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A Study on Work Assistance for Single Mothers

(Summary)

The Japan Institute of Labour

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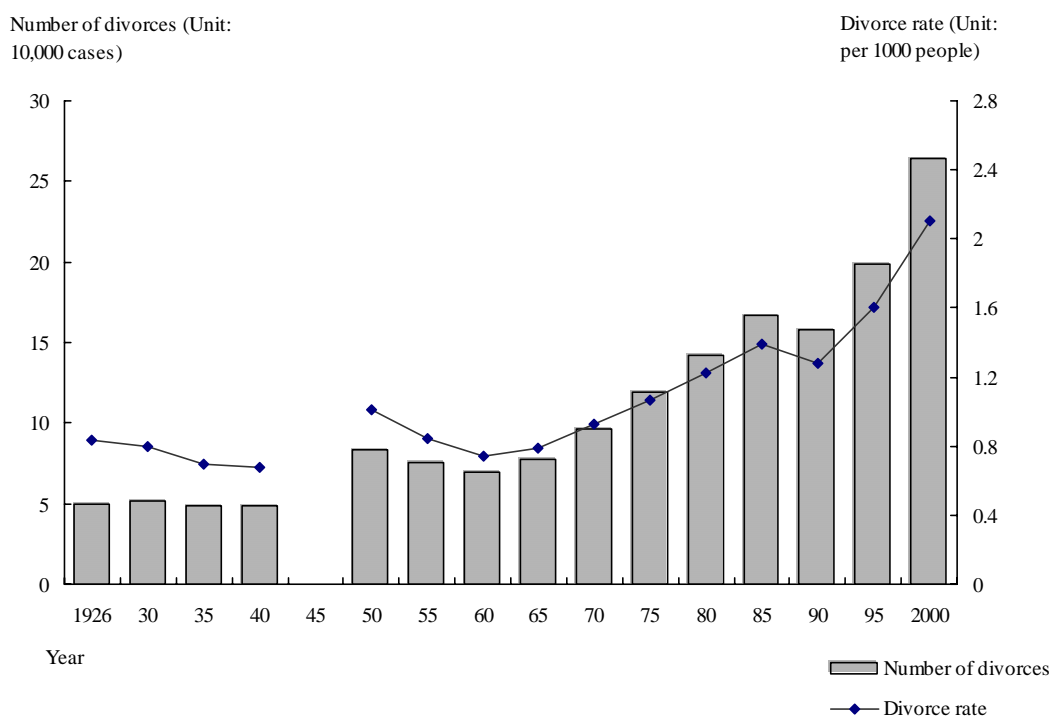
(The titles and names of listed organizations are current as of the time of writing)

1. Study Outline

(1) Objective of the Study

According to the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare's Vital Statistics Survey, the divorce rate per 1,000 people in Japan increased dramatically from 0.73 in 1963 to 2.10 in 2000. Such a rapid rise in the divorce rate has led to an increase in the number of single-parent households. In particular, according to the National Survey of Mother-Child Households conducted by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, the number of mother-child households rose to about 950,000 in 1998, up 20% from 1993. (In 1993, however, annual figures for both the number of mother-child households and the number of father-child households decreased, despite a 12.4% increase that had occurred over the previous decade.) And over the twenty-year period from 1978 to 1998, the number of mother-child households increased 50%. In terms of the reasons for households becoming fatherless, bereavement accounted for 50% of all cases in 1978, however this figure dropped to less than 20% in 1998. In general, the actual situation regarding mother-child households has changed significantly in terms of its characteristics and quantitative aspects.

Figure 1. Change in the number of divorces and the divorce rate



Source: Comprehensive Survey of Living Conditions of the People regarding Health and Welfare,
Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare
Note: No data available for 1945

Reasons Why Households Became Fatherless

Year	Number of households (Unit: 1,000 households)					
	Total	Bereavement	Separation			
			Total	Divorce	Unmarried Mother	Other
1978	633.7	316.1	317.5	240.1	30.3	47.1
1983	718.1	259.3	458.7	352.5	38.3	67.9
1988	849.2	252.3	596.9	529.1	30.4	37.3
1993	789.9	194.5	578.4	507.6	37.5	33.4
1998	954.9	178.8	763.1	653.6	69.3	40.2
Percentage (%)						
1978	100.0	49.9	50.1	37.9	4.8	7.4
1983	100.0	36.1	63.9	49.1	5.3	9.5
1988	100.0	29.7	70.3	62.3	3.6	4.4
1993	100.0	24.6	73.2	64.3	4.7	4.2
1998	100.0	18.7	79.9	68.4	7.3	4.2

Source: *National Survey of Mother-Child Households*, Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare

This study focuses on mother-child households among single-parent families.

As householders, mothers of single-parent families need to earn enough money to make a living. However, they are often forced to start work with insufficient skills and find it hard to become economically independent. Although various measures have been implemented to try and help these mothers, their lives seem to have become more difficult as the general employment situation has worsened. Surveys on the actual conditions of mother-child households have been conducted by local governments in addition to surveys carried out by the former Ministry of Welfare. However, many of such surveys were basically general ones or were detailed but limited to certain areas. This study therefore aims to identify the problems that mothers of mother-child households face, including the process of gaining employment, with the objective of helping formulate future policies so that they can live economically independent lives.

(2) Survey Method

The Study Group on Work Assistance for Mother-Child Families and Others was established in FY2000 within the Japan Institute of Labour. The Study Group implemented a questionnaire survey and an interview survey which targeted the mothers of mother-child households, and also conducted analysis of the results from previous surveys.

