

## **Advisory Opinion**

# **Social Security and Social Welfare that can Respond to the Crises and Risks associated with the COVID-19 Disaster: Transforming into a System and Support that Leaves No One Behind**



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**Committee for Sociology  
Subcommittee on Social Welfare**

This Advisory Opinion is largely the outcome of the deliberations of the Subcommittee on Social Welfare, the Committee for Sociology, Science Council of Japan.

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

### **I Background**

The worldwide spread of the novel coronavirus infection (COVID-19) since the beginning of 2020 has exposed the limitations of conventional social security and social welfare systems, having triggered the need to reconsider the standards and targets on which conventional systems are based and review the design of the systems in anticipation of future disasters. In this advisory opinion report, we focus on the following groups of people and issues that were severely affected by the COVID-19 disaster<sup>1</sup> in Japan due to their "vulnerability": (1) the needy, (2) children and families, (3) women, (4) people in need of assistance in daily life, and (5) those who experience discrimination, and propose institutional reforms to eliminate or reduce social vulnerabilities that amplify crises and risks.

### **II Current Situation and Issues**

The increase in the impoverishment caused by the COVID-19 disaster has brought to highlight the limitations and problems of existing systems. For example, the consultation services provided by the Self-Reliance Support Benefit for the Needy and the Special Loans for Living Welfare Fund implemented by the municipal councils of Social Welfare played a major role, but the consultation services that should have been originally provided on-site have remained insufficient. At the same time, undesired loneliness and social isolation has been becoming increasingly serious. For accompaniment-type support that attends to the needs of each individual to function, it is necessary to establish a comprehensive support system utilizing a Multilayered Support System Development Program. In addition, the Housing Security Benefit, whose use has been increasing rapidly, is a program for jobseekers with restrictions on duration and income, and the application for such benefits requires complicated procedures. Although stable housing is the foundation for life and livelihoods, Japan does not have a sufficient, universal housing security system. Furthermore, the public assistance system, which is the last safety net, is a system that should be "easy to get

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<sup>1</sup> The term "COVID-19 disaster" became widely used in newspapers and on the Internet around the middle of March 2020 as a generic term for the calamity or crisis situation caused by a new type of coronavirus infection. [https://www.nhk.or.jp/bunken/research/kotoba/20200701\\_4.html](https://www.nhk.or.jp/bunken/research/kotoba/20200701_4.html) (July 31, 2023).

in and easy to get out," as inquiries regarding possible support by relatives and stigma<sup>2</sup> are factors that prevent people from applying for such system. In addition, because no systematic social security and social welfare support system has been established for foreign residents, there is an urgent need to create a system based on multicultural understanding.

On the other hand,, during the COVID-19 disaster, children and women under social structural discrimination faced compounding problems, such as violence and human rights violations. Their well-being depends heavily on environmental conditions such as home and school and is always prone to serious crises and risks, such as anxiety, truancy, abuse, and social withdrawal. To identify such risks in ordinary times, it is necessary to establish a system for sharing and utilizing data among related institutions. In addition, stable employment and the proper assignment of welfare professionals, including consultants/social workers for women, are essential to deal with the challenges faced by vulnerable populations. Efforts based on the "Law Concerning Support for Women with Difficulties" and the "Basic Act on the Child" enacted in 2022 must be strengthened.

In addition, it is required for welfare facilities that care for the elderly people, persons with disabilities, and others who need assistance in their daily lives to formulate Business Continuity Plans (BCPs) based on "continuity of services," "ensuring the safety of users," and "ensuring the safety of staff." However, in order to make these plans effective, it is indispensable for health, medical, and welfare institutions to have wide-area cooperation. In addition, a nationwide disaster welfare network should be established, with "welfare" positioned as a "type of rescue" under Article 4 of the Disaster Relief Law, and disaster welfare support centers established as the foundation for regional cooperation. Simultaneously, infrastructure should be developed to enable both users and supporters to utilize technology, including Information and Communication Technology (ICT), and a system should be established to enable the training, registration, and dispatch of personnel to implement disaster case management.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 disaster has also revealed discrimination and abuse of human rights. In order to deal with prejudice, discrimination, bullying, and other human rights violations surrounding COVID-19, the government has taken a certain level of measures to disseminate correct knowledge and prevent prejudice and discrimination. Nevertheless, legal measures to prohibit discrimination and remedies that go beyond

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<sup>2</sup> It is used to mean "a brand of shame." It is regarded as a "shame" that a person needs the support of the welfare system because of poverty and causes hesitation and a sense of inferiority in using the system.

consultation support, publicity, and awareness, are required. In addition to legal measures, it is also important for each individual to engage in a proactive process of thinking about prejudice, discrimination, isolation, and social exclusion in their daily lives in order to prevent discrimination. It is also important to position welfare education as school education and social education to create such a process, and to make efforts to foster a sense of coexistence.

### **III Recommendations**

Based on the recognition of the issues mentioned, we propose realization of the following reforms to reduce social vulnerabilities that amplify crises and risks and to reform the systems and support so that no one is left behind:

- (1) Reduction in crisis/risks and institutional reforms for the needy
  - i. Reinforcement of accompaniment-type support and establishment of a comprehensive support system to reduce crises and risks;
  - ii. Introduction of universal social policy toward housing security and expansion of housing support;
  - iii. Considering a welfare system that is “easy to get in and easy to get out”;
  - iv. Establishment of systematic support for foreign residents.
- (2) Reduction of crises and risks and systemic reforms for children and families
  - i. Establishment an objective screening system to detect potential risks;
  - ii. Establishment of inter-agency collaboration to enable preventive support;
  - iii. Promotion of policies based on data collaboration on child and family issues;
- (3) Reduction of crises and risks and institutional reforms for women
  - i. Sustained efforts to eliminate violence and discrimination against women;
  - ii. Promotion of stable employment of women’s consultants/social workers as professionals;
  - iii. Required and appropriate appointment of women’s consultants/social workers in cities and wards;
- (4) Reduction of crisis and risks and institutional reform for those who need assistance in daily life
  - i. Wide-area coordination of health, medical care, and welfare for the preparation and implementation of BCPs;
  - ii. Specify "welfare" in the "rescue" section of the Disaster Relief Law, establish disaster welfare support centers, and create a disaster welfare network;
  - iii. Establishment of comprehensive support and disaster case management through various domains and media;

(5) Prevention of discrimination during crises and system reforms

- i. Implementation of prompt and adequate remedial measures for those who have suffered from discrimination;
- ii. Search for and formation of new "connections" in the age of living with coronavirus;
- iii. Positioning the content of welfare education in the Basic Plan for the Promotion of Education, etc., and developing it as a curriculum;

#### **IV Challenges**

The whole picture of the damage caused by the COVID-19 disaster, including its residual effects, has not yet been elucidated, and academic efforts to analyze its effects in detail must be continued in the future. To this end, it is necessary to collect data widely and continuously in cooperation with private support organizations and to examine ways to transform the system and support into a more inclusive one.