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Social Policy and Administration in Japan



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Synonyms

Frontline workers in Japan; Local social welfare offices in Japan; Social administration in Japan; Social policy and policy implementation in Japan; Social security system in Japan; The Japanese welfare state

Definition

The institutionalized response at local governments to social and economic problems and risks, such as economic insecurity, inequality, and poverty, according to the development of an administrative state.

Introduction

Rapidly aging and shrinking population is among the most serious challenges that Japan currently faces. Meanwhile economic and social disparities have expanded in the last two decades. The number of Japanese children born in Japan in 2019 will reach 864 thousand, falling below

900 thousand for the first time since statistics began in 1899, according to a Health, Labor, and Welfare Ministry report. (“The number of births in 2019 fell for the first time in nine hundred thousand, earlier than expected.” (in Japanese) *Asahi-Shinbun*, December 24, 2019.) In addition, Japan’s population aged 65 years and older is expected to exceed 30% in 2025.

These developments have caused observers to question the sustainability of Japan’s social security system. Although both national and local social security expenditures continue to increase rapidly due to the aging of society, Japan’s social security system faces a number of challenges, including providing sufficient nursing care and health care for the elderly, child-rearing support, and other welfare benefits. Local government plays an important role in social policy implementation not only as a follower of national redistributing policies but also as a gatekeeper of social policy.

Turning our eyes towards local welfare administration, this essay considers how and why local government works to realize the ideal welfare state and mitigate inequality. First is an overview of the Japanese welfare administration system. Next, previous studies regarding the welfare system in Japan are reviewed and followed by a examination of both the characteristics of the reforms carried out as a response to the retrenchment of the welfare state and the characteristics of the Japanese welfare state that have persisted in spite of these reforms. The characteristics of the

current Japanese welfare administration system are then discussed. After that, the importance of exploring the discretion of local government and the exercise of discretion by frontline local government officials are argued. Finally, this essay discusses major social, demographic, economic, political, and institutional challenges that Japan is facing, with a focus on the implementation of social policy at the local level, along with an exploration of the corresponding theoretical challenges that researchers face in analyzing this landscape.

The Japanese Welfare Administrative System

Welfare policies vary from country to country and depend on the type of welfare state that each country establishes. Article 25 (2) of the constitution of Japan states that the State shall endeavor to improve and promote social welfare, social security, and public health in all aspects of life. In Japan, the definitions of social security and social welfare vary among advocates. Based on the social security council “Recommendations on Social Security Systems” (October 16, 1950), social security is here defined as comprising social insurance, social welfare, public assistance, and public health. Social welfare and public assistance are positioned as welfare policies. Social insurance is based on the principle of mutual aid and risk diversification, including pensions, medical insurance, and employment insurance. Social welfare supports the lives of the socially disadvantaged and should be borne by taxes. It is legislated for each target population, such as people with disabilities, children, single-parent families, the elderly, and the needy.

These various social security benefits are provided by the national government and local governments. According to the financial results for fiscal 2018, 34.4% of Japan’s total (national and local government) 169.2 trillion yen budget went towards social security–related expenses. Of this portion, 70% was spent by local governments,

excluding pensions, which are entirely covered at the national government level. As fiscal expenditures, local governments account for 57% of total government expenditures; it can be said that local governments account for a large share of social security expenditure (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications 2020).

Of the 2.74 million local government employees, 368,000, or 13.3%, are welfare workers. Welfare-related employees account for approximately 40% of the total general administrative sector (which excludes education, police, firefighting, and public enterprises). In particular, of the total 1,349,000 municipal employees, 311,000, or 23.1%, are welfare related (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications 2019). From these figures, it can be said that local governments play an extremely important role in the social security field.

Social security benefits consist of a combination of policy recipients and means of delivering benefits to them. The recipient of the benefit is prescribed by each law. Under the Public Assistance Act, the recipients are poor people; under the Child Welfare Act, they are children under 18 years of age; under the Single Mother and Widow Welfare Act, they are single parents; and under the Comprehensive Support Act for Persons with Disabilities, they are people with disabilities.