(3) Outline of the Research

1) Questionnaire Survey

Survey concerning Work Assistance for Mothers of Mother-Child Households

This survey was conducted in order to understand the actual living and working conditions of single mothers, as well as their attitudes.

- Subjects: 5,000 households consisting of a mother under the age of 60 and a child (or children) under the age of 20.

First, survey areas were selected nationwide using the survey districts that were established for the 1995 Population Census. Five thousand households, consisting of a mother under the age of 60 and a child (or children) under the age of 20, were then selected based on the Basic Resident Register. These households included those in which the fathers were working away from home. In cases where a household was found to represent an irrelevant survey sample, such households were excluded. Irrelevant samples accounted for 30% of the returned responses.

- Survey period: January to February 10, 2001
- Survey method: Questionnaire sheets were distributed and returned by postal mail
- Collection:

Number of questionnaires distributed and actually received by the households: 4,940

Number of completed questionnaires collected: 2,733

Relevant responses: 1,874

Irrelevant responses: 859

Number of valid samples: 1,721

Estimated collection rate of valid responses^{*1}: 50.8%

Estimated minimum collection rate of valid responses^{*2}: 42.2%

Notes: *1 This figure is based on the assumption that the same percentage of irrelevant cases is included among those who did not answer as respondents.

*2 This figure is based on the assumption that irrelevant cases are not included among those who did not answer.

- Survey content: The living and working conditions of mother-child households and their attitudes.
- The findings are summarized as follows.
 - a. 90% of single mothers are working.
 - b. 40% are regular employees, while 30% are part-timers or temporary workers.
 - c. Many of the regular employees are clerical workers, specialists or technicians, while most of the part-timers and temporary workers are engaged in services, manufacturing, sales or clerical work.
 - d. Their commuting time is short so that they can both work and raise their children. 40% of the respondents said they have a commuting time of "less than 15 minutes" while 70% responded that their commuting time is "less than 30 minutes" (including those working at home).
 - e. Their average annual income is ¥2,456,000. The median is ¥2 million.
 - f. Their average monthly income is ¥210,000, including social security benefits and others. More than 60% of the respondents feel that they have a tough time making a living.

- g. 40% had not worked prior to becoming a single mother. Many of them started to work to earn money as soon as possible, however they hope to change employment once they can find a better job. Half of those who had not held a job prior to becoming a single mother, changed employment after becoming single.
 - h. The respondents said they desire help in the following areas: developing vocational abilities, finding information about ways of getting a better job, and resolving work-related problems. Those with a lower annual income tend to desire skill development assistance, while those with a higher income tend to desire child-care help.
 - i. As to the respondents who were divorced, 90% earn income from work, 20% get help from their parents or relatives, and 20% receive child-rearing expenses from their ex-husbands. More than 70% receive child-care allowances. Of those respondents whose husbands had died, nearly 90% receive money from “survivor's basic pension,” and 80% earn income from work.
 - j. Housing rent and educational expenses occupy the majority of their household budget.
- More than 1,000 respondents wrote various comments in the ‘free-entry column’ provided on the questionnaire. This aspect, combined with the high collection rate, represent the characteristics of the survey that was implemented. Their comments show how strongly they want to change their current conditions and to also have them changed. Moreover, looking back over the past difficulties they have faced and overcome, their desire to make things easier for those in a similar situation was reflected in their responses. Some earnestly implored for help to change the difficult conditions they live under. Also, some critical comments were received regarding the actual usefulness of the survey itself.
 - An attempt was made to analyze the free comments written by the respondents and they were included, unedited, in the report. It should be noted that their views do not necessarily reflect the measures that have been taken to date, and some of the opinions are likely based on misunderstandings. However, they have not been excluded because it was believed important to know how the individuals concerned feel about and view the current situation.

2) Interview survey

When the questionnaire survey was implemented, the respondents were asked whether they were willing to also take part in an interview survey. Among those who agreed to cooperate, 11 interviewees were selected according to the following conditions.

First, the interviewees were limited to those who receive child-care allowances. Some people were excluded in terms of the amount of allowances, as well as income and age requirements. Meanwhile, other requirements were also set for selecting interviewees, such as the period of time that had passed since they became single mothers, the conditions under which they became single and their experiences up until the present time, as well as working patterns and the kinds of jobs undertaken. Survey areas were limited to major cities, and the interviewees were selected mainly

from the Tokyo metropolitan area, with some also from the Kansai Region.

3) Analysis of earlier surveys

The results of the 1987 and 1997 basic Employment Status Surveys, the 1993 and 1998 National Surveys of Mother-Child Households, and the 1997 vital statistics survey on social and economic aspects regarding the children of divorced parents, were analyzed.

Analysis of the Employment Status Surveys conducted by the Ministry of Public Management, Home Affairs, Post and Telecommunications

The results of the 1987 and 1997 Employment Status Surveys were reviewed in order to understand the real situation of working single mothers and their attitudes. As a result of comparing various types of households (mother-child households, father-child households, mother-child households living with the mother's parents or other relatives, father-child households living with the father's parents or other relatives, households consisting of parents and children), it was found that mother-child households have the following characteristics:

(Findings)

- a. The annual income of mother-child households is low. Nearly 50% of them earn less than ¥2 million per year. Only 10% or so receive an annual income of ¥4 million.
- b. Both independent (those not living with their parents or other relatives) and dependent single mothers are in many cases poorly educated. This tendency is more noticeable compared with the case of independent and dependent single fathers.
- c. The ratio of those who are regular employees among all single mothers is 50%, and this is much higher than the figure of 30% for working mothers who have spouses. In terms of single mothers who work as regular employees, the percentage of those in professional, technical or managerial fields is half of that compared to mothers who have spouses. When compared with women with spouses, the incomes of single mothers are seen to be lower. And the income gap has widened over the past decade.
- d. Single mothers have a strong desire to switch to a regular job. The rate of job seekers is high and they are highly motivated to gain employment.
- e. Single mothers without jobs are willing to be employed and more than half of them are seeking work.
- f. 30% of those who hope to gain employment, but are currently not seeking jobs, said that they cannot work because they are sick or aged. Many younger single mothers also cited illness or their age as the reason for not working, and it seems that some cannot work even though they want to.

