



Written by [Angeline Tan](#) on October 7, 2022

## A Brief Look at Japan's Demographic Collapse

SINGAPORE — Earlier in May this year, Tesla chief executive and billionaire Elon Musk tweeted a warning that Japan will “cease to exist” unless it deals with its declining birth rate. Musk’s tweet was in response to a news report that Japan’s population recorded its largest decline, dropping by 644,000 in 2021. Such a decline marked the eleventh consecutive year that the Japanese population has shrunk, fueling concerns for the country to permit more immigration and to enhance its work-life balance.



Torsakarini/iStock/Getty Images Plus  
Tokyo, Japan

“At the risk of stating the obvious, unless something changes to cause the birthrate to exceed the death rate, [Japan](#) will eventually cease to exist. This would be a great loss for the world,” Musk, who has expressed his worries about a global population collapse, commented in the post. \_

Based on data from the [CIA's World Factbook](#), Japan ranked near the bottom of the average annual number of births per 1,000 people in the population. Also, Japan also recently invested \$970 million in regenerative medicine as it is the country with the [world's oldest population](#).

36.27 million people were over 65, a figure that hit a record high. This over-65 demographic comprised 29.1 percent of the population, based on data from the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications.

Japan is the oldest society by proportion of over 65s in the world, well above Italy in second place at 24.1 percent and Finland in third place with 23.3 percent. This year, elderly men totaled 15.74 million, accounting for 26.0 percent of the total male population, while the number of elderly women came to 20.53 million, comprising 32.0 percent of the overall female population.

Annually since 1950, the share of the elderly population in Japan has been rising. The country's National Institute of Population and Social Security Research predicts the percentage of elderly to hit 35.3 percent of the total population in 2040, when people born between 1971 and 1974 to post-war baby boomers, will reach 65 or more.

Some respondents and commentators were thankful that Musk broached the issue and criticized the Japanese government for not doing enough to support couples who have or may wish to have children. These people mentioned the financial responsibilities of having children and the high living expenses as reasons that have slowed birth rates in Japan.

Indeed, these figures may show that Japan's population is aging and declining. However, these statistics do not imply that the death rate in Japan is rising. On the contrary, Japanese people are living longer lives than ever before. This year, the country's over 75s comprise over 15 percent of the population for



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the first time, after their numbers increased by 720,000 to 19.37 million people, according to government data released. An aging population becomes a problem when this phenomenon is coupled with a decreasing birth rate. And Japan only knows this double whammy too well, as it is facing this crisis now.

Government data revealed that the [proportion of people aged 15 to 64](#) stood at a record low of 59.4 percent, while that of those aged 65 or older hit a record high of 28.9 percent. People aged 14 or younger comprise a record low figure of 11.8 percent of the population.

A large proportion of young women in Japan who are hoping to get married want only one child or none at all. This marks the first time in Japan's post-war history that the average number of desired births has dropped to below two, based on a survey. Such statistics intensify worries about the country's rapidly graying and declining population.

Factors contributing to Japan's falling birth rates abound, such as women prioritizing their careers, postponing marriage and children. Economic insecurity is another important factor that contributes to hesitancy in having children among couples, as they worry about not being financially stable or capable enough to support and raise a child.

A 2022 white paper on the declining birth rate released by the Cabinet Office indicated that Covid-19 and its impact had taken a toll on the number of marriages and pregnancies, highlighting that people in their 20s and 30s had become more hesitant about marriage, income, jobs, and families than other age groups compared with prior to Covid-19.

As Japan is a country where men are still widely expected to be the main breadwinners supporting their families, many men who are struggling with holding stable jobs that pay decently enough to pay the bills do not marry or choose not to have children because they think they cannot afford to. Such dwindling financial and economic opportunities arise from a broader and more transnational trend: the onset of contract or unsteady employment. Japan has had a tradition of "regular employment" in which men began their careers at jobs that provided them with an assortment of benefits, reliable salary raises, and the idea that if they were loyal to their companies and worked industriously, they could retain their jobs till retirement age.

Nonetheless, times have changed, and currently about 40 percent of the Japanese workforce is "irregular," meaning that employees do not work for companies where they are guaranteed job security till retirement. Instead, many employees have to juggle between temporary and part-time jobs with meager salaries and zero benefits. Notably, such temporary workers are still deemed as employed in government statistics, with their resultant insecurities not captured by official figures. Additionally, less than half of irregular workers are able to transition into regular jobs at some point in their career.