The means of providing benefits can be broadly divided into cash benefits and in-kind benefits. Cash benefits are further divided into grants and allowances, insurance systems, and loans. The responsibilities of providing and administering benefits are shared among the national government, prefectures, and municipalities, as shown in Table 1.

As you can see from Table 1, social security administration is roughly divided as follows. The national government, i.e., the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare (hereafter MHLW) is responsible for social insurance such as pensions and unemployment insurance, in which financial support plays a central role. The national government also carries out programs that are established under a country-wide, unified system such as

Social Policy and Administration in Japan, Table 1 Division of social security and administrative roles between the national and local governments

Field		Social insurance	Social welfare	Public assistance	Public health
National government		Pension, unemployment insurance, and healthcare (medical license, drug license etc.)			
Local government	Prefecture	National health insurance, health care planning, and public hospitals.	Child welfare (abuse, temporary protective custody, etc.), issuance of disability certificates, payment for services and supports for persons with disabilities, and special child-rearing allowance benefit	Public assistance (towns and villages)	Public health centers, immunizations
	Municipality	Long-term care insurance	Child welfare (childcare support), welfare for the disabled, and elderly care	Public assistance (city)	Water and sewage, health centers, and public hospitals

health care. Most programs related to social welfare, public assistance, and public health are carried out by local governments because they are centered on personal services. Of course, the MHLW is also involved in designing programs that are carried by local governments and providing financial support. Prefectural governments are mainly responsible for highly specialized work and measures that should be implemented over a wide area. On the other hand, municipalities take various measures to implement the six welfare laws (public assistance, child welfare, welfare for the elderly, welfare for single parents, welfare for the physically disabled, and welfare for the mentally disabled), and childcare support, among others, is not handled by the MHLW or at the prefecture level. In addition, local governments do not only receive subsidies and realize a social security system designed by the national government, but also provide additional services as independent programs of local governments by making efforts according to the actual conditions of the area. For example, medical expenses are subsidized and long-term care prevention programs are provided. This is why social welfare

in Japan is called “municipal welfare.” This paper will focus on the welfare administration provided by local governments in Japan.

The Previous Research on Japanese Welfare Administration System

Many studies have debated the development and current status of Japanese welfare states, in terms of political economy and comparative welfare regime perspectives (Esping-Andersen 1997, 2001; Estévez-Abe 2008; Kasza 2006; Kato 2003; Hall and Soskice 2001; Miura 2012; Miyamoto 2003, 2008; Lynch 2006; Peng 2000, 2012; Shinkawa 1993; Hall and Soskice 2001). Japan has been variably categorized as having “equally combined the main elements of both the liberal–residualist model and the conservative–corporatist model” (Esping-Andersen 2001: xiii), as a “familialist regime” (Shinkawa 1993), or as a combination of liberal, conservative, and social democratic regimes (Miyamoto 2008), with these three characterizations drawing upon welfare regime theory, while also having been

categorized as a coordinated market (CME) (Hall and Soskice 2001), drawing upon “varieties of capitalism” theory. Previous research has considered the Japanese welfare state as an amalgamation of small public welfare, private corporate welfare, the male breadwinner family model, age-oriented welfare, and low-productivity employment policies, such as protection and regulation of small- and medium-sized companies, and public works in local areas (Tanaka 2019).

An important theme that researchers have identified in the public and policy discourse is the nature of the Japanese welfare state as a “Japanese-style welfare society” supported by corporate welfare and family welfare. This discourse has been part of the ideology of LDP conservatives and describes the substantial characteristics of their policies. This approach to welfare policy differentiates Japan from other advanced Western countries that Esping-Andersen’s model can be applied to describe. The term “Japanese-style welfare society” was used in Prime Minister Ohira’s administrative policy speech in January 1979 during the period of low economic growth following the oil shock, and the Cabinet approved the “seven-year plan for a new economy and society.” This idea of a Japanese-style welfare society consists of the following seven elements. One element is non-acceptance of Western welfare state models on the grounds that such approaches lead to the corrosion of family ties. Second is the emphasis on self-help efforts such as savings and life insurance. Third is the affirmation that living together with the elderly and their children are “hidden assets of welfare” in Japan, resulting in the emphasis on welfare by the family. Fourth is an emphasis on mutual aid provided by the local community. Fifth is continued support for corporate welfare represented by lifetime employment and seniority-based wages. Sixth is affirming the importance of the private sector and market systems. And last but not least is an emphasis on social security measures as a safety net in cases where self-help efforts and family welfare are not sufficient.