Analysis of the National Surveys of Mother-Child Households conducted by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare

The main scope of this survey was focused on actual living conditions and livelihood support received. Independent mother-child households (Category A) and mother-child households living with the mothers' parents or relatives (Category B) were compared.

(Findings)

- a. The percentage of mother-child households living with the mothers' parents or other relatives is high for single mothers in their early 20s who have preschool age children.
- b. Before becoming a single mother, the percentage of those who did not work was almost the same between Categories A and B. The percentage of those who work as regular employees was high for Category B compared with Category A.
- c. There is not much difference in the current working situations between the two categories. The percentage of those who work as regular employees is slightly higher for Category B, as mentioned in "item b" above.
- d. The percentage of those who have no job is slightly higher for Category A. However, the situations as to why they are not working are different. For Category A, many respondents said they were seeking jobs, or were sick or in poor health. In Category B, quite a few respondents said they were receiving vocational training, although the overall number was small.
- e. There is a difference between the two categories in terms of the educational aspirations the single mothers have for their children. Category B mothers tend to hope that their children will go on to college, while mothers in Category A often hope their children will simply graduate from high school, with some considering graduation from junior high school as being sufficient, though the number of such mothers is small.

Re-analysis of the vital statistic survey on social and economic aspects regarding the children of divorced families conducted by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare

This survey is valuable because it investigates the situation immediately after the parents have divorced by consent. According to a re-analysis of children from divorced families, 60% are six years of age or younger, and 40% are two years of age or younger. The mothers are more likely to gain custody of the children. The following matters were also examined: (i) the family structure and housing situation of single-parent families following divorce; (ii) the age of the children; (iii) any changes in the mother's job around the time of divorce and economic situation prior to divorce; (iv) factors that determine whether child-rearing expenses or a lump sum payment is made; (v) which people are more likely to receive child-care allowances in light of applicants and actual recipients, and (vi) the type of lives single-parent families generally lead.

As mentioned above, we not only conducted our own surveys but also reviewed surveys that had been carried out previously. Our report includes an outline and the findings of these surveys,

and examines the reality of employment for single mothers.

In the "Actual Employment of Single Mothers: Findings from Surveys" report, the mother-child household was defined, and a detailed analysis was conducted regarding the actual situation of employment for single mothers. It examined the following: (i) the high employment rate of single mothers and the characteristics of their working patterns; (ii) their income from work; (iii) their working hours; (iv) the factors that determine income from work; (v) their situation, according to the period of time that had passed since they became single; (vi) how mothers worked before and around the time they became single; (vii) their educational backgrounds, and (viii) their children's work opportunities after graduating from school and access to higher education. Future issues were also studied.

The report "Career Formation for Single Mothers and their Potential - Based on the 1997 Employment Status Survey" focused on women between the ages of 20 and 49. It compared mother-child households (those with children under the age of 18) with households that had both parents (in some cases it also examined the situation regarding unmarried women), and the following items were analyzed: (i) how greatly employment differs, in terms of the rate of labor force participation and income according to employment pattern, between single mothers and mothers with a spouse; (ii) the time at which single mothers gained employment in regular jobs and the relationship between their initial age and wages; (iii) how the attitude toward changing jobs and job seeking differs between single mothers and mothers with a spouse; (iv) how individual living standards differ between mother-child households and married households with children; (v) an estimation of the wage function; (vi) estimation of the Heckman-type wage function, and (vii) what kind of employment assistance mother-child households desire.

This report consists of four parts. Part 1 summarizes the findings of our own surveys. Part 2 summarizes the findings from the above-mentioned analysis of past surveys. Part 3 includes analytical articles written by the panel members. Part 4 consists of references, including the detailed results of the questionnaire survey and the reviewed surveys. It is our hope that they will be of use to persons interested in the actual situation of mother-child households. Part 4 also illustrates the efforts that local governments, businesses and other organizations have made to assist mother-child households, with one case example given for each (information for which was provided by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare).

2. Policy Issues and Implications of This Study

This study aims to understand the actual living conditions and attitudes of mother-child households in Japan by focusing on employment problems. Needless to say, the problems affecting mother-child households represent complex, multi-faceted social issues. When examining issues related to employment of single mothers, various related factors, as well as the diversity of mother-child households, must be taken into account. The outline of this study was mentioned

above, and detailed analyses of the findings are given in the report. Herein we discuss the policy issues regarding mother-child households and the implications of this study.

(1) Definition of “mother-child household”

According to the National Survey of Mother-Child Households (hereinafter referred to as NSMCH) conducted every five years by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, the "mother-child household" is defined as “a household with fatherless children who are being raised by their mother.” "Children" in this case means "unmarried persons under the age of 20." The word "fatherless" indicates that "the father has died, the parents' marriage has been nullified, the parents are unmarried, or that the father is missing, has deserted the family, is mentally or physically disabled, or is incarcerated, or any other relevant situation¹." "To raise" means "to live with and have the custody of the children, and maintain a livelihood." The 1998 survey showed that the number of such households was 954,900. Given a rapid rise in the divorce rate in recent years, this figure is estimated to exceed one million in 2002.

