
Introduction

A Statistical Approach to Labor Issues in Japan

When the international community turns its attention to Japan, the language barrier remains as impenetrable as ever. Regrettably, the same is true when it comes to statistical information, so vital when exploring a range of social issues. True, statistical agencies and academic sources have become more positive about issuing information in English in recent years. Nevertheless, this still tends to involve merely converting pre-existing Japanese-language information into English as and when it appears. English and Japanese speakers often take different positions when approaching issues; in many cases, transmitting information in English is expected to involve presentations from each speaker's viewpoint. At such times, pure translation of Japanese information can create a breeding ground for misunderstanding.

In this issue, studies summarizing how various concepts related to Japanese labor issues are reflected in statistics have been re-edited and published with additional material for the benefit of English-speaking readers. Eight themes are presented, namely solitary non-employed persons, leisure, wages, satisfaction levels, suicide, non-regular labor, labor movement and employment of new graduates.

In "Solitary Non-Employed Persons," Yuji Genda explains a concept proposed by the author himself as an approach to analyzing non-employment. Although measuring employment situations is the primary mission of labor statistics, international standards guided by the ILO have already been determined for the concepts of unemployment and non-employment. The Labour Force Survey conducted by Japan's Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIC) is also in line with ILO standards. Meanwhile, OECD and other international bodies publish figures that are open to international comparison, with coordinated concepts of measurement. Compared to these situations of employment and unemployment, analysis on the situation of non-employment after leaving the labor market has not progressed. The concept of NEETs in younger age groups was proposed in the 2000s, leading to a better understanding of their non-employment situation. However, there was an undeniable tendency for this to be regarded as a problem peculiar to younger age groups. Genda proposes the new concept of "Solitary Non-Employed Persons" based on the Survey on Time Use and Leisure Activities, a time use survey conducted by the MIC. He points out that some groups of people in non-employment situations are isolated from society. The author defines Solitary Non-Employed Persons as "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," and reports that people of this description have tended to increase since the 1980s, reaching 1.62 million as of 2011.

In "Leisure," Sachiko Kuroda describes how non-working hours, a topic of growing

interest in recent years, are perceived in Japanese statistics. Many developed nations conduct time use surveys on types of activity undertaken within the 24 hours of one day; in Japan, the Survey on Time Use and Leisure Activities (MIC) and the Japanese Time Use Survey (NHK) are available for this purpose. Previously, labor research was focused on working hours, and many labor statistics were designed to gather information on hours actually worked. Since the 1990s, on the other hand, a need has also been seen to consider the work-life balance and other aspects of the balance between work and non-work. Kuroda draws particular attention to hours of sleep, and discusses a tendency for average hours of sleep by the Japanese to decrease and their hours of activity to extend ever deeper into the night.

In "Introduction to Wage Statistics in Japan," Daiji Kawaguchi summarizes wage trends in Japan, drawing primarily from two statistical surveys by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW) (Basic Survey on Wage Structure and Monthly Labour Survey) and one by the National Tax Agency (Statistical Survey of Actual Status of Salary in the Private Sector). Even without referring to examples in the United States, information on wages has traditionally been gathered as part of income appraisal based on household surveys. In recent years, however, basic data such as employers' payroll registers and employment insurance contributions have come to be used as administrative data from various countries have become more available. A characteristic of Japan is that payroll register information has traditionally been collected; the various statistics mainly dealt with here by Kawaguchi also belong to this scheme of things. However, caution must be exercised over the tendency to limit survey targets (for example, the exclusion of small businesses and the "self-employed stratum," as a constraint on business establishment statistics). In fact, as this paper points out, the two surveys by the MHLW have no information from businesses with fewer than 5 employees; in order to complement these, other statistics must be used in combination. Even so, all of the statistical sources reflect a decreasing trend in wages since 1997, and this is explained as a general trend in Japan's labor market as a whole.

