at first marriage rose from 26.9 in 1970 to 30.2 in 2008 for men and from 24.2 to 28.5 for women (Vital Statistics). According to the Population Census, over the period from 1970 to 2005, the proportion never married at ages 25 - 29 increased from 46.5 to 71.4% for men and from
18.1 to 59.0% for women. Over the same period, the proportion never married at ages 30 - 34 increased from 11.6 to 47.1% for men and from 7.2 to 32.0% for women. If this trend continues, the percentage of people remaining unmarried for life will reach an unprecedented level. The lifetime employment system has been greatly shaken over the same period, reducing regular employment opportunities for young men and women. Non-regular employees and jobless people have increased among youths, causing new social problems.

The first report from this research project was published in March 2009, and we are now publishing the second report. We have made the second report in English to facilitate the exchange of information and research output with foreign researchers. The report includes seven papers by project members and other researchers. Several main points related to the project theme are summarized below.

Methods for demographic analyses of changes in the transition to adulthood include a macro approach using aggregate population data and a micro approach exploiting individual data. Using the former approach, Motomi Beppu analyzed changes in average duration of different marital statuses (never married, currently married, divorced, and widowed) by creating the marital status life tables for four years (1930, 1955, 1980 and 2005), with the 1930-2005 period divided into three 25-year portions. First-marriage data indicate that the average duration of the never-married status expanded substantially twice: between 1930 and 1955, and between 1980 and 2005.

However, existing government statistics have failed to cover employment, home-leaving, returning to the parental home, sexual relations, cohabitation, and other key events that occur during the transition to adulthood. National sample survey data are required to examine changes in the timing (age), sequencing and quantum of these events. Toru Suzuki primarily used the National Survey on Household Changes, conducted by the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, to analyze youths' family formation behaviors, including first marriage and home-leaving. Generally, a large proportion of younger cohorts have never left home. An analysis using marital status life tables that incorporate both home-leaving and marriage found a distinctive Japanese pattern in which men tend to leave home before marriage and that their home-leaving is relatively earlier according to an international comparison. Women tend to leave home upon marriage and their home-leaving is as late as seen in South European countries. Akihiko Kato used data from the National Family Research of Japan, conducted by the Japan Society of Family Sociology, to comprehensively analyze life course events, including employment, marriage, childbirth and couples' living with or close to their parents. These analyses demonstrated that the transition to
adulthood in Japan has become an increasingly protracted process.

Suzuki also found that first-marriage hazard is low for people who have never left home, indicating that a delay in home-leaving results in later first marriage, which contributes to lower fertility. Kato conducted a comprehensive and detailed analysis of the mechanisms underlying very low fertility in recent years in Japan. His analysis focuses on three different mechanisms: the trend toward later and less marriage, the rising divorce rate, and declining marital fertility.

Ryuizaburo Sato, Noriko Shiraishi, Motomi Beppu and Kimiko Tanaka examined the social, economic and cultural background of changes in the transition to adulthood from the historical viewpoint of youth culture formation in Japan after World War II. They concluded that the youth period transformed from a period of training and abstinence into a youth culture and consumption period, and that the growing tolerance of pre-marital sexual relations has contributed to the current trends toward later and less marriage and low fertility. Kato concluded that the patterns of universal marriage and 'above replacement fertility through the mid-1970s were supported by the community-based reproduction system and postwar economic growth.' He then demonstrated that growing difficulties in getting and remaining married among people in lower social and economic statuses following the end of rapid economic growth and the weakening of the community-based marriage system, combined with the diffusion of the ideology of individualism, have been behind the trend toward later and less marriage, the rising divorce rate, and declining marital fertility. Suzuki paid attention to the fact that first-marriage and fertility rates have recently rebounded for young women, partly due to an increase in shotgun marriages (marriages preceded by pregnancy), although the rebound has not been strong enough to affect the long-term downward trend of nuptiality and fertility. Suzuki interpreted the tendency as indicating that the unplanned and temporary disposition that gives little consideration to the future course of children has taken hold among some people as the protracted economic slump has affected the middle class sentiment that the majority of Japanese people began to share in the 1970s.

On the theme of changes in the transition to adulthood, comparative research on Japanese and Western situations is important. The first report covered an extensive review of English papers by Raymo and Vogelsang, while the second report includes Hideko Matsumo's literature review and comparative analysis of European countries using the European Social Survey (ESS) data. Noting that in settings where men, who had been the main household earners, have declining economic resources, the link between women's economic uncertainty and fertility has become increasingly important.
Matsuo argued that young women's economic security through childbirth and child-rearing cost reductions as well as their working are important. This viewpoint may be particularly relevant for understanding related changes in Japan.

Research on policies regarding the transition to adulthood shows how to incorporate youth policy into the social and public policy framework in Japan, where very low fertility is an important policy focus. Michiko Miyamoto, who began paying attention to the youth problem earlier than others in Japan, divided Japan's postwar development into four periods that reflect important changes in the transition to adulthood. The first is the postwar reconstruction period (from the end of the war to 1954), when the traditional model was maintained for the transition to adulthood. The second is the period of high economic growth (from 1955 to 1973), when the modern model (called the “postwar youth model”) characterized the transition to adulthood. The third is the transitional period (from 1974 to 1989), when the modern model of the transition to adulthood matured. The fourth is the structural adjustment period (from the 1990s), when the model for the transition to adulthood collapsed. Miyamoto cited the establishment of a comprehensive youth policy, as well as the expansion of youth employment measures as key challenges in the current period.

