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**Japanese Policies toward
Poverty and Public
Assistance**
A Historical Perspective

Sheldon Garon

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In Japan today, means-tested public assistance remains a modest component of the welfare system—in marked contrast to the expanding universal programs of national pensions, national health insurance, and medical care for the elderly. Remarkably the numbers of public-assistance recipients in Japan have sharply declined in recent decades, despite urbanization and structural changes in the economy. Moreover, a mere one-third of households below the poverty line receive public assistance, in part because most lower-income Japanese do not apply for such aid. This paper explores the various historical, political, and ideological factors that underlie Japan’s minimal provision of public assistance. For more than a century, the Japanese state has sought to discourage dependence on official poor relief. Bureaucrats, conservative politicians, and others have worked hard to cultivate and strengthen a “sense of shame” in the Japanese people regarding reliance on public assistance. Officials also have designed stringent procedures that inhibit the poor from requesting aid. At the same time, the authorities have eschewed a laissez-faire approach, preferring to intervene to compel families and communities to support their poor members in lieu of large-scale official assistance.

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Contents

Foreword *v*

The Evolution of Public Assistance Policy *3*

Managing Nongovernmental Actors *8*

Recent Developments and International Comparisons *11*

Lessons from Experience *15*

References *16*

Foreword

This paper was prepared for a project on Social Development in East Asia. The project was organized by the World Bank Institute under the auspices of the Program for the Study of the Japanese Development Management Experience (The Brain Trust Program), which is financed by the Policy and Human Resources Development Trust Fund established at the World Bank by the Government of Japan (GOJ). We greatly appreciate the generous support from GOJ.

The principal objectives of this Program are to conduct studies on Japanese and East Asian development management experience and to share the lessons of this experience with developing and transition economies. The experiences of other countries are often covered in order to ensure that these lessons are placed in the proper context. This comparative method helps identify factors that influence the effectiveness of specific institutional mechanisms, governance structures, and policy reforms in different contexts. A related objective of the Program is to promote the exchange of ideas on development among Japanese and non-Japanese scholars, technical experts and policy makers.

The papers commissioned for this project cover a number of important issues related to Japanese Social Policy. These issues include, among other, Japanese pension system, public health insurance in Japan, evolution of social policy in Japan, role of families, communities and government in improving socioeconomic performance, and Japanese policies towards poverty & public assistance. We hope that these papers will provide important policy findings and lessons for policymakers in developing countries and other development stakeholders.

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Japanese Policies toward Poverty and Public Assistance: A Historical Perspective

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Author's Note: Following East Asian practice, Japanese surnames precede given names, excepting those Japanese whose English-language works have been cited.

In Japan today means-tested public assistance is a necessary, but seemingly minor, component of the welfare system. This modest program for lower-income Japanese stands in sharp contrast to the expanding programs of universal entitlements. While policies and attitudes toward national pension plans, national health insurance, and medical care for the elderly have undergone significant changes since the early 1970s, policy toward poor people has been marked by continuity in the years since World War II.

Indeed, the principal legislation governing public assistance remains the Daily Life Security Law, which was first enacted in 1946 and revised in 1950. The law was, and is, designed to enable households to maintain a minimum standard of living, as defined by administrative formulas. Aid is provided primarily in the form of monthly living allowances, housing allowances, medical assistance, scholarships to children, and three other categories.

Equally noteworthy, aid to the poor is politically uncontroversial in Japan today and arouses little public resentment. Japan is, in this respect as in several others, a mirror image of the United States. Contemporary Americans commonly rail against assistance to the poor, while welcoming the vastly more expensive universal programs for the elderly (namely, Social Security and Medicare). Japanese, by contrast, vigorously debate what to do about pensions and care for the elderly in light of the nation's "aging-society problem." One hears little of a comparable "poor-people problem."

In quantitative terms, as well, Japan's public assistance program and its universal social policies appear to be on very different trajectories. While expenditures on universal policies soar as the population rapidly ages, spending on public assistance shrinks in proportion to total social security expenditure—falling from 7.8 percent in 1970 to only 2.3 percent in 1995 (if we include social welfare services, expenditures on lower-income people have dropped from 11.5 percent to 6.3 percent).¹

What is most distinctive about Japan's public assistance policy is the sharp *decline* in the numbers of recipients in recent decades. This decline occurs in the face of sustained urbanization, erosion of traditional familial support networks, and wrenching structural changes in the economy. In 1965, some 1,438,000 people received assistance under the Daily Life Security Law; in 1997, that number had fallen to 906,000. Relative to the population, there were 16 recipients per 1,000 Japanese in 1965, and roughly 12 during the 1970s and early 1980s. Since the mid-1980s, that figure has steadily declined and, in 1997, stood at a mere 7 per 1,000 Japanese (see table 1).

¹ Social Development Research Institute (1995: 26–27); National Institute of Population and Social Statistical Research (1997: 22–23).

Table 1. *Public Assistance under the Revised Daily Life Security Law, 1951–97*

<i>Year</i>	<i>Recipients (in thousands)</i>	<i>Recipients per 1,000 people</i>
1951	1,862	24.4
1955	1,704	21.6
1960	1,425	17.4
1965	1,438	16.3
1970	1,143	13.0
1975	1,160	12.1
1980	1,251	12.2
1984	1,469	12.2
1985	1,431	11.8
1986	1,348	11.1
1987	1,266	10.4
1988	1,176	9.6
1989	1,100	8.9
1990	1,015	8.2
1991	946	7.6
1992	898	7.2
1993	883	7.1
1994	885	7.1
1995	882	7.0
1996	887	7.1
1997	906	7.2

Sources: Soeda (1995: 62, 187, 258, 295); Kōseishō daijin kanbō tōkei jōhōbu (1999: 198).

The diminishing role of public assistance may not be all that remarkable. As Ministry of Health and Welfare officials frequently note, poverty itself has radically declined in Japan since the early postwar years. After several decades of sustained economic growth, Japan today enjoys some of the lowest rates of poverty and income inequality among the world's advanced economies.² In addition, the recent expansion of the Japanese welfare state has moved many off public assistance rolls and into the ranks of those receiving universal benefits. Considering these circumstances, we might reasonably conclude that Japanese social policy has woven an effective safety net for the most destitute without incurring substantial costs, fiscally or politically.

We might be tempted further to conclude that the Japanese government qualitatively responds to the problem of poverty in much the same way as Western states. However, let us also consider the ample evidence of political and cultural peculiarities that places Japan closer to other East Asian societies. Significantly, arguments of Japanese or Asian exceptionalism have been put forward by Japanese on both sides of the political spectrum.

From outside the government, leading scholars of social policy observe that few lower-income Japanese apply for public assistance, even when they technically qualify for it. Their behavior may be explained in various ways, as we shall see. Nevertheless, observers invariably speak of the Japanese "sense of shame" and the "stigma" that society attaches to being on the dole.³

A more positive appraisal of the role of Japanese culture comes from the conservative elite. The nation's antipoverty programs need not approach the scale of Western counterparts, they insist, because Japan is blessed with a much stronger "family system," which effectively supports poor and elderly family

² UNDP (1997: 36).

