

Perspectives

'Hikikomori' bedroom hermits should be regarded as national crisis

There are approximately 230,000 people who almost constantly shut themselves in their rooms except to go to nearby convenience stores, according to a survey conducted by the Cabinet Office. The number increases to about 700,000 if those who only go out to do something hobby-related are included.

Moreover, there are an estimated 1.55 million potential so-called 'hikikomori' who have felt like shutting themselves in their own rooms. Most of them are young people.

As the population of young people declines due to falling birthrates, the statistics have raised questions about the future of Japan.

Hikikomori are defined as those who shut themselves in their homes for at least six months but are not involved in child care or housework even though they are not sick.

Problems involving shut-ins have been pointed out over the past 15 years, but only experts and nonprofit organizations have worked on the issue, with little public support. The government has been late in responding to the situation and taken only stopgap measures. Numerous cases have ended in tragic incidents, and the situation was worsened as a result of treatment and education that lacked solid scientific foundations.

The problem had previously been regarded as an extension of truancy, but the results of the latest survey have shown that 44 percent of the hikikomori began to shut themselves in their rooms because of problems involving work or job-hunting, and 46 percent are in their 30s. Men account for nearly 70 percent of all shut-ins. They are aging while their parents are also growing old.

The government has worked out a vision for children and youths in an effort to help reintegrate hikikomori into society, but just talking about their philosophy and conducting public relations and awareness-raising campaigns are far from sufficient. Even though some people think the shut-ins merely lack self-reliance and independence, there are deep-rooted and grave problems behind the phenomenon -- such as child abuse, insufficient child care as a result of poverty, schoolyard bullying, corporal punishment and insecure employment as a result of an increase in the number of temporary and part-time workers.

It has been widely known that mental and sexual abuse leaves the victims with long-standing mental trauma. Some other surveys demonstrate that many of the withdrawals suffer from a developmental disorder. Many of them have suffered mental distress as a result of the public's prejudice and lack of understanding.

To avoid tagging hikikomori with humiliating labels or extending inappropriate assistance as a result of misunderstanding the issue, it is necessary to conduct thorough studies on the root causes of the problem.

Nearly 70 percent of the shut-ins feel a sense of guilt, with one of them saying, "I'm sorry for my family," and another saying, "I'm worried how other people view me." Yet another said, "I sometimes feel it's painful to live." Almost 70 percent are also hesitant to consult public institutions dealing with the issue.

It should be kept in mind that measures to deal with hikikomori are difficult and cannot produce immediate results.

The central government had launched a three-month camp aimed at vocational and lifestyle training to help

reintegrate hikikomori back into society, but the program was abolished after the government's cost-cutting panel judged that it was not effective enough for the cost. The decision has disappointed numerous supporters. In other words, inconsistent policy-making has poured cold water on steady efforts made by those who are helping shut-ins. The government should bear in mind that it cannot produce any tangible results if it ignores longstanding efforts made by various circles.

(Mainichi Japan) July 27, 2010