

Introduction

Thoughts in a society beset with hardships and a declining population

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“There have been fewer people, and more housing vacancies.” “It’s fine if you’re a married couple, but it’s really hard living alone as a man.” “There are no more events due to COVID-19, and nobody comes to visit, so nobody would even know if someone died inside.” “It’s been over 10 years since the Earthquake, so everybody has gotten that much older. It’s different from when I moved here.” “I can’t move back to the place I used to live in.” One day at the outpatient clinic, an older male patient who was living alone in reconstruction housing would tell me these things, unprompted. Eleven years after the Great East Japan Earthquake, the situation surrounding the towns and residents has changed significantly since residents moved into the housing. When moving, they enjoyed support from the government and volunteers. It was lively, and there were active neighborhood association activities, bolstering the enthusiasm of the residents toward creating a new town. In the years since the disaster, like a comb with missing teeth, the number of residents has decreased, and everybody has continued to get older.

There are many older people who live alone. As of 2014, one in six older people live alone. There are also many older people who prefer to live alone. In a survey conducted in 2014 by the Cabinet Office that targeted men and women aged 65 years and older living alone nationwide, 76.3% of respondents answered that living alone as they did is agreeable, and 78.3% of those aged 80 years and older said that they would prefer to remain living alone. All these surveys were conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic, and the answers may not necessarily be the same today.

When I asked the older man who was alone at the outpatient clinic what he does during the day, he said, “I go to a daycare center. There aren’t many older people in my neighborhood, and everybody goes to a daycare center. [...] I used to drink tea with other people, but now there’s nobody, so I can’t do that.” He also said, “I’m alone during the day, so I turn on the TV and just sit around doing nothing. There’s nothing interesting on TV, but it’s lonely without people’s voices.” In the past, standard TV programming included period dramas and song programs, such as sumo wrestling, Mito Komon, and Abarenbo Shogun. However, in recent years, except for sumo wrestling, there are fewer such examples of standard programming. There are fewer people watching TV. Up until around 2010, 90% of people watched TV every day. However, in 2020, although over 90% of those aged 60 years and older watched TV, the overall percentage was 80%, and only 50% of those in their 20s and younger watched TV, instead shifting to online streaming. Commercial TV used to target wealthy older people. However, a report released by the Financial Services Agency in 2019 gave people the strong impression that pensions alone would not be enough to cover old age and that they would be short 20 million JPY, and in fact, the purchasing power of older adults is decreasing. Apart from most key commercial stations, even the NHK has narrowed its core audience (core target) to those aged 49 years and younger, with the number of programs for middle-aged and older people continuing to decline. For middle-aged and older people, the number of TV programs that they can enjoy has steadily decreased, even if they want to watch TV.

Although half of the people aged 60 years and older own smartphones, 12.1%, or approximately 5 million people, do not own digital devices, such as smartphones, computers, or tablets. Many older people have smartphones but only use them for making phone calls. This is the so-called digital divide. In the Society 5.0 plan, the national government claims that it will create a human-centered society with a system that fuses the virtual with the physical space. Indeed, there has been increased attention to the virtual space known as the Metaverse. According to a survey in Miyagi Prefecture in April 2021, 31.4% of single-person households aged 65 years and older live in reconstruction housing (Asahi Shimbun electronic version June 6, 2021). The reconstruction housing vacancy rate is 4.8% in Miyagi Prefecture (2.2% of all public housing), and the vacancy rate is expected to continue to increase in the future; 60% of the municipalities in the three affected prefectures had concerns about solitary deaths among older adults (Nihon Keizai Shimbun electronic version March 14, 2022). As society changes owing to the Great East Japan Earthquake disaster and now the COVID-19 pandemic, and as isolation and solitary deaths increase not only among older adults but in general, specific attention should be paid to the use of the internet, including YouTube, and digital devices. I believe that we need a new form in which people can help one another in a society with an aging and declining population.