In his seminal work on Japanese welfare politics, Campbell (1992) focused on the

development of Japan’s social security policy, starting with the time when the welfare state was expanding in the 1950s up until the 1970s, through the reassessment and reform of these policies beginning in the 1980s to the 1990s. Campbell studied the decision-making processes in Japan that affecting policies addressing Japan’s aging society, such as pensions, health care, and employment. Other research has explored why Japan failed in carrying out fundamental social and economic reforms designed to boost productivity, encourage the participation of women and immigrants in the workforce, and facilitate work-family balance in order to respond to the industrial hollowing out and women’s declining fertility (Schoppa 2006). Using Hirshman’s framework, Schoppa argued that individuals who wanted to have children but still continued to work and firms that wanted to escape from Japan’s convoy system both exited from the political market. Kitayama (2011) analyzed national health insurance policy development from the viewpoint of historical institutionalism and examined the impact of local government on the development of the welfare state.

While a lot of debate over the trajectories of Japanese welfare state, such as formation and reform among others, has focused on political factors such as class mobilization, party politics, and institutional legacies, few studies have examined the characteristics of welfare administration and welfare implementation at the local government level, and intergovernmental relationships in the welfare field, which are all components of Japan’s welfare state but may have different mechanisms due to local administrative systems. The notable exception is Campbell (1992), who discusses the free health care program for the elderly established by the Minobe administration of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government in the late 1960s. However, this movement to introduce free health care was limited in time and political context, when progressive, reform-minded, government leaders of prefectures and large cities emerged, and more progressive local governments expanded benefits as a whole in the era of the old people boom. Thus, Campbell just examined the choices of local government as one actor

in the political arena of national social security policy, while not considering the structure of the intergovernmental or local administrative systems, which have significant impact on the implementation of social security policy.

Of the limited research covering these topics, there is literature that examines welfare magnet theory as put forward by Peterson and Rom (1990) and investigates its explanatory power for the Japanese case, in terms of public choice. For example, Tanabe (1996) characterizes Japan's National Health Insurance system as a policy of redistribution between regions as well as redistribution between individuals, and that the welfare magnet theory does not apply in the case of Japan, considering the policy legacies such as the municipal system, linkage with the general account budget, and subsidies from national government. Second, there is some literature that focuses on intergovernmental relations (IGR) in the welfare field, in terms of finance and human resource management, among others. For example, Hiromoto (1996–1997) argued that by paying attention to the subsidies from the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare, the relationship between the national and local governments in welfare administration is sparse, and that the national government is active in increasing the financial burden of local governments. Third, there is literature that examines political factors that affect the quality of welfare policies. For example, Park (2014) examined the case of Takanosu-machi, a former municipality in the Akita Prefecture that attracted attention as a model for “the best welfare in Japan.” In 2003 Takanosu-cho had a pivotal mayoral election in which whether the municipality should merge with another was the top issue. The candidate that supported the merger was elected, and subsequently the area experienced a decline in welfare quality.

The Change and Continuity of the Welfare Administration System

As has already been made clear, the end of economic growth after 1980 and the collapse of the

bubble economy in the early 1990s led to major changes in the nature of the welfare state in Japan, as well as in the postindustrial societies of other developed countries. In line with this change, Japan's welfare administration system also changed.

The era from the late 1980s to 1990s was a period when the welfare policies were decentralized while the central government imposed local planning obligations. By reason of the financial constraints due to the oil crisis and the end of the high economic growth, the central government promoted administrative reform in the 1980s. As part of the central government's administrative reform, many administrative tasks of five of the six welfare acts, excepting the Public Assistance Act, such as those related to the placement of childcare and special nursing homes for the elderly, was shifted from being administered by central government to instead local government. As a result, the government's share of the financial burden had been reduced from around 80% to 50%.