³ Soeda (1995: 250–51, 296).

members in lieu of a massive welfare state. Beginning in the late 1970s, bureaucrats, conservative politicians, and business leaders openly spoke of building a “Japanese-style welfare *society*,” in which families, communities, and firms would provide the lion’s share of social welfare.⁴

A final ingredient in the operation of public assistance is the central role of the state itself. Japan’s vaunted “sense of shame” and supportive families are not necessarily natural, immutable aspects of a national culture. Rather, they have been carefully cultivated and strengthened by a state that, over the past century, has sought to discourage dependence on official assistance. The Japanese approach to poor relief confounds the conventional dichotomy of *laissez-faire* versus state intervention. On one hand, Japanese officials have historically done their utmost to contain the costs of public assistance and other social programs. At the same time, these officials have generally rejected the Anglo-American liberal principle that the state play only a minor role in the welfare of its people. Instead, the authorities have actively intervened to arrange familial and communal support for the poor. Welfare is one of several policy areas in which the twentieth-century Japanese state has “managed” and mobilized society in pursuit of national goals.⁵

The Evolution of Public Assistance Policy

In Japan, as in Western nations, welfare policies evolved as a result of historical interplay among indigenous practices and beliefs, foreign models, and new challenges emanating from social change. From the late nineteenth century to approximately 1960, the government relied on three successive poor laws as the primary means of social security.

The first, the Relief Regulations (*Jukkyū Kisoku*) of 1874, was introduced following the formation of the modern Japanese state in 1868. This highly restrictive ordinance limited relief to those who “were extremely poor *and* without family” in the following categories: (a) the crippled, (b) those aged 70 and over who suffered from “severe illnesses and the decrepitude of old age,” (c) the chronically ill, and (d) children aged 13 and under. Excepting the children, all applicants had, moreover, to demonstrate their incapacity to work. In actual operation, the government’s Home Ministry imposed means tests so stringent that all but a tiny fraction of the poor were denied national assistance. There were a mere 25 recipients in slum-infested Tokyo in 1885, and only 2 or 3 in some of the most impoverished rural prefectures.⁶

The officials who drafted the Relief Regulations were little influenced by contemporary European poor laws. The new government’s primary motivations were to centralize, and reduce the costs of, the disparate relief programs run by the Tokugawa shogunate, big cities, and autonomous domains during the early modern era (1600–68). Beginning in the 1870s, Victorian ideals of *laissez-faire* and individualism reinforced the indigenous aversion to providing more generous relief.⁷

Although some scholars and officials studied German social policy and proposed a comprehensive poor law during the 1890s, by the turn of the century most Japanese bureaucrats emphatically rejected the trajectory of European poor laws. Their critiques of European social policy influenced future generations of bureaucrats and, to some extent, shape Japanese discourse on welfare to this day. These officials associated Western poor laws with soaring costs and the growth of a debilitating sense of entitlement among recipients. Government spokesmen in the early twentieth century touted instead Japan’s own Relief Regulations, whose “principle of strictly limited assistance” ensured that relief be granted not as an unconditional right, but simply as an “act of mercy by the State.” Believing generous local governments in Germany and England to be the prime culprits in rising relief costs, Japanese administrators strengthened the central state’s powers to determine when assistance would be granted.⁸ Besides, they argued, the

4 For example, *Jiyū minshutō* (1979).

5 See Garon (1997).

6 *Shakai hoshō kenkyūjo* (1981–84, 4:6); Yoshida (1960: 87–89); Ikeda (1986: 304).

7 Ogawa (1959: 264, 266–67, 270–71, 309).

8 Inoue (1909: 168, 185–86, 191).

Japanese family supported its own and made public assistance unnecessary. Whereas Western families were portrayed as collections of autonomous individuals, in Japan—according to one senior official—“it is a family shame to send one of its own out to bother outsiders and to depend on others for assistance.”⁹

After functioning for some 50 years without serious challenge, the Relief Regulations gave way to a more elaborate public assistance law. The Relief and Protection Law (*Kyūgohō*) was enacted in 1929 and went into effect in 1932. In the decade following World War I, Japan experienced a series of social problems that overwhelmed the state’s minimal relief mechanisms. Rapid urbanization and industrialization were accompanied by labor militancy, proliferation of slums, and unprecedented urban protests over rising commodity prices. At the same time, the nativist champions of “strictly limited assistance” were succeeded by higher civil servants who openly acknowledged the inadequacy of the Relief Regulations. Within the Home Ministry, this new generation of “social bureaucrats” threw themselves into investigating interwar European models as the basis for Japanese social policy.¹⁰

The Home Ministry also developed a novel means of delivering social services to the poor. Beginning in 1918, prefectural governors appointed community leaders to serve as “district commissioners” (*hōmen iin*) within their neighborhoods. The commissioners were, in effect, unpaid caseworkers who counseled lower-income households on how to escape poverty while mediating between their charges and the government’s assistance programs and social services.¹¹

Recognizing the need for a public assistance measure that would better support the increasing numbers of poor people, the district commissioners joined with social bureaucrats to effect the Relief and Protection Law. Some officials proposed following the latest trends in European social policy and considered the adoption of separate laws to assist the elderly, the disabled, and mothers and children. In the end, the new law resembled the classic Western poor laws, which consolidated various types of assistance into one statute. The Relief and Protection Law provided benefits for medical care, childbirth expenses, occupational rehabilitation, and funereal costs, although relief in money and goods remained the leading form of assistance.

The prewar Relief and Protection Law significantly expanded the scope of public assistance. In 1937, the recipients numbered 237,000, compared with a mere 18,000 under the old Relief Regulations in 1931. Nevertheless, the new system retained many features of the past. The Relief and Protection Law excluded all potentially employable persons, male or female, and it limited coverage to those lacking a family or neighbors who could support them. Moreover, the law recognized neither the right to receive relief nor the right to appeal if aid were denied. Determination of eligibility was highly subjective. The district commissioners were entrusted with gauging eligibility, and, guided by official policy, they often rejected claimants whose conduct they deemed to be “conspicuously bad or lazy.”¹² In 1935, the Relief and Protection Law assisted less than one-third of those who were technically eligible, reported the Home Ministry with some satisfaction.¹³

The final phase in the evolution of public assistance laws began with the enactment of the Daily Life Security Law of 1946. The measure originated in the unusual circumstances following Japan’s devastating defeat in World War II. The new public assistance system was formulated, in part, to relieve widespread destitution in the war’s aftermath. Millions of Japanese had been left poor by American bombing, massive unemployment, hyperinflation, food shortages, loss of overseas territories, and war-related deaths and disabilities of family members. Yet the strongest pressure for the transformation of Japan’s prewar relief mechanisms came from American social policy experts in the Allied Occupation (1945–52).

