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# The Solitary Non-Employed Persons (SNEPs): A New Concept of Non-Employment

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## I. Overview

Solitary Non-Employed Persons (SNEPs) is a new concept that refers to “Non-employed persons who are aged over 20 and 59 or less, who are not married or engaged in study, who are normally completely alone or who do not spend time with people other than their family.” According to the time use survey to focus on interaction during two consecutive days nominated randomly, the number of SNEPs rapidly increased in the decade from 2000, reaching 1,620,000 as of 2011 in Japan. A high percentage of SNEPs do not engage in any social activities such as sports, travel, or volunteer activities in the previous year. SNEPs tend to be male, middle-aged and older, junior-high school graduates. However, the tendency for people in their 20’s not to become SNEPs has weakened, and the isolation of young unmarried non-employed persons is becoming more serious. SNEPs do not tend to use e-mail and information searches. SNEPs are negative about either job-seeking activities or wanting to get jobs. The increase in SNEPs may be a factor of social instability and fiscal burden, such as the further increase in welfare recipients, and urgent policy responses are required such as public programs for generating skilled supporters who can outreach to SNEPs.

## II. Introduction

Japan has finally entered the age of full-fledged, irreversible population decline. According to a report by the Statistics Bureau, Japan’s estimated population as of December 1, 2012 was 127,492,000. It had declined by 296,000 in the previous year—the largest decline we have ever experienced. Securing the manpower to maintain the vitality of the economy is an urgent issue.

Initiatives such as revamping measures against falling birthrates and expanding acceptance of foreign workers have been proposed to address this issue. However, such initiatives miss an important point. While the average number of workers in Japan during 2012 was 62,700,000, the number of individuals who are not working, or non-employed individuals, has increased to 48,250,000 (this figure excludes those under the age of 15 years).

Before blindly deciding to allow the influx of immigrants or waiting for the number of children to increase when there is no promise for the occurrence of such, something needs to be done. We need to start by tapping non-employed “dormant workers,” and having as many of them work as possible as long as they are capable.

In fact, the number of workers over the age of 60 years has been increasing steadily in recent years. However, an unusual change is now occurring among non-employed people who are in their prime age.

### **III. Solitary Non-Employed Persons (SNEPs)**

The Survey on Time Use and Leisure Activities (STULA) has been conducted by the Statistics Bureau of Japan's Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications every five years since 1976, in order to understand the daily time usage and behavior of the people.

In this survey, approximately 200,000 subjects answer questions related to "what they did, with whom, and for approximately how many minutes" during a specified period of 48 consecutive hours during the two consecutive days randomly surveyed. Through the results of this survey, the details of everyday life among individuals who do not normally work are elucidated.

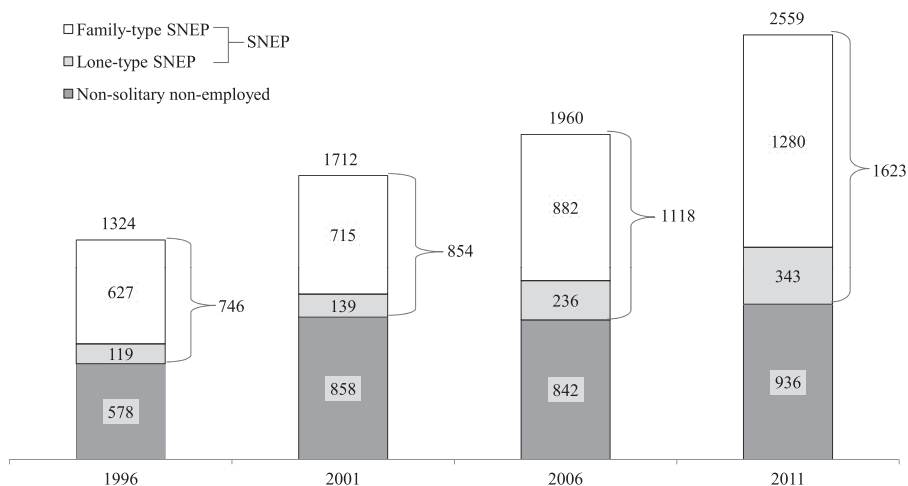
The author has devised a new definition of non-employed persons as stated below by using the micro data from the STULA and investigating their situations.

We call non-employed individuals who meet the following definition "solitary non-employed persons" (SNEPs): "of all unmarried individuals between the ages of 20 and 59 years who are not in school and are unemployed, those who do not usually spend time with anyone other than family members or who spend the entire time alone." This new concept of SNEPs can be measured in most developed countries that conduct the time use surveys examining the activities for randomly selected two days at least as well as Japan's STULA.

