



A university student volunteer teaches math to a junior high school student at the Tadazemi free cram school in Tokyo. | BLOOMBERG

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In Japan, 1 in 6 children lives in poverty, putting education, future at stake

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“Abenomics” may have helped double stock prices and enabled companies like Toyota Motor Corp. to post record profits in Japan, but one segment of the economy remains behind: the poor.

One in 6 Japanese children lives in poverty, the highest level since records began in 1985, according to the latest government figures. That ratio rises to 55 percent among children in single-parent families — among the worst for countries in the Organization for Economic

Cooperation and Development.

One of the main factors hobbling the poor from getting ahead is the cost of education. Paying hefty cram school fees is a virtual necessity when it comes to passing high school entrance exams to get a shot at a decent job. Parents who cannot afford it risk condemning their children to a life of low-paid work.

The prospect of a lost generation of educated workers in a country with one of the highest debt burdens — more than twice its annual economic output — is something the government can ill afford. Japan has compulsory education until the age of 15.

“If children are unable to exercise their full potential, it’s undoubtedly bad for the quality of the labor force and its dynamism,” Aya Abe, a professor at Tokyo Metropolitan University who researches poverty and social exclusion, said in an interview. “Failure to invest in overcoming poverty will damp economic growth.”

Already faced with an aging population and declining workforce, the government risks losing about ¥96 million per person in lifetime taxes and welfare payments because disadvantaged youngsters fail to forge successful careers, Abe said.

Japanese kids who lack financial resources are far less likely to stay in school through the age of 18 or beyond, government statistics show, in a nation where about two-thirds of students attend cram schools and tuition fees for one subject can cost tens of thousands of yen a month.

Those on welfare risk passing poverty on to the next generation, as their lack of qualifications means they later struggle to earn enough to educate their own children, Abe said.

Ryosei Tahara, who grew up with a single mom and an older brother, dropped out of school at 15 to look for a job.

Now 19, the clean-cut, six-foot-tall (186-cm) construction worker remembers growing up in a “small, dark, dirty” apartment while his mother worked from early morning to late at night, after he’d gone to bed. The brothers often skipped meals and brought home bread rolls and cheese from the school canteen.

“I wanted to work as soon as possible to get money,” he said. “I was always hungry and looking for something to eat. I didn’t want to live like that anymore.”

While Japan provides relatively equal access to education, the numbers of children on welfare who go on to higher schooling dwindle as they go through the system. About 90 percent of children from poor families go to high school, compared with 98.4 percent among the general population, according to a 2010 study by Professor Ryu Michinaka of Kansai University of International Studies.

As for higher education, less than a fifth of low-income students make it to university, compared with more than 51 percent of the general population, according to government figures.

Fees for public high school add up to ¥400,000 a year, while private schools average roughly ¥1 million, according to education ministry statistics. Getting admitted in the first place is a hurdle for poorer families because tuition fees for the extra classes add up.

“I was going around in circles and getting anxious,” said one single mother-of-two of her 15-year-old son’s struggle in junior high school. “If he hadn’t gotten into a public high school, he might have had to leave and find a job,” said the 46-year-old woman, who requested anonymity for herself and her son, for fear of being ostracized.

The mother, who does clerical work at a school, said she gave up on cram school lessons for her elder son after realizing she would face bills of ¥45,000 a month for two subjects. Her annual income of ¥2.7 million is just above the threshold for receiving welfare payments, she said. Japan defines those in poverty as families that earn roughly less than ¥1.22 million per member.

The government passed a law in 2013 mandating a blueprint to help the poor, including placing more social workers in schools and providing more free after-school tutoring for struggling students.

Professor Mari Osawa of the University of Tokyo criticized the blueprint as lacking a concrete target for poverty reduction and failing to provide enough money to help those in need.

“There’s no system set up to monitor the percentage of these kids who go on to high school each year,” said Osawa. “I have to wonder how serious (the blueprint designers) are.”

Still, Noriko Furuya, a lawmaker with ruling-coalition partner Komeito who helped write the child poverty legislation, said the blueprint was an important step.

“It’s extremely significant that we drafted a law on child poverty,” she said. “It sends a message that we as a country are going to tackle the problem. I am aware of the criticism that specific indexes are not included.”

An official at the Cabinet Office section charged with coordinating the effort on child poverty declined comment on criticism of the plans.

In a report last year, the OECD noted that a long-term trend toward income inequality has curbed economic growth, partly because people from disadvantaged social backgrounds underinvest in their education. A 2007 study in Sakai, Osaka Prefecture, found 25 percent of those who grow up in households that rely on government welfare payments also find themselves on social security later in life.

Families can fall into poverty after a divorce, and need a broad range of support, including housing, mental health treatment and job training, said Furuya, the lawmaker.

“In most cases the mother will take the children,” she said in an interview. “Someone who has been a homemaker often won’t have up-to-date skills or much experience. Even if they work long hours, their income is extremely low.”

Under the circumstances, finding the time and energy to help their kids keep up at school is often difficult. The single mother, for example, said she took a second job to try to make ends meet, meaning she is out of the house from 8 a.m. until 10 p.m. each day.

Her 15-year-old son was one of the lucky ones. After enrolling for free lessons run by a nonprofit organization called Kids’ Door, he passed the entrance test for a public high school where he’s now enjoying his first year and making plans to go to university.

The weekend classes, taught by student volunteers from the University of Tokyo, Waseda University and other top-notch colleges, helped him understand how education could broaden his career options, the boy said in an interview at his former cram school. “I had thought people went to high school just for the sake of studying,” he said.

The students who volunteer there say they are shocked by the problems they find.

“People talk about the educational divide, but when you come here, it really hits you,” said Yuki Yamada, a student at the University of Tokyo who teaches at Kids’ Door. “There are third-year junior high school students who don’t know their multiplication tables and can’t spell a single word in English. They have been left high and dry.”

Ryosei, the construction worker, said going back to school isn’t an immediate concern.

“One of the supervisors at the construction company told me to study or obtain some kind of qualification while I am young,” he said. “But I don’t know what I can do, or what I want to do.

“Right now, I’m able to feed myself. I don’t feel a need for change.”

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