Jeff Kingston, a professor at Temple University's Japan campus and the author of several books about Japan, said that from 1995 to 2008, Japan's number of regular workers fell by 3.8 million, while the number of irregular workers rose by 7.6 million.

Irregular employees earn on average less than \$2,000 monthly but spend much of their earnings on rent, paying back their college loans, and paying into Japan's social-security program. As a result, they do not have much savings to live on, let alone raise a family.

Such economic insecurities and instabilities for Japanese employees have crucial ramifications for marriage and childbearing. Men who do not hold regular jobs are not regarded as ideal marriage partners. Even if a man and a woman who have irregular jobs want to get married, their parents will



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likely object to such a union, as Ryosuke Nishida, a professor at Tokyo Institute of Technology who has written about unemployment among young workers, put it. A 2016 survey of Japanese people ages 18 to 34 found that nearly 70 percent of unmarried men and 60 percent of unmarried women aren't in a relationship.

About 30 percent of irregular workers in their early 30s are married, juxtaposed with 56 percent of full-time corporate employees, Kingston asserted. "Japan has this idea that the man is supposed to get a regular job," Nishida elaborated. "If you graduate and you don't find a job as a regular employee, people look at you as a failure."

While Japan is not the only country that has witnessed a rise in temporary workers, cultural factors and societal values still prioritize regular employment in Japanese society. Hence, unlike other developed economies such as the United States, Japanese people who cannot obtain regular employment, regardless of educational background, are often looked down on in a way that people in the United States might not be. "There's a tendency, when someone doesn't have a job, to blame them," Nishida said.

Women seeking full-time work typically land up in irregular jobs as well. Such irregular employment also impacts women's decisions to have a family or not, as unstable and irregular employment translates to unpredictable hours and meager pay. That being said, men still bear the brunt of the consequences of not having steady and well-paying jobs, as approximately 70 percent of women quit working after their first child, and instead rely on their husband's salary for some time.

"The gender stuff is pretty consistent with trends around the world — men are having a harder time," opined Anne Allison, a professor of cultural anthropology at Duke University who edited the recent collection of scholarly essays *Japan: The Precarious Future*.

Furthermore, women in Japan's big cities have also complained about the paucity of available men. Matchmaking companies such as Zwei have attempted to encourage Japan's city women to be more open to marriage prospects in Japan's suburban and countryside areas. In fact, Zwei's business model centers on matching women in Japan's big cities with men in other parts of the country, where men are more likely to be regarded as viable prospects as they have jobs that can better match the standard of living outside big cities.

"Men in their 20s, they don't have an idea of having families or a house," opined Makoto Iwahashi, a member of POSSE, a group formed by college graduates who wanted to create a labor union for young people. "Most of them feel that it's just not a reality."

"Easing restrictions on immigration is a necessary first step in boosting the population, but the Japanese government also needs to address structural problems in the Japanese economy and society that keep young people from getting married and having children — even if they want to," [John Person](#), an associate professor in the Department of East Asian Studies at University at Albany, State University of New York, told the National Interest. "This includes tackling the issue of growing economic inequality and ensuring better access to affordable childcare."

Not everyone agreed with the idea that the government was not doing enough. Shigeki Matsuda, a sociology professor at Chukyo University in central Japan, warned that the declining marriage trend would adversely affect the birth rate.

"The Japanese government has been working to increase the birth rate by trying to help those who wish to get married or have children fulfill their aspirations," Matsuda told the Mainichi Shimbun newspaper.



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“But if the number of people who don’t want to marry continues to increase, the government will be forced to review its policies, and it could lead to a further decline in fertility.”

After all, Matsuda’s comments resonate with figures showing that the interest in marriage has declined in Japan, based on a government survey in 2021. This survey showed that 84.3 percent of women were interested in marriage, down five percentage points, and 81.4 percent of men were keen on marriage, down 4.3 percentage points. Such figures also add to worries about the low birth rate.

According to the survey, 17.3 percent of men and 14.6 percent of women aged between 18 and 34 said they had no desire of ever tying the knot — the highest figure since the questionnaire was first conducted in 1982.

In perhaps the most blatant hint of Japan’s double problem of increasing elderly and low birth rates, media reports have noted that adult diapers have outsold baby diapers in Japanese supermarkets.



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