The number of SNEPs who do not interact at all with anyone other than family members has been increasing in Japan. Figure 1 shows trends and compositions in the non-employed 20-to-59-year-old unmarried population. The SNEPs can be divided into two categories: family-type SNEPs who have time to spend with family members, and lone-type SNEPs who do not spend time with family members and stay completely alone. The combination of family-type SNEPs and lone-type SNEPs shown in the figure comprises the entire SNEP population.

The number of non-employed unmarried individuals between the ages of 20 and 59 years (excluding those in school) was 1,324,000 in 1996, when the wounds created by the burst of the bubble economy were still somewhat raw. Of those, SNEPs accounted for 746,000 people; about 44% of non-employed unmarried individuals at that time had the opportunity to socialize with friends and acquaintances on at least one day out of the two.

However, in 2001, when the financial recession intensified and the unemployment rate crossed the five-percent mark for the first time in Japan, the number of non-employed prime-aged unmarried persons increased to 1,712,000, and the number of SNEPs jumped to 854,000. While there was a huge increase in the number of non-solitary non-employed persons who interact with friends and acquaintances, the number of SNEPs also increased by



Source: The figure was created from *The Survey on Time Use and Leisure Activities*, Statistics Bureau, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, Japan.

Note: The population includes non-employed, unmarried individuals between the ages of 20 and 59 years (excluding those in school).

Figure 1. Trends in the Non-Employed 20-to-59-Year-Old Unmarried Population (in thousands)

about 108,000 during the period lasting from 1996 to 2001.

After 2002, corporate downsizing due to situations such as write-offs of loans in default began coming to an end, and we saw signs of decline in the unemployment rate. However, the number of non-employed prime-aged unmarried individuals did not decrease even during that economic recovery period. Of all the non-employed persons, the number of unemployed individuals looking for jobs declined; however, the non-labor-force population not looking for jobs continued to grow then.

As seen in Figure 1, the number of SNEPs continued to increase to 1,118,000 in 2006 and finally reached 1,623,000 in 2011. The opposite was true of the number of non-solitary non-employed persons, which decreased from 2001 to 2006, perhaps because of the economic recovery. The increase in these non-solitary non-employed persons from 2006 to 2011 was small compared to that in SNEPs. As a result, about 63% of non-employed people were SNEPs in 2011.

The Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare defines *hikikomori* (socially withdrawn individuals) as “people who mostly remain at home for more than six months” in their guidelines formulated in 2010. A questionnaire survey conducted by the Cabinet Office in the same year estimated that there were 236,000 *hikikomori*. These individuals fall under the categories of family-type or lone-type SNEPs.

Table 1. Social Activities in the Past 12 Months among the Non-Employed Unmarried Individuals between the Ages of 20 and 59 Years

	Estimated Population (in thousands)	Those who did not engage at all in sports, travel, or volunteer work in the past 12 months	
		Estimated Population (in thousands)	Percentage
All non-employed	2,559	852	33.3%
SNEPs	1,623	665	41.0%
Family-type SNEPs	1,280	485	37.9%
Lone-type SNEPs	343	180	52.4%
Non-solitary non-employed	936	188	20.0%

*Source:* The table was created from *The Survey on Time Use and Leisure Activities (2011)*, Statistics Bureau, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, Japan.

*Note:* Estimated populations were rounded to the nearest thousand.

#### IV. No Social Interactions for over a Year

Some readers may feel that it is rather extreme to label people who did not spend any time with anyone other than family members for just two days as “solitary.” Some likely think that seeing no acquaintances for two days has no major significance.

However, that is not the case. In fact, differences in overall daily life among non-employed people can be highlighted rather clearly by focusing on personal interactions during two consecutive, randomly specified days. Indeed, the importance of the SNEP concept lies in the fact that it identified this distinction for the first time.

For example, Table 1 shows the percentage of people who did not engage in sports, travel, or volunteer activities in the past 12 months, according to the STULA conducted in 2011. All of these activities are done by leaving one’s home. Of all non-employed, unmarried individuals between the ages of 20 and 59 years (excluding those in school), 33.3% did not engage in these activities in the foregoing 12 months. Among non-solitary non-employed individuals, the percentage was 20.0%. However nearly double that proportion, or 41.0%, of solitary non-employed individuals, did not engage in those social activities in the foregoing 12 months.

In particular, 52.4% of lone-type SNEPs did not engage in those activities. Whether travel, sports, or volunteering, such activities typically include interaction with people. Almost half the number of all lone SNEPs have been cut off from such social interactions for as long as one year.

