

# Population in Decline: Examining Solutions to Japan's Population Crisis

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**Learning Objectives:** I can evaluate the problem of population decline, and weigh the costs and benefits of various solutions in active discussion.

## **Lesson Overview:**

Students will learn about population decline in Japan using data, its history that is relevant to understanding the population crisis, and the unique situation that Japan is in as a nation-state which seeks to preserve its cultural unity. Students will examine different perspectives and discuss/debate the different solutions that could create a more sustainable population for the future of Japan.

**Grade Level:** 8-12

**Time periods:** 1-2 Class periods

## **Minnesota Standards:**

### **Economics:**

Standard: 9.2.1.1: People make informed economic choices by identifying their goals, interpreting and applying data, considering the short- and long-run costs and benefits of alternative choices and revising their goals based on their analysis

Benchmark: 9.2.1.1.1: Apply reasoned decision-making techniques in making choices; explain why different individuals, households, organizations and/or governments faced with the same alternatives might make different choices.

### **Geography:**

Standard: 9.3.3.5 The characteristics, distribution and migration of human populations on the earth's surface influence human systems (cultural, economic and political systems).

Benchmarks:

9.3.3.5.1 Describe the patterns of human population distribution in the United States and major regions of the world.

9.3.3.5.2 Use the demographic transition model to analyze and explain the impact of changing birth and death rates in major world regions.

9.3.3.5.3 Compare the population characteristics of places at a range of scales using population pyramids, birth and death rates, and other key demographic variables.

## **Materials needed:**

- Presentation and Projector (google slides/powerpoint compatible) You can edit to suit your teaching and learning style.
- Computer with internet access for student research (for optional extension or for digital assignment)
- 1.1 Handout. Research Guides- Print one per student
- 1.2 Proposed Solution Readings. Print or share digitally to each student.
- 1.3 Perspective Cards- one for each student, some students may have the same or similar roles, they might work together or separately. Cut Out the perspective cards in advance of the lesson. You will need one perspective card per student in the class.

## **Procedure:**

### Warm up:

1. Have students begin class by watching a short video or reading a short article on Japan's Population Crisis. If you would like to skip the video or article, you could also begin class by reviewing population related definitions like "fertility rate" (the average number of babies born per woman in her fertile years) and "life expectancy" (The average number of years a person could expect to live)

### Presentation:

1. Before going into the presentation, be sure each student has a copy of 1.1 Handout. They will use this to take some notes as you cover information.
2. Go over each of the slides, and spend extra time examining the data slides.
3. Be sure to give students enough time to ask questions and take notes as you cover information.

### Reading:

1. Hand out 1.2 Proposed Solutions Reading to each student or have students share copies.
2. Have students read and answer the questions in their handout when they are finished reading.
  - a. If you would like to, you can have students annotate as they read.
3. When students are finished with the reading, you will pass out their Perspective Card. Each student will receive only one. They will need to use the card and its perspective to participate in the proposed solutions discussion.
4. Give students some time to prepare their perspective opinions and comments before beginning the discussion.

### Discussion:

1. You can choose a moderator or be the moderator for the discussion. Each student should be prepared to speak twice during the discussion, and their opinions should align with the perspective on the card they received.
  - a. You could choose to have the class split in two and do two smaller discussions.
  - b. You could also choose to style the discussion as a Socratic seminar and do a few rounds to work through the four proposed solutions, in a for and against style.
2. Each of the four proposed solutions should be presented to the class, and the students who feel strongly about those solutions should volunteer to speak their opinions from their card's perspective.
3. After the discussion is completed, you may ask students to vote on a solution and come to a class consensus.
4. At the end of the discussion when all students have had an opportunity to participate, each student should fill out the final reflective questions at the end of handout 1.1.

