

Editor's Note: Please see the online supplements for a list of recommended articles and resources for teachers by the authors of this article.

JAPAN'S DECLINING POPULATION

Beyond the Textbook

By Phillip O'Brien and Byron Haast

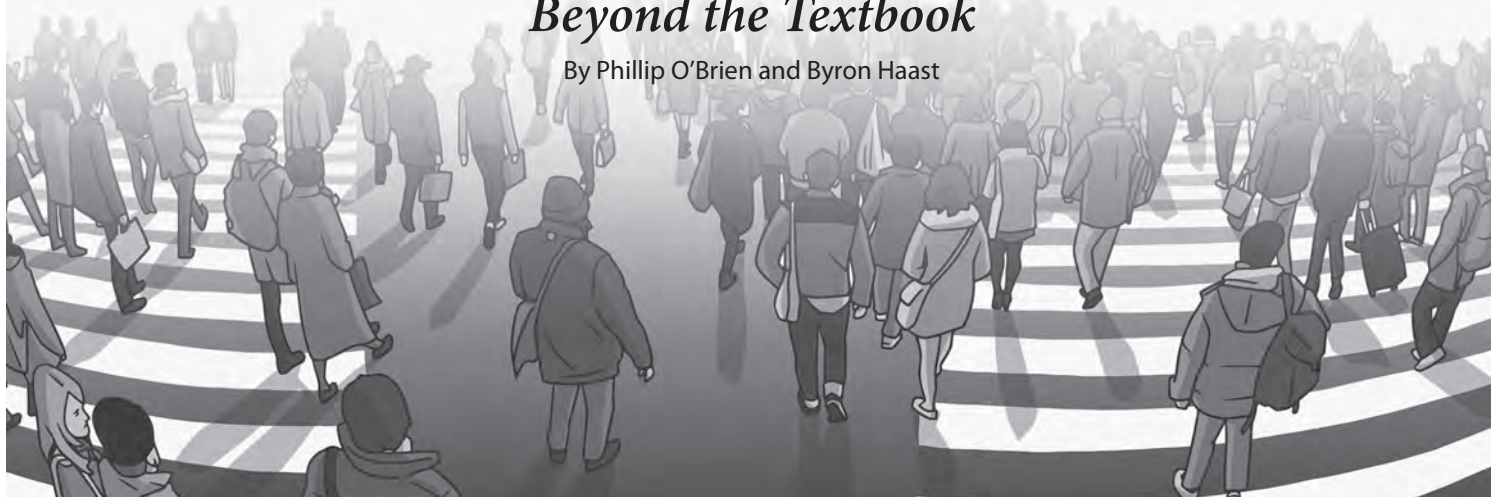


Illustration of city residents disappearing into the distance. Source: Illustration by Rob Zs. © Shutterstock.

Geography, as a discipline, allows students to explore, analyze, and understand the places that comprise our world. Most geography curricula focus on both physical and human geography, often in the context of "issues"-based learning; this serves to demonstrate the dynamic and applicable nature of the subject to learners. Within the context of human geography, population is an area of study that enables geographers to plan the use of Earth's resources, make sense of the underlying factors influencing changes in societal demographics, and develop policies to mitigate the impact of population growth or decline.

While senior geography textbooks employ a range of geographic data and case studies, to best explore modern demographics, it is essential that students develop competence in identifying, analyzing, and interpreting data, particularly the most up-to-date available. Of special relevance for this are the following sites:

- *Population Pyramids of the World from 1950 to 2100* (<https://www.populationpyramid.net/>)
- *World Population Data: 2016* (<http://www.worldpopdata.org/>)
- *Gapminder: Unveiling the Beauty of Statistics for a Fact-Based World View* (<http://www.gapminder.org/>)
- *Population Reference Bureau* (<http://www.prb.org/>)
- *World Bank: Japan* (<https://data.worldbank.org/country/japan>)

This kind of interactive data provides a good context to extend geographic learning and create a foundation for analyzing and discussing various population dynamics before considering the causes, impacts, and responses of these changes. It is also particularly pertinent for establishing points of comparison on a range of scales, such as comparing Japan to other nations, regions, or even global and historical data.

Contemporary press coverage allows for a novel and up-to-date approach when studying causes, impacts, and responses to demographic changes. A wide array of outlets, from *The Atlantic* to *The Japan Times*, have considered Japan's challenges—among others—with regards to adult diapers, the political power of the elderly, government-mandated match-making, and reluctant acceptance of immigrants. For this purpose, a selection of links to English-language print media articles have been provided.

Working with such data is an effective platform for introducing and incorporating a broad range of geographic content and terminology, including the examples in the following table:

Key Language	Process, scale, distribution, change, replacement rate, fertility rate, elderly dependent cohort, aging society
Geographic Concepts	Population pyramid, population dynamics, demographic transition
Comparison	Stages of the demographic transition model—Japan versus global context
Geographic Factors	Considering the causative and influencing factors behind demographic challenges and how they may be classified
Impacts	How does declining population impact all facets of a society? Are these impacts all negative? Are they long term or short term?
Responses	How has the government responded? How have Japanese citizens tried to confront the issue? To what degree have these responses been successful (or are likely to be)?

It is essential that students develop competence in identifying, analyzing, and interpreting data, particularly the most up-to-date available.