In 1990, eight welfare-related laws were revised, and municipalities were required to perform many of the welfare-related tasks. The revisions included defining in-home welfare services. In addition, the government adopted the planned administration system both in order to improve the service provision infrastructure in response to the increasing welfare needs, and in order to control the quality of welfare work performed by local governments around this time. A 10-year strategy for the promotion of health and welfare for the elderly called the gold plan (10 years from FY 1990), a plan in the field of child welfare called the angel plan (5 years from FY 1995), and a plan for the disabled (7 years from FY 1996) were formulated, requiring local government to decide the direction of its policies while revising its plan. During this period, most of the welfare work was shifted to a system centered on municipalities, but that services were provided based on national standards did not change as local governments still relied on central government funding.

The era during the 2000s was the period of basic structural social welfare reform. In order to

cope with the declining birth rate and aging population, as well as increase the quantity and improve the quality of welfare services, the government aimed to change the three basic structures of social welfare that had developed since 1945 to this period. First, the government changed the welfare system from a safeguard system (*Sochi*) into a contract system. Before this reform, the government was required to provide the services, through compulsory administrative measures called “*sochi*.” Under the contract system, services are provided through contracts between the user and the service provider, allowing the user to select a service.

The second major structural reform was the introduction of the private sector’s entry into the welfare service market. It can be said that the concept of NPM (New Public Management), which became in vogue in Japan at that time, was applied to the welfare field. Until at that time, only a limited number of organizations, such as local governments or social welfare corporations, had provided welfare services under the principle that welfare services should be provided by public entities. However, by promoting the entry of private businesses into the welfare service sector and systematically positioning nonprofit organizations (NPOs) and volunteers as welfare services, the government sought to respond to increasing demand for services and to improve the quality of services through the principle of competition among businesses.

The third structural reform was the promotion of decentralization. In 2000, the decentralization package law was enacted, and decentralization has since advanced not only in social welfare but throughout all policy areas. In order to ensure that welfare services are in line with local conditions, the role of local governments has been emphasized in the operation of the system, and local governmental authority in providing services and supervising business establishments has been increased, along with national funding transferred to local budgets. Specifically, the 1951 Social Welfare Services Act was revised through the 2000 Social Welfare Act, aiming to promote community welfare, expand the scope of social welfare services, and establish a system to protect

users. In addition, the act made it obligatory for local governments to make an effort in drawing up community welfare plans. In 2000 the long-term care insurance system, in which municipalities are insurers, was also introduced. Childcare center admission became a contract-based system (1997), and the disability support fee system was introduced (2003).

In addition to these three major reforms, in order to respond to the diversification of welfare issues, a system was created to protect those who were disadvantaged due to specific acts such as abuse by others. This system was established through the passage of the child abuse prevention law (2000), the domestic violence prevention law (2001), the elderly abuse prevention law (2005), and the disabled persons abuse prevention law (2011).

The term during the 2010s has been a period of pursuing inclusiveness, support for self-reliance, and community-based service. Due to facing an unprecedented low birth rate and aging population, it has been becoming increasingly difficult to cope with labor shortages, a shortage of welfare workers, and a tight fiscal situation. The government plans to raise the consumption tax, carry out comprehensive reforms of the social security and tax systems, raise the self-pay portion of insurance premiums and impose income restrictions. The issue of day care waiting lists for children has become a problem due in part to the promotion of women’s participation in the workforce, and child poverty has become a problem due to widening disparities. In addition, an increasing number of families have multiple welfare issues, such as poverty, abuse, hikikomori (individuals who isolate themselves at home for 6 months or longer), and elderly care (The Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare website. <https://www.mhlw.go.jp/seisaku/2010/02/02.html> (Accessed on October 10, 2020)). Until now, the welfare administration in Japan has been structured according to the type of recipient, and the budget and staffing have been divided vertically. The problem was that there were too many vertical barriers and suboptimal cooperation between specialists and organizations in different fields. Inclusion is being pursued to improve service delivery

efficiency and address complex challenges. In addition, in order to cope with the shortage of workers and financial resources, support for self-reliance is provided so that people can live independently, prevention is emphasized so that intensive support is not required, and support is aimed at the local level.

