Amplifying Vulnerabilities: How COVID-19 Is Impacting Japanese at Risk Youth

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Abstract
There are 608 "Children's Homes" (児童養護施設 jidō yōgo shisetsu) across Japan caring for youth unable to live their parents for an array of reasons mainly abuse and poverty. According to the most recent data 13.9% (2020 OECD) Japanese youth live in poverty and in 2018, 159,850 child abuse consultations were made (2018, MHLW). Institutionalization of any kind is always difficult for youth as well for their caretakers. Inside the children's homes, the situation is difficult due to limited staff and tight budgets. The onset of COVID-19 has meant an increase in the need for support while at the same time a decrease in the support institutions could provide, putting an already vulnerable population at added risk. Based on interviews with leaders at leading non-profit organizations working with children from low-income families and in Children's Homes, this examines the immediate difficulties faced during the emergency order when schools were closed and during spring/summer when youth returned to school. Interviews revealed both the needs faced by youth and staff as well as the potential long-term educational and social impacts.

Keywords: COVID-19, Vulnerable Populations, Children's Homes, Child Abuse, Child Poverty, Japan

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Introduction

For most of us, the COVID-19 pandemic has required that we change our personal and professional routines to protect ourselves from infection and to adjust to the different prevention measures (social distancing, stay at home requests, etc.), however those already institutionalized are more vulnerable to infection and have less options. All over the world, there are children living separately from their families and particularly in wealthy nations these children are invisible. Public or private institutions step in and assume responsibility for these young people and in Japan, there are diverse types of organizations attempting to serve the needs of the children, all working with limited resources. During the best of times, young people living in orphanages struggle with isolation, schoolwork, trauma from past experiences, and being ostracized. Any disruption impacts what they are able to do and a major crisis such as a pandemic can have dramatic effects on their work and the youth they serve.

This paper mainly focuses on the "jidō yōgo shisetsu (児童養護施設), Japanese institutions usually translated into English as "orphanages" or "Children's Homes." The children come from families unable to care for them, although they often retain some contact with birth parents. These licensed social welfare institutions are residential facilities that are designed to care for children while they attend regular school until the completion of high school.

Nonprofit organization leaders working with children's homes or their parents were interviewed after gathering data and information from publicly available reports. Interviews were conducted during different phases of the pandemic: during the first wave in spring 2020 during the emergency order when schools were closed; in summer 2020 after children returned to school; and at the beginning of the third wave before the limited emergency order in December 2020. Interviews illustrated the changing conditions in terms of daily life inside the homes, in family relationships and education - both formal and social.

Any institution has to be particularly careful to protect itself from any type of infection, the homes had to curtail almost all contact to the outside world during the spring 2020 emergency order when not only could the children not go to school, but they were constricted to limited contact with other children and even their own family members. Preventative isolation, lack of sufficient staff support and insufficient resources greatly increased the difficulty both for children and the staff who are supposed to take care of them. From June 2020, children were back in school in person. While many youth were thrilled to be able to go out and see friends, some were concerned about travel due to the crowds and long commutes common in major cities in Japan (Benkhart, August 2020; Clemons, August 2020). The Dec 2020-Feb 2021 Emergency Declaration over the most populated areas of Japan did not close public schools, despite a drastic increase in COVID numbers[1]. The article describes the impacts over the course of the year and shows that many challenges were ongoing despite the return to "normal".

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[1] While COVID-19 numbers in Japan have not reached the levels of nations like the U.K. or U.S. at the time of this writing in early Jan 2021, patient cases were rapidly increasing.

Alternative Care in Japan

There are a range of alternative care institutions with different missions and target populations. Facilities include maternal and child life support facilities (母子生活支援施設 boshi seikatsushien shisetsu) for children and mothers fleeing family violence; child psychotherapy facilities (児童心理治療施 jidō shinri chiryōshi) for those requiring regular psychological care; independent living group homes (自立援助ホーム jiritsu enjo hōmu) for 15 to 19 year-olds who have left other care facilities; infant care facilities (乳児院 nyuuji-in) for those up to age 2; foster parent homes ; foster family group homes (ファミリーホーム famirii hōmu or 小規模住居型児童養育事業 shōkibo jukyō-gata jidō yōiku jigyō) where five to six children live with a family; and kinship-based foster parents (親族里親 shinzoku sato-oya) where youth live with grandparents or older siblings (MoHLW, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2014). These quasi-government social welfare institutions were designed to provide basic needs including food, clothing, basic support and a safe living space. While there is much overlap in the issues faced, this will focus only on Children's Homes.