Unlike the Population Census and other surveys, the NSMCH includes mother-child households which live with the mother's parents. According to our analysis of the survey data, the percentage of such households was 26.8%. The fact that about a quarter of all mother-child households live with the mother's parents is closely related to the family structure in Japan and is important from a policy perspective. Generally, living together with one's parents can help resolve the difficulties that a single mother and her children face. For example, this can help in reducing housing expenses. However, three-quarters of all mother-child households earn an independent living. Returning to the parents' home does not always help solve all the problems faced by mother-child households.

Some independent mother-child households receive assistance from the mother's parents in various ways. It is true that such family assistance prevents the problems mother-child households face from coming to the surface. According to the current JIL survey, which was limited for methodological reasons to only households consisting of a mother and her children (excluding mothers and children living with the mothers' parents), mother-child households that have never received assistance from their parents or relatives account for 39.6% of the total. Problem resolution through family assistance is limited though, and can be unbalanced at times because the family situations are different. These matters are important when discussing the problems associated with mother-child households.

(2) Increasing number of mother-child households

Why is the problem of mother-child households attracting wider social attention from the public?

The first important fact is that the number of mother-child households has been increasing significantly; this figure was estimated to be around 789,900 in 1993, however increased rapidly to 954,900 by 1998, according to the NSMCH. In Japan generational effects regarding the age

structure of the population have also been significant, particularly involving the post-war baby-boomer generation, and therefore the change in the overall numbers does not necessarily show an accurate representation of the true size. As such, it is necessary to estimate the ratio of mother-child households to all households with children. However, current statistics are unable to provide data concerning the total number of households with children under the age of 20. And although the Population Census counts the number of mother-child households, this data does not include households in which single mothers and fatherless children are living with the mothers' parents or other relatives. It is therefore impossible to calculate the ratio of mother-child households, including ones that live together with their parents, among the households with children. Accordingly, the following calculation was attempted, even though the survey years were different: "The number of mother-child households in the NSMCH" divided by the added amount of "the number of general households with two parents and a child", "the number of mother-child households" and "the number of father-child households obtained from the NSMCH." The result is shown in Table 1. According to this calculation, the estimated ratio of mother-child households for 1998 is 6.4%. Using the results based on our analysis of Employment Status Survey data, another calculation becomes possible. That is: "the number of independent mother-child households (not living with the mothers' parents or other relatives)" divided by the added amount of "the number of households consisting of two parents and a child under the age of 20", "the number of independent mother-child households" and "the number of independent father-child households." As a result, the percentage of mother-child households among independent households with children under the age of 20 is 5.2% for 1987 and 6.2% for 1997. To sum up, the ratio of mother-child households in Japan can likely be estimated to have exceeded 6% by the end of the 1990's.

Table 1. Ratio of Mother-Child Households

	Census	National survey of mother-child households		Total	Percentage	
	Number of general households with children	Number of mother-child households	Number of father-child households		Percentage of mother-child households	Percentage of father-child households
1985/88	16,639,060	849,200	173,300	17,661,560	4.8	1.0
1990/93	15,390,491	789,900	157,300	16,337,691	4.8	1.0
1995/98	13,690,610	954,900	163,400	14,808,910	6.4	1.1

- Notes: 1. "General households with two parents and a child" means those consisting of a husband, wife and a youngest child under the age of 20.
2. Calculation method for ratios

$$\frac{\text{Number of mother-child households}}{\text{Number of general households} + \text{Number of mother-child households} + \text{Number of father-child households}} \times 100$$

$$\frac{\text{Number of father-child households}}{\text{Number of general households} + \text{Number of mother-child households} + \text{Number of father-child households}} \times 100$$

3. The National Survey of Mother-Child Households was conducted three years after the Population Census.

(3) Low percentage of mother-child households in Japan

Is the above figure high or low? To answer this question, an international comparison is helpful. Of course, an accurate comparison is difficult because the definition of a mother-child household differs from country to country. According to a report titled “Lone Mothers in European Welfare Regimes” edited by J. Lewis, the percentage of mother-child households rose from 10.7% in 1981 to 17.5% in 1991 in the UK, where the problem of mother-child households has attracted much attention as a social and political issue. In the Netherlands, however, where not so much attention has been focused on the problem, the percentage was around 9% in 1993. In Sweden meanwhile, it was estimated to be at 13.5% in 1991. The upper limit for “age of children” in the definition of mother-child households differs between countries. However, since the same age is applied for both the denominator and the numerator, it does not appear that any major error results from this difference in the upper limit for age of children.

When compared with the data from these countries, it can be said that Japan's figure (6-7% as of the end of the 1990's) is still relatively low. This seems attributable to the typical family situation in Japan: (i) As indicated in Table 2, the divorce rate is increasing but is still lower in Japan when compared on international basis, and (ii) the ratio of unmarried mothers (including those who stopped cohabiting with their partner) among all single mothers remained at 7.3% in 1998, a far lower percentage than the UK's 36.5% in 1991 (Lewis, 1997: p.55)².

However, Japan's family structure is changing. Table 2 shows that the divorce rate saw a particularly sharp rise in the 1990's. According to the 1993 NSMCH, the ratio of unmarried mothers among all single mothers also increased from 4.7% in 1993 to 7.3% in 1998. As a result of these changes, there have been a growing number of mother-child households, and this problem has become a greater social concern.