**Enrichment:** Instead of providing students with data tables to analyze, have them collect and analyze the data themselves using Gapminder. [https://www.gapminder.org/tools/#\\$chart-type=bubbles&url=v1](https://www.gapminder.org/tools/#$chart-type=bubbles&url=v1)

**Population in Decline: Examining Solutions to Japan's Population Crisis**

*Instructions: Use this sheet to take notes, gather data, and research.*

1. What is Japan's *estimated* population?
2. What is a "*Highly Developed Nation*"?
3. What factors contributed to Japan's population growth?
4. What are some ways in which Japan's population crisis is different from other countries?
5. Examining the Data on *Fertility Rate*:
  - a. What similarities do you see between Japan's rates and other countries?
  - b. What differences do you see between Japan and other countries?
6. Examining the Data on *Life Expectancy*:
  - a. What similarities do you see between Japan and other countries?
  - b. What differences do you see between Japan and other countries?
7. After reading about some of the different solutions:
  - a. Which one do you think you would agree the most with and why?
  - b. Which one do you think would work the least and why?
8. After getting your PERSPECTIVE card:
  - a. What solution do you think your person might agree with most and why?
  - b. What solution do you think your person would like the least and why?

9. In the discussion you will need to share your perspective with the class on the solution you like the most and why, and the solution you like the least and why. Use this space to prepare some of your thoughts for discussion.

*Reflection: I can evaluate the problem of population decline, and weigh the costs and benefits of various solutions in active discussion.*

10. After the discussion with the class, what solution seems like it might be best for all the different shared perspectives?
11. What solution do you think has the most potential to bring significant change and positive impact to Japan?
12. Why might some of these solutions be very difficult to implement in Japan?

## 1.2 Proposed Solution Readings

### **Proposed Solution: Revitalizing Rural Japan**

Rural communities in Japan have seen a steady decline in population since the 1960s. With the rise of mega cities like Tokyo, many people move to the city to find higher paying jobs, and more conveniences. Many corporations choose to build in Tokyo because of the international access, the infrastructure, and the number of people available to work. It is difficult to start a business in the countryside because Japan's physical geography and infrastructure do not travel much outside of the metropolitan areas. While there are trains that run in Japan most places, there are some places that are very difficult to access due to mountainous terrain. Even with the ability to build in mountainous terrain, Japan has the disadvantages of natural threats like tsunamis and earthquakes.

*It is proposed that Japan will develop and expand its infrastructure to make some rural communities attractive places for businesses to be located. With businesses located in the countryside, workers will move to follow the employment opportunities.*

It would be beneficial for businesses to move to the countryside for many reasons, some of which include:

- Decreasing the “heat island” effect in Tokyo by depopulating some of the city
- Revitalizing dying and aging communities, and providing fresh resources
- Better population distribution in Japan overall
- Greater opportunities for economic growth in rural areas
- Greater infrastructure to connect rural Japan with urban centers

There are some difficulties and challenges to this proposal as well:

- The cost of building new roads/railways/airports/harbors and other infrastructure will cost billions of dollars.
- Many businesses might not be attracted to the countryside, and prefer to do business in areas with many other businesses for competitive reasons.
- The cost of moving an existing business to the countryside, even with improved infrastructure would be very expensive.
- Some people might not be interested in living in rural areas of Japan, even with improved infrastructure.

## **Proposed Solution: Open Borders to Immigration**

Japan has a long history of being a “closed nation”. During the time of European colonization and imperialism, Japan restricted foreign access. This was to protect the Japanese from foreign influence. In the 1860s Japan was forced to open its borders to trade by the United States. Japan gradually began trade with other nations, and then went through a period of industrialization. Throughout all of this, there were still few foreigners who chose to move and live in Japan. Japan today has a primarily ethnic Japanese population (over 98% of all people living in Japan are ethnic Japanese). Because Japan has had few immigrants historically, they have preserved more aspects of their cultural history than many other nations who experienced colonization/imperialism and countries with more lax immigration policies.

*It is proposed that Japan will open its borders to a limited number of immigrants each year, to help offset the aging population and lower birth rates. The immigrants will be of working age and able to meaningfully contribute to the Japanese society and economy.*

It would be beneficial to adopt this policy in the following ways:

- Japan would have some faster relief to the population crisis.
- Japan would become competitive in the foreign market for highly skilled workers. (people with advanced skills or higher levels of education)
- Japan would become more culturally diverse as more people from different cultures would blend with Japanese culture.
- Japan would grow significantly economically as more people are able to enter into the workforce.