Children's Homes *(*児童養護施設 jidō yōgo shisetsu) are institutions for six or more children aged two to eighteen years old who cannot live with their parents. They are sometimes mistakenly referred to as "orphanages" in English; however, since most nonprofit leaders refer to these as 'Children's Homes,' because most have contact with their birth parents, this article uses that term and "care workers" to refer to the people who work in them.

According to the Ministry Health Labor and Welfare (MoHLW, 2020), 93.3% of the 27,000 youth in children's homes, have 1 or 2 parents living, and 97.9% of them were from "single parent homes." About 65%, have some type of regular communication with parents 2 to 11 times a year and less than 20% have "no interaction" with family members. As of 2018, 608 children's homes housed 27,026 young people throughout Japan accounting for 60% of all children not living with their parents.[2] The average age was 11.5 years old and on average youth stay in these homes for about five years, but not necessarily consecutively (MoHLW, 2020).

Youth placement may be due to parents being sick, disabled, or poor, but the main causes involve neglect or abuse. Precarious conditions are legally categorized separately as neglect, abuse, absentee parents, leaving children unattended, abandonment, and refusal of childcare under Japanese child welfare laws and more than 45% of children are placed in homes for one of these reasons. The ratio of children that has ever experienced some form of abuse is higher at 65.6% and this includes physical abuse (41.1%), sexual abuse (4.5%) neglect (63.0%) and psychological abuse (26.8%). For all alternative childcare facilities except infant homes, the rates of abuse experienced exceeded 50% (MoHLW, 2020).

Decisions regarding the placement of children in Japan are made at the local government level by child guidance centers, who are generally predisposed to placing youth in institutions, as opposed to adoption or foster care. According to Human Rights

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[2] As a point of reference, of the approximately 45,000 of the children not able to live with their birth parents, 86% are living in orphanages and 13% are in foster care.

Watch, 78 % of child guidance centers indicated that children are placed in institutions instead of foster care based on the preference of the birth parents (Human Rights Watch, 2017)[3].

Children's homes are residential facilities and 93.4% attend school regularly. While more than 36% were reportedly behind in school, 56.4% reported "no particular problems with schoolwork". They may face other challenges: 36.7 % have some type of disability, mostly intellectual or psychological disabilities. Of these 47.5% have developmental disorders (autism spectrum), 37% have ADHD, 29.2% have reactive attachment disorder, 12.6% have intellectual disabilities, and 9.7% have PTSD (MoHLW, 2020).

Youth may stay in the homes until they graduate from high school or leave the education system upon completion of obligatory education from age 15 years (MoHLW, 2020; Human Rights Watch 2014). Despite having living relatives, when these young people leave the homes and enter society upon leaving junior or senior high school, there are no familial safety nets to support them in their transition to adulthood, resulting in the solo navigation of finding and keeping a job, finding an apartment and managing daily life such as signing up for and paying for utilities without any support (Bridge for Smile, 2020).

The Organizations Involved in this Study

After gathering basic information on the situation facing youth in the systems from the government and reports, I interviewed employees at six leading Japanese nonprofits working with those from children's homes and economically disadvantaged families. The following nonprofit organizations support disadvantaged youth and provided the information for this paper.[4]

● <u>Mirai no Mori</u> works to build the capacity and potential of youth in children's homes by engaging them in outdoor activities.
● <u>You Me We's</u> primary mission is to help children in homes to become fully capable and financially independent young adults as they prepare to leave the home.
● <u>Bridge for Smile (B4S)</u> focuses on, helping to prepare teenagers for post-orphanage life, developing both their hard and soft skills.
● <u>Hands on Tokyo (HOT)</u> promotes civic engagement through partnerships between organizations needing support and people who want to get involved.
● <u>KIDS DOOR</u> works with lower income families.
● <u>Ashinaga</u> provides educational support to orphaned children worldwide.

What follows is an overview some of the issues faced in daily life and related to education, family and socialization as well as how nonprofits responded to meet these new challenges faced.

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[3] In 2017, a new policy was enacted aiming to place pre-school children in foster care instead of Children's homes, however this was met with opposition by some local governments and Children's Homes alike.

[4] Although in spring 2020 I contacted 25 children's homes through cold calling and email, I was not able to get sufficient responses directly from them. Most responded that they were too busy to address my questions. Other information was gathered from their websites – however these contained limited information.