The Act on Comprehensive Support for Persons with Disabilities (2012), the Act on Child-Rearing Support for Children (2012), the Act on Self-reliance Support for the Destitute (2013), and the Child Poverty Countermeasures Act (2013) were established in line with the above objectives. In addition, the Act on Promotion of Comprehensive Assurance of Medical and Long-Term Care (2014) was enacted to construct a community care system that comprehensively ensures the provision of efficient and high-quality medical and long-term care in communities.

These systems are built on the basis of local communities, so naturally, municipalities and prefectures play an important role. As a result of the second decentralization reform, local governments can now develop their own standards in a more flexible regulatory environment, such as in the designation of service providers and the standards for the operation of facilities. In addition to providing welfare services, local governments now have a certain degree of authority to regulate businesses.

As the national population continues to decline, policies continue to pursue inclusiveness, self-reliance, and community-based service. The goal is to realize a society in harmony with local communities from 2017 and to provide social security for all generations in 2019. The importance of local governments is expected to increase in the future in terms of how to involve people in the face of an overwhelming shortage of financial resources and a shortage of volunteers and other service providers.

While the major reforms of decentralization and marketization were carried out, it is important to note that the direction of the “Japanese-style welfare society” has not changed significantly, though some social support systems such as the long-term care insurance system, the child-rearing

support system, and measures to cope with the declining birth rate have been introduced.

The four types of “Jo,” which means “help” and is the final kanji “助” in the Japanese words for self-help, mutual aid, mutual assistance, and public support, are often used in the social welfare administration of Japan. Self-help (individuals) refers to the ability to solve one’s own life problems on one’s own initiative, while mutual aid (community ties) refers to the ability of people with personal relationships, such as family, friends, and club activity friends, to help one another to solve one’s own life problems. Mutual assistance is institutionalized mutual aid. It refers to mutual assistance provided by insured persons, such as medical care, pensions, long-term care insurance, and social insurance systems. Public support (government) refers to a social welfare system that provides the necessary livelihood security in cases where self-help, mutual help, and mutual assistance are not sufficient.

Moreover, the introduction of the long-term care insurance system does not include financial compensation for family caregivers, and households are still required to support their families. At the same time, corporate welfare is said to be a family-style management that extends the family system to corporations, and has provided various welfare services such as retirement allowances, company housing, corporate pensions, and social insurance premiums on behalf of the public sector. In recent years, the burden on welfare recipients and their families has increased as the number of nonregular employees has increased since the 1990s and corporate welfare has declined. On the other hand, the unprecedented and rapidly declining birth rate and the aging of society has spurred the promotion of women’s participation in society. While there are still many issues that remain to be addressed, company policies as they relate to women, such as the establishment of a system that enables greater work-life balance for women (and in principle men as well), have changed cultural perspectives from viewing women as needing the protection of men in a male breadwinner society to interacting with women as workers.

Furthermore, in relation to family welfare, most of the provision of social welfare services in Japan is carried out on a household basis. Each household receives welfare benefits, medical insurance, and pensions. Some people do not receive welfare benefits because they are referred to their families for support when they apply for benefits. This also impedes children on welfare from going to college and contributes to what in Japan is sometimes referred to as the “8050 problem” in which older parents, often around 80 years old, support their adult hikikomori offspring, who are around 50 years old.

Forty years have passed, and the social situation has deteriorated with the declining birth rate, the aging population, the growing fiscal deficit, and the lost 30 years. As the Japanese-style welfare state faces the same reform pressures as other developed countries, and as welfare decentralization and NPM reforms proceed, government responsibility will recede and the burden will be placed on communities, families, and private actors. As a result, new discrepancies have appeared and local governments have to coordinate the various actors involved in welfare service provision to tackle these tensions.

The Characteristics of the Japanese Welfare Administration System

At present, there are five main characteristics of the social welfare administration system in Japan based on the “Japanese-style welfare society” (Hori 1981). The first is the use of public funds in the social insurance system. The second is a lack of emphasis on frontline workers having expertise in providing welfare services. The third characteristic is there are not only profit-making corporations and social welfare corporations but also various intermediate organizations and individual volunteers involved in providing social welfare services. The fourth characteristic relates to the particular administrative challenges in the application system. The fifth is that, in many cases, council systems (*shingikai*) are used to determine the direction of the administration,

draw up administrative plans, and implement them accordingly (Yamaguchi 2016).