Table 2. Divorce Rate according to Gender (Husband/Wife) and Age Group between 1930 and 2000

(%)

Age group	1930	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000
Husband							
Total ¹⁾	2.50	2.01	1.17	1.47	2.07	2.14	3.74
19 and younger ²⁾	0.10	0.09	0.01	0.03	0.03	0.06	0.18
20-24	2.14	2.47	0.79	1.12	1.21	1.67	3.02
25-29	5.59	5.51	2.88	3.63	3.84	4.36	7.23
30-34	5.04	4.11	2.53	3.22	4.63	4.97	8.97
35-39	3.86	2.81	1.76	2.18	3.75	4.08	7.37
40-44	2.83	1.95	1.19	1.40	2.59	3.30	5.73
45-49	2.14	1.30	0.81	0.93	1.82	2.53	4.47
50-54	1.52	0.90	0.59	0.58	1.06	1.59	3.37
55-59	1.20	0.62	0.45	0.47	0.65	0.93	2.15
60 and older	0.66	0.31	0.28	0.27	0.26	0.30	0.62
Wife							
Total ¹⁾	2.52	1.85	1.09	1.38	1.95	2.03	3.52
19 and younger ²⁾	1.04	0.62	0.15	0.19	0.20	0.27	0.50
20-24	5.41	4.47	2.22	2.59	2.74	3.16	4.90
25-29	5.44	4.33	2.76	3.71	5.17	6.02	9.94
30-34	3.97	2.70	1.88	2.47	4.29	4.85	9.59
35-39	2.75	1.68	1.26	1.62	3.12	3.65	6.93
40-44	1.94	1.10	0.76	1.02	2.05	2.80	4.99
45-49	1.41	0.66	0.43	0.59	1.25	1.91	3.57
50-54	0.87	0.39	0.28	0.36	0.68	1.04	2.36
55-59	0.57	0.24	0.17	0.21	0.34	0.53	1.29
60 and older	0.17	0.06	0.07	0.07	0.08	0.12	0.29

Quoted from *Population Statistics 2001/2002* by the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research.

Notes: ¹⁾ Includes people of unknown age. The target population is those who are 15 years of age and older.

²⁾ From 15 to 19 years of age.

(4) The economic problem affecting mother-child households is “low wages”

Why does an increase in the number of mother-child households constitute a social problem? It can be said that in a certain sense the growing number of divorces and unmarried mothers simply indicates a changing trend in family structure and does not directly constitute a social problem. However, mother-child households, when compared to two-parent households, tend to experience various problems in their everyday lives. Resolution of such problems is an important challenge for the entire society and is an urgent policy issue.

The most acute problem that mother-child households face is an economic one: a shortage of income to maintain an adequate standard of living. According to our analysis of the 1997 Employment Status Survey data, the average annual income of mother-child households where the mother does not live with her parents or other relatives was ¥2,480,000. Even when limited to households where the mother is working, this figure was ¥2,610,000. These numbers are significantly lower than ¥6,690,000, which is the average income received by two-parent

households. In addition, the income of independent mother-child households is supposed to include child-care allowances (on average, about ¥350,000 per year), which will be mentioned later. Based on our analysis of the 1998 NSMCH data, the average earnings for independent mother-child households was ¥2,277,000, lower than the average figure from the Employment Status Survey.

The percentage of working mothers is very high among mother-child households, whether they are independent or living with their parents or other relatives. According to analysis of the 1997 Employment Status Survey data, the rate was 86.7% for independent mothers and 86.0% for single mothers who live together with their parents, respectively. Of working mothers, the percentage of those who work 200 days or more per year was 80.6% for independent mother-child households and 83.7% for those who live with their parents, while the rate of those who work 35 hours or more per week was 79.6% and 82.7%, respectively. Thus, a high percentage of working mothers have long working hours. Nevertheless, their income is low due to the fact that, even though they work long hours, they tend to be employed in low wage jobs. In contrast, the annual average income of two-parent households where the wife does not work was ¥6,070,000 (annual income of the husband of the households where both parents work must be lower than this, as the income level that enables the wife not to work should be relatively high), according to our analysis. This means that mother-child households without a husband who holds a well-paying job are at a disadvantage. In order to resolve the low-income problem experienced by mother-child households, it is obviously important to enable single mothers to get higher-paying jobs. That is also one of the major concerns of this study. In other words, the problem is to elucidate the effective support measures that need to be taken in order to allow single mothers to acquire better paying jobs.

One could say that if mother-child households stopped being fatherless, perhaps the problem might be resolved. In this context, remarriage would be viewed as an option. Theoretically, if all single mothers were to marry again, one could argue that the problem might improve. It would be possible to develop policies for supporting remarriage. In fact, there are probably many cases in which the problems faced by single mothers are resolved in this way. While the purpose of this study is not to examine such mechanism, however, we could just point out an important fact that the remarriage rate is considerably different for men and women. Table 3 shows that the remarriage rate for women aged 20 to their early 30's is two-thirds to three-quarters of that compared to men in the same age group. Though it is purely conjecture, the remarriage rate for women in mother-child households is thought to be likely lower than that for bereaved or separated women without children, therefore the effectiveness of the "remarriage solution" is limited. Moreover, the choice of whether to marry or not is a personal matter. A society where the problems faced by mother-child households can only be resolved through remarriage virtually deprives single mothers of the freedom of "not to marry." In addition, both the marriage rate and birth rate can decline in a society where risks of divorce and having children are high. If a declining birth rate is a concern for the society, then the economic difficulties mother-child households face are most likely one of the major obstacles in achieving policy objectives.