Stresses and Pressures Faced

Throughout the year the most common concerns were about the stresses put on the youth and how it would manifest itself in life in the homes and school. In April 2020, Lights on Children conducted a survey of children's facilities to assess COVID-related impacts, resulting in 74% reported stress on children, and 50% concerned about education. The Youth Support Fund surveyed 46 homes in September 2020 and 90% responded that COVID was causing great damage to young people in social care (Sept 2020). In interviews, nonprofit leadership explained that the stresses these children experience are similar to others of a similar age, however the impacts are worsened due to past abuse experience and family separation. Their isolation amplifies the trauma and difficulties they face (Uemura, 2020). Likewise, some care workers expressed that there were more fights between the children and one specifically mentioned that at any given time, one child in the facility was crying (Oka, May 2020). Younger children refusing to separate themselves from the care workers, becoming more competitive with each other for attention was also observed (Koirala, 2020). While struggling with cabin fever due to COVID-19 stay-home measures was not unique to children's homes, most people are not doing so while also living with a large group of unrelated persons sharing communal space.

Inside the Homes

The first concern in all institutions has been avoiding the spread of infection and maintaining order. During the spring 2020 during the initial emergency declaration period, a lack of masks and antiseptic was prevalent but these material need gaps abated by summer 2020. Mask wearing and hand washing are not controversial issues, as they are in other nations, but social distancing poses a challenge. While on average there are openings at homes, in more densely populated areas such as Tokyo, the homes operate at or over capacity (Uemura, 2020).

Care workers were directed by government authorities to adhere to social distancing without specific directives, which is challenging given the lack of extra space. Children's homes established different rules regarding social distancing, and some separated the youth into groups of four to six that are not allowed to mingle outside of these smaller groups (Clemons, May 2020). The shared facilities - bathrooms, toilets, and eating areas - pose the biggest health concerns. In some homes, shifts were created to determine when each person could take a bath or eat, resulting in further stress and conflict (Koirala, 2020).

Since June 2020, when children went back to school and society seemed to return normal, Care workers have kept trying to maintain social distancing rules and limit interaction of large groups. While easier to limit the younger ones, it became increasingly more difficult for homes to limit the movement or engagement of teens especially as they need to work, and crowds returned to many places over the year. (Clemons, Aug 2020; Oka, Aug 2020).

The changing situation also posed financial challenges for the homes which rely for roughly half of their funding each from the public and private sectors (Uemura, 2020). Initially, funds were needed for basic preventative costs such as plastic sheeting, masks and disinfectant but increased costs for food and overtime staff pay during the initial

emergency declaration period were also significant. Initially, the government did not anticipate all the additional costs which is why throughout 2020, the Japan National Council of Social Welfare had to repeatedly request additional funds to cover preventative measures (June 2020), to allow care workers access to relief funds and PCR tests and to ensure they may be vaccinated as soon as possible in spring 2021 (August 2020).

The Need for Routine

During the "lockdown" in Spring 2020, homes struggled to keep children occupied and engaged; having diverse activities and a set schedule was important to maintain some semblance of order and normalcy (Clemons, May 2020). Mirai no Mori responded by creating activity kits in spring and summer 2020 which included songs, videos, and activities sheets based on their summer camp and weekend programs. For example, Nature Bingo was adapted so that instead of looking for animal footprints in the woods, children could look for leaves on their Home grounds. Cooking tutorials aimed to keep the camp spirit alive as well as encourage children to take a more active role in the homes. These helped not only keep the children busy with fun activities but also helped serve as a channel for children's connection to the outside world. The interactive educational materials were also aimed at motivating youth to keep learning (Oka, May 2020).

Managing Education Needs

The OECD reported in Dec 2020 how the COVID-19 crisis could have long-lasting impacts for students globally. Such experiences can impair memory and attention, making learning difficult (Rowena, 2020). Since children's home residents tend to have a lower school performance and difficulties due to disabilities or trauma, the ramifications may also pose a more severe challenge for them. Even before the pandemic the children's inability to keep up with schoolwork weighed heavily on Care Workers and while they play an important role in helping youth with homework, Care Workers are not teachers (Koirala, 2020). In Spring 2020, while some national and private schools have started online learning, most public schools distributed worksheets to be completed at home. Care Workers do all they can to help youth keep up with schoolwork, but during the lockdown the aim was to help them not get too far behind (Oka, May 2020). Helping a number of children aged 2 to 18 years old, with assignments from different schools, all of whom need different types of support, while also trying to complete home management and administrative tasks would be a challenge even for the best teachers or administrators.

Connecting to the World Online

The lack of Wi-Fi, overhead projectors, and computers in most homes was a challenge prior to the pandemic which is why You Me We had for years worked with private donors and homes to distribute 500 computers and tablets to young people and staff at homes throughout Japan (Clemons, May 2020). Throughout 2020, organizations responded with computer and cash donation campaigns. Lights on Children initiated a "Give a computer to an orphanage in Tokyo," for children's homes in Chiba, Saitama and Kanagawa prefectures (Lights on Children, 2020; Save the Children Japan, 2020). After assessing how high school students were falling behind by not being able to take

part in online programs, HOT held a fundraising campaign aiming for five million yen to provide 100 youth computers, tablets and technical support (Hands on Tokyo, 2020).

