

20% of Tokyo's children from impoverished households: survey

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Children enjoy a warm meal with volunteers at Kongoin, a temple in Toshima Ward, Tokyo, in April 2015. A Tokyo Metropolitan Government survey shows more than 20 percent of the children in the capital come from financially challenged families and are often improperly fed or dressed. | KYODO

A survey commissioned by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government has found that more than 20 percent of children in the capital come from households in severe financial hardship — where families scrape by on little income, miss utility or rent payments or lack the means to buy new clothes or go out.

The survey, conducted by professor Aya Abe of Tokyo Metropolitan University between August and September last year, covered 19,929 households in Toshima and Sumida wards and in the cities of Chofu and Hino, targeting fifth-graders in elementary school, second-graders in

junior high school and teens 16 to 17 and their parents.

The survey drew mailed-in responses from 8,367 children and 8,429 parents.

Households with financial difficulties are defined by the metro government as those that meet two of three criteria, including an annual income of ¥1.35 million or less.

The other two criteria are experience falling behind on utility or rent payments, and an inability to pay for cram schools, books or toys for their children.

Households must meet at least two of the three criteria to be considered in financial hardship.

The results of the survey, announced Thursday, show that 3 percent of all households were unable to pay their utility bills and 10 percent were unable to adequately feed themselves. Another 15 percent said they could not afford to buy clothes for their children.

Children in impoverished families were also more likely to fall behind in their studies.

Nearly 30 percent of fifth-graders in such families said they had problems understanding school lessons, versus 13 percent for all students in the grade. About half of all junior high second-graders from such families replied they couldn't keep up with classes, versus 24.3 percent for all children in their grade.

The survey found that children in families with severe financial difficulties were less likely to attend *juku* (cram schools) or use private tutors, and more likely to become targets of bullying and feel depressed.

Juichi Nishio, head of the department in charge of child welfare at the metro government, pointed to the fact families with financial hardships were also less likely to know about helpful social services available to them,

such as food banks and after-school study sessions.

“In response, from the next fiscal year starting in April, we plan to introduce new subsidies for municipal governments who hire full-time staff tasked solely with child poverty measures,” Nishio said. “Such people would liaise with related agencies to provide the aid each family needs. We also plan to beef up subsidies for municipalities offering free lunches at drop-in centers for children during summer holidays.”