In 1946, the Occupation’s specialists directed Japan’s Ministry of Health and Welfare (MHW) to draft what became the Daily Life Security Law. Many of these professional social workers were members of the

9 Tokonami (1910).

10 See Garon (1987, chap. 3).

11 Yoshida (1979: 131–33).

12 Yamazaki (1931: 287); *Kōseishō* (1988: 815–6, 818); for details on the Relief and Protection Law and the campaigns to enact and effect it, see Ikeda (1986: 688–702).

13 *Chō shakai jigyō kyōkai* (1937: 1–2).

American Public Welfare Association, whose 1945 platform called for granting public assistance to all needy persons on an unconditional and nondiscriminatory basis.¹⁴ Accordingly, the Americans sought to eliminate the discriminatory and preferential aspects of presurrender relief measures. That meant the repeal of the Relief and Protection Law of 1929, which had permitted officials to deny assistance to applicants deemed to be able-bodied or of bad character. The Occupation also ordered the abrogation of the prewar Military Assistance Law, which offered more generous benefits and preferential treatment to the families of dead or wounded servicemen. The Daily Life Security Law, which replaced these measures, covered most categories of the needy, regardless of the causes of one's poverty.

The Occupation's New Dealers were also keen on establishing an entitlement to state-provided welfare.¹⁵ Apparently written by Americans, Article 25 of the postwar Constitution of 1946 decreed that: "All people have the right to maintain the minimum standards of wholesome and cultured living. In all spheres of life, the State shall use its endeavors for the promotion and extension of social welfare and security, and of public health."

In practice, the needy's "right" to claim public assistance remains problematic. The early postwar Ministry of Health and Welfare interpreted Article 25 as affirming only the state's obligation to protect those persons who satisfied a stipulated set of conditions. The individual's unequivocal right to relief was not readily recognized. Even after the revised Daily Life Security Law of 1950 established an appeals process for applicants who were denied assistance, senior Ministry officials did not believe that the poor possessed a bona fide right to request public assistance in the first place.¹⁶ The bureaucrats also continued systematically to deny recipients levels of support sufficient to "maintain the minimum standards of wholesome and cultured living." Only after a series of lawsuits by frustrated claimants, beginning with Asahi Shigeru's action in 1957, did the government significantly raise levels of public assistance and place itself in compliance with the Constitution.¹⁷ Among lower-income Japanese today, the consciousness of a right to assistance remains weak, many scholars note. This is in no small part because of the government's historical reluctance to inform the people of their constitutional and legal entitlements.¹⁸

As in the case of entitlements, the Occupation's reformism transformed the content of public assistance law while doing less to alter the underlying bureaucratic mentality. The revision of the Daily Life Security Law in 1950 marked a major departure from not only the prewar poor laws, but also from the original legislation of 1946. Besides introducing an appeals process, the revised law offered cash assistance and social services to all eligible citizens on a nondiscriminatory and equal basis. It also invoked Article 25 of the new Constitution in guaranteeing to all needy persons the assistance necessary to "maintain the minimum standards of wholesome and cultured living."¹⁹

According to one detailed study, the revised Daily Life Security Law was in large part the product of technocratic policymaking. The Ministry of Health and Welfare's Assistance Section drafted legislation that deftly balanced conflicting political pressures and policy needs. The bureaucrats were motivated, first and foremost, by the urgent need to provide assistance to the growing numbers of poor and unemployed individuals in the late 1940s. At the same time, they sought to fend off demands by organized labor for more generous aid that would accord with the Left's interpretation of Article 25 of the new Constitution. Officials further contended with conservative politicians who regarded unemployed workers and the ordinary poor as less deserving than veterans' families and fatherless households. Conservatives wished to enact preferential assistance laws for the two latter categories.²⁰

The technocratic nature of antipoverty policy did not, however, mean that the Ministry of Health and Welfare had entirely abandoned past approaches. To avoid incurring unacceptable fiscal costs, bureaucrats

14 Tataru (1975: 344, 475–76).

15 Tataru (1975: 402).

16 Milly (1990: 124–25, 165 n. 1, 180); see also Milly (1999).

17 Hiraoka (1991).

18 Soeda (1995: 245, 296); Ishida (1989: 241).

19 Soeda (1995: 41).

20 Milly (1990: 163–72).

deliberately left the levels of assistance undefined by law, to be determined by the Ministry. Also, the revised Daily Life Security Law stipulated that public assistance would be provided as a last resort—only after an applicant had made every effort to earn a living, and only after exhausting all sources of support from close relatives (see the next section of this paper).²¹ And many Ministry officials believed that the law gave them powers to continue to differentiate between the deserving and undeserving poor. The original Daily Life Security Law of 1946 explicitly ruled ineligible “persons of indifferent behavior” and able-bodied persons who “have no will to work.” Occupation authorities directed the Japanese drafters of the 1950 revision to remove language that would exclude applicants on moral grounds. Nevertheless, Japanese officials seized on the new law’s stated object of encouraging “self-reliance” to deny assistance to anyone whose character rendered him or her incapable of becoming self-reliant.²²

The revised Daily Life Security Law established a public assistance system whose administration and operating assumptions have changed little since 1950. However, we may distinguish a few stages in its evolution.

During the first half of the 1950s, public assistance became politicized as it never again would be. To its defenders, state relief meant survival to a great many families. In 1951 and 1952, some two million people (2.4 percent of the population) received assistance under the Daily Life Security Law; this amounted to roughly 4 percent of all households. When the Ministry of Finance and the governing Liberal Party attempted to make major cuts in the program in 1954, they were thwarted by a pro-welfare coalition of local governments, the right-center Progressive Party, and even backbenchers from the Liberal Party.

To many right-wing politicians, however, public assistance represented an enormous financial drain, absorbing 50 percent of total social security expenditures during that period. They also condemned the program for allegedly assisting able-bodied individuals in large numbers. Reinforcing the public’s image of the welfare recipient as socially marginal was the fact that a disproportionate number of claimants were ethnic Koreans, outcaste *burakumin*, and day laborers. Conservatives, moreover, strove to trim public assistance as a means of weakening the Left. They took particular aim at the Communists, who were effectively mobilizing day laborers and others to demand assistance from local welfare offices.