In "Satisfaction Levels (Qualitative Data)," Akihito Toda introduces statistics reflecting people's subjective evaluation of society. Even in labor research (for example, in the fields of economics and labor law), discussion has mainly focused on "objective" working conditions, such as wages and working hours. With the expansion of academic disciplines in recent years, however, emphasis has also come to be placed on the actual mental state of workers. As Toda points out, although the Cabinet Office has conducted its National Survey of Lifestyle Preferences over a relatively long period as a Japanese statistical source in this field, this could be said to have been developed under the guidance of researchers and the private sector, rather than as official statistics of the government. If we recall the problem of comparisons between individuals in subjective evaluation, we may easily imagine the limits of analysis using simple cross-section data; it would then be only natural that so much of this subjective information has been incorporated in the panel data developed rapidly under guidance by researchers in recent years. Nevertheless, according to Toda,

levels of satisfaction in society by the Japanese public are in a decreasing trend, and this is an important point in ascertaining broad trends in Japanese society.

In the following “Statistics on Suicides of Japanese Workers,” a joint paper by Yasumasa Otsuka and Yuji Horita, the authors provide statistical information on workers’ physical and mental health around the key issue of suicide. It is often reported that suicides increased sharply around 1998 in Japan, and are now at a level in excess of 30,000 per year. The gravity of this will be clear if we consider that annual road deaths in Japan have numbered fewer than 5,000 recently. However, as outlined by Otsuka and Horita, caution is required, since there are subtle differences between suicide trends in the crime statistics of the National Police Agency (NPA) and the population statistics of the MHLW. According to the NPA crime statistics, the motive for suicide is attributed to health problems in nearly half of all cases; it is difficult to ascertain to what extent these involve “*karojisatsu*” (suicide induced by overwork), whereby workers in active employment are driven to suicide following a breakdown in their mental health. Nevertheless, data on industrial accidents suggest that these suicides due to overwork are steadily increasing in number, and the authors highlight the need for careful analysis using multiple statistics.

In “Differences in Definitions of Non-Regular Employees in Government Statistics,” Ryo Kambayashi discusses non-regular labor, a characteristic of Japan’s labor market in recent years. For English-speaking readers, much of the difficulty in understanding the discussion on non-regular labor arises from its very definition. Kambayashi cites the three main Japanese definitions of non-regular labor, namely definitions based on the “length of the labor contract,” “workplace title or description” and “working hours,” respectively. He then statistically examines the relationships between these and warns that both the numbers involved and the tendency to increase differ completely, depending on the definition. The author also points out that “workplace title or description” is an important factor in deciding significant working conditions, i.e. wages and workplace training, and that “length of the labor contract” is not necessarily such an important determinant. This differs significantly from the situation in Europe, where non-regular labor is mostly defined by fixed-term labor contracts; the author suggests that Japanese-style employment practices related to personnel management, among others, lie behind this.

Masahiro Abe’s study on “Labor Turnover and Movement” is useful as a source of information for understanding how active Japan’s labor market is. There is a stereotype that labor movement through the market is sluggish in Japan, but to what extent can this be confirmed statistically? Abe mainly focuses his study on the Labour Force Survey, a household survey by the MIC, and the Survey on Employment Trends, a business establishment survey by the MHLW. From the former, the author extrapolates the labor force flow describing temporal trends in the employment situation, and from the latter, clarifies the job accession rate and separation rate.

Finally, Mitsuko Uenishi’s “Employment of New Graduates” is a study on the collective hiring of new graduates, a characteristic of Japanese employment practices. In Japanese

companies, where the emphasis is on long-term employment, new employees hired immediately after graduation follow different career paths compared to those who already have employment experience and are hired in mid-career. Priority is often placed on the former as future management candidates. Uenishi summarizes this point by referring to the School Basic Survey by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology. Among other findings, the author points out that career choices for new graduates are highly uncertain up to the point of graduation, and that those who ultimately fail to find employment are too numerous to be ignored. The author also expresses concern that government statistics are preoccupied with information on fields where universities, senior high schools and other state or public institutions play a pivotal role, but do not adequately account for graduates from vocational colleges and other institutions, which now growing in importance.

As the above descriptions illustrate, this issue provides a brief summary on how topics recently attracting attention in labor research are reflected in Japanese statistics. The statistics cited are basically in the public domain, and include commentaries in English. Interested readers are therefore invited to refer directly to the original data.

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