First, the Japanese social welfare is the public expense burden of the social insurance system. In many countries, insurance premiums are the sole source of revenue for the insurance system, but in Japan there is a tax burden. National subsidies, contributions from prefectural governments, and transfers to the general account (national health insurance) fund many insurance policies, such as employment insurance, medical insurance (national health insurance and employee health insurance), long-term care insurance, and pension insurance. Although this has the effect of alleviating inequalities between regions, it is a unique system that does not adhere to the logic of the insurance system because, despite compulsory social insurance, the implementation of related insurance projects and premiums may be affected by state subsidies, making the relationship between burden and benefits unbalanced.

The second characteristic of Japanese social welfare is that the staff of welfare offices and their supervisors engage in frontline work with little consideration given to staff having relevant expertise or qualifications. In Japanese local governments, caseworkers in the administrative and welfare professions are mixed, with the former predominating. They are hired simultaneously by local governments and transferred to different government departments every three to four years. The welfare department is often an unpopular place to work, so new employees are placed there and sometimes they quit. As a result, in the context of interpersonal services, the bureaucratic behavior of frontline staff may be more intense, with them exercising greater control over clients (Hatakeyama 1989). As a result, organizational management in the workplace is very difficult.

The third characteristic of Japanese social welfare is that semi-governmental organizations and individuals, such as social welfare corporations, social welfare councils, and welfare and child welfare commissioners, play a major role. Based on the social welfare law, social welfare corporations are public interest corporations engaged in social welfare services that require the approval of the relevant authorities, are given preferential tax

treatment, and have long been the center of social welfare services in Japan. Although a social welfare council is a private social welfare corporation, its relationship with local governments is very close because local government employees are allowed to serve as directors, and there were many local government retirees and employees on loan. Since the introduction of the nursing care insurance system, social welfare councils often provide nursing care services and carry out community welfare activities in areas where the number of NPOs and private nonprofit organizations has been low.

A welfare commissioner is a volunteer, part-time, and special civil servant who is commissioned by the Minister of Health, Labor, and Welfare on the recommendation of a prefectural governor based on the Welfare Commissioners Act. Welfare commissioners and commissioned child welfare commissioners were formerly district commissioners under the Relief and Protection Act. The welfare district commissioner exercised considerable authority in public assistance before World War II, but has officially become more of a government support position after the war. However, some local governments are still asking for welfare commissioners to do more, such as when there are few other welfare workers. The commissioners will carry out activities in each of the municipalities and provide advice, information, and assistance to residents so that they can live independently. Due to urbanization, many local governments have become less connected to each other, making it difficult for welfare commissioners to carry out their work, and the aging of their members has become a problem. In 2016, the position fill rate across the nation was 96.3%, though some regions “only” achieve 80%. Compared to their more comprehensive pre-war exercise of authority, today welfare commissioners have increasingly focused on specifically watching over the elderly and assisting those in need perform a variety of small, daily tasks (changing light bulbs, taking out the trash, etc.). Although the number of profit-making corporations participating in the provision of social welfare services has increased as a result of the basic structural reform of social

welfare, the roles of these organizations are still significant in light of the declining birth rate and aging population.

The fourth characteristic of Japanese social welfare involves two major administrative challenges in the application system. One challenge is whether the right of the recipient to receive welfare services is guaranteed in practice. The other major challenge is whether the potential recipient actually receives services.

Originally, an application was defined as an act for the benefit of citizens and residents based on national laws, ordinances, and local ordinances and regulations. In order to guarantee the rights of the people and residents, the government will have to respond to the request. When administrative resources, i.e., financial resources and manpower, are limited, insufficient information may be provided, or applications may be rejected or withheld at welfare windows, coping activities referred to in Japanese as “border operations.” The fact that the percentage of people receiving welfare benefits in Japan is the highest in Osaka City at 5.07% and the national average is 1.66% (March 2019), which is much lower than in other countries, is also a sign of lack of consistent administrative guarantee. Such responses by the administration is an example of a discrepancy between the guarantee of legal rights and the operation of such rights.