The Ministry of Health and Welfare resisted the most conservative pressures to slash the public assistance budget. But in the mid-1950s, the Ministry must have pleased the Right when it mounted a nationwide campaign to cut large numbers of ostensibly able-bodied recipients who had made fraudulent claims. This drive was nothing less, in the words of Deborah Milly, than “an attempt to reinforce the work ethic and to limit the notion of a right to a minimum standard of living, and an attack on the activism of the poor.”²³

In the decades that followed the 1960s, public assistance policy has rarely surfaced as a contentious political issue. Key decisions in this period have generally been hammered out in negotiations among ministries, within official commissions of bureaucrats and social policy experts, or in actual administration. Poverty itself gradually became a less pressing problem. People saw fewer signs of outright destitution, and public assistance expenditures shrank as a share of the social security budget. Indeed, the numbers of Japanese living in abject poverty declined dramatically from what they had been in the early postwar days. This was in large part attributable to Japan’s impressive economic growth. In 1970, the Economic Planning Agency described Japan as on the verge of the “dissolution of poverty.”²⁴ The public assistance rolls likewise shrank, both absolutely and relative to the population. In 1951, some 2.4 percent of the nation was on the dole; in 1960, that figure dropped to 1.7 percent, and it hovered around 1.2 percent throughout the 1970s and early 1980s.²⁵ In addition, the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) abandoned its previous hostility to public assistance, and endorsed a number of policies designed to reduce the inequalities accompanying Japan’s high-speed economic growth. Faced also with the prospect

21 Milly (1990: 175–77, 179).

22 Soeda (1995: 42–43).

23 Milly (1990: 193, also 185–96).

24 Keizai kikakuchō (1970[1976]).

25 Soeda (1995: 62, 187, 258).

of losing power in the early 1970s, the LDP joined the opposition Socialist Party in championing an across-the-board expansion of the Japanese welfare state.²⁶

Although Ministry of Health and Welfare officials maintain their vigilance against fraudulent claims and “undeserving” applicants, they have unequivocally committed themselves to narrowing the gap in living standards between recipients of public assistance and other Japanese. They were, of course, forced by successful lawsuits to raise benefit levels to comply with Article 25 of the Constitution. Beginning in the early 1960s, welfare officials also came under the influence of British proposals for ameliorating “relative deprivation,” in addition to absolute poverty. The MHW repeatedly raised assistance levels, despite opposition from the fiscally conservative Ministry of Finance, which insisted that the state provide only enough aid to relieve absolute poverty and not enough to encourage indolence. Why, asked one Ministry of Finance spokesman in 1968, should the government improve benefits for workers in inverse proportion to their industriousness?²⁷

In the end, the MHW’s concept of relative deprivation triumphed. Between 1966 and 1973, the Ministry raised the monthly living allowance some 13 to 14 percent per year for a family of four. Because living standards (as measured by consumption) of nonrecipient households in the lowest income quintile substantially improved during those years, the Ministry initially failed to narrow the gap. Amid the acute inflation of the mid-1970s, the government periodically increased living allowance levels until they eventually reached 60 percent of consumption expenditures by other lower-income households. In 1983, the MHW formally embraced this target of 60 percent, which it judged to be in line with public assistance policies in the United Kingdom and other advanced welfare states in the West. Since then, living allowances have been adjusted upward to maintain that ratio.²⁸

The living allowance constitutes the largest component of monthly assistance for most recipients, but the Daily Life Security Law grants assistance in six other categories as well. In 1997, as a proportion of the total recipients of public assistance, 86.6 percent received living allowances; 79.0 percent received medical assistance; and 73.9 percent received housing allowances. Covering families with children in elementary or middle school, educational assistance was given to only 8.4 percent of the total. Recipients of the remaining three categories—assistance for childbirth, funerals, and finding employment—came to a mere 0.2 percent of the total. Those who were granted living allowances also received the housing allowance and medical assistance. However, a growing minority of those who receive no other public assistance are given medical assistance. Medical assistance comes in the form of payments or partial payments for specific medical services.²⁹

Nearly all recipients of public assistance may be classified as belonging to one of three categories. In 1997, the largest number was of elderly households (44.0 percent of total recipients), followed by families with a disabled member (41.0 percent). Single-mother households made up only 8.3 percent of the total. In this aging society, the share of elderly households has gradually risen—from 32.5 percent in 1985, to 44.0 percent in 1997. In terms of the size of assisted “households,” most in fact are comprised of a single individual (73.4 percent in 1997), or two members (16.8 percent). Few lower-income families with small children receive public assistance.

What do typical assisted families look like, and what levels of aid do they receive? Official statistics for 1995 are instructive, for they calculate the amount of assistance granted monthly to households according to their composition. The living allowances vary in amount depending on cost-of-living levels in a given area. I present the assistance levels for those living in the most expensive areas, such as Tokyo. In each case, the living allowance constitutes the largest component, and each household receives a basic monthly housing allowance of 13,000 yen. A 70-year-old woman living alone would receive a monthly total of 105,000 yen. An elderly couple is granted 146,000 yen. With respect to households with severely

26 Milly (1990: 55–56).

27 Satō (1968[1991]: 45–46, also 32–33, 35–36). (The quotes refer to the 1991 publication.)

28 Soeda (1991: 36, 46–48); Soeda (1995: 293).

29 Relevant statistics appear in *Kōseishō daijin kanbō tōkei jōhōbu* (1999: 203–4) and (1997: 202); Soeda (1995: 297–99).

disabled members, a 65-year-old mother and her 25-year-old disabled son receive a monthly total of 188,000 yen (including special disability allowances and payment for a care-giver). The typical single-mother household is made up of a 30-year-old mother and two young children; their monthly allowance of 195,000 yen includes 2,100 yen for educational assistance.

Managing Nongovernmental Actors

Judged solely on the basis of rising living allowances, Japan would appear to have joined the ranks of Western welfare states. However, no public assistance system that aids a mere one-quarter of households below the poverty line should be taken as the centerpiece of a government's antipoverty strategy (see the following section). And few administrators and ordinary Japanese would regard it as such. When conservative governments in the late 1970s and 1980s called for the creation of a "Japanese-style welfare society," this was more than a rhetorical flourish. The phrase expressed long-standing Japanese sentiments and practices that placed families and communities in the front lines of the struggle against destitution. The state's role, in this formulation, is not to shift the ultimate responsibility for the nation's welfare to the individual, but rather to minimize the costs of official relief by actively organizing families and communities to support their own. These assumptions remain a fundamental part of public assistance administration to this day.

The government's reliance on familial and communal assistance has a long history. In late-nineteenth-century Japan, the state and society held attitudes toward the poor that varied considerably from those in Victorian England. To be sure, Japanese officials shared the Victorians' aversion to aiding anyone deemed able-bodied. Nevertheless, Japanese functionaries were less preoccupied with determining whether impoverished individuals were morally "deserving." Their primary task was to make sure that all poor people were sustained—ideally by families and neighbors, but, as a last resort, by the state.

