

Japan's Declining Population

Task 1

The rapid decline of Japan's population since the second baby boom in the 1970's is now a major social and cultural concern of the country, as it has severe economic and social repercussions. While Japan's population fluctuated in the middle of last century, it now displays a temporal pattern in which the population decreases at a rapid rate. With the demographic being a rapidly ageing society, and a decrease of the birth rate, Japan risks losing their global economic standing, as soon they will be unable to cope with the demand of their workforce due to lack of people. Consequently, Japanese society risks permanent recession with a decline in basic services, infrastructure, employment, decrease of population, and gross domestic product (GDP). Economic growth would be affected. In 2020, the International Monetary Fund predicted that 'the ageing and shrinking population will strain Japan's public finances, as age-related spending, such as on healthcare and pensions, rises while the tax base shrinks'. The aging population of Japan means that, along with fewer workers paying taxes, the costs of a retired population are becoming increasingly more difficult to meet. A study conducted in 2020 found that by 2040, Japan could be short of 11 million workers, a result of the ageing population and low birth rate. Already Japan's workforce relies on its older workers rather than younger people. These problems result from falling fertility rates. In the 1950's Japan's fertility rate was about 3.34 which had fallen to record lows of 1.15 to 1.2 in 2024. The significance of this is obvious when a fertility rate of 2.07 is needed to maintain a stable population. In comparison to the world's fertility rates, Japan is the 16th lowest.

As well as the declining population, more than 1 in 10 people in Japan are aged 80 or over. This is because of Japan's cultural environment. Traditional gender roles result in women being expected to assume primary responsibility for childcare, even if they work full time. The issues surrounding Japanese childcare include availability, affordability, and quality, which means that women who wish to not sacrifice their career for a family choose simply not to have children, contributing to the lowering birth rate. Women still face discrimination in the workforce, their participation in the Japanese labour industry has risen more than 10% from 2012 to 2022, as reported by the International Monetary Fund. This is a significant temporal change in Japan's culture. The decline in marriage rates throughout Japan have resulted in a lower birth rate. Economic pressures have contributed to financial instability, making people less likely to marry and begin a family they cannot support. Additionally, societal norms such as work culture, where jobs are prioritized over personal life, and the traditional expectation of marriage, have also led to lack of marriage due to people's changing social perspectives.

Japan's restrictive immigration policies are a further factor contributing to the issues their declining population could have on their economy. The number of foreigners in the total population in Japan is only around 3%, one of the lowest among the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries.

Japan's rapidly declining population is occurring throughout the entirety of Japan. However, the issue is much more noticeable in rural areas as opposed to urban areas. An estimated 9 million homes are abandoned in rural areas, and some countryside towns face extinction. According to the World Bank, 92% of people live in urban areas in Japan. Farming and agriculture, which occur mainly in these rural areas, are now at risk due to a lack of people in these areas to work.

Task 2

Values and Perceptions leading to response

Group 1: The Japanese Government

The Japanese government's response to the declining population is strongly influenced by its perception of the threat this causes to the nation's economic stability. Economically, Japan is the fourth largest country in the world, in terms of nominal GDP. This is a success achieved by growth in industrial manufacturing and export sectors following the economic collapse from World War Two. However, Japan's economy relies heavily on their industrial sector, which in turn is dependent on its workers. Already the majority of Japan's workforce is between the ages of 45 and 54, and statistics note a 20% reduction in the workforce population. The Japanese government believes the issue of declining birthrate and Japan's rapidly aging population will drastically alter their economic development. This perception of economic risk led them to make policies that lower the costs of child-rearing and support family formation.

Traditional social values also shape the government's perception of the issue. Japanese leaders believe that a declining birthrate will put strain on health and welfare systems and weaken the community if there are too few young people to support an aging society. Because they value the stability of their society, they believe that as the government they must intervene with policies to address the issue.

The concerns of economic stability and their traditional values have led to the Japanese government to take an active response to the issue. The government has begun to make policies assisting childcare and encouraging their citizens to produce children. Prime Minister Fumio Kishida stated in January of 2023 that his government would spend approximately \$20 trillion yen, on measures to support young couples wishing to have more children. This includes paid parental leave, childcare subsidies, and an increase in child allowances. Also, as a response to the issue, cabinet minister Masanobu Ogura was appointed the Minister of State for Measures for Declining Birthrate in 2022. He submitted a proposal which focused on increasing financial assistance through more government subsidies for child rearing, greater access to childcare services, and increased student loans for higher education.

Group 2: Chisato Kitanaka

Chisato Kitanaka is a sociology professor at Hiroshima University who specialises in gender studies. She argues that Japan's declining birth rate is due to long established social attitudes. She observes that parenthood is socially tied to marriage in Japan, which stigmatizes single mothers and makes it hard for them to both earn an income and raise children. Because she perceives these attitudes as barriers, she concludes that the policies by the Japanese government will not resolve the issue of a declining population.

