

## Country Brief: Japan

Yokohama



The next (2014) ISA World Congress will be held in Yokohama, Japan – currently the world’s most aged country. In the midst of global concerns about population aging and its social, political and economic consequences, Japan is in many ways serving as a case study of these consequences and the efficacy of various strategies for dealing with them. Policy analysts from other countries around the world can potentially learn a lot from a close study of what is going on today in Japan with attention to which strategies for dealing with these issues are working and which are not working as well.

Since 2007, the United Nations has classified Japan as what is termed a super-aging country. This term is sometimes used to describe those countries in which 21 percent or more are aged 65 and over. In 2010, this age group accounts for 23 percent of the country’s population, whereas the corresponding figure for the world is only 7.6 percent. Japan is also the country with the oldest median age and highest old-age dependency ratio. Japan has also experienced population aging at a much faster rate than experienced

by most other industrial countries. For instance, for the 65+ age group to increase from 7 to 14 percent of the total population took about 115 years in France, 85 years in Sweden, and 69 years in the U.S, but only 26 years in Japan.

In many respects population aging can and should be viewed as a positive societal development. It is a natural outcome of: (1) its highly education population, (2) the high quality of and access to medical care, and (3) generous government spending on age-related social welfare programs. Despite these achievements, however, in the case of Japan, this fast population aging has created unprecedented challenges to the country and government policy makers. The main challenges are found in four areas: (1) projected depopulation over the next few decades which may weaken the country’s economic vitality in an increasingly competitive 21<sup>st</sup> century global economy; (2) mounting pressure to delay the retirement of older male workers which must be balanced with the potential unintended risks of reducing employment opportunities for younger workers and older women; (3) improving a

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new medical insurance program exclusively for those age 75 and older (implemented in 2008), which is being severely criticized by many as a form of age-based health care rationing; and (4) finding ways to integrate the foreign-born long-term care workers needed to serve the frail elderly into Japanese society, a society which is currently characterized by strong cultural and linguistic homogeneity and persistently strict immigration policy.

In order to deal with these challenges, Japan needs to gradually engage in restructuring long-held social institutions and the traditional cultural values that underlie the country’s long-established employment institutions, social policies, and welfare programs. As the world’s premier example of a super-aging society, Japan’s experience calls for greater attention from sociologists of aging and the life course around the world. Those interested in such issues as depopulation, old-age labor force participation, health insurance, and long-term care will be particularly interested in learning about the ways in which Japan is trying to balance pressures linked to population aging in an increasingly competitive global economy on the one hand with the need to consider the well-being of young and middle aged members of Japanese society at the same time. Come join us for the next ISA World Congress in 2014. Enjoy the attractions and learn both achievements and challenges of the world’s most aged country. ✨