Delay in the experience of key life course transitions and their causes and consequences have attracted a great deal of attention in research on the transition to adulthood. However, the fact that some young people experience key life course events at lower ages should not be overlooked. The paper by James Raymo, Miho Iwasawa, and So-jung Lim provides a comparative analysis of early marriage (first marriage prior to age 22) and subsequent economic well-being using data from the Japanese National Fertility Survey and the U.S. National Survey of Family Growth. They suggest that when early marriage and other behaviors that used to be normative components of the transition to adulthood become increasingly uncommon and, presumably more non-normative, they may be increasingly associated with less favorable subsequent outcomes such as economic well-being. This provides a new viewpoint for demographic research on the transition to adulthood.

As explained above, this report discusses a wide range of topics, from demographic analyses of changes in the transition to adulthood in Japan to the social and economic significance of such changes as well as policy issues. Further research achievements will be left for the third report, which will be published when this project ends in March 2011.

In carrying out this project, we received cooperation from a great number of people inside and outside our institute. In particular, we would like to thank Prof. Kazuo Yamaguchi at the University of Chicago, Prof. Kiyoshi Hamano at Kansai University, Mr. Fumihiko Nishi of the Statistical Research and Training Institute at the
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VI.

Changes in the Process of Transition to Adulthood and New Trends in Youth Policies in Japan

Michiko Miyamoto
Changes in the process of transition to adulthood and new trends in youth policies in Japan

Michiko Miyamoto

1. Transition to adulthood: background to the changes and their social implications

Traditionally, studies of transition to adulthood belonged in the domain of developmental psychology, but in recent years, the subject has become a focal point in a much wider context. In the 1990s in Japan, the hitherto accepted pattern of transition began to lose its relevance as a result of the profound changes in social and financial structures that had taken place in the previous decade. The country found itself in a state in which its young people were failing to make a successful transition to adulthood on an unprecedented scale and by the early 2000s, the difficulties these young people were facing had been acknowledged as issues that had wide social implications well beyond personal and psychological problems for the individuals concerned. This coincided with a time when Japan was experiencing three major social problems: a fall in the birth rate, a reduced labour market for young people, and an alarming increase in the number of young people experiencing acute social withdrawal and who were incapable of participating in any social activities including family, school or work (hikikomori). In this context, the notion of transition to adulthood became a focal point for both specialists and the general public: the failure of the transition to adulthood was seen as a phenomenon that epitomised the country's social problems which had been building up for over a decade. Surveys on young people were carried out, studies were published, the media reported endlessly on the related incidents and commentaries and both national and local governments began setting up and implementing new youth programmes.

These new youth policies were developed in three distinct areas, each based on the three problems described above. Those were the initiatives to: make labour policies for young people and help them make a smooth transition from education to employment, brake the fall in the birth rate and provide practical help for young people in order to enable them to achieve social independence. A strategic plan for providing young people with aid to achieve financial independence was signed by four cabinet ministers and published in 2003. Also in 2003, new legislation was introduced to make it a requirement for the workplace and other relevant organisations to provide support for young families. The aim of this legislation was not only to support families but to
encourage young people to have a positive attitude towards their future by ensuring them that support would be available when they needed it. This marked the beginning of a new development in the government’s approach, which was followed by many other programmes including the introduction of career education in schools and support schemes that focused on disadvantaged young people.

These policies were the government’s response to the social and financial changes to which young people were particularly vulnerable: with construction and heavy industries all but disappeared, secure employment was hard to come by for many school leavers and changing family structures were forcing young people to become homeless. One of the most serious implications of this situation is that young people were missing the opportunity for socialisation which is vital for the transition to adulthood. The country’s prolonged financial slump added poverty to the already serious situation for these young people.

Until the early 2000s, the three areas described above had been considered independent from each other but since then, the inter-related nature of the issues has been recognised and work to establish an integrated system has been actively promoted. This new approach aims to support young people in all aspects of their personal and social lives and to help them to become valuable members of society.

This paper mainly focuses on the 1990s onwards and reviews how the process of transition to adulthood has been influenced by changes in social structure and how the government has responded to the results of these changes.

2. The transition to adulthood in Japan: four phases from the post-war era to the present day

In post-war Japan, while the country was establishing itself as a modern industrial nation, a pattern had emerged as the norm for young people to follow in the process of reaching adulthood: this was based on the direct transition from school to work. This model was characterised by the close relationship between schools and industry and was based on a number of conditions: (1) schools were expected to and usually succeeded in finding jobs for all their pupils; (2) recruitment was an annual event that ensured all young people leaving education would find full-time employment; (3) the tradition of life-long employment meant few people change their jobs; (4) payment rose according to the number of years an individual stayed at the company, which meant that there was
no incentive to leave or change jobs; (5) training was an exclusively in-house activity which discouraged people from seeking new employment; (6) there was a continuous demand in industry for a new workforce.

In this context, for young people in Japan, their first employment was their first step into a life that was well mapped out and secure for the rest of their lives. Most importantly, irrespective of the different functions between school and workplace, they continued to belong to an established social structure. Secure employment also ensured that young people were able to achieve the socially approved status of adulthood by following the traditional pattern: become employed; get married and have a family. The high marriage rates during the era of industrial growth are one piece of evidence which demonstrates that society fulfilled all the conditions described above. In this era, family was just as stable as employment. The cost of education in Japan was relatively high compared with other industrialised nations, yet parents were willing to accept the financial responsibility, since it was taken for granted that investing in education would guarantee the future of their children. Life-long employment and its payment system ensured that parents would be able to afford the cost when it was due. In post-war Japan, the combination of secure employment and stable family life created a social framework in which young people were able to achieve the transition to adulthood as part of the normal pattern of their lives.