Such thinking lay behind the aforementioned Relief Regulations of 1874. For nearly six decades this ordinance aided only "the poor who have no one to turn to"—that is, those without families. At the same time, officials went to extraordinarily lengths to compel families and communities to support the many poor individuals ruled ineligible for state relief. The authorities tenaciously tracked down relatives, who were ordered to aid the indigent. In several instances during the 1870s, local officials forced an elderly person to adopt an unrelated adult as a son; the younger man then became obligated to support his new parent.³⁰ Legally the prewar Civil Code of 1898 mandated a "duty to support" one's needy family members, according to an elaborate hierarchy of relationships that began with obligating the spouse, children and grandchildren, parents and grandparents, in-laws, siblings, and reached down to fairly distant relatives.³¹

Communal relief mechanisms also functioned as an integral part of the state's managed welfare system during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The modern regime continued pre-1868 practices of encouraging villagers to maintain emergency granaries. Peasants collectively accumulated rice to feed the needy in times of bad harvest. Officials further pressured the wealthy into donating large amounts of rice and money to the poor in their communities.³² "Extorted benevolence" was how the British reformer Beatrice Webb described the practice during a visit to Japan in 1911.³³

Absent more expansive poor laws before 1946, the family persisted as the primary welfare provider in the prewar decades, much as it had in premodern times. The character of communal support, by contrast, underwent far-reaching changes that would shape public assistance well into the post-World War II era. As more and more Japanese left the countryside, the old mutual assistance networks in villages and neighborhoods—and particularly in the teeming cities—broke down. By the 1910s and 1920s, growing

30 Ogawa (1959: 305, 307–8).

31 Toshitani (1982: 43).

32 Garon (1997: 28–29, 38).

33 Diary entry of August 23, 1911, in Feaver (1992: 35).

numbers of impoverished nuclear families in the cities sorely challenged the welfare system. They could neither depend on assistance from extended families and neighbors, nor qualify for public assistance intended for those without families. The government's solution was to embark on a series of campaigns to *re-create* the traditional community and, in some cases, to establish new intermediaries between the state and the people.

Begun in 1918, the district commissioner system emerged as the linchpin in these efforts to rationalize communal assistance. Home Ministry officials aimed to create a phalanx of state-appointed community activists who, as neighbors, could oversee and ameliorate the lives of the poor. Most were shopkeepers, workshop owners, teachers, and others who worked locally. By 1942, there were 74,560 district commissioners, to be found in nearly every city, town, and village of the land.³⁴

The district commissioner system profoundly influenced the provision of prewar public assistance. The Relief and Protection Law of 1929 granted the commissioners legal powers to help administer assistance. In the absence of many professional social workers, the district commissioners assumed the primary role of determining whether claimants merited relief and protection. The application process could not have been better designed to stigmatize the needy. To request assistance, the applicant had typically to visit the home of the commissioner, usually a man of local influence, rather than apply directly to the municipal office. By nearly all accounts at the time, district commissioners aggressively discouraged the poor from applying for public assistance, preferring to offer moral and practical advice or arrange for social services.³⁵

The district commissioner system survived World War II and the Occupation remarkably intact. And for a time, the commissioners continued to function as the *de facto* administrators of public assistance. Occupation authorities had hoped to destroy the influence of these local volunteers and replace them with professional social workers and municipal administrators. However, American efforts failed in the face of resistance from the Japanese government and the highly organized commissioners. The Occupation, moreover, confronted a glaring lack of trained social workers. In the short run, all that changed was the name. In 1946, "district commissioners" became "welfare commissioners" (*minsei iin*). Under the Daily Life Security Law of that year, the volunteer commissioners retained their prewar authority to "assist" local officials in determining eligibility and the amount and type of public assistance.

Predictably the central involvement of welfare commissioners impeded the expansion of public assistance, much as it had before 1945. Defying the Occupation's directive to eliminate the arbitrary, preferential, and discriminatory aspects of the old system, local commissioners routinely denied assistance without legal cause, or granted assistance at levels well below those to which applicants were entitled. Many a welfare commissioner deliberately withheld legally allowable assistance in the hopes of fostering self-reliance in his or her charges.³⁶ In his classic study of a Tokyo ward in 1951, Ronald Dore remarked on the enormous powers wielded by the welfare commissioner and the municipal social welfare secretary:

One receives relief not by stating one's case objectively . . . but by "asking" these powerful individuals. . . . It means that you put yourself in the hands of the other person, that you will consider his decision not as the operation of legally prescribed machinery, but as the personal giving or withholding of a favour, that a favourable decision will necessarily entail a personal sense of gratitude and consequently the acknowledgement of a certain indebtedness.³⁷

Indeed, little had changed since the prewar days.

Only gradually has postwar public assistance become disentangled from the welfare commissioners and other community activists. In the revised Daily Life Security Law of 1950, welfare commissioners lost their legal powers to determine eligibility and assistance levels. These tasks were assumed in each locale by the social welfare secretary, a newly created municipal office. Social workers have since taken over

34 Yoshida (1979: 131–33); *Shakai hoshō kenkyūjo* (1981–84, 6: 1124–25).

35 *Shakai hoshō kenkyūjo* (1981–4, 6: 1180, 1231, 1272–73, 1277).

36 Ishida (1984: 50–51).

37 Dore (1958: 70).

much of the administration of public assistance, as social work became professionalized and the numbers of recipients declined to manageable levels. Although there were only 15,000 trained social workers in Japan in 1984, most were concentrated in municipal welfare offices dealing directly with means-tested assistance. The number of certified social workers has steadily expanded since the late 1980s, when the government stepped up efforts to ameliorate the problems of an aging society.³⁸

Community volunteers have by no means relinquished all aspects of their previous role in assisting the poor. In 1998, welfare commissioners numbered 216,824. Under the revised Daily Life Security Law, they are still charged with the task of “cooperating” with officials in the operation of public assistance. This includes locating needy families in their districts and investigating household circumstances.³⁹

The actual influence of present-day commissioners on public assistance is difficult to gauge. According to some reports, the typical neighborhood commissioner can be quite aggressive about investigating lower-income families. This “government-appointed neighborhood busybody” may also press the children of elderly claimants to contribute to their parents’ maintenance.⁴⁰ Other observers distance the welfare commissioners from public assistance administration. In his study of two suburban communities near Kyoto in the early 1980s, Eyal Ben-Ari noted that the local commissioners, all women, primarily visited and arranged various services for the elderly. Only occasionally did the commissioners deal with fatherless households, families with handicapped members, and other nonelderly, low-income households. To some extent, the provision of public assistance remains embedded in the Japanese community. According to Ben-Ari, of the applicants for all welfare services (including public assistance), approximately 30 percent still made requests through the welfare commissioner and another 10 percent through local assembly members and heads of neighborhood associations. Nevertheless, Ben-Ari astutely concludes, today’s commissioners no longer possess the authority to bestow or withhold public assistance as public favors. The needy may apply directly at the municipal welfare office, and indeed most do.⁴¹

If communal intermediaries no longer play the crucial role in public assistance that they once did, the same cannot be said for the family. Remarkably enough, the postwar Civil Code of 1948 continues to obligate a broad range of family members to support their poor relations. The present Civil Code jettisoned the prewar code’s ponderous chain of obligated family relations, but the “duty to support” still applies to parents and children, siblings, and “relatives living together.” According to the revised Daily Life Security Law, public assistance is strictly “supplementary,” to be offered only after legally obligated family members have supported the applicant to the best of their abilities.