It would be difficult or challenging to adopt this policy in the following ways:

- Infrastructure is currently set up in a way that most immigrants would find themselves in major cities where there are many jobs. This is difficult because it will contribute to the overpopulation of cities.
- Foreigners may experience discrimination by Japanese. It is sometimes difficult for foreigners to find housing, jobs, and even to eat at some restaurants.
- Many immigrants will be unfamiliar with Japanese language and culture which could lead to some challenging situations for both immigrants and Japanese.
- Japanese cultural traditions might not remain as intact as they currently are if foreigners introduce cultural changes to Japan.

## **Proposed Solution: Enhance Gender Equality**

Japan has had many successful strides in terms of Gender Equality in recent years, yet Japan still falls below many other highly developed nations in this category. While the government has been outspoken on treating women equally to men in means of pay and work opportunities, it is still left up to companies and businesses to bridge the gap. Women are more often than men to find themselves as the caregiver at home. Women also have a difficult time gaining access to the same opportunities as men in many different industries. The societal norms of a man providing for the family, and a woman acting as the caregiver for the family and home, date back a long way in history, but if Japan is to overcome the challenge of gender equality, they will need to do more to bridge the gap.

*It is proposed that Japan will bridge the gender gap to provide more gender equality. This will be done in a number of initiatives by lowering the working hours of men and women so they are able to spend more time with their families. There will be public outreach groups designed to get women involved in politics, and also outreach groups designed to help women become professionally successful in the workplace.*

### It would be beneficial to adopt this policy because:

- Women who are respected and treated as equals will have more comfort in raising children, knowing the burden will not primarily fall on them.
- Outreach groups might help women become more actively involved in areas of society that have traditionally been dominated by men, such as the government.
- Men will have greater opportunities to contribute to their family with working hour limits, so a woman might feel more supported at home.

### It would be difficult to adopt this policy because:

- It is challenging for businesses to change working hours, or to encourage hardworking and motivated employees to work less.
- It is difficult to change overall societal norms and values, and it will take a significant amount of time.
- The increase in birth rates for gender equality has been inverse historically. With greater gender equality, historically, women have chosen to have less children.
- Working women still might choose not to lose out on professional opportunities and growth to have children.

## **Proposed Solution: Mitigate the Higher Costs of Urban Living for Families With Children**

The cost of living in cities like Tokyo is very high. Food is expensive, schools and daycares can be very expensive, and housing costs are very expensive. If a family of two can afford a home and the daycare costs associated with one child, the prospect of having a second child and incurring additional costs is not very attractive. There are also very limited resources for childcare, and sometimes access to childcare can be very competitive. A family might need to join a waiting list for several months to gain access to care for children.

It is proposed that the government could help mitigate the costs of urban living for families with various subsidies that could include: opening government sponsored and funded daycares, providing families of daycare aged children with substantial tax credits to offset the cost of childcare, to offer tax incentives to businesses that open childcare centers at their business for employees.

### It would be beneficial to adopt this policy because:

- Families could have more children without the financial burden of childcare.
- Families could use government support and subsidies or could choose not to.
- Families who had access to childcare at their business could visit their children throughout the day and feel like they are still connected throughout the workday.

### It would be a challenge to adopt this policy because:

- The cost of subsidizing childcare and offering incentives and tax credits, means raising taxes on the overall population, even those who might not have or want children.
- Businesses will incur operational costs to have a business daycare for employees.
- Some parents still might choose to raise their children outside of daycare centers because they prefer to spend the time with their children instead.
- Not all high urban costs will be addressed by working to address childcare needs and costs. Some families will still struggle in other ways.



