

Children in Japan struggle to break out of poverty cycle

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A staffer at an education support facility for children in poverty run by the Fukuoka Prefectural Government teaches math to a child last May. | KYODO

It was when Hyungsik Lee entered the prestigious University of Tokyo that he realized Japan's social stratification.

Having grown up in one of dozens of municipal government-run houses for low-income households in Hyogo Prefecture, poverty used to be part of his daily scenery. On the way to his local elementary school were dwellings with homeless people where he saw a man who froze to death taken away by an ambulance. At school, about half of his classmates were from single-parent households with financial difficulties.

Some dropped out of high school, while some were sent to juvenile detention centers for committing crimes, he said. When Lee, 26, thanks to

his education-minded mother, went on to enter the nation's top university, many of his local friends were working at factories or fast-food chains.

Coming from such an environment, it was shocking for him to find out that many students he met on campus were from wealthy households, where going to college was the norm. According to the university's 2014 data, 54.8 percent of its students were from households with more than ¥9.5 million in annual income.

"I felt like I came to a totally different world. ... That was when I strongly felt there is a hierarchy," said Lee, who heads Learning for All, a Tokyo-based nonprofit organization that provides academic support for children in need.

"My college peers said my local friends' plight has to do with their lack of efforts. ... But I know for a fact that some had no time to do their homework as they had to look after their younger siblings, or had no choice but to give up their dreams because of financial difficulties.

"A child's future is hugely influenced by where they were born or by their families' backgrounds, and that often is hard to change solely by their own efforts," Lee said.

The cycle of poverty over generations is a growing issue in Japan. Children in financially strapped families tend to have low academic achievement and schooling, and hence a low lifetime income, analysts say.

According to the Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry, the relative poverty rate — the percentage of children living under the poverty line — has increased from 10.9 percent in 1985 to 16.3 percent in 2012. The figure translates into roughly 1 in 6 children.

The poverty line is taken as half the median household income of the total population. In 2012, Japan's poverty line stood at ¥1.22 million annual income per person. For a household with a single parent with two children, the line was roughly at ¥2.07 million, or about ¥170,000 a month.

A 2014 study by Ochanomizu University determined children's academic levels increased almost in proportion to their parents' income levels.

Historically, government measures to tackle poverty had centered on the welfare system to provide money to people in financial difficulty.

In recent years, the government added measures to support the cost of children's education, including increasing the maximum amount of child support allowance to single parents, given children's poverty is often linked to single parents.

But such financial support to low-income families is widely seen as ineffective in rooting out the cycle of poverty, as parents do not necessarily use the money for their children's benefit.

According to a simulation of 15-year-olds by the nonprofit organization Nippon Foundation and Mitsubishi UFJ Research and Consulting Co., if the issue is left unaddressed, those children's lifetime income will be reduced by ¥2.9 trillion. That loss also results in ¥1.1 trillion less in government tax revenue.

“The issue is not other people's business. It's a social loss and each of us needs to support them in the end,” Yohei Kobayashi, senior analyst at Mitsubishi UFJ Research and Consulting, said during a recent symposium on child poverty.

Given that reality, both the public and private sectors have been beefing up efforts to support low-income families, hoping to break the vicious poverty cycle.

Among initiatives is the *kodomo shokudo* children's canteen, where kids are provided with free meals and after-school academic support.

But some projects have struggled to reach out to children who really need the help, because unlike people in abject poverty who are suffering from hunger, relative poverty is difficult to detect unless those who are struggling identify themselves.

To address the issue, the Nippon Foundation recently launched what it said would be the nation's first large-scale study on the long-term effects of education programs for children in low-income families.

Under the plan, the foundation is set to open 100 facilities across the country within the next five years for first- to third-grade elementary school children living in poverty to spend their after-school hours until their parents pick them up in the evening.

They plan to offer programs to improve children's reading skills or help them acquire basic lifestyle habits that they often lack, such as brushing their teeth after dinner, according to the group. The foundation will develop more educational programs together with education company Benesse Holdings Inc., and follow up on the children to study their education continuance rate, employment rate and — hopefully — their income.

“Our ultimate goal is to create measures based on objective data obtained in our project,” said Moeki Kurita, a member of the project team at the foundation.

Similar studies have been conducted in other countries, like in the Perry Preschool Study of the United States, which found out through following up on children through age 40 that high-quality preschool programs for children living in poverty lead to their better performance in school and work. But Japan lacks such scientific data to evaluate the effectiveness of measures by the private and public sectors as well as nonprofit groups, Kurita said.

The foundation opened its first facility in Toda, Saitama Prefecture, in November. Lee's group is participating there as an operator.

“Children are fast learners. Their adaptability is surprisingly high,” a facility staff member said. “They didn't have the customs of cleaning their teeth or having dinner sitting together with everyone when they started to come here. But now they do them matter-of-factly.”

Lee said children will change for the better if they get the support they need.

“All children have possibilities. The important thing is to bring out their abilities so they can play active roles in society,” he said.