The process of transition to adulthood is inextricably linked with the education system, labour market and society’s assumptions about marriage and family. On this basis, the pattern of transition to adulthood in post-war Japan up to the present day can be divided into four distinct phases which correspond with the changes that have taken place in society (Miyamoto 2004): the first phase was the time of rebuilding the nation after the war (up to 1954) when the traditional transition pattern was maintained; the second phase (1955-1973) was when the country entered into the era of fast economic growth and the new pattern of transition began to emerge; in the third phase (1974-1989), the nation’s economy had been well established and the new transition pattern became a new social norm; and the fourth phase (1990 and after) when society underwent restructuring and the transition process that had been established in the previous phase became dysfunctional.

The most profound change was that which occurred in the fourth phase (1990 onward). By this time, the nation’s economy was no longer strong enough for industry to
maintain annual recruitment or life-long employment. This effectively destroyed the very foundation on which the process of transition to adulthood had been built.

3. Issues in youth employment and the development of related policies

3.1. Changing employment strategies and the creation of new laws
At the beginning of the 1990s, Japan's 'economic bubble' burst and the country plunged into a long recession. Whilst this naturally brought about high unemployment, it was in fact not as entirely natural a consequence of the recession in the face globalisation and the IT revolution as it was assumed. Some felt that the situation was exacerbated due to manipulation by the country's financial and management sectors. In 1995, Nippon Keidanren (Japan Business Federation) published a controversial report entitled New Business Management in the New Era. In this report, Keidanren argued that corporations should only guarantee permanent positions or provide benefits and pension schemes to senior managers and professionals who were, in their own words, 'long-term, cost-effective human assets' and jobs that were sufficiently specific should be outsourced. Non-professional and non-skilled workers should be employed on a temporary basis and corporate benefits for this group should be minimal.

Spurred on by this report, companies went ahead with extensive job cuts in the name of cost effectiveness and filled the positions with temporary workers. In response to this state of affairs, employment laws were revised and in 1995, the Agency Workers Act came into force. At first, the Act classified agency workers as temporary labourers and restricted the types of work they could be employed to do. There were many more restrictions, for example, employers were not allowed to use agency workers for jobs normally carried out by their permanent employees. These restrictions were gradually removed and in 2004, discrimination against agency workers in terms of job types finally came to an end.

Whilst the opportunities available to agency workers have been improving, it has been pointed out by OECD that in Japan, the gap is still large between permanent employees and other workers when it comes to equal treatment in the workplace (OECD Outlook 2005). Today, one third of all workers in Japan are of non-regular employment status and the younger they are, the higher the rate.

3.2 Changing trends in youth employment
It was not until towards the end of the 1990s that Japan became aware of the seriousness
of the problem of unemployment amongst young people and the lack of opportunities in terms of permanent jobs for them. Even then, it was generally perceived that the sharp increase in the number of freeters’ (part-time workers of young people not in regular employment) was caused by young people’s attitude towards work and not linked to the changes in the labour market described in the previous section. The link was only recognised in the middle of the 2000s when, with the fall in national income and the unprecedented scale of unemployment, the effect of the problems became too visible for society to ignore.

The government made youth support one of its priorities in its 10-year strategic employment plan published in 1999. In 2000, a white paper was published in which the government proposed to work towards combining the skills of older people and the potential of young people in order to maximise their abilities and consequently benefit society. This was the first publication by the government in which the problems specific to freeters were acknowledged as a major issue. The paper estimated that there were 1.51 million freeters in the country. The figure was a decisive wake-up call to the nation. The white paper argued that there were two main reasons why young people left or changed jobs as frequently as they were doing: the changes in young people’s attitudes towards life and work and the financial capacity and willingness of parents to support their grown-up children. The white paper warned that if these young people continued as they were, it would not only be a serious disadvantage to their own future but would also be a potential cause for extensive damage to society. The paper pointed out two factors as the main root causes of youth unemployment: industry’s reluctance to employ a permanent workforce and the fact that the traditional school-to-workplace recruitment method had become all but dysfunctional.

Despite the paper’s reference to the unfavourable reality of the labour market for young people, the general opinion at the time was still largely putting the blame on young people themselves; it was their lifestyle and attitudes that were causing the problems.

3.3 The government’s response to youth unemployment
One of the first significant measures the government took in response to the growing youth unemployment problem was the strategic plan signed by four cabinet ministers for supporting young people in achieving financial and personal independence. This was published in 2003. In 2004, the total budget for youth-related projects went up to 7.27 million yen from 2.74 million in the previous year. With this increase, the government
took a more integrated, inter-departmental approach and established three targets. Firstly, various programmes whereby young people would be aided to increase their employability as well as given necessary career guidance when required. This would be done by introducing an apprenticeship scheme, work experience and a dual system. More career consultants specialising in careers for young people would also be trained. Secondly, the youth labour market would be thoroughly reviewed to identify trends in demands. Thirdly, schemes would be developed to encourage young people to start their own business. These initiatives resulted in the opening of one-stop employment support service centres (known as job cafes) throughout the country in the following year. These centres provide information on available apprenticeships, presentations and open days run by local companies. The centres also provide career advice and recommendations.

It can be seen as almost ironic in that, on the one hand, the government has encouraged industry to use non-permanent workers by removing all restrictions on job types for which agency workers can be employed, but on the other hand, it is encouraging young people to find permanent employment.

After freeters, the government’s next target was the young people who were not in education or in employment (NEET). At the beginning of the 2000s, between 620,000 and 640,000 young people aged between 15 and 34 were thought to be in this state (Figure 1). The figure remained the same but little was understood about the reality of this group of young people. In 2005, 30 purpose-built youth camps were set up where young people who had been in the NEET state for more than a year could join and stay for three months. They would receive training in both work and social skills which would prepare them to take the step towards employment. In 2006, 20 regional youth support centres were opened, which increased to 92 by 2009. The centres provide advice and information, run courses and organise work experience for the NEET.