In addition, from the perspective of the citizens and residents, the application system itself may hinder their willingness to receive welfare benefits. The administrative response is cold, the system is complicated, there are many documents, and even though people think of applying because they need help in the first place, they are exhausted at the application stage and give up. Culturally, Japan still has a strong stigma when it comes to receiving welfare services, and many fatherless families do not apply for such services. As described below, there is almost no research on welfare administration in Japan, a serious gap in the literature that would be valuable to fill.

The fifth major characteristic of the social welfare system in Japan is that the direction of local government policy formulation is decided by the

chief executives of local governments upon consultation with the council (*Shingikai*), and the implementation of policies is secured by administrative plans. There are two types of councils: those that are required by law and those that are established by local governments through ordinances. The latter plays a more active role than the former. In addition, since the 1990s, with the aim of securing a system for providing welfare services as described in the historical background, local governments have adopted an administrative method in which targets are set in plans and implemented. At first, plans centered on the elderly, but now over 15 plans have been developed to address various fields such as child-rearing, disability, single-parent families, and medical care.

Discretion of Local Governments in Welfare Administration and the Size of Their Role

As discussed above, although the privatization of welfare services has progressed since the basic structural reform of social welfare around 2000, local governments, especially municipalities, continue to play a major role in welfare administration. Municipal welfare policies cover a wide range of areas, including the provision and management of direct welfare services, the regulation and supervision of private welfare services, the planning of local government policies, and the coordination of multiple sectors. As the declining birth rate and aging population exacerbate fiscal constraints while there remains a shortage of welfare workers, provision of welfare services must be carefully prioritized. The question is how to provide the necessary services to those who need them most, and how to properly provide safety nets.

The work of local governments is considered to be carried out within the framework of the national social security system, but local governments can exercise two major forms of discretion. First, local governments have a lot of discretion in carrying out welfare policy. While some recent literature has begun to examine this area, more

research is needed to study local politics and relations between local and national government.

Second, frontline officials can exercise a substantial amount of discretion as they directly interact with residents. As mentioned in the previous section, the personnel in charge of welfare administration in Japan often do not have related formal qualifications or expertise. Although frontline employees in welfare administration are expected to play both roles as a bureaucratic agent of the state and as an agent of the citizen (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003; Zacka 2017), the Japanese system emphasizes the state aspects and not becoming client oriented, but instead directing the client in compliance with the application system. Overseas studies have found that such government responses reduce clients' sense of effectiveness. In addition, as will be described later, there are cases in which clients cannot be helped unless frontline employees from different fields can cooperate effectively with each other.

Little is known about the principles of behavior of frontline staff in Japan. Some research has examined the relationship between frontline workers and their supervisors, and how this relationship is affected by organizational controls. Hatakeyama (1989) performed early research exploring these relationships across a variety of frontline employees in Japan, while Tanabe (1987–1988) Takechi (1996) and Seki (2014) focused on public assistance case workers, and Suzuki (2019) further honed in on frontline workers who handled child abuse cases. However, with a few exceptions (Arami 2014, 2015), little research has been done on how Japan's frontline employees relate to their clients and how they behave when frontline operations are privatized. Research in this area is urgently needed given the impact these behaviors can have on the delivery of services, although several studies dealing with hybridization in street-level bureaucracy research have been explored abroad.

Recent Issues

There are three main challenges facing Japan's present welfare administration system. First is

the declining birth rate and aging population, resulting in a fundamental financial, staffing, and other strains on the system. Due to the declining birth rate and aging population, many social security systems created during the era of rapid economic growth are suffering from institutional fatigue, and their sustainability is in danger. In 2025, the baby-boomer generation will be especially older adults over 75 years old, and in 2040, the population of Japan will be about 110 million, with 1.5 workers (in the working-age population) will support 1 elderly person. The population aged 85 or older will account for nearly 30% of the total elderly population, and the elderly population will become even older. In addition, the generation that was unable to obtain stable employment during the employment ice age will continue to grow old and the elderly will become increasingly impoverished. More than 40% of elderly households are single person, and the elderly are becoming increasingly isolated.