Notably, not spending time at all with anyone other than family members during the survey period of two consecutive days was not uncommon among non-employed married

Table 2. SNEPs and Their Social Activities among the Several Kinds of Non-Employed Individuals

Several kinds of non-employed individuals	Estimated non-employed population (in thousands)	Non-employed individuals who did not spend time with anyone other than family members in the two consecutive days (in thousands)	(2) as a percentage of (1)	Those who did not engage at all in sports, travel, or volunteer work in the past 12 months	
				Population (in thousands)	(3) as a percentage of (2)
	(1)	(2)	(2) ÷ (1)	(3)	(3) ÷ (2)
Unmarried non-employed (ages 20 to 59 years, excluding those in school) <our analysis population>	2,559	1,623	63.4%	665	41.0%
All non-employed persons (all ages, all marital statuses, including those in school)	41,174	19,805	48.1%	5,669	28.6%
Married non-employed (ages 20 to 59 years)	7,638	4,382	57.4%	536	12.2%
Divorced/widowed non-employed (ages 20 to 59 years)	499	274	54.9%	99	36.2%
Non-employed (ages 60 years or older)	24,260	12,842	52.9%	4,254	33.1%
Teenagers or in school, non-employed	6,292	698	11.1%	114	16.3%

Source: The table was created from *The Survey on Time Use and Leisure Activities (2011)*, Statistics Bureau, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, Japan.

Note: Estimated populations were rounded to the nearest thousand.

individuals in the same age group. Table 2 shows that the percentage of people who did not spend time with anyone other than family members was slightly lower in the non-employed married population overall, than in the non-employed unmarried population. In contrast, the percentage of people who did not engage in travel, sports, or volunteer activities in the past 12 months was only 12.2% among the non-employed married population—less than

one-third of the rate among non-employed singles. Predominantly, non-employed *singles* lose social interactions and become actually isolated; the table also shows that isolation is also a serious issue among non-employed individuals who are divorced or widowed, as well as older people over the age of 60.

## **V. Who Becomes a SNEP?**

The next question is who among non-employed singles in their prime age are most likely to become SNEPs.

First, men are more likely to become SNEPs than women are. This tendency may relate to the notion that males are more prone to becoming socially withdrawn. In Japan, the social norm demanding that individuals be self-reliant is stronger for males, making it harder for them to enter the workforce. The same probably applies to SNEPs.

Age also affects one's chances of being a SNEP. It has been relatively less likely for individuals to become SNEPs in their 20s, when there are many occasions to see friends. The probability for non-employed individuals to become isolated increases after their 30s; The SNEP status has been a more serious problem among middle-aged and older people than among youths.

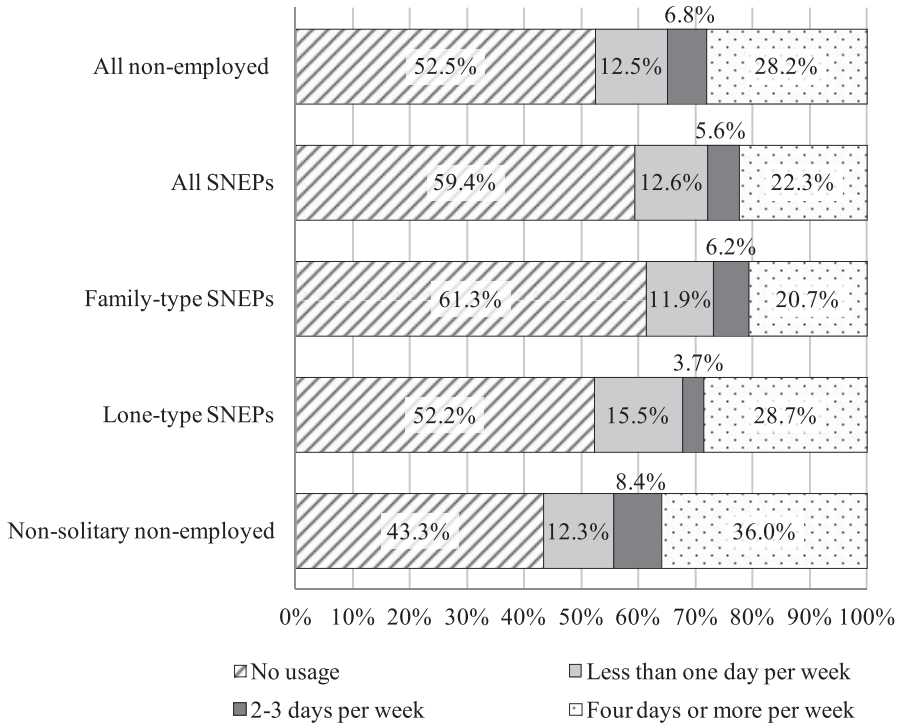
Between 2001 and 2011, however, the most noticeable increase in SNEP percentages was in young people in their 20's. In 2001, the percentage of SNEPs in their 20's, which had fallen to 40.4%, recorded a drastic increase of over 20 points to 62.2% by 2011. SNEPs in their 20's account for approximately 40% of non-employed unmarried people under 60, and the fact that the SNEPs percentage rose in the younger demographic is clearly a contributing factor in the overall increase in SNEPs in the 2000s.