In 2006, the then Prime Minister Shinzo Abe set up a committee that would oversee the creation of a society with more opportunities for everyone and in 2007, three targets were set up: to reduce unemployment and poverty caused by the recession, to promote equal opportunities and to achieve an inclusive society. The first clause included freeters, NEET and other non-regular workers as one of the target groups. The objectives proposed were: to provide wide-ranging advice at Hello Work and job cafes, to run training courses targeting 250,000 freeters with the aim of encouraging them to find
permanent employment, to ensure the legalisation of equal treatment for non-regular workers, to open more youth camps and support stations and to run a pilot scheme on outreach support. Establishing a local support system for disadvantaged young people was also included.

Source: Labour force survey by the Office of Statistics, the Cabinet Office

Note: 'Jobless young people' refers to young people aged between 15 and 34 who are not in employment and neither occupied with housework nor attending any educational institutions.

3.4 The characteristics of youth unemployment

Whilst these support schemes saw some effects, they were not sufficient in terms of making a significant difference to the ever-increasing number of non-regular workers amongst young people. The general employment situation improved slightly in the late 2000s but permanent employment available for young people and women fell even further. This was even worse in the case of young people with a low educational background. According to Employment Outlook published by OECD (2007, 2008) this can be explained by three factors. Firstly, in the traditional life-long employment system, employability was not a question, since a new workforce was not recruited according to their skills and all training was provided in the workplace. Now that this system is no longer the norm, those with less education or training are at a serious disadvantage. Secondly, there is a mismatch between what education is providing and what industry demands. Thirdly, employers are reluctant to recruit permanent workers because the legal requirements to protect them are much more extensive. Amongst the OECD
member countries, Japan has one of the fastest falling labour distribution rates: the ratio of earnings to national income was 75% in 1980 but fell to 61% in 2005. This fall reflects the trends in Japanese industry: faced with increasing competition from countries where cheap labour was available, companies invested in technology rather than human assets. Also, the makeup of the country's industry had shifted from the labour-intensive sector to the capital-intensive sector. It is important to acknowledge the fact that the main cause of the youth employment problems is linked to the changing structure of the global economy and not simply the country's economic downturn. The problems are made worse by many laws and workplace customs that are no longer relevant to the current situation. Taking this into consideration, one of the most urgent tasks that the government needs to do is to carry out a thorough review of the legal aspects of employment and social security that concern youth employment.

The labour market in Japan seemed to have recovered in the mid-2000s but it reverted to the previous state at the end of 2008, as it was hit by the global financial crisis. The job market for new graduates all but disappeared and the number of people who lost their jobs increased sharply. To those who had never had an opportunity to gain the status of permanent employment, there was little hope of finding it now.

In July 2009, the government set up an inter-departmental project to address the problems of youth employment. The project was based on the understanding that the root of the problems lay in the structure of society itself and identified two factors that existed at the core of all youth employment related issues. Firstly, the tradition of annual recruitment meant that for those who missed that one opportunity, the way to permanent employment was practically closed. Secondly, those who missed the first opportunity for full-time employment also missed the opportunity for vocational training, since nearly all training was organised internally. No job, no training. No training, no job. This was the Catch 22 into which those who missed their first chance were more than likely to fall.

This project proposed that, in order to tackle the problem from its root, the Ministries of Employment, Education and Trade must work together so that available government funding would go to where it would be most effective in helping young people to find permanent jobs. The project would be implemented at local level. The support system that the project was to create should prevent the country from repeating the situation that created freeters and NEET. There were five programmes for implementing the
policy: (1) to promote an environment in which those who had missed their first chance could still have job opportunities. This included creating more vocational training courses, providing personal and financial support, encouraging industry to recruit not just new graduates, making more use of the job card system; (2) to introduce and develop career education and vocational training in schools; (3) to develop a system through which personal advisers are available for those who need continuous and specific help; (4) to make long term, one-to-one counselling, available to the NEET and other disadvantaged young people; (5) to develop a regional network for supporting children and young people.

Whilst the government has made a significant effort to improve the employability of young people, little has been done to make any significant changes to the labour market. Questions such as how to support young people financially while they are in training or looking for work have not been addressed. Other issues that have not been given enough consideration are: how to make vocational qualifications more sector-based and how to cultivate an appropriate labour market in order to increase employment mobility in young people so that they will have greater job opportunities. All these issues are yet to be addressed by the government.

4. Marriage and family

4.1 Marriage and family at a time of social uncertainty

The continuing uncertainty surrounding employment has had a significant influence on young people, not just in terms of the pattern of transition from education to employment but also in terms of the way in which they marry and have a family, since the necessary financial security is no longer taken for granted. The average age of young people marrying for the first time is much higher now than it used to be and the number of people who remain unmarried has increased considerably. Figure 2 shows the number of people who married in the last five years according to employment status (as a percentage). In the case of men, the figure is lower in those who are in non-regular employment or jobless than that of those in permanent employment. However, this is not the case for women. A detailed analysis shows the correlation between levels of earnings and marriage rates in the case of men, irrespective of age groups - the higher the level of earnings, the higher the marriage rate (Kosugi 2005). In the late 20s group, the rate exceeds 50% when their annual earnings reach 5 million yen and in the early 30s group, this occurs when their earnings reach 3 million yen (figures 3-1, 3-2). It also shows that in all age groups, the rate is significantly lower in those whose annual
earnings are less than 3 million yen, which indicates that men are unlikely to or unable to afford to marry until their earnings reach this level. The implication of this is that for men, their employment status is clearly one of the major causes of them remaining unmarried, or marrying later in life. Figures 4 show the correlation between employment status and marriage rates. In the case of men, the marriage rate rises almost in correspondence with their age in those who are self-employed or in permanent employment. In contrast, it hardly rises in the case of men who are in non-regular employment, unemployed (jobseekers) or jobless. Interestingly enough though, in the case of women, the pattern is reversed (Kosugi ibid.).