Lest one dismiss these obligations as unenforceable, let us note the government’s dogged efforts to put the principle of familial support into practice throughout the postwar era. To an extraordinary degree, the authorities have maintained the prewar practice of locating family members and compelling them to furnish support. In 1963, for instance, the MHW’s Bureau of Social Affairs carefully instructed local officials on how to deal with a person who has the means to support a poor relation, yet declines to fulfill his or her legal obligation. That person must apply for a judgment to family court; if the court rules against the person, the local social welfare secretary is directed to force the relative to provide support. If anything, in recent years the Ministry has intervened more forcefully to enforce the duty to support. In its new “guidance and inspection policy” of 1988, the MHW instructed municipal officials to take the following several steps before granting assistance:

1. Have you accurately located those who are obligated to provide support?
2. Have you determined their actual living conditions, income, and assets—especially those of former husbands in the case of single-mother households and of children who have moved out [of homes of elderly parents]?

38 Tatara (1975: 423–24, 488–89); Gould (1993: 51–52).

39 *Kōseishō* (1999: 402–3).

40 *Economist* (1996).

41 Ben-Ari (1991: 148, 150–51, 154–55); see also Bestor (1989: 179).

3. Have you determined whether those obligated to provide support can actually provide support on the basis of evidence and tax records?

4. Have you determined whether the potential recipients are legally tax-exempt as dependents of those obligated to provide support . . . ?

5. In cases in which those obligated to provide support live in your jurisdiction or live in a neighboring city, town, or village, and you can expect some level of support, *have you gone to their homes and investigated?*

6. If you determine that a person can provide adequate support, but they refuse, have you directed him or her to appeal to family court for investigation and judgment? If the person refuses to do this, *you must undertake more thorough guidance and commence enforcement of Article 77 [of the Daily Life Security Law] and its penalties [fines].*

7. If there is reason to think circumstances in familial support have changed, have you done a yearly investigation?⁴²

The primacy of familial support remains the central precept of public assistance in Japan today. Anecdotal evidence suggests rather zealous enforcement of the MHW's inspection policy. In his study of a poor Tokyo neighborhood in the early 1990s, Edward Fowler recounts the case of a day laborer who was "denied any benefits until the government's telephone request of support from a relative—living not in Japan but in the United States—was summarily rejected."⁴³ Some condemn these intrusive procedures as anachronistic and not in keeping with the trend toward nuclear families.⁴⁴ Nonetheless, families somehow continue to furnish the bulk of support to lower-income Japanese, and there are few signs that society wishes state assistance to supplant familial support in principle.

Recent Developments and International Comparisons

The most remarkable change in public assistance since the mid-1980s has been the accelerated decline in the number of recipients (see table 1). No Western welfare state appears to be on the same trajectory. A comparison with the United Kingdom is illuminating. In 1951, 4.2 percent of the population received public assistance (national assistance), compared with 2.4 percent in Japan. Thereafter the two cases diverged sharply. By 1970, whereas 7.7 percent of the British drew supplementary benefits (under national insurance), only 1.3 percent of Japanese received comparable assistance. In the mid-1990s, a whopping 17 percent were on means-tested income support in Britain, versus a mere 0.7 percent in Japan.⁴⁵ The present divergence would be even more glaring if we added British recipients of housing benefits and council tax benefits. While Japanese spending on public assistance is a minuscule part of total social security expenditure, in Britain means-tested benefits (including housing allowances) accounted for more than 30 percent of social security spending in the mid-1990s.⁴⁶

The U.S. case differs from those of both Japan and the United Kingdom. The number of recipients of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) rose steadily from 1970 to 1994, but their numbers plummeted in 1996 and 1997. Fewer than 4 percent of Americans were on AFDC in 1997 (although roughly twice as many receive food stamps). The U.S. and Japanese cases seem to be moving in the same direction at present, but they differ fundamentally. Whether the decline in AFDC recipients continues over the long term is questionable because a strong economy has been a major factor in decreasing welfare rolls in the United States. The declining number of American recipients is also attributable to changes in state policies and the 1996 federal welfare reform, which impose more stringent conditions and constitute a

42 Italics mine. Cited by Matsushima (1990: 367–68 note 32, also 348–49).

43 Fowler (1996: 46).

44 Soeda (1995: 295).

45 Soeda (1991: 41); *Daily Telegraph*, 5 January 1998, p. 4.

46 Evans (1998: 270).

systemic restructuring.⁴⁷ In Japan, the decrease in public assistance recipients has been a gradual phenomenon, occurring with little political controversy.

How do we explain the sustained drop in the number of Japanese recipients of public assistance, particularly since 1984? Declining poverty remains the government's principal explanation, followed by the expansion of other social security benefits. There is substance to both explanations. The 1980s were marked by a booming economy and labor shortages, which raised living standards among lower-income families with able-bodied adults. If the economy were the crucial variable, however, we would expect growing numbers of recipients amid the stagnation and rising unemployment that have plagued the Japanese economy since 1991. Instead the numbers of public assistance recipients have remained at historical lows during the 1990s.

The recent expansion of other benefits for the elderly, infirm, and handicapped may be more significant. Thanks to new policies in the 1970s and 1980s, the elderly are now entitled to better-funded pensions and heavily subsidized medical care. In 1995, 480,000 individuals aged 70 and over received a means-tested, old-age welfare pension (*rōrei fukushi nenkin*) of 33,533 yen (approximately \$300) per month. These are people who were not enrolled in the Employee Pension System and were not able to contribute to the National Pension System over the required number of years. To what extent universal and means-tested pensions have been responsible for removing the elderly from public assistance rolls is not clear. The welfare pension is a rather paltry sum, compared with the 82,000–105,000 yen that the government set as the public assistance standard for a single elderly woman in 1996.⁴⁸ Regardless of whether pensions and other benefits have truly made up for the loss of public assistance, a growing number of elderly people have seen their public assistance terminated owing to their receipt of other benefits.⁴⁹

On a more fundamental level, the Japanese trajectory differs from that of Britain and the United States because of a profound divergence in family structure. Both Britain and the United States have experienced dramatic increases in single-mother households in recent decades, and these households have become the major object of public assistance. Japan, remarks the Economic Planning Agency (EPA), has thus far avoided America's "feminization of poverty." Japan's divorce rate has climbed (from 0.7 per 1,000 people in 1963 to 1.61 in 1995), the EPA allows, yet it remains low compared with most Western societies, especially the United States. Moreover, in 1992 a mere 1 percent of Japanese children were born out of wedlock, compared with 30 percent in the United States. In 1959, some 60 percent of American families below the poverty line were headed by males, whereas today we see the reverse; families headed by women comprise 60 percent of the poor in the United States. In Japan, by contrast, the proportion of female-headed households on public assistance has been remarkably stable. Despite a brief spike in the early 1980s, female-headed households account for only 30 percent of first-time recipients of public assistance (in 1993)—approximately the same ratio as in 1960.⁵⁰

Even those figures exaggerate the weight of single-mother households among Japanese public assistance recipients, for most of these female-headed "households" were in fact widows without dependent children. Notwithstanding the rising divorce rate, single-mother households receiving public assistance have significantly *declined* since 1985, both in numbers and as a percentage of total recipient households. In 1997, a mere 8 percent of recipient households were headed by single mothers (see the section above on the "Evolution of Public Assistance Policy").