Another factor influencing people's probability of becoming SNEPs is their educational background. There is a definite tendency for those who have only graduated from junior high school including high school dropouts to become SNEPs. High school dropouts often face difficulties developing relationships with friends. Furthermore, the fact that dropping out of school causes previous friendships to wane might have a large impact on this finding. High school dropouts are not only prone to struggle to become non-employed, but also likely to find themselves isolated in life in general.

## **VI. Everyday Lives of SNEPs**

How do people who shut themselves in at home spend their time? Might they be in a state we would call "Internet-dependent" or "Internet-addicted?" Such a concern has become a popular topic of conversation.

However, data from the STULA provides no indication that SNEPs tend to indulge themselves in the Internet or video games for an extended period of time. Even SNEPs who did not engage in sports, travel, or volunteer activities in the past 12 months did not



Source: The figure was created from *The Survey on Time Use and Leisure Activities (2006)*, Statistics Bureau, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, Japan.

Note: The population includes non-employed, unmarried individuals between the ages of 20 and 59 years (excluding those in school). The percentages may not add to 100 because of rounding.

Figure 2. The Frequency of E-Mail Usage

frequently play home video games either. Thus, the notion that SNEPs are isolated from society because they are Internet addicts is not true.

Many SNEPs are not close to being Internet addicts—they do not even use e-mail (including cell-phone texting). Some readers may expect everyone to use e-mail; however, as shown in Figure 2, over half of non-employed individuals do not use e-mail. The use of email is especially low among SNEPs, and in particular, about 60% of family-type SNEPs do not use e-mail at all. SNEPs are isolated—not just in their daily lives, but also in the virtual world of the Internet.

SNEPs are often not eager to utilize or obtain information on the Internet. 58.4% of SNEPs did not search or obtain information on the Internet, at least as of 2006. The rate of Internet use is also the lowest among family-type SNEPs.

Instead of the Internet, SNEPs tend to simply watch TV. They spend long hours watching TV because it does not cost money and occupies their time. It is rare for SNEPs to

focus on any certain type of study or research. Meanwhile, SNEPs sleep as much as they watch TV. Compared to non-solitary non-employed individuals, SNEPs are not particularly more likely to be under medical treatment due to illness or injury; they end up sleeping long hours simply because they cannot find anything else to do (however, some SNEPs spend very long hours for medical treatment although they are not so many.) As they continue to distance themselves from the society, they become less engaged in every type of activity.

## **VII. SNEPs and Work**

There are various attitudes toward work among non-employed individuals. Many of them wish to work and aggressively look for jobs by going to the government employment service center, which is called Hello Work, or private job placement companies. Some ask acquaintances for referrals or directly contact companies. On the other hand, there are people who are unable to take specific action for certain reasons although they do wish to become employed, and there are also people who do not wish to work at all.

Figure 3 illustrates job search activities and the desire to work by type of non-employed primed-aged individual. Overall, more than half the number of non-employed primed-aged people desire to work, and are actually looking for jobs. One-fifth of the non-employed population wants to work but are not looking for jobs; one-fourth do not wish to work at all.