Figure 2: Marry rate in the last 5 years by employment status


Note 1: The survey targets were those who were unmarried at the time of the first survey and who responded until the 5th survey.

Note 2: The age relates to the age after marriage.

Note 3: The employment status relates to the status prior to marriage.

Note 4: 'Married' includes those who became divorced after the 5 years of the survey period.

Note 5: As for those who married twice or more, the latest is counted.
Source: Kosugi, Reiko (2005) Youth employment support and its future direction in Employment, unemployment and other employment status in young people No. 35 Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training (91-)
Figure 4 Percentage of Married Men by Employment Status and by Age Group (not including full-time students)

Source: Kosugi, Reiko (2005) Youth employment support and its future direction in Employment, unemployment and other employment status in young people No. 35 Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training (91-)

Whilst the lack of financial stability is clearly a decisive factor when it comes to men marrying at a later age, there is an additional factor to their employment status which has a bearing on the marriage pattern in men: those who do not belong to a permanent workplace are deprived of opportunities to meet their prospective spouses. The workplace used to provide a major opportunity for young people to find their prospective spouses. In the traditional corporate culture, senior members of the company customarily acted as matchmakers for their junior staff (Iwasawa and Mita 2005). The workplace also provided young people with opportunities to socialise, thereby giving them more chance to meet their prospective spouses. According to Iwasawa and Mita (ibid), one of the major causes of the falling marriage rate is the fact that these traditional roles that the workplace had have almost disappeared, yet no alternative has emerged: 50% of the factors affected the fall in the marriage rate is the former (the lack of appropriate matchmakers) and that of 40% is the latter (socialisation).

For those who are not in regular employment and thus financially insecure, the lack of opportunity to meet their prospective spouses is an additional barrier to embarking on married life. Even for those who are in permanent employment, the changing culture in
the workplace has had a significant influence on their pattern of marriage. The changes in the labour market are not simply an issue of employment. Instead, it must be understood as an issue that is having profound effects on all aspects of young people's lives.

4.2 Changes in family structure and the effects on young people
The way in which young people marry and have a family in Japan differs considerably from that in Western culture. In the West today, most young people spend a certain period of time living an independent life after leaving home and before getting married and having children. In this period, they experience at least one example of what might be called a transitional household: single household, shared household with friends or cohabitation. Whilst the majority of young people move on to the next step and form a permanent household with a partner; it is not uncommon for them to remain unmarried. This diversity indicates that the process of starting life together as a couple and having children is perceived as a personal choice rather than a social norm (Miyamoto 2004). In contrast, when Japanese young people form a relationship, instead of establishing themselves as a couple by setting up a household and continuing to work if necessary, they tend to remain separate, each in their parental home. This recently developed tendency in Japanese young people to remain at home instead of committing themselves to an independent and married life can be seen as evidence of how the profound changes in the employment system has affected almost all basic social assumptions and practices: marriage is no longer an absolute social norm. Combined with financial insecurity, it is not difficult to understand why young people avoid commitment such as marriage.

This in turn has an extensive influence on the idea of the modern family. Traditionally, young people would complete their education, enter employment, become financially independent and leave home, find a prospective spouse, marry and have children. From the point of view of the parents, they would see through the children's education, assist with the necessary socialisation, see them leave home and eventually retire from work to spend their old age on their savings and pensions. Within this framework, parents aimed to give their children as much education as they could afford while they were working so that their children would have more chance to achieve higher social status. This was the model of family life that was the base of all aspects of society. The social and financial changes discussed in the previous sections have destabilised this very base, causing not only young people but also their parents to face numerous uncertainties in
their lives. Increasing numbers of young people are making the choice to remain at their parental home for various reasons, which is causing marriage rates to fall and also causing considerable pressure for their parents who are often already retired and yet having to support their grown-up children indefinitely (Miyamoto 2008).

Whilst on average, the earnings of married men are higher than the earnings of those who are unmarried, they are relatively lower than that of the previous generation. This is another factor that has affected the family structure. In most households, the earnings of the husbands have not increased and their jobs are often insecure. This has led to the situation in which wives are either having to go back to work or having to find a job after they have had children and often they have to do this sooner than they wish. Moreover, jobs that are available for women in this situation are almost all non-permanent and therefore maternity or childcare benefits are not available. The implication of this is that the anxiety over the loss of income caused by a career break is making young women reluctant to have children.

Assuming that the current state of employment is irreversible, the traditional idea of family in which a husband earned a living and the wife stayed at home to look after the children is also irreversible. For young people to have a stable base of personal life, we need to review the system of education and training, housing and other social benefits and to develop an effective system to provide information, advice and childcare support (Nagase and Murao 2006).