Organizations attempted to respond to the needs as they evolved by creating new initiatives in diverse forms. Besides the aforementioned self-learning kits, organizations created new phone, and online classes, and programs. For example, after initial assessment in spring 2020, Kids Door launched some phone-based education support programs and shifted to offering programs using diverse methods, including phone, online, in-person and hybrid systems (Benkhart, May and Dec 2020).

The issues of access are more complicated than having PC and Wi-Fi access. A Lights on Children survey of 56 facilities results showed that while 85% answered that they would like to use the Internet to supplement studies, 82% of homes had problems in how to utilize the computers distributed (Lights on Children, 2020). Even when computers are distributed it does not mean that there is adequate internet access or knowledge of how to make the most of having a computer (Uemura, 2020; Clemons May 2020). Care workers also lacked confidence in how to manage online security and children's online safety (Clemons, Aug 2020*).*

If youth were falling more behind in school was not really clear, however teens were behind in high school and college examination preparation. Due to both schools being closed in spring, and the delay of preparation courses, teens were not where they should be in exam preparation (Benkhart, Dec 2020). In a country where entrance exams are so important for moving ahead, this could have lifelong impacts on at-risk youth.

While 2020 posed many challenges, a common sentiment was that long-term, internet and computer accessibility would have positive impacts once new programs were normalized. Not only can this give youth greater access to information and promote the development of new skills, but it could also foster different ways of learning that some youth might find rewarding. The push to "go online" has the potential to bring about new opportunities in the future, given lasting infrastructure development, although this is also an additional ongoing cost to Children's Homes' already tight budgets.

Financial Pressures

For teenagers, keeping up with studies and exams are just part of their struggles. The transition to living on their own after they leave the Children's Homes is always stressful, but COVID-19 brought about new unknowns. Many teens noted a reduction in hours and wages and/or concern about having less money (Ashinaga, 2020, Youth Support Fund, 2020). Working to save money and secure any type of employment is intrinsic to their post-home survival since they have no support system if they do not find employment. If teenagers are unable to work part-time due to pandemic, it also means they could experience difficulties paying their cell phone bills, which isolates them from both their social network, and more importantly holds them back from contact with potential study and work opportunities (Uemura, 2020). In fall 2020, Kids Door and Ashinaga stepped up efforts for scholarship funds. Based on prior research showing the economic insecurity teens faced, these campaigns aimed to support the costs of examination practice tests, entrance exams and the transport which all cost money that they did not have (Benkhart, Dec 2020; Ashinaga, Dec 2020).

Family Connections

Family relations, an ever-present issue, became more pressing in 2020. During the emergency declaration, a priority was placed on health, so visits from outside persons, including parents, were restricted in many homes (Oka, May2020). Guidelines were generally eased from June. However, the type of work parents engage in either presented a higher potential risk for infection or increased negative economic impact, or both. Parents of those in homes tend to have irregular or unstable employment, and many work at jobs with high risks of infection such as nursing, elder care, food service, and hospitality businesses making them concerned about making visits (Ashinaga 2020). Some children visit or stay at their parent's homes regularly and/or usually have visits during the summer or winter year-end holidays. Limited visits by family members due to concern over infection or financial reasons presents another stress (Clemons, August 2020; Oka, Dec 2020). The fear of losing family connections and the potential for re-abandonment could have serious impacts on the children (Oka, May 2020; Clemons, May 2020; Uemura 2020).

Technology can ease some of the stress by helping maintain contact with parents, family members, teachers, volunteers, and friends, which is why the availability of video calling platforms such as Skype is meaningful (Uemura, 2020; Clemons 2020). Even though parents want contact this can be a challenge due to the parents' lack of infrastructure. (Social Welfare News Online, May 2020). The loss of these parent-child meetings is particularly devastating in the cases where there was the expectation of reunion (Clemons, Aug 2020; Oka, Aug 2020).

Socialization and Connections to the World Outside the Homes

Nonprofit employees and volunteers not only provide much needed financial, material and service support, but as individuals, they also function in developing social skills and provide exposure to new ideas and perspectives. Throughout 2020, organizational leaders expressed concern about what the long-term impacts of the limited exposure to their volunteers would be on children.