Kitanaka's commitment to gender equality has directly influenced her ideas on policies to resolve the issue. She views the slow progress on gender equality, including the unequal burden of care and limited support for working mothers, as a structural failure in society which has contributed to low fertility. Because of this, she advocates for an increase in welfare payments for families and reducing education costs. She argues that lowering the financial and caregiving pressures on women would make bringing up children more realistic and attractive. Her belief that systemic change is necessary explains why she publicly critiques the current government policies and speaks in interviews about building a more equal society to resolve the population decline.

Kitanaka also recognises that many Japanese people are reluctant to accept foreigners, which limits the role immigration can play in resolving the declining population. Consistent with her values of inclusion and equality, she supports expanding immigration and lowering education costs as solutions that could work together, aimed both at offsetting the population decline and

easing the financial burdens that prevent families from having children.

Overall, Kitanaka's values (equality, inclusion, structural fairness) and perceptions (restrictive social norms, stigma toward single mothers, resistance to immigration) clearly shape her response. She calls for deep social change, stronger family support, more affordable education, and a greater openness to immigration. Her media statements, including those made to Deutsche Welle (DW), reflect these beliefs and aim to shift the discussion toward issues of social structure and equity rather than straight economics.

Task 3

The recommended course of action to address Japan's declining population is to increase immigration, as this option directly raises population numbers while also resolving the country's critical labour shortage. I recommend this solution because it is the best way to solve the workforce problem and maintain economic growth.

Increasing immigration provides an immediate and measurable demographic impact. It increases the number of people living and working in Japan. Through targeted immigration policies, Japan could attract young, skilled, working-aged individuals who would contribute to both society and the economy. This solution is effective because Japan's economic challenges are closely tied to its shrinking workforce. With more than 9.1 million workers aged 65 or older making up a growing share of the labour force, and very few young people entering due to low fertility rates, Japan faces risks to its productivity and economic stability. A strength of this issue is that targeted immigration can provide an immediate solution to workforce issues, but alternatives like policies relating to childcare and financial support for parents etc would provide a long term solution.

Another reason why immigration is the better solution is because it brings more diversity, which has been shown to benefit countries both economically and socially. Research by Hong and Page found that groups with people from different backgrounds solve difficult problems better than groups where everyone is the same. This means that if Japan increases immigration, it wouldn't just help boost the population, it will also support innovation and improve productivity over time. These advantages show why immigration helps Japan build a more flexible and adaptable workforce, which is especially important as the population gets older.

There are some social challenges that come with increasing immigration to Japan. Japan has always valued having a very culturally similar population, which comes from its long history of isolation, such as the sakoku (closed country) policy. Even today, many people still hold onto these traditional beliefs, and Japan's strict rules make it hard for foreigners to settle there. Language can be a big barrier. A 2021 survey showed that 75% of Japanese companies require non-Japanese applicants to pass the highest level of the national language test, which makes finding work extremely difficult for immigrants. On top of this, many Japanese citizens worry that immigration could change or weaken Japanese culture.

Even though these issues make immigration more complicated, they don't mean it's not a good solution. Instead, they show why strong government action is needed. Changing immigration laws only requires political decision-making, whereas changing deep cultural beliefs would take much longer.

Other possible solutions include giving more funding to childcare facilities and increasing maternity and paternity leave, have already been introduced, and are expected to increase the birth rate. However, these are much weaker options because they won't solve the current economic issues related to workforce but with immigration they will rely on major changes in social attitudes. More childcare funding would cost the government a lot of money but doesn't guarantee that people will actually choose to have more children. It might also lead to higher taxes, which could cause frustration among people living in Japan. Increasing leave is even

harder because of Japan's strong gender expectations. Many women don't want to take long periods of leave because it could damage their careers, and men often face stigma in the workplace if they take paternity leave. These deep cultural beliefs make these solutions difficult to work, and they don't directly address the biggest cause of the population decline. However, they are needed to reduce population decline and social stability. Chisato Kitanaka suggests a wider approach as discussed in section two. This focuses on deep social change, stronger family support, more affordable education, and a greater openness to immigration, and her suggestions provide a range of alternative courses of action. However, when the course of action requires money, the economy needs to be growing.

Increasing immigration directly resolves Japan's workforce issues resulting from declining population. It boosts the population, fills gaps in the workforce, and helps support long-term economic growth. It is also easier to implement and more practical because it depends on government policy changes rather than convincing an entire society to shift its cultural views. While immigration still needs to be managed carefully, its effectiveness, affordability, and ability to meet Japan's immediate needs make it the best immediate solution.