

Chapter 49

The Public Library in an Aging Society: Developing Active Library Participation in Japan

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes the present conditions of our aging society, with a particular focus on Japan as a typical example of such a society. In Japan, one in every four individuals is over 65 years of age, and one in eight is over 75 years of age. Further, based on this demographic change to an older population, this chapter discusses a new library service designed to enhance the lives of elderly citizens. The authors explore this new service from the viewpoint of lifelong learning, utilizing the results of recent government surveys and some case studies, such as those done at the Izumo City Hikawa Library and the Akita Prefectural Library in Japan. Although the elderly have been placed within the category of “disabled library patrons,” in recent years, it has become more common to consider the elderly, as a whole, as an individual service category. We should, in the near future, pay more attention to supporting elderly citizens at public libraries to engage them in the development and maintenance of their own communities.

INTRODUCTION

With a rapidly aging world population, how do public libraries respond to this demographic change and develop appropriate services for the elderly?

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Japan's current aging population is significantly high, thus transforming the traditional role of public libraries is difficult. We present Japan's situation as a model for how public libraries can build new services for its aging population. On the basis of recent governmental surveys, we present an overview of the demographic changes in

Japan, and discuss a fundamental framework for an aging society that focuses on lifelong learning. Finally, we discuss a new role for public libraries in response to this demographic change.

ADVANCING AN AGING SOCIETY

Japan represents a typical nation with a demographic shift toward the older population (Figure 1). In 2012, Japan's total population was 127.5 million, of which 31 million were over 65 years of age (24.3%) (Statistical Bureau, 2013b). Now in Japan, one in every four individuals is over 65 years of age, and one in eight is over 75 years of age (15 million).

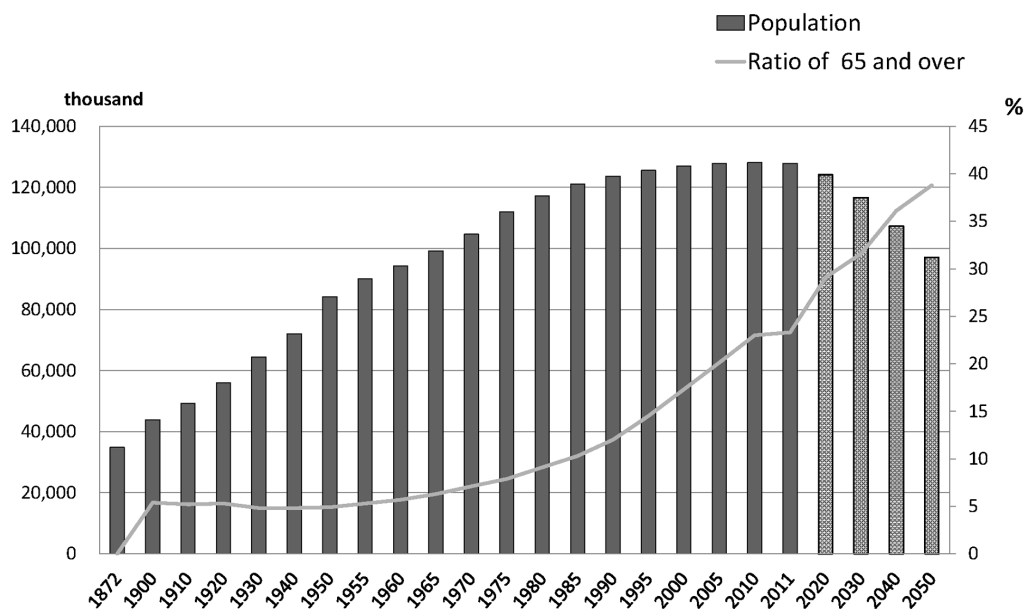
Coulmas (2007) indicates that there are three types of society based on the aging population rate and the proportion of population over the age of 65: aging society in which 7–14% of the population are 65 years of age or older, aged society in which 14–21% are over 65, and a hyper-aged society in which 21% or more are over 65. Japan is already a hyper-aged society.

Furthermore, the speed of population aging in Japan's society has witnessed unprecedented advancements. As Figure 2 shows, in 1950, approximately 60 years ago, the rate of population aging was less than 5%. Until the 1980s, the Japan's rate was ranked lower than that of most other developed countries. However, in the 1990s, the rate increased to a moderate position, and by 2010, Japan's rate of aging population was one of the highest in the world (Cabinet Office, 2011a).

Table 1 indicates that France and Sweden required 115 years and 85 years, respectively, for the proportion of their elderly population to increase from 7% to 14%. However, Japan took only 24 years, growing from 7.1% in 1970 to 14.1% in 1994. These comparisons indicate the rapid pace of aging population in Japan.

Japan is not exclusively facing such a crisis and some other countries are closely catching up in terms of increased rates of aging population. In fact, projections for some Asian and South American countries indicate that they are facing a population aging crisis at a more rapid pace than that in Japan. Projections indicate that Korea,

Figure 1. Japan's total population and elderly ratio (Source: Statistical Bureau, 2013b)



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