### 1.3 Perspective Cards

<p><b>College Female</b></p> <p>You are young and studying in a 4 year college in the city. You are concerned about job opportunities once you graduate. You don't mind living anywhere in Japan, but would like the cost of living to be less expensive in case you would like to have children.</p>	<p><b>College Male</b></p> <p>You are young and studying in a 4 year college in the city. You are eager for job opportunities in the city when you graduate, because you want to live the city life and enjoy the privileges of living in the city. You are not interested in anything that will hold you back professionally.</p>
<p><b>Elderly Female With No Children</b></p> <p>You live in a major city and are retired. You decided never to marry or have children. You were concerned that you would not have the same professional opportunities with children, and put your ambitions first. You have no regrets about your choices, but you feel lonely and lack many connections as you no longer work and many who were close to you are beginning to die.</p>	<p><b>Politician</b></p> <p>You worry about Japan's economic future. You see that there are less young people to fill the positions of the elderly, and you also worry that the tax contributions of the working will not keep up with the needs of elderly who use benefits like pension and universal health care. Increasing taxes is very unpopular, but there must be a solution to fill the many vacant jobs and provide for the elderly.</p>
<p><b>Rural Business Owner</b></p> <p>Your family has owned a sweet shop in rural Japan for three generations. Over your time as the owner, you have seen the town's size shrink and business has grown slower and slower. Most people who are young have moved to the city for jobs, and the only people who choose to stay are elderly. Occasionally business picks up in the tourist season, but it is not sustainable to stay in business much longer. Your own child sees the benefit and opportunity of being in the city, and they are not very interested in taking over your shop.</p>	<p><b>Rural School Teacher</b></p> <p>You love the small town you live in, but each year there are less and less students enrolled in your school. You have seen some of your close colleagues have to leave due to under enrollment. You are worried that the school may have to close if more children do not enroll next year. It might be difficult to find a job and stay in the same community that you have become attached to.</p>
<p><b>Urban School Teacher</b></p> <p>Your school has many students and you work long hours each day. The students are all wonderful and respectful and have bright futures ahead of them. You worry about the amount of work you have each day, and don't think that you would be suited to raise your own children because of your demanding schedule.</p>	<p><b>Urban Housewife</b></p> <p>Your family lives in Tokyo, and it is EXPENSIVE. You constantly worry about finances, but are unable to do much because of the work your husband does. Because of your young children, you decided to stay home and care for them. The costs of childcare far outweighed your own salary, so it made sense to save the money and care for your own children. Your friends without children seem to be having a lot of fun with much greater freedoms. You love having children but you wish the costs would be lower so you could work.</p>

<p>Urban Technology worker</p> <p>You work for a very successful company in Tokyo. You live in a modest apartment, and ride public transportation to work. The city is very crowded and most of the time you have to wait for a second subway because there are so many in line and the subway cars are all full. You work long hours and have no time to date, and haven't considered a spouse or children. Your skills might allow you to move to another city or country where you could make more money.</p>	<p>Foreign Worker- Highly Skilled</p> <p>You have a high level of education, and learned Japanese in your old country. You work a good paying job, but encounter many challenges as a foreigner in Japan. It was difficult for you to find a place to live, as many were unwilling to rent to foreigners. You can only stay a short time in Japan as becoming a permanent resident is a challenge, and why bother when you face discrimination as a foreigner?</p>
<p>Foreign Worker- Low Skilled</p> <p>You moved to Japan on a temporary work visa to fill jobs desperately needed due to population decline. You learned how to speak Japanese in your training on arrival, and you work at a local hotel. Your skills will help you live a more successful life in your home country, but much of what you do isn't something demanded in your home country, and you see there are more opportunities for you in Japan. Unfortunately you will have to go home soon.</p>	<p>Young Adult Male</p> <p>You have always dreamed of a quiet life where you could work hard, be professionally successful, and raise a family. You work in the city though, and the hours are very long and demanding. You have dated a few people, but finding time to date and build a relationship is very challenging. The thought of adding children is a stressful idea. It might be better to live somewhere else, or instead, focus on building your career.</p>