5. Measures against a fall in the birth rate as an integrated part of youth policy.
5.1. The first stage: support for working women
The total fertility rate in Japan began to fall in the 1980s and in 1989 it fell to 1.57 (figure 5). The figure had sufficient impact to raise society's awareness of the seriousness of the situation. This extremely low rate is still continuing. In 1994, the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare published a plan whereby integrated programmes would be developed for supporting families and childcare. In 1994, an agreement was signed by the four governmental departments that were responsible for the implementation of the plan: the departments for education, welfare, labour and housing. Clearly defined objectives for the support programmes were set out. In the same year, three cabinet ministers who were responsible for finance, welfare and internal affairs jointly published a framework for implementing a childcare support system and specified the priority targets. This was to be part of a five-year plan. In July
1998, the Prime Minister formed a committee comprised of academics and specialists in family related matters. The committee was divided into two groups: one to address issues on how to improve working conditions so that they would be more suitable for young families and the other was to address how to support young parents and enable them to build a stable family. In December, the committee published a set of proposals for how to build a society in which everyone can have a stable family and where children can grow up in a secure and happy environment. Following these proposals, the government held a cabinet meeting in May the following year in order to advance matters and in December, published a framework for implementing various family support programmes. This was reinforced by a plan agreed by six Ministers\textsuperscript{xii}, \textsuperscript{xiii} in which priority targets and practical procedures were set out.

5.2. Development: restructuring the workplace culture

By the end of the 1999 the measures against a fall in the birth rate implemented so far were becoming less effective than they were intended to be. As the 2000s began, it was felt that the traditional workplace culture needed to be restructured if the measures were to be practicable and effective in the changing society. In July 2001, the Cabinet reached an agreement on a strategy for supporting working parents or parents who wished to work. It included plans with specified dates and numbers to ensure places in nursery or playschool for every child (without them having to wait) and to improve afterschool facilities. Related projects continued to be published and in 2003, two bills were passed: building a better world for the future generation and creating a society that responds to the needs of the family.\textsuperscript{xiv} The former has four principles: to restructure workplace culture (this includes the way both women and men are expected to work), to improve locally-based childcare, to develop long-term social security from which children will benefit in the future and to encourage children to participate in social activities and to help them learn to be independent. Based on the recognition that for the measures against a fall in the birth rate to be effective society as a whole must be accountable, these policies extended their target well beyond immediate support for working mothers. They also expected more positive involvement from local authorities and industry.

Measures against a fall in the birth rate that followed were characterised by their close links with the government’s strategies for employment: the notion of work-life balance has come to the forefront of the government’s social policy. In 2007, the Work-Life Balance Charter was published, which was followed by a set of directives on how to
promote a better balance between work and life. The Charter made it clear that the nation must unite to work towards creating the best work-life balance not only for parents but more importantly for the future of children. It set detailed aims and objectives and defined a clear structure of responsibility. The overall aim of the Charter was to review and systematically restructure the contracts of employment that were commonly provided by companies and to promote a more flexible working culture to suit all members of society. The three main objectives were: to reduce working hours, to eradicate insecure employment (by promoting non-regular workers to permanent employment) and to offer equal payment to non-regular workers.

Despite these government initiatives, the employment situation worsened further in the 2000s and the programmes for achieving a more flexible working environment became impracticable. The condition was worse for young people, especially for young women and poverty was spreading amongst parents with young children. In this context, the concept of the measures against a fall in the birth rate must be put into much wider perspective and the policies must include effective and practical social security systems to ensure that everyone will be able to achieve stable life.

6. Helping young people to achieve independence
6.1. Young people's independence as a social issue
In the early 2000s, with the background of worsening employment situations and continuing a fall in the birth rate, the problems that were affecting young people began to be seen as a social issue with far-reaching implications. The government responded by publishing and implementing a number of programmes. This section will review the government's activities in the last 10 years.

In July 2003, the government set up the Youth Support Taskforce to enable the relevant government departments and agencies to work closely together to ensure effective planning and implementation of youth-related policies. The taskforce differed from previous inter-departmental projects in that it was led by the Prime Minister and consisted of the cabinet ministers instead of the heads of the relevant offices in each department, as in the past, whose responsibility was not broad enough for the requirement of the projects. The taskforce identified insecure employment and prolonged dependency on their parents, which in turn was preventing young people from achieving not only financial but also personal independence, as one of the major sources of the problems. In December, the taskforce published a guideline for the
policies for youth support which set out its aims and objectives: it proposed to review the existing policies and to promote new initiatives that would include education and training programmes, career and personal guidance and social insurance schemes.

Prior to this, in April 2003, a series of meetings of academics and specialists in the field were held by the government in order to enable them to discuss the problems. The meetings concluded that since each department had not produced the expected result when working independently, an integrated, inter-departmental working system needed to be established amongst the following departments: education, welfare, employment and social environment. The report based on the conclusions of the meeting was published in April 2003 and defined the term youth/young people as those people approximately between the ages of 18 and 30 who were expected to achieve financial independence, independence from their parents and participation in social activities during this period. Marriage and family were not included in the reportxvi.

In December 2008, another guideline was published in which the policies set up previously were further developed. One of the major developments was the inclusion of people over 30 in the target group of the support programmes. These are the group of people who missed the opportunity to enter permanent employment when they completed their education, as it coincided with the beginning of the country's financial crisis when companies radically changed their recruitment strategy. A large number of people in this group have never been able to find secure jobs. Another development to be noted was the proposal to develop a partnership between the public and the private sectors. The proposal was based on the fact that, against the backdrop of the series of serious crimes committed at the time by young people, it is often found that these young people were deeply affected by their parents' insecure employment and the financial hardship of their parents. The guideline emphasised the importance of the involvement of all sectors in society. The objectives included placing personal advisers who were specialised in the needs of the freeters in all Hello Work centres and encouraging companies to introduce a provisional employment period for young people.