During the spring, all volunteers were prohibited from direct engagement. Not being able to accept volunteers into the homes to assist with schoolwork, to play games with, or to provide computer, life skills, or English classes, when exposure to the outside world was most limited posed a particular challenge (Clemons, August, Dec 2020; Uemura 2020). Many homes extended isolation rules through the year due to infection and social distancing concerns despite COVID-19 cases dropping after summer. Other times, volunteers were unable to provide direct engagement support due to either corporate policy or their own chronic health issues (Benkhart August 2020; Clemons, Dec 2020)

Through their programs, nonprofit volunteers provide necessary alternative role models. Young people in homes generally have a limited scope of adult role models – usually care workers and teachers. Children living with parents can meet parents' friends, people with different jobs and interests, and these role models expose the youth to new possibilities (Koirala 2020). Volunteers represent alternative future options as well chances to get new perspectives on life. The lost potential of broadening each child's

world because they cannot meet new people from whom they can learn may have long-term effects (Oka 2020).

The role of nonprofits is especially important in the area of building community connections. Partly due to the increased COVID-19 numbers, December holiday events were canceled. Often these events involve neighborhood residents as well as volunteers and these are significant beyond the presents the youth receive.[5] Mirai no Mori decided to switch focus away from the youth receiving gifts and to the spirit of giving through their new Christmas activity kit. Kits included information on holiday craft making and cookie baking as well as greetings from Mirai no Mori leaders. By having the youth make cards and/or gifts for others, they were able to turn fun activities into a new learning experience. (Oka, Kozue; Dec 23, 2020). The engagement aspects of programs provide both a respite from stress and a sense of connection and normalcy.

Silver Linings?

While the pandemic highlights the divide between youth who live/don't live with their families as well as those with/without resources there may be some positive knock off effects. The most obvious is the increased access to technology. Care workers, nonprofit organizations and supporters all had to step up and improve their own online, offline and hybrid program delivery by trying new things. The diversity of programs and events shifted to match changing conditions and this flexibility may also be meaningful for the youth long term.

Another potential silver lining could be if more attention was brought to the plight of these children, there could be more active collaboration between the children's homes and other agencies or sectors (Benkhart May 2020; Uemura, 2020). Some organizations found local government more flexible about support guidelines (Benkhart Dec 2020); and other organizations recognized the need to consider new ways of working with the Care workers themselves (Clemons Dec 2020). More partnerships at the local level between nonprofits and local governments, the business sector, and social welfare agencies could result in more people sharing expertise and contributing to the growth and development of these young people into active, successful members of society (Clemons, May 2020).

Representative of these positive trends was the first ever online exchange event for people from orphanages throughout Japan held in a hybrid fashion online and in various location, supported by the Ministry of Health Labor and Welfare. While only 150 people joined, participants were from all over Japan. They not only talked about issues that matter to them, but also shared singing and dancing performances (Social Welfare News Online, Nov 2020). Should events like this continue, this may help develop a broader identity, awareness or public acknowledgement of the issues they face.

On the flip side, because underlying issues that contribute to the difficult situation these children face - neglect, abuse, and economic pressures – have not been addressed, there is nothing to show that these youths will not get by unscathed. During the best of times, young people living in orphanages struggle with schoolwork, trauma from past

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[5] This information came from nonprofit leaders and the review about children's homes websites showing the cancelation of holiday and Christmas parties.

experiences, and ostracization and the pressure to grow up earlier than their peers. The importance of the nonprofits supporting the homes has greatly increased because they provide the needed support networks.

Concluding Thoughts

Throughout 2020 nonprofit leaders had to be nimble and adapt to changing needs and all showed concern over the long-term impacts as well as for the children living in abusive homes. While moving some of these young people into the more institutionalized children's' homes is necessary, this move also comes with its own challenges, as we have seen in this article. Beyond the children who are already in homes or alternative care, attention and empathy needs to also be extended to those children who *should* be in care homes but are not. Such children have an urgent need to be protected from a range of abuses, but they are invisible because they are stuck in the place where the abuse is occurring (Oka, May2020; Clemons, May 2020).

The impacts of the 2020 pandemic on these youths are difficult to predict. Much depends on how long the pandemic continues, if COVID-19 numbers in Japan spike again and if nonprofits have the resources to continue programs and services. The pandemic has shown just how chronically vulnerable the institutions and the youth inside are, not just during a pandemic or any similar crisis, but on an everyday basis. However, it will take more altruism to alter the conditions. A shift in attitudes towards them as well as changes in the systems which confine them will require an investment of resources, including money, time and expertise to bring about broader change. In such a rapidly aging society, which cannot afford to let any youth fall through the cracks, the pandemic offers an opportunity for this investment.

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