The recent reductions in Japan's public assistance rolls have no doubt been influenced by the factors mentioned above. Yet they do not explain why the country assists only a small fraction of its poor, compared with Western societies. According to one highly regarded survey, on average only 27 percent of Japanese households whose income qualified them for public assistance actually received such aid

47 U.S. House of Representatives (1998: 402, 410); *New York Times* (1998).

48 Kōseishō (1996: 397, 440, 442); Campbell (1992: 12–13, 290–94).

49 Soeda (1995: 295).

50 Keizai kikakuchō (1996: 74–75); Kōseishō (1996: 46–48).

between 1972 and 1982.⁵¹ In Britain, by contrast, some 65 to 75 percent of those eligible obtained comparable supplementary benefits during the same period. There is as yet little data on the rate of omission for the 1980s and 1990s, although the social policy scholar Soeda Yoshiya estimates that, among the eligible poor, only one of every three receives public assistance.⁵² In short, Japanese public assistance rolls, which were already at comparatively low levels by 1980, have been able to decline further because most lower-income households are not covered.

How do we understand a system that does not assist a large majority of the needy? We begin with the indisputable fact that most of Japan's needy do not apply for public assistance. Lower-income Japanese, agree most observers, are more reluctant than Western counterparts to request aid owing to the shame or stigma associated with receiving public assistance. These attitudes, as we have seen, are rooted in history. In a survey of Tokyo recipients in 1956, more than half reported a "shrinking of personal pride" while on relief, several because "their neighbors talked." A mere 13 percent expressed no particular embarrassment, regarding the assistance as an entitlement.⁵³ One might expect urbanization and modernization to have weakened this sense of shame and heightened popular consciousness of the constitutional right to assistance. If anything, argue some specialists, public assistance has become *more* stigmatized since the 1970s, as fewer and fewer Japanese receive aid or know anyone who is a recipient.⁵⁴

The Japanese may feel ashamed about requesting public assistance, yet it is a sense of shame that has been assiduously cultivated by their government. Since at least the turn of the century, officials have endeavored to persuade the nation that it would be a "family shame" to depend on the state for relief. This message was reinforced in the 1980s by the proponents of the "Japanese-style welfare society," who trumpeted the primacy of family-based welfare. Along with the media, government has successfully associated public assistance with an unflattering portrait of American society; welfare dependency, family breakdown, loss of a work ethic, and high crime rates are presented as a set.⁵⁵

But the Japanese sense of shame, whether spontaneous or inculcated, is only half of the answer. Critics charge administrative practice itself with having discouraged a sizeable portion of the poor from requesting assistance. Officials do this in two ways. The first is to do little or nothing to reach the needy. In Britain, remark the critics, the surge in public assistance recipients began in the mid-1960s, when the government launched a concerted drive to assist all of the needy. Following a comprehensive survey of relative deprivation in 1966, officials visited the homes of those below the poverty line, informed people of their rights, and urged them to apply for assistance. Beginning in 1975, British authorities annually measured the rate of the eligible poor receiving supplementary benefits, with an eye toward aiding all.

The Japanese case could not be more different. The Ministry of Health and Welfare does not recognize the widespread omission of would-be recipients as a problem. It does not officially keep statistics on the percentage of eligible households on public assistance, either. Although in the mid-1950s MHW bureaucrats actively located and helped at least the "deserving" poor, they have been singularly passive since the mid-1960s. Lacking central direction to do more, local welfare officials make little effort to encourage the poor to apply for assistance. "If they don't apply, we don't provide" and "we don't do much of anything in terms of PR" was how many summed up their approach in interviews.⁵⁶

While remaining passive with regard to nonapplicants, the Ministry has actively *inhibited* applications by administering means tests so stringent as to deter most people. The practice of tracking down relatives and compelling them to support the applicant has already been described. Indeed, in 1994, the MHW openly attributed the reduction in public assistance rolls in part to more rigorous investigations into family members' abilities to provide support.⁵⁷

51 Sohara (1985: 183–88).

52 Soeda (1995: 240–43, 296).

53 Taira (1967).

54 Soeda (1995: 296); Soeda (1991: 57).

55 Pyle (1992: 51); Keizai kikakuchō (1996: 60–62).

56 Nakamura (1978: 10–11); Soeda (1995: 186–87, 245–48, 296); for comparison with Britain, see Konuma (1980).

57 Cited by Soeda (1995: 294–95).

As if intrusions into the lives of relatives were not enough to discourage applicants, these individuals also face heavy-handed official control over their own lives, once assistance is granted. One recurrent practice has been to punish thrifty recipients who manage to put aside some of their assistance. The authorities often count such savings as “income” and reduce aid accordingly. In one recent case, a local welfare office in Fukuoka cut a chronically ill man’s benefits in half on discovering that he had taken out and paid up a postal insurance policy that funded his daughter’s high school education.⁵⁸

In addition, public assistance procedures discourage applications from males who make up the poorest ranks of the Japanese—the homeless and day laborers. Homelessness in Japan is, of course, of a lesser magnitude than that found in some American cities. Some 50,000 people in New York lived in shelters or on the streets in 1996, compared with only 3,000 to 4,000 in Tokyo. Be that as it may, Japanese welfare offices exclude the homeless from consideration of public assistance on a nearly categorical basis. The government, it turns out, requires any claimant to list a fixed address to receive benefits. Although the Tokyo Metropolitan Government currently provides some shelters and job counseling, the homeless are not necessarily eager to take advantage of these services. Some emphatically refuse, contending that the benefits are not worth subjecting themselves to strict rules and controls.⁵⁹

Day laborers, who usually live in cheap lodging houses, would more easily qualify for aid than the abject homeless, but they, too, are generally not covered by public assistance. Indeed, notes Soeda Yoshiya, it is “extremely rare” in the 1990s for healthy, able-bodied men or their families to receive public assistance. In 1997, day laborers and their families accounted for a mere 1.3 percent of all assisted households. The San’ya district is the best known repository of day laborers in Tokyo. Some 7,000 of these socially marginalized men lived there in the early 1990s. Only 15 percent received assistance from the government, and most who did qualified on grounds of disabilities, which rendered them incapable of working. Few day laborers who were technically eligible for aid even registered their addresses with the ward office, much less applied for public assistance—be it out of pride, ignorance, or a realistic assessment of their slim chances of claiming benefits.⁶⁰