<p>Elderly Male With No Children</p> <p>You have always lived in the city. You worked at a highly successful firm and have retired to a very comfortable life. When you retired, your company was left in good hands, but you noticed over time that they needed someone experienced to help manage the workload. You decided to do some work part time, even though you are much past working age. You hope that by continuing to work, the burden on younger men is less, and they can spend time with their families.</p>	<p>Elderly Man in Rural Setting With Children Far Away</p> <p>You have always lived in a small mountain village, several hours from any big city. Your family had lived there for many generations doing woodworking in the forest. You were able to provide well for your family and your two children went to college and got high paying jobs in the city. It is very lonely now because your family is gone, and there are no jobs close to you that would allow your children to live close by. You only see your grandchildren once or twice a year.</p>
<p>Tea Ceremony Instructor</p> <p>Cultural Traditions mean a lot to you. You love when foreigners visit and take a lesson on the Tea Ceremony, however you like that it is something unique and preserved in Japan. There has been talk of changing immigration policy in recent years, but you worry about the cultural integrity of Japan and its traditions. You like to share your culture, but are worried about it being "watered down" by foreigners.</p>	<p>Foreign Affairs Counselor</p> <p>You work with other nations and see that Japan is a highly successful nation with great life expectancy, great education, and a rich cultural history. You see that other countries have higher levels of violence, and worry what that might mean if the solitude of Japan is interrupted by changing the foreign immigration policies. You like foreigners, but see Japan as a safe place and very much would like to keep it that way.</p>

<p><b>Kendo Instructor</b></p> <p>Japanese Kendo has become a highly popular sport internationally and you are a local instructor. At your school you have three foreign students who train hard with your other students each day. Although they are not Japanese, you see that they are dedicated to the art and willing and eager to learn more. You are happy to share this passion with them.</p>	<p><b>Rural Housewife</b></p> <p>You and your husband live happy lives in the countryside. You have a farm and three children that have to travel very far for school each day. Life is peaceful, but sometimes you worry about the time needed to travel for your children, and the quality of the education they receive in the countryside versus if they went to school in the city. You want your kids to have equal opportunities for college and employment in their future.</p>
<p><b>Rural Shinto Priest</b></p> <p>You work at a small shinto shrine in a historically significant coastal town. Over the years the shrine had many families that would visit for holidays and for family ceremonies. The town's population has declined and is primarily filled with elderly now. The shrine is becoming poorer and upkeep is difficult. Many of the visitors now are foreigners who are eager to see a shrine that has been standing for more than 700 years.</p>	<p><b>Emigrant Male</b></p> <p>You are an ex-Japanese citizen who moved to a different country. You were offered a promotion at work which involved you moving to a different country. The hours of work are better and the cost of living is lower. You found someone to marry and are expecting your first child soon. You have considered moving back to Japan, but overall life is happy where you are, and you remember the stress of working long hours, and expensive rent.</p>
<p><b>Rural Farmer</b></p> <p>You have lived on a farm for several generations. The work and living is modest, but very much valued in society. You have three children and one has shown interest in continuing the family tradition of farming. You would like it if your farm could grow in size and output, but with limited people living and willing to work in a farming village, you are unable to make many changes.</p>	<p><b>Emigrant Female</b></p> <p>You moved out of Japan for college and the adventure. You wanted to experience different cultures and see the world. You decided that it might be better to live outside of Japan permanently because of employment opportunities and cost of living. You thought children might be complicated without your family near and decided to have none.</p>
<p><b>Young Woman With Three Children</b></p> <p>You live and work in Tokyo. You work from home and have a mother in law that comes over during work hours to help care for your youngest child while the others are in school. You find that working from home is nice, however it is a challenge to get all of your work done and do the home responsibilities of chores and cooking. If your children are sick, you also feel the burden of needing to care for them while still needing to complete your work. Your husband helps out as much as he can, but his commute and hours are long. It is a difficult life.</p>	<p><b>Young Man With Three Children</b></p> <p>You live and work in Tokyo. Your commute to work is about an hour and a half in the morning and the same in the evening. You usually work 8-10 hours a day, sometimes more when there is more work to get done. Your wife works from home, which is nice to have two incomes. Your wife also has much of the burden of caring for your children. It is nice to have children, but the cost is large and sometimes you worry that it has become too stressful.</p>