6.2. Support for disadvantaged young people
The two plans reviewed in the previous section were the government's response to the youth employment problems and the hardship caused by the lack of state-provided family and childcare support. In the guideline published in 2008, the related issues were brought together and a plan for an integrated approach was presented. Amongst the
initiatives proposed was an integrated programme for helping young people with social and personal disadvantages. This programme was the result of a consultation meeting held by the Cabinet Office in 2005. The conclusive speech given by the chairman (the author of the present paper), quoted in its entirety below, was regarded as the watershed in policymaking in terms of helping disadvantaged young people, who up until then had not been given any help specific to their needs in order to achieve independence.

Youth employment problems occurred in Japan considerably later than in the Western nations and it was even later when this particular matter was understood as a critical issue inherent in the process of young people's transition to adulthood. As society's anxiety about young people grew, the government responded by issuing a number of policies, yet these were mostly dealing exclusively with employment issues. The current youth problems are often seen as a temporary state caused by the country's recent recession and as such, will be resolved when the economy recovers. There is also a strong belief in society that the problems are the result of young people's lack of aspiration; therefore, they have only themselves to blame for the situation they are in. I would like to point out that these are the views of people who are only seeing the tip of the iceberg. The reality of life for young people in Japan today is extremely complex. I would like to emphasise here that if we are to help young people to fulfil their potential, we must understand the reality by looking at every aspect of their lives. I would also like to draw attention to the fact that most social norms established in the days when the country's finances were stable are no longer dependable; in particular, the norms that guided young people as they entered adulthood have all but disappeared. Moreover, this is irreversible. Any youth policy that ignores this vital reality will go no further than an exhibition case in a museum.

In the climate in which young people in general are facing difficulties in all directions, for disadvantaged young people there is little to choose from except being left behind. In Japan, we have never given a serious thought about the gap between the rich and the poor where young people are concerned. But it is time we did. The gap is visible everywhere if we look and it is getting wider. We may blame young people for their lack of aspirations, but it is society that is depriving them of the chance to have aspirations. For young people who are already disadvantaged, the situation is near enough impossible. When making decisions on youth policies, we must be absolutely clear that what appear to be social problems and young people's personal problems are two sides of the same coin.
Whilst a number of programmes have been run by both the public and private sectors in recent years, these are mostly unrelated initiatives organised on their own terms. The needs of young people who are on the threshold of adulthood are extremely complex and there are often additional factors in their family lives that need to be taken into consideration. Independently organised programmes are not capable of responding to these multi-layered needs and the support they provide is usually short-term in nature. If the problems are multi-layered, the response must also be multi-layered. Those of us who are within our own specialised fields must now climb out of the boundaries and join forces to build a system that is capable of supporting young people in all aspects of their lives: the system that will help them to become valued members of our society.\textsuperscript{xviii}

The meeting proposed a nationwide network of support systems which are locally based and provide personal, holistic and long-term support to young people. The pivot of the system was to be the presence of personal advisors, similar to the service provided by Connexions in England. The principle of the proposal was welcomed as the clear direction by those who were working with young people and it culminated in the introduction of the Children and Youth Support Bill in June 2009. The bill will come into force in the spring of 2010 and preparation has begun in the local authorities throughout the country.

6.3: Supporting young people in a wider context

Young people's failure in achieving independence was not considered to be a social concern in Japan until the fact was known that a large number of these young people were neither in education nor in employment. They were identified as NEET: those between the ages of 15 and 34, not regularly attending school or a training institution, jobless but neither intending to work nor seeking jobs, and single.\textsuperscript{xvii} Between 2002 and 2008, there were 640,000 NEET whereas the number was 440,000 in 2000. Since the population in this age band is decreasing, the rate of this group has increased from 1.8% to 2%. In the under-24s segment, the number is decreasing but it increases after 25 and the rate becomes higher as the age goes up.

As the newly organised youth support services began their work throughout the country and a number of surveys were carried out, it became apparent that a large proportion of this group has been bullied at school, stopped going to school or are suffering from mental health problems and lack of social skills. Complex personal history and domestic
background are also not uncommon. All these are adding difficulty to an already unfavourable employment situation. In order to ensure that these young people will become financially independent and make a successful transition to adulthood, it is vital that the problems be identified and the support begins while they are still at school. The support needs to continue through the process of their progress until they have established independence. The current system is still far from adequate, especially in the field of social security which should be the major financial means for these young people. This aspect needs to be given utmost priority if we are to prevent the situation from becoming even worse.

The current state of the labour market also needs to be taken into consideration. Young people, especially those with a complex background cannot become independent unless they have a job that provides them with a secure income. The reality is, however, jobs available for these young people are far from secure. The jobs are usually low paid, low-skilled, involve long working hours, poor working conditions and the workload is generally heavy. In other words, even if these young people manage to find employment, it is not the kind that leads them to financial independence. They are simply turning from jobless poor to working poor. Competition in the labour market is high and job requirements are often too high for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Consequently, even if they find employment, most are unable to remain employed and tend to fall into the pattern of going from unemployed to insecure jobs and back to unemployment. Moreover, the older they are, the harder it becomes to find employment. The increasing numbers of NEET who are over 30 can be seen as a warning sign to the future of younger NEET.

This is evidence that in Japan, there is still no integrated, holistic system to support young people when it comes to making a successful transition to adulthood. The root of the problems lies in the fact that the question of who is accountable for the lives of young people has never been clearly answered. As it is, the responsibility still largely falls on parents and they often need support themselves.

7. **Youth support: from an employment policy to a total support approach**
Up until recently in Japan, when youth employment problems worsened, the notion of transition to adulthood had been given little attention by academics or policymakers. The notion came into focus when the country became aware of the existence of a large number of young people who did not attend any education institutions or had no
commitment to work and the traditional social and political systems were largely inadequate, if not completely irrelevant for dealing with this particular problem. Whilst the awareness has brought the notion of transition to adulthood to the forefront of social and political consciousness as being a distinct area that needs specific attention, the political responses which can make a real difference have not yet caught up with the consciousness.