Table 3. Remarriage Rate by Gender (Husband/Wife) and Age Group between 1930 and 2000

(%)

Age group	1930	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000
Husband							
Total ¹⁾	48.96	34.12	32.93	41.33	37.73	34.56	33.11
19 and younger ²⁾	34.52	81.57	12.72	9.53	94.89	122.09	38.30
20-24	102.93	178.64	203.97	239.97	260.91	277.71	212.27
25-29	185.84	236.14	321.56	440.96	349.62	315.21	243.36
30-34	200.69	237.62	248.26	318.33	251.08	246.53	216.52
35-39	166.44	170.13	151.76	180.07	136.52	136.26	136.83
40-44	105.99	86.43	92.21	100.99	66.97	71.49	74.11
45-49	57.19	38.04	53.55	63.24	40.76	42.05	41.27
50-54	29.79	16.84	27.42	38.63	27.15	26.01	27.41
55-59	17.35	7.87	12.02	20.89	18.43	16.18	18.89
60-64	10.06	4.23	5.22	8.55	8.97	8.70	10.65
65-69	5.39	1.75	2.72	3.64	4.26	3.96	5.27
70 and older	1.78	0.55	0.83	0.84	0.94	0.48	1.38
Wife							
Total ¹⁾	11.47	7.49	4.78	6.08	7.44	7.57	8.43
19 and younger ²⁾	39.19	63.75	37.83	8.45	231.71	188.41	75.10
20-24	96.46	87.95	144.80	138.74	271.85	196.27	140.73
25-29	108.96	68.40	96.70	161.20	218.97	186.65	148.81
30-34	71.74	30.12	38.01	68.73	99.79	115.11	107.44
35-39	36.42	10.63	14.17	27.61	40.41	49.70	55.22
40-44	18.61	4.78	4.75	10.95	16.94	23.78	25.89
45-49	9.75	2.42	2.32	4.57	7.89	14.00	15.65
50-54	4.97	1.30	1.22	1.68	3.36	6.40	9.49
55-59	2.51	0.66	0.52	0.69	1.11	2.33	4.73
60-64	1.03	0.24	0.25	0.28	0.37	0.77	1.92
65-69	0.42	0.13	0.12	0.12	0.14	0.23	0.64
70 and older	0.09	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.02	0.07

Quoted from *Population Statistics 2001/2002* by the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research.

Notes: ¹⁾ Includes people whose age is unknown. The target population is 15 years of age and older.

²⁾ From 15 to 19.

(5) Reasons why single mothers have a high rate of employment

Another characteristic of mother-child households in Japan is that the employment rate for single mothers is extremely high when compared with other countries. As mentioned above, the rate obtained through analysis of the 1997 Employment Status Survey data was over 86%. The 1998 NSMCH also showed that the rate was as high as 85%. According to Lewis (Lewis, 1997a), the employment rate for single mothers in European countries in the early 1990s was as follows (see Table 4): 70% for Sweden (the highest rate), 41% for the UK, and 40% for both Germany and the Netherlands. In the UK, many single mothers receive public assistance, and consequently, this financial burden and "welfare dependency" have become a major political problem as in the US. When compared with these countries, the employment rate of Japanese single mothers is extraordinarily high, and this phenomenon can be reasonably called another intriguing aspect of Japanese society.

Table 4: Employment Rate for Single Mothers in Europe

(%)

Country	Regular employees	Part-timers	Total
Denmark	59	16	69
Germany (1992)	28	12	40
Ireland (1991)			23
Italy (1991)	58	11	69
The Netherlands (1994)	16	24	40
Sweden (1994)	41	29	70
United Kingdom (1990)	17	24	41

Source: J. Bradshaw, A. Corden, T. Eardley, H. Holms, S. Kennedy, M. Kilkey, and J. Neale, (1996) *The Employment of Lone Parents*, London: Family Policies Study Center, T.I.3, p.13; Cited by Lewis, 1997a, p.4, after partial elimination.

What are the factors that have supported such a high employment rate? This study is not primarily intended to thoroughly discuss this question, and it is a theme that needs to be addressed in the future. However, it is possible to suggest the following factors.

First, the social security system is different in Japan. Some Japanese mother-child households are on welfare because they cannot receive earnings from work or support from their families. According to the 2001 Comparative Survey of Living Conditions of the People regarding Health and Welfare, the percentage of welfare recipients of means-tested public assistance among mother-child households was 11.7%, far higher than the 1.8% for all households. In terms of mother-child households, this rate saw a decrease compared to the 15.7% figure in 1985. However, for all households, the rate has increased from the 1985 level of 1.3%, though the reason for such increase is unknown. Apart from public assistance based on the means test, the child-care allowance system based on the income test is operated and widely used in Japan.

Child-care allowances in Japan are provided under the Child-Care Allowance Law. Article 1 of the law stipulates that child-care allowances be paid to relevant children in order to contribute to the stability and independence of families whose children are brought up without support from the father, as well as to promote welfare for children. This benefit is paid until March 31 of the year in which the relevant child turns 18 years old, and its amount is restricted according to household income. A household consisting of a mother and a child will receive a monthly payment of ¥42,370 (full amount) when the annual income is less than ¥904,000 (equal to the limit of non-taxable income), and ¥28,350 per month when the annual income is between ¥904,000 and ¥1.92 million. If a household with an annual income of less than ¥904,000 has two children, then the full amount of the benefit increases by ¥5,000 to ¥47,370; for a third child an additional ¥3,000 is added. (These represent payment amounts in effect prior to the 2002 revision of the Law.) The system was changed significantly in 2002 and this study deals only with the situation prior to such reform; the types of revisions made and their effects are not mentioned here. For fiscal 2003, the total budget for child-care allowances was ¥259 billion.

