

Japan is shrinking. Should we be worried?

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Topic: 3.2.4.7 Case study of a country/society in population change to illustrate causes, problems, patterns, and implications of this.



Before you get stuck into this resource, consider checking out:

produced by luke pearson for the geography portal, v1.1, 6.3.25
resource bank > 3.2.4.4 population & the environment

Population Pyramids & The Demographic Transition

Why is this important?
Demography, or the study of populations, likes to focus on large scale trends visible across multiple countries or societies from which trends and conclusions can be observed and conclusions made as to why / what may happen in the future.

Our world is changing rapidly right in front of our eyes. Developed society is becoming older and fewer children being born, with immigration plugging much of the demographic deficit. Developing countries have a youthful population in search of work and opportunities only possible in our interconnected, globalised world.

Part 1: Natural Population

This metric relates to the growth (typically) of a population without it being corrected for immigration (or emigration) of an area. This is comprised of raw data from vital rates: Birth Rates, Death (Mortality) Rate, Infant Mortality Rate (IMR), Fertility Rate and Life Expectancy. It gives us a population growth rate (%) which determines how quickly a population is increasing (or decreasing!).

When you plot two crude variables for a society (one of birth rate and one death/mortality rate,) you get the graph to the left. Geographers like to break it down into 5 Stages:

Stage 1 – Initially Developing

Here, a society has a **very high birth rate** as birth control is non-existent, and also **very high death rate** (both at a young age and a low life expectancy) owing to disease/famine etc... Therefore, the age-based demographic is one which is **youthful but barely growing**. There are very few nontribal societies in this region.

Look at the data!
Which of the lines do you think represents birth rate?

Background Information:

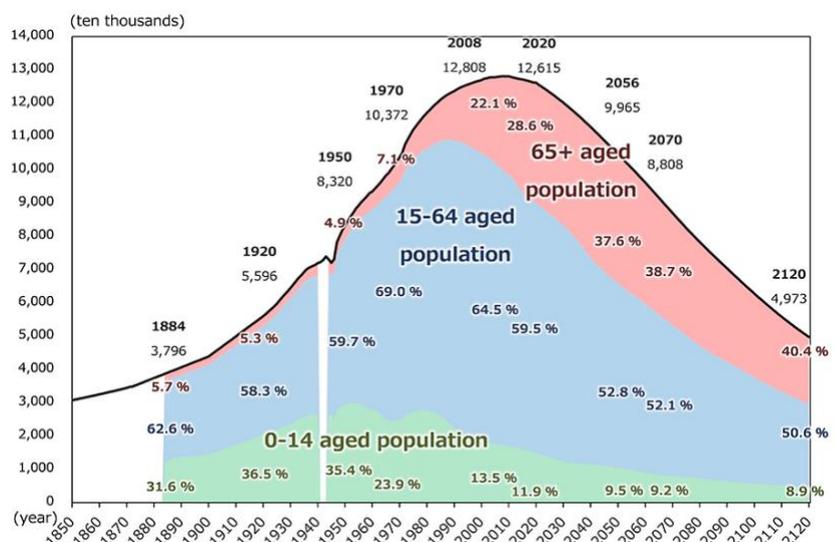
Japan's miraculous post-war recovery has been the subject of many articles, with various reasons such as allied aid, a highly motivated, educated workforce and heavy focus on export driven manufacturing industries. During this period, a rapid expansion of the Japanese middle class occurred, and household names such as Yamaha, Toyota, Sony, and Nintendo emerged.

Along with this came a post-war increase in births, with a rise in younger people, and a large growth in the working age population who were born in the interwar years.

A suffocating work-life culture and challenges of raising children in contemporary urban Japan has seen birth rates stagnate then completely slide down to a current level of **around 1.2 children per mother**. This is nearly half the natural replacement level of 2.1, last hit in 1973, and lower than most comparable nations, except China, S. Korea, and Taiwan.

The graph (right) showcases the situation Japan find itself in. Before we go further, consider the implications of that changing age-based breakdown and population collapse. What problems can you foresee?