In summary, I have listed the areas that need further attention, in order to establish a system in which young people are supported in all aspects of their lives and which ensures their successful transition to adulthood.

- The strategy to employ non-permanent workers in the name of cost-effectiveness was adopted by industry within a very short space of time, which created, also in a very short space of time, a large number of people who were forced to work for payment that was hardly sufficient to live on and who were not provided with any benefits or legal protection. It is not just equal treatment in the workplace but also provisions for social security and other state benefits for people in non-permanent employment that must be urgently established.

- In the current state of the country's labour market, permanent employment and stable earnings can no longer be guaranteed. The government needs to establish a wide range of social security systems by which people's earnings can be supplemented when and where necessary. This should include child benefits, education funding, housing benefits, unemployment benefits and funding for skills training. The important point to note is that these systems can function as a crucial incentive for young people to make an effort to participate in social activities, of which employment is one of the most important.

- When dealing with young people, it is important to take their background into consideration, since it is evident that disadvantages in their lives are usually the disadvantages in labour market. On this basis, rather than trying to solve the problems when they occur, it is more effective to prevent them from happening by extending the support system to families with young children. Families in poverty or at risk must be identified and be supported by means of supplementing the cost of education and providing children with academic aid. A review of high school and university fees is especially urgent.

- In order to support young people with added difficulties, the support programmes need to be carefully planned to cater for the different needs at each step until they
achieve independence, including early identification of problems and continuous support. Unfortunately, the current systems are far from satisfactory. Those at risk usually lack social skills and if not helped, sooner or later they are most likely to withdraw from all social contact and the longer they remain in this state, the harder it becomes to return to normal life. Others may run away from home and become homeless. The exact number of young people in a state such as this has not yet been established but several hundred thousand may not be an overestimation.

- Children who stop going to school or drop out from high school need to be given access to a place where they can continue studying or can receive vocational training in order to ensure that they will become employable. A way in which they can return to education must also be provided and schools and other related agencies in local communities must work closely together in order to achieve this.

- All children and young people who drop out must be given a chance to resume life in the community. This involves vocational education and training that is accessible to all, as well as adequate social benefits while they are in training. At the same time, companies must review their annual recruitment strategy targeted exclusively to new graduates and school leavers. They must be encouraged to provide job opportunities throughout the year and to all young people.

- Taking the unstable employment situation into account, a ‘safety net’ system in the form of various social security policies must be put in place in order to ensure that leaving or changing jobs will not become negative factors in career development.

- Currently, most high schools provide general education and the entrance examinations are a serious barrier for children who are not academically orientated. If there were more high schools which taught vocational qualifications, these children would not only be less likely to drop out from education but would be likely to be more employable when they leave education.

- The time it takes for young people to complete the process of transition to adulthood is much longer today than it used to be. Taking this into account, in order to provide young people with enough security in life during this period, the social structure as a whole must be extensively reviewed and restructured. We must aim to build a society in which social benefits will be available to a much wider category of people than they are in the current system. In this state of social uncertainty, it is important to ensure that those who are in the process of building their future are able to commit themselves to work and family life, aided by easily accessible state support that includes housing, welfare, access to information, guidance, and family and childcare support.
The traditional social security system in Japan was built upon two social norms: employment was life-long and companies looked after their workers in all aspects of their lives and continuous state projects (mostly construction works) provided stable business to small and medium sized businesses as well as the constant demand for a workforce. State pensions were restricted to the elderly. In other words, permanent employment was the essential condition for a stable life. Now that employers are no longer the provider of a stable and secure life, the state must take responsibility for building and maintaining a society in which everyone has equal access to what it takes to build a stable and happy life for themselves and for the future generations. Japan still has a long way to go.

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1 As well as the actual changes in the structure of the labour market, it was the disappearance of the traditional pattern of recruiting young people that had a significant social impact. This aspect will be discussed later in the paper.
2 Where young people were concerned, schools were, in fact, regarded as the mainly reliable employment agency by employers.
3 Recruitment was not based on vacancies or the requirements of the companies; but they took in what could be called their share of young people.
4 Agency workers only had 16 types of jobs available to them. These were mainly office assistant roles and similar positions.
5 The term is thought to be made up from freelance and the German word Arbeiter.
6 Minister of Health, Labour and Welfare; Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry; Minister of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology; the Cabinet Office.
7 It refers to a training system similar to study release or 'sandwich courses', i.e. training is integrated into work.
8 The term is used in Japan to refer to the group of young people in this state rather than as the statistic term originally used in the UK.
9 The Japanese equivalent to Jobcentre Plus.
10 They are referred to as the Lost Generation: the time they left education coincided with the boom in agency work, when few permanent positions were available. This era is often referred to as the Ice Age of Employment and the Lost Generation is its legacy.
11 This recruitment event was targeted exclusively at new school leavers and graduates.
11a Ministers of Finance, Education, Welfare, Labour, Housing, and Internal Affairs
11c http://www8.cao.go.jp/youth/suisin/vhombu/vhombu.html
11d http://www8.cao.go.jp/youth/suisin/kondan.html
11e http://www8.cao.go.jp/youth/suisin/iirfu/index-j.html
11f Young people, mostly women, who are assumed to be occupied with housework at home are not included in this group.
11g High school education (from 15 to 18) is not compulsory and even state schools are fee paying. Tuition fees also apply at university level.
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National Youth Development Policy Proposal 2008,