According to the “Report on Cases of Social Welfare Administration 2000,” about 710,000 mother-child households receive child-care allowances. The average annual amount of such benefit, ¥366,000, can be calculated by dividing the annual budget of about ¥260 billion by the number of recipient households. It is easy to imagine how the value of this allowance (the full amount of which can exceed ¥500,000) can be a significant help to households with an annual income of around ¥2 million. Many households with an annual income of around ¥2 million receive the full amount, while households with an annual income of around ¥2-3 million receive partial benefits. According to our review of the 1997 Employment Status Survey results, 55.9% of independent mother-child households earn less than ¥2 million from work, while 24.9% earn between ¥2 and ¥3 million. That is, 80% plus of independent mother-child households earn less than ¥3 million. On the other hand, mother-child households that live with the mothers’ parents or other relatives earn more: earners of less than ¥2 million account for 45.6% and those who earn less than ¥3 million for 69.2%. Of the mother-child households that are likely to be financially supported by the parents or relatives they live with, the number of child-care allowance recipients are thought to be relatively small.

If mother-child households were only able to use the public assistance system and not the child-care allowance system, more of them would likely stop earning a livelihood from work and would come to rely on public assistance. The UK does not have such a child-care allowance system that makes up for earnings from work. It has a public assistance system under which single mothers do not necessarily need to work. In this case, it is natural that there are a large number of recipients of public assistance and that the employment rate is lower. Conversely, the Japanese child-care allowance system provides a strong incentive for people to get a job. This might be one of the reasons why the employment rate of single mothers is exceptionally high in Japan³.

Secondly, the availability of child-care facilities has a profound effect on the employment rate for single mothers who have preschool age children. There are a large number of public child-care facilities in Japan, and single mothers are identified as those who acutely need such facilities. According to the current JIL survey, 71.8% of single mothers with preschool age children said that their children were cared for at authorized child-care facilities. Even when their household income is low, they can still use such facilities for a relatively small fee, because the fees are adjusted according to household income. By contrast, the UK does not offer sufficient public child-care facilities and their fees are high, thus reducing the incentive for single mothers with preschool age children to get a job (Lewis, 1997b). In Sweden, where public child-care facilities are abundant, the employment rate of single mothers is relatively high (Hobson & Takahashi, 1997).

Thirdly, it is purely a conjecture, but differences in social systems and the level of public safety could also have an effect on the employment rate for single mothers with preschool age children. In the UK, parents have to drop off their children at school and pick them up afterwards, which is different from the situation in Japan. The phrase “latchkey kids,” is commonly used in Japan, however it is difficult for most to imagine the concept itself as it exists in the UK and the US.

If the level of public safety diminishes in Japan and many "latchkey children" are exposed to certain dangers, it may become difficult to maintain the high employment rate of single mothers without some concomitant improvements in after-school care programs.

Fourthly, the situation regarding labor supply and demand has been favorable for single mothers. When the Japanese economy has performed well, job opportunities have been created by small- and medium-sized enterprises, thus making it relatively easy for single mothers, as well as others, to find work. A prolonged period of economic stagnation in recent years however, is hurting such favorable conditions.

Fifthly, the fact that there were a relatively small number of single mothers contributed to the maintenance of the high employment rate. Specifically, when the number of mother-child households was small, securing resources for child-care allowances was not a major problem. As this number has increased, so have the associated costs, and it has become a key financial problem the government needs to address.

(6) Associating the problems faced by mother-child households with social stratification

Many arguments have been highlighted in this study (for the exact details, please refer to the report and its findings). However, one thing that should be mentioned here is the importance of considering the relationship between mother-child households and social stratification.

For example, one of the significant facts this study uncovered was that the educational background of single mothers is significantly lower than that of other women in corresponding age groups. According to our analysis of the 1997 Employment Status Survey data, the percentage of those who graduated from junior college, technical college, university or graduate school was 36.3% for mothers in two-parent households, 25.4% for single mothers living with their parents, and 19.3% for independent single mothers. The significance of these figures can be explained from various viewpoints. One possible argument is that educational background is a proxy variable of the mother's social strata. If it is assumed that many single mothers come from families that are less well-off, then perhaps they are more likely to marry men of equivalent status. Initially, both husband and wife work and the household income is secured. But when a child is born and the wife stops working or shifts to a part-time job, earnings decrease and their living conditions worsen. (According to the JIL survey, 38.2% of the respondents had not worked prior to becoming single mothers. Of the respondents who said they had worked previously (56.8%), only 36.5%, or 20.2% of all respondents, had worked as regular employees.) As the economic conditions worsen, frustration between the husband and wife is more likely to produce household tension, thus eventually leading to a higher incidence of divorce, and resulting in an increase in the number of mother-child households. Given this development, the rise in the divorce rate in Japan during the 1990s may be at least partly attributable to the difficulties associated with living during an economic stagnation. There is a saying in Japan that goes, "children are a link that joins husband and wife together." As expressed by this saying, the divorce rate has often been assumed to be lower for couples who have children. However, the opposite may be the case, given the tendency

that having children may increase the risk of divorce through worsening the economic condition.