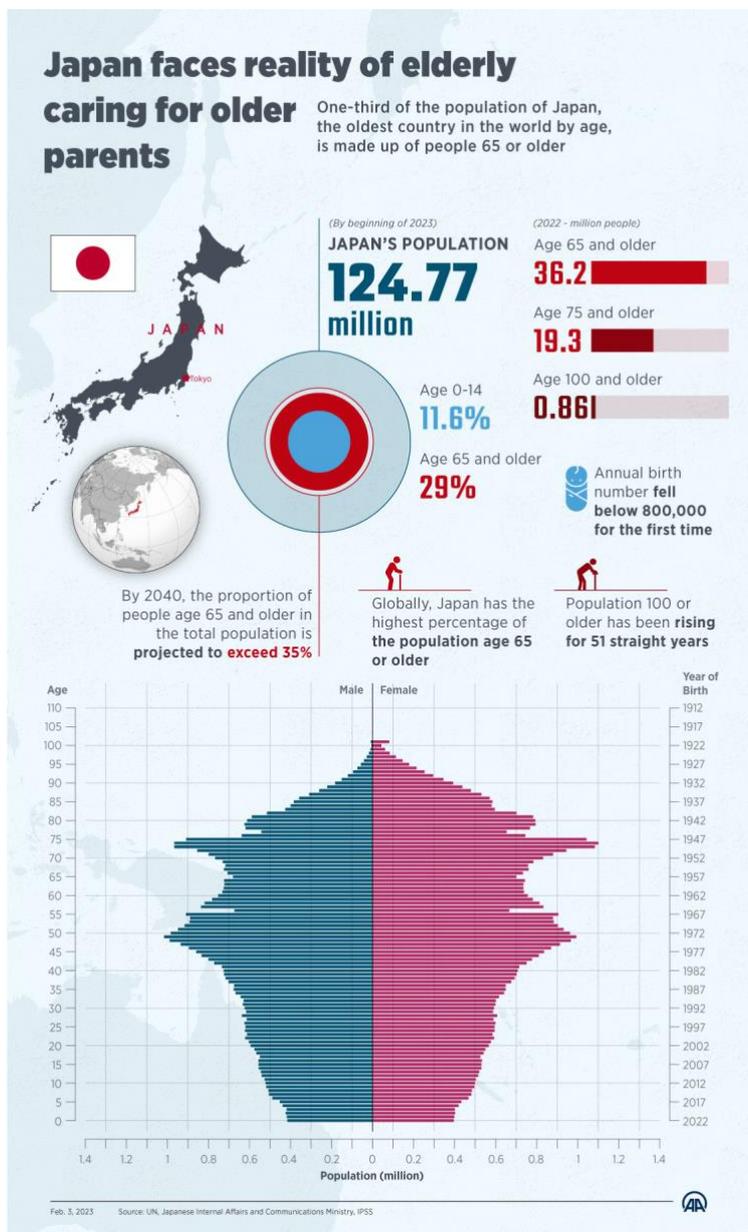
We're going to be analysing a lot of data as part of this case study, but before we get stuck into that, make sure you are familiar with the concepts highlighted in our article on the demographic transition. Click the image above or scan this code to get access:



Part 2 – why & what are the implications?

Stop Press!

Reading loads of text can get a bit boring, especially when it's on the main reasons for Japan's baby bust. We encourage you to do your own research (this topic can quickly get complicated) and wanted to only provide a few key reasons below. This really cool documentary is a great place to get started – it highlights the underappreciated loneliness epidemic in Japan which ties into this topic very effectively.



Development / Birth-Rate Correlation

We know this to be the case – countries, as they get more developed, especially rapidly as is the case with Japan. An increase in women's autonomy, longer, healthier lives, lower infant mortality as well as less need for children to work and a greater childbearing cost led to the steady decline in birth rates.

What is unique is the speed and intensity with which this decline has occurred:

Cultural Expectations

Japan has an intense work culture. Many people are subservient to large corporations and frequently push 70+ hour work weeks. This, combined with stagnant career progression and wages, makes finding the time, money, or even mental strength to raise a family challenging.

Japan's Loneliness Epidemic

Another somewhat unique cultural quirk, many young Japanese people are not getting into relationships. Many people are either content with being just single, or haven't been able to maintain a healthy relationship, so just refuse to engage in one. This is obviously not good for fertility rates!

Look at the population pyramid above. What stage of the demographic transition model might this represent? Don't forget that Japan is also one of the oldest countries in the world by life expectancy. With current projections, their population may shrink to around 65 million by 2100.

What are the implications of this decline?

Well, population declines have happened before, but in contemporary advanced societies, we can't really say for *exactly* what will occur but can theorise.

Countries have something called a **demographic dividend**. This is the economic growth potential from a country's changing demographic structure, particularly when more people are working age. When people live older and retire, they:

- 1) Aren't contributing to the economy in the same way as if they were working, and...
- 2) Require greater expenditure from the government on health, pensions etc...

What this means is that:

- The declining productivity of a smaller labour force will **hamper productivity** and economic growth.
- The growth of older people puts far **more demand on health and hospital services**. This, combined with fewer people paying taxes and more pensions puts a huge pressure on government finances (where is the money coming from?)
- **Rural-urban divides are widened**. This population decline will likely not be felt very much in the likes of Tokyo, but small regional areas of the country will likely become ghost towns. There are already 4 million estimated abandoned buildings in Japan, more than almost any other country.
- The government will have to **spend far more on policies to encourage childbearing**, such as tax offsets, free childcare, and improving work-life balance.



A small ray of sunshine?

Consider how Japan is better prepared for this demographic phenomenon than many other nations. They began investing in automating and robotising jobs very early and technology has made the workforce decline more palatable to businesses.



Links & Resources:

What if I want to practice an actual exam question?

We have you covered! The Geography Portal contains a huge bank of questions tailored to the AQA A-Level specification. Some come from past papers, some from teachers and examiners, all of them have detailed mark schemes which you can read through to figure out how well you did, where you could've added details or for your teacher to grade it.

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