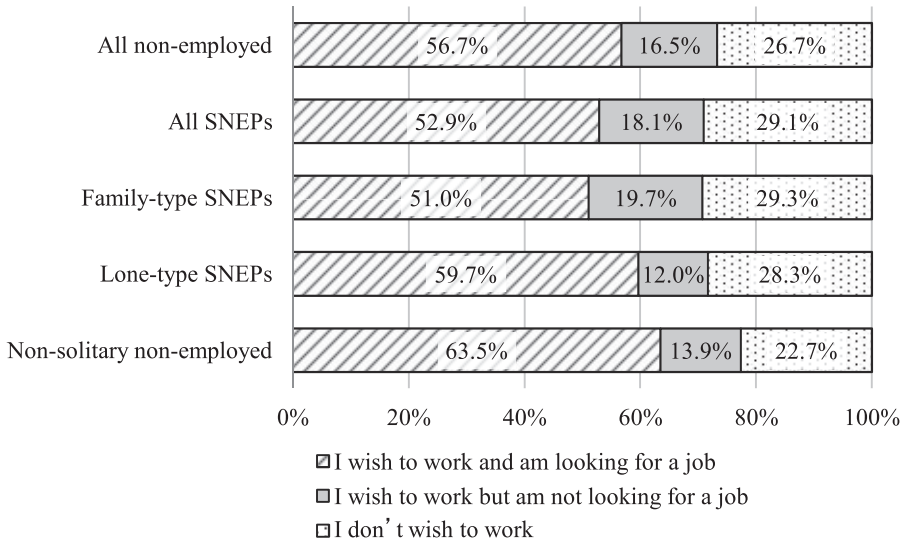
Meanwhile, non-solitary non-employed individuals who interact with friends and acquaintances are more eager to work: 63.5% of these are searching for jobs. Some can ask acquaintances to help them find jobs. They might also become interested in work or obtain knowledge regarding the job search process through conversations about work with their friends.

In contrast, SNEPs have been placed in a situation that is far from work. Figure 3 illustrates that the percentage of people who are actively looking for jobs is almost ten points lower among SNEPs compared to non-solitary non-employed individuals; for SNEPs, who are passive towards life in general, job search activities also tend to stall. The increase in the non-labor-force, that is those who do not search for jobs, among primed-aged population in recent years has been driven largely by the increased number of SNEPs.

Family-type SNEPs are an especially serious issue. Lone-type SNEPs are often desperately looking for jobs in order to make a living. However, the proportion of those actively pursuing jobs is considerably lower among family-type SNEPs, who spend time with their families and are often protected by them. Thus, the motivation to become employed itself is already weak among family-type SNEPs. It is possible that the generous protection of family hinders the prospects for employment to result in independence for family-type SNEPs.

It is highly likely that SNEPs are driving the growing number of welfare recipients in Japan. Unless we halt the rise in the number of SNEPs, higher social security costs due to





Source: The figure was created from *The Survey on Time Use and Leisure Activities (2011)*, Statistics Bureau, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, Japan.

Note: The population includes non-employed, single individuals between the ages of 20 and 59 years (excluding those in school). The percentages may not add to 100 because of rounding.

Figure 3. Job-Search Activity and Desire to Work

increased welfare will become more difficult to avoid in the future. Family-type SNEPs currently do well in general, because they still have families who can support them. However, after their aged parents pass away, they will be left in a serious situation unable to make their own living.

### VIII. Discussion

What is required to halt the increase in the number of SNEPs? The “outreach” is required to meet this end. By “outreach,” we mean support initiatives in which care providers are sent to visit the homes of people who cannot travel to medical or welfare facilities despite their need for care. A supporter visiting a *hikikomori* at home to help him/her and his/her family members is another form of outreach.

Observing and measuring SNEPs is difficult because SNEPs do not make any contacts with others. Apart from the fact that there are limited opportunities to meet them in person, they also encounter difficulties providing information via the Internet. That is why we need to set up “encounters.” As long as SNEPs themselves cannot come forward for help, others must encourage them to seek help or skillfully “meddle in.”

The Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare is currently working on a “Local Youth

Support Station Business,” in cooperation with the local government. It provides comprehensive support aiming to help non-employed young people with issues related to work in order for them to become vocationally independent. As of May 2013, they have established 149 Support Stations throughout the country and launched a wide variety of support activities such as technical consultation, provision of support programs, and referrals to Hello Work. Outreach is another activity of the program; they are currently providing support through home visits in many locations throughout the country. In particular, they focus on home visits for high school dropouts.

To halt the increase in the number of SNEPs, securing people with technical knowledge and experience in handling outreach, and training such people is more important than anything else. Tenacious negotiation and delicate support skills are required in order to conduct support outreach targeting SNEPs and their families.

In order to mitigate the increase in social security costs, it is necessary to allocate an appropriate budget to develop support personnel who have practical knowledge and experience to handle outreach. It is also necessary to develop public programs for generating skilled supporters. The details of such “support for supporters” needs to be considered and translated into official policy as soon as possible.

This short paper has highlighted the grave realities of non-employed individuals who are becoming isolated. Do everything possible to stop increasing isolation among non-employed individuals. Unless we expand such efforts steadily, we will be unable to end the decrease in the number of working individuals in their prime age.