The above represents simply one hypothesis to help explain certain trends observed in single mothers' educational background. Further examination is necessary to assess the validity of this hypothesis. In-depth analysis will require a panel data set that can track the behavioral course of individual persons. However, the following conclusion can be drawn from the above-mentioned discussion. It is generally thought that an increase in the number of divorces and single mothers reflects a change in the value system typical of "an affluent society" generated by economic growth. And though sometimes such accusations, based on the conservative sense of value, on parents who divorce and single mothers as selfish and egoistic are observed, the reality of the increasing number of mother-child households cannot be explained in large part by such modern discourse. Rather, we should view it as a part of the classic problem of social stratification and poverty.

Deeper recognition of this aspect is important in order to formulate future measures that support mother-child households. For example, at first glance, it would seem effective to exert more pressure on divorced fathers to make them pay the expenses of bringing up children, thereby helping to make up for the income shortfall seen in mother-child households. The present JIL survey also shows that of the 1,199 households that became single mother ones due to divorce, only 21.8% received child-care expenses from ex-husbands. This figure is almost the same percentage as that for single mothers who are supported by their parents or relatives, and seems unjustifiably low. It is no wonder, therefore, that some argue that the responsibility of the divorced father in bringing up children should be more clearly defined and should be more strictly enforced.

As Table 3 implies, however, a majority of divorced fathers remarry and have the added duty of supporting their new children. In this case, a difficult question arises as to what degree of responsibility should be imposed on them. If the above-mentioned theory is valid though, in other words if the majority of divorced fathers receive only a relatively low income, it is doubtful as to whether they can afford to pay such child-care expenses. According to the JIL survey, the percentage of single mothers who receive money from their ex-husbands is 23.2% for women who have graduated from college or higher educational institutions, 17.3% for high school graduates, and a low 13.3% for those who graduated from only junior high school.

(7) Conclusion: Will the "Kome Hyappyo" mentality continue? (*Kome Hyappyo* is a guiding principle of historical significance in Japan, and means "we should not think only of the present, but act also for the future.")

In Japan, the divorce rate has historically remained low and so has the number of unmarried mothers, meaning that the number of mother-child households has remained a relatively small figure. The economic climate has been for the most part good, and social security systems that facilitate getting a job, including the child-care allowance system, have been effective. Single mothers themselves have worked hard to give their children the best education possible. According to the 1998 NSMCH, only 0.3% of respondents said their children would finish their education after graduating from the junior high school level (at the age of fifteen), while 30.2% said they

wanted their children to go on to high school and then start working. Moreover, 28.5% said they hoped their children would attend university, and 17.3% wanted their children to attend technical college, junior college, higher vocational school or special school. That is, 45.8% of single mothers want to give their children the opportunity to receive an advanced education (two to four years of higher education) after completing high school. This shows that single mothers have the desire to see that their children will be better off in the future, and single mothers have worked hard to achieve this goal. As a result, their employment rate has remained high. The actions and behavior of single mothers in Japan are reminiscent of the "*Kome Hyappyo*" (literally translated as "100 sacks of rice") story which attracted attention after Prime Minister Koizumi quoted it in one of his more memorable speeches. Around 1868, the province of Nagaoka which had been defeated in the Boshin Civil War and reduced to ruins, was sent a gift of 100 sacks of rice from a neighboring province. However, this rice was not used to feed the impoverished people and instead was sold in order to invest in education. This is the origin of the Japanese saying *Kome Hyappyo*, which means "to not only think of the present, but to also act for the future."

However, things have continued to change significantly in Japan. There are now a growing number of mother-child households, and they are finding it more and more difficult to obtain opportunities for stable employment. Policy failures will only help to produce more poverty, thereby leading to serious social problems. Given this context, it is becoming critical that employment assistance be provided for mothers, in other words, to help them get higher-paying jobs. It is our hope that this study will help contribute to policy planning for this purpose.⁴

Notes:

- ¹ The manual used by survey takers in the National Survey of Mother-Child Households states that “children without a father” means any of the following:
 - a. Children whose father has died.
 - b. Children whose parents are divorced.
 - c. Children whose father’s whereabouts are unknown.
 - d. Children deserted by their father.
 - e. Children who cannot be brought up by their father because he is mentally or physically disabled.
 - f. Children who cannot be brought up by their father because he is incarcerated.
 - g. Children who were born to an unmarried mother.
 - h. Children who are in a situation similar to the above items.
- ² There are many factors that affect the number of unmarried mothers. According to Bussemaker (Bussemaker et al., 1997), for example, the percentage of mother-child households is relatively low in the Netherlands partly because use of “the pill” was allowed early on and abortions are easy to obtain.
- ³ We are not saying that there are no problems with the child-care allowance system. There are many issues that need to be discussed. For example: the system is not applied to father-child households; it may entail some adjustments in working hours in order to satisfy income limit; there is the risk of invasion of privacy because it could involve an investigation of the family’s situation or status, and it may lead to greater intervention in people’s private lives. It seems certain, however, that this system has had a profound effect on the high employment rate of single mothers.
- ⁴ Some European countries have provided social welfare benefits to help single mothers devote themselves to childcare, rather than to encourage working. Thus, some may argue that Japan's measures for assisting single mothers lean too much towards employment. However, since children will eventually leave the household when they get older and mothers will have to maintain their own standard of living afterwards, it would be desirable for them to gain work experience while raising their children and maintain and develop their work abilities. The policy for maintaining a high employment rate seems, from this perspective, reasonable.

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