In addition to generation imbalances, regional imbalances are also significant. Due to the declining population in rural areas, there are fewer places to work, and the population is increasingly concentrated in Tokyo, which is the most difficult place for the working generation to raise children.

It is said that the system will collapse if all of the medical, nursing, and pension systems are not reformed, but it has yet to be fully reformed. In addition, the government is trying to make up for the population decline by promoting the active participation of women, but the number of people who have children is not increasing due to insufficient support systems for child rearing and work-life balance, such as the day care waiting list for children. The government has announced a plan to reform the social security system for all generations, but the question is how to resolve the tax burden. While the social security system is in crisis, the tight fiscal situation has a great impact on welfare administration, which is directly connected to the residents.

Second, there is a shortage of welfare workers. Despite the need to further support child rearing and work-life balance, there is a continuing shortage of childcare workers and few caregivers. The number of local government employees has also

decreased, and the number of nonregular workers has increased, resulting in a shortage of workers at local government offices. Moreover, despite the increasing incidence of child abuse, there is a problem of staff burnout due to the lack of professionals involved. In some areas, there is a shortage of doctors and hospitals.

In addition, the number of people who support people in need of assistance is decreasing due to the aging of the local population. Since 2017, the government has been aiming to realize a “my problem is our problem” society in which local communities support each other in promoting an engaged citizenry and strengthening professional skills. The government is now trying to encourage more elderly people to volunteer to help maintain their healthy age. However, such efforts are not enough to resolve the tax burden and redistribution issues.

The third challenge is multi-agency, cross-sector collaboration. As can be seen from the historical background, the welfare administration in Japan has developed in the form of expanding the number of people subject to welfare in each field. As a result, there is a strong sense of factionalism among both administrative agencies and specialists, and they have not been able to deal with issues that span multiple fields or that fall into a vacuum in the system. In order to address this challenge, many inter-agency meetings are being held in an effort to foster collaboration, though even a cursory glance at staff schedules raises concerns about the frequency of such meetings being excessive. It is necessary to improve collaboration between local government employees in different agencies and private welfare service providers.

The impact of the declining birth rate and aging population cannot be resolved by reforming social welfare administration alone. Reforms are needed in other related areas such as in the rollout of the national ID system, in the family registration system, in the mechanisms of providing individual public services, and in the personnel and organizational management of local governments.

Conclusion

This essay explored the Japanese administrative system including its organization, funding, and institutions, with a particular focus on the performance of local government. It then described the historical origins of how role sharing between the national and local governments developed, shedding light on how local government plays an important role in the implementation of contemporary Japanese welfare policy. This essay also examined the theoretical development of research on local Japanese government social policy, a field constructed with a traditional attention to intergovernmental relations regarding finance and personnel. I argue that frontline workers play a vitally important role and that these issues should be further studied. I then described the characteristics of Japanese welfare administration at the local welfare office. Finally, this essay discussed looming challenges. In order to address such issues as the shortage of financial resources, a decrease in the number of welfare staff (and volunteers), and factionalism among multiple agencies, it is necessary to resolve the issue of tax burdens, promote interagency cooperation, enhance the capabilities of local welfare officials, and better manage private service providers. It is also necessary to reform the basic structure of public services beyond social welfare administration. In light of all these considerations, local government's role as a gatekeeper of social policy will likely increase in efforts to overcome these challenges. Local officials need to improve their abilities so that people can lead independent lives with peace of mind.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Decentralization Promotion in Japan](#)
- ▶ [Frontline Workers](#)
- ▶ [Governance](#)
- ▶ [Intergovernmental Relations in Japan: Local Government Participation in National Policymaking](#)
- ▶ [Legislation and Policy for the Nonprofit Sector, Japan](#)

- ▶ [Local Finance in Japan](#)
- ▶ [Local Fiscal Reforms and Municipal Amalgamations in the 2000s in Japan](#)
- ▶ [Public Personnel Administration in Local Government, Japan](#)
- ▶ [Social Policy](#)
- ▶ [Welfare State](#)

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