

Increase in Single-person Households in Japan Should Be Addressed

In November last year, the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research (IPSS) released its projection for the future number of households by prefecture. The projection results showing a large increase in the proportion of single-person households among regular households (excluding households of persons living in institutions, etc.) by the year 2050 in all prefectures drew a great deal of attention. This article reviews the changes in household composition in Japan.

The first point that needs to be emphasized is that the number of single-person households has greatly increased already over the 30 years up until 2020 and the proportion of single-person households among regular households (the single-person household ratio) has also risen substantially. Looking at the specific data (see Figure 1), the number of single-person households, which was 9.39 million households in 1990, doubled to 21.15 million households in 2020, the single-person household ratio reached 38.0%, and single-person households are already the largest type by household composition. These data make us realize that revisions to Japan's systems in accordance with changes in household composition have not been sufficiently implemented. How various policies are formulated with the "standard household" comprising a husband, a full-time housewife, and two children as the norm clearly represents this. For example, the revision of the pension system policy which gives preferential treatment to full-time housewives needs to be addressed directly.

According to the IPSS projection, while the absolute number of single-person households will turn to a decline after 2036, such households will account for 44.3%, or nearly half of all households, in 2050 (see Figure 1). Moreover, this projection was based on the 2020 Population Census and, therefore, it does not fully

reflect the increase in the percentage of unmarried people and the decrease in the birth rate, which are presently advancing faster than expected. So, the percentage of single-person households is likely to increase even more than projected.

Next, examining the breakdown of single-person households by age segment, single-person households of individuals age 15–39 accounted for around 60% of the total in 1990, but in 2020 single-person households of individuals age 65 or older accounted for 34.9% of the total, surpassing the percentage of those of individuals age 15–39, and in 2050 they will account for 46.5%. Also, looking at the ratio of single-person households by prefecture, this varies greatly by municipality with the highest ratio in Tokyo Metropolis (from 50.2% in 2020 to 54.1% in 2050) and the lowest in Yamagata Prefecture (from 28.4% in 2020 to 34.5% in 2050).

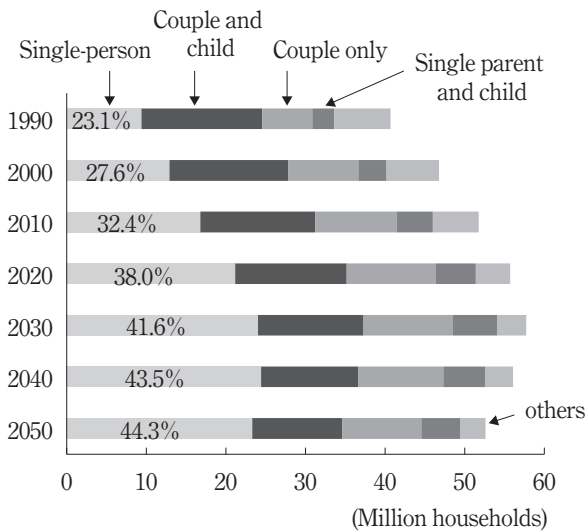
Looking at the level of happiness among people who live alone in the Happiness Research Committee Report released last November by Sompo Institute Plus, the subjective level of happiness of people living alone was 6.1 (on a scale with 10 being completely happy and 0 completely unhappy), far lower than that of people living with others (6.8) (see Figure 2). By age segment, the difference in the level of happiness depending on whether people live alone or with others is large for those in their 30s through 60s. Of course, there are cases of people who feel a high level of happiness even though they live alone, but the survey shows that, from a macro perspective, the people with the lowest level of happiness are those who are middle-aged and live alone. When formulating policies for single-person households, there is a tendency to naturally focus on the segment of people who are 65 or older, but devising a more detailed response including measures reflecting the actual conditions of the middle-aged seg-

ment is essential. The survey indicates that for those in their 60s and older, the level of satisfaction with a meaningful life and hope for the future, which significantly influence the level of happiness, depends on the number of people they can rely on and trust, and on their level of participation in donations, volunteering, and other altruistic activities. However, from now on, with the increase in the percentage of people who remain unmarried and in the number of divorces as well as the further decline in the birthrate, the number of single-person households with no close relatives or associates they can rely on is highly likely to increase further. If no action is taken, the number of people who fall into “unwanted loneliness” will greatly increase.

Promoting employment is one thing that will help prevent loneliness. For example, in Kyushu the percentage of people 65 and older who are employed greatly increased in many prefectures over the 10 years from

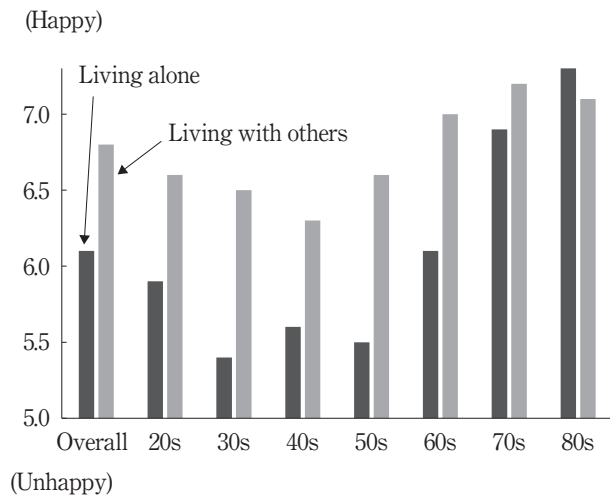
2012 to 2022. This was propelled by activities such as the introduction of good examples at individual companies by the Kyushu-Yamaguchi Lifelong Active Society Promotion Council. In addition to such initiatives, it is necessary to greatly expand the provision of rewarding workplaces for members of the generation affected by the “employment ice age” (a period when job opportunities for young graduates were severely limited due to prolonged economic recession). Measures reaching out to people living alone include the payment of subsidies to households where three generations live together, rent subsidies for young people who move in with elderly people living alone, and assistance to spread shared housing. We must recognize anew that the expansion of such steady measures would enhance ties among people and an altruistic orientation, and lead to boosting the level of happiness among people who live alone.

Figure 1: Change in the Number of Households and Projection



Source: *Household Projections for Japan* by IPSS

Figure 2: Distribution of Level of Happiness of People Who Live Alone by Age Segment



Source: *Happiness Research Committee Report* by SOMPO Institute Plus