Unquestionably the controls that most offend the poor, in general, result from the MHW’s strict guidelines concerning which household items a recipient may possess and which are considered “luxuries.” Caseworkers from local welfare offices regularly visit homes to make sure clients do not own unacceptable possessions. The harshness of the system reveals itself occasionally when the consequences turn tragic. In 1966, a widow and her daughter committed suicide after a caseworker discovered a refrigerator and advised the mother to sell it quickly or lose her eligibility. More recently in 1994, officials in Okegawa compelled a 79-year-old woman to sell her air conditioner. The hot summer took its toll, and she was eventually hospitalized for acute dehydration. Such highly publicized incidents have prompted the MHW to remove items from the list of banned luxuries over the years. Nevertheless, possessions that are not owned by at least 70 percent of households in the recipient’s locale are still deemed luxuries and must be sold.⁶¹

News stories about draconian administrators elicit public sympathy for mistreated recipients—especially when they are elderly. Yet these reports have not fundamentally altered the deterrent aspects of Japanese public assistance policy, which have evolved over the past hundred years. In one sense, publicity about the demeaning features of the system further deters potential applicants. In a society that overwhelmingly thinks of itself as middle class and values thrift and a few household comforts, how many Japanese wish to subject themselves to administrators who forbid them to save money or own air conditioners? An elderly woman and her bedridden son recently starved to death, although they had been eligible for public assistance. The two, surmised a Tokyo assemblywoman, did not apply for assistance

58 *Daily Yomiuri* (1995); for similar cases in the 1970s, see Soeda (1995: 230–38).

59 *Economist* (1996); *Japan Times Weekly* (International Edition), 8 September 1997.

60 Fowler (1996: 9, 16, 123, 137); Soeda (1995: 294–95, 298–99); *Kōseishō daijin kanbō tōkei jōhōbu* (1999: 205).

61 Soeda (1991: 38–39); *Mainichi Daily News* (1994); *New York Times*, (1996).

because of humiliating experiences in the past. After all, she noted, “local governments are really tough on people on welfare.”⁶²

Lessons from Experience

Despite its dehumanizing tendencies, Japan’s public assistance policies accomplish their goals in the sense that the nation is not plagued by high levels of poverty and social breakdown. Public assistance plays an important, though fiscally minor role, plugging holes in a larger safety net. Among the elderly, universal benefits may cover many more people, yet means-tested aid functions as a vital supplement to maintain basic living standards for lower-income old people, the sick, and the disabled. However, public assistance is only one component in the Japanese government’s overall strategy of ameliorating poverty by implementing measures that are not normally considered welfare. These include the provision of nearly universal education through high school, policies for economic development in depressed regions, and employment-maintenance and job-retraining programs for companies and workers. Various policies have also helped maintain the sizeable sectors of small proprietors and farmers, whose families often absorb and employ displaced kin during economic slowdowns. As for Japan’s largest minority group, the *burakumin*, the government has significantly raised living standards by providing their communities with substantial aid.⁶³

In addition, Japan’s antipoverty programs depend on the family as the primary welfare provider. The low incidence of family breakdown is more than an innate cultural trait. Not only does postwar Japanese society frown upon divorce for moral and economic reasons, but government and company policies actively discourage attempts at economic independence by single mothers. It remains difficult for women, especially mothers, to secure better paid, long-term positions in firms. Nor is it easy or pleasant for single mothers to obtain adequate public assistance (in such cases, the authorities look first to the woman’s parents for support). Few Japanese officials doubt the intrinsic link between poverty-prevention and family stability. “A collapse in the functions of the family would invariably result in the collapse of [Japanese] society,” remarks the Economic Planning Agency in its 1996 white paper.⁶⁴

But can Japan’s web of antipoverty policies survive the social and economic challenges ahead? The economy has yet to emerge from the doldrums that beset it in the early 1990s. Unemployment is inching upward (though it remains low by international standards). At the same time, the welfare functions of agrarian and small-business households weaken as their share declines in the total population. Finally, demographic change will surely have an impact. The population is rapidly aging while the birth rate hits record lows. If these trends continue, familial support may be stretched to the breaking point, as each nuclear family supports as many as four elderly parents and parents-in-law. Under these circumstances, officials warn, the government will not be able to provide today’s level of pensions and health care in the future. One probable set of solutions would be to cut universal benefits drastically, thus placing an even greater burden on families, and, once again, make means-tested assistance the core of the nation’s welfare programs. Were that to happen, the state would have to commit to aiding all needy persons, as it clearly is not doing today.

What lessons might Japan’s current public assistance policies offer to other countries? The model cannot easily be exported to most Western societies. Its omission of three-quarters of the needy might prove socially explosive, and the authorities’ enormous powers to intrude in the lives of the poor would be less acceptable to either Western recipients or society at large. Differences in family structure would also weaken the success of the Japanese model. Few Western societies enjoy as high a percentage of intact households as Japan. None retains a legal system that effectively obligates family members, including

62 *Mainichi Daily News* (1997).

63 See Garon and Mochizuki (1993: 145–66, and 325–46).

64 *Keizai kikakuchō* (1996: 70).

siblings, to support each other. Finally the Japanese system differs considerably from that advanced in the United States by the Republican Party's champions of the federal welfare reform of 1996. The Republicans take a radically laissez-faire position, envisioning work and self-help as the sole alternative to public assistance. Japanese officials, by contrast, historically have intervened to arrange familial support even as they cut the rolls—and they still do.

The nations of East and Southeast Asia might find the Japanese model more appealing. Japan's public assistance program may seem modest compared with Western counterparts, but it provides reasonable levels of aid to a larger portion of the population than those currently in operation throughout the rest of Asia. The costs of Japanese-style assistance would be manageable because of the strength of familial and communal support in much of Asia. Although we should be suspicious of attempts to lump Japan, the Republic of Korea, and Singapore together as "Confucian welfare states," state and society in each generally value family and community as the primary bases of welfare. In the absence of much state-sponsored welfare, the role of families looms just as large in Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia. Furthermore, in most of these nations, as in Japan, the state enjoys the capacity to manage society so as to strengthen familial support while administering public assistance as a last resort. Singapore, for example, similarly enforces laws that obligate children to support their parents. Eager to sustain family-based welfare, these governments also structure incentives and disincentives that promote household savings and discourage consumption.⁶⁵

Whether the Japanese system is the most humane model for Asian nations is another question. On one hand, if they adopt the entire package of Japanese welfare policies, Asians would obtain not only relatively generous public assistance, but also decent pensions, health insurance, and other universal benefits. Given the current financial crises in the region, however, Asian governments would likely judge Japan's costly expansion of universal entitlements to have been a negative lesson, and they may instead focus on means-tested assistance. If so, the Japanese model would function in East and Southeast Asia much as it did in Japan between 1945 and the 1970s. States would relieve the worst of poverty, at a relatively low cost, while families would continue to bear enormous, even crushing burdens in supporting their own.

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⁶⁵ See Jones (1993).

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