Exploring the nature of modern Japan's demographics will provide students with ample opportunities to refine key skills, including:

- Describing the nature of Japan's population dynamics in the past, present, and future with reference to key terms like "total fertility rate"
- Stating, explaining, and evaluating the relative importance of processes influencing these dynamics
- Identifying and explaining the impacts of this change across time and space both positive and negative, short term and long term
- Discussing various responses occurring at the local, regional, and national scale while evaluating their current/future likely success

"Abenomics" is a prominent example of a national-scale policy initiative that contained several demographic proposals for students to consider. Part of the package, released in June 2014 by Prime Minister Shinzō Abe, aimed to tackle the declining population.

Beginning with a website such as *Population Pyramids of the World*, students can observe population structures throughout Japan's history, as well as the process of making inferences based on population pyramids (e.g., a wide base indicates a high birth rate and many young people, while less of a pyramid shape, with more in older categories, indicates an increasing dependent population). Students can be paired or grouped and provided with a population pyramid from a particular time in Japan's past. A population pyramid could be provided with an indication of the number of observations and inferences expected. Students could then report their findings to the class, as each will have different time periods. Suggested time points include 1915, 1950, 1975, 2015, and 2050 (projected).

Arguably, Japan exhibits one of the most complex collections of processes influencing its population dynamics in the world. This comes from a collection of conservative political and social values; a generally high cost of living, which includes expensive child care; and traditional gender roles that serve as disincentives for many women to work full time when raising children. These processes can be categorized using a simple social, historical, economic, environmental, political, and technological (SHEEPT) factor graphic organizer. Students should be encouraged to include data, specific examples, and explanations of each factor. For example, the rising marriage age of Japanese women (twenty-nine years) is yet another widespread social factor influencing Japan's fertility rate. This is significant, as this results in fewer reproductive years. Unmarried women having children remains incredibly unlikely, as only 2 percent of births occur out of wedlock in Japan, compared with 43 percent in Britain.¹ Students should then rank the importance of these SHEEPT factors through evaluating the relative importance of each factor. They can also be asked to justify this ranking through the use of data and examples drawn from news reports. Further possibilities for exploration include:

- Japan's rapid rate of urbanization over the past few decades, as well as its economic advancement: This advancement needs to be considered within recent economic developments, notably the rise of the Chinese and Indian economies. Even though Japan has the third-largest economy in the world and experienced its seventh consecutive quarter of economic growth in August, its aging workforce is a point of concern. As a hyperaged society, Japan is increasingly relying on those over the age of sixty-five for its workforce needs; as of 2017, 11 percent of Japan's workforce is classified as "elderly."
- The dramatic decline in manufacturing as a cornerstone of the Japanese economy: In 1973, almost 28 percent of the Japanese workforce was employed in manufacturing. By 2012, this had fallen to just 16 percent.² Over the same time period, employment in the service industry grew from 49 to 69 percent.
- The "salaryman" culture, which often means long working hours, grueling commutes, and relatively little time off
- High access rates to tertiary education for both genders, which also contributes to rural-urban migration among young adults.
- Traditional family units, which might include several generations living under one roof: In modern times, with soaring land prices, this is increasingly more complicated in smaller housing. Further-

more, extended life expectancy can place severe financial pressure on younger generations to support older family members.

- Many of the processes just discussed have resulted in a number of evolving economic and social impacts, which can be long term or short term and positive or negative. These could be uncovered through a series of news articles distributed to different groups and peer-taught at the end of the activity. Examples include continued political conservatism as a result of an elderly population, a shrinking labor force and associated impacts (e.g., smaller tax base for increasing social security costs), and social costs of caring for older relatives. Impacts could also include novel positive outcomes such as a growing adult diaper industry, which is predicted to surpass baby diapers by 2020, with an annual growth rate of 6–10 percent a year.³ Furthermore, students should consider the growing economic burden for the government of having a larger elderly-dependent population percentage, which, in addition to contributing less tax revenue, will require increased expenditure for medical and social services.

It is important that students identify regional variations in the percentage of residents over the age of sixty-five. For example, urban areas like Tokyo and Osaka record less than 20 percent, while some rural areas record over 50 percent. Students could be provided with a political map of Japan, a blank map, and a table of data before being asked to map the distribution of aged population in Japan. This offers an opportunity to both learn the distribution and important geographical skills (traditional and choropleth mapping). These rural locations also offer some of the most novel responses. Nagoro, a small town in southwestern Shikoku, has suffered from consecutive years of rural-to-urban migration. As a result, the residents have resorted to using dolls as substitutes for those who have moved away or died in the village.⁴ This is just one of the potential hooks for a lesson regarding responses to Japan's changing population. Responses should be considered through local, regional, and national lenses while considering their various strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. Local responses could consider actions like those taken by the residents of Nagoro.

"Abenomics" is a prominent example of a national-scale policy initiative that contained several demographic proposals for students to consider. Part of the package, released in June 2014 by Prime Minister Shinzō Abe, aimed to tackle the declining population. Measures included increasing the workforce participation of women and increasing immigration. Both of these responses will require overcoming previously mentioned conservative beliefs and values. Primarily as a result of both natural topography and geographic isolation, as well as the Sakoku period of Japanese history (approximately 1633 to 1853)—in which the nation was for the most part closed to outsiders and citizens were forbidden from leaving—Japan's population remains largely homogeneous. Many in Japan have been quite reluctant, to say the least, in diminishing this homogeneity. However, during Japan's economic peak years in the 1980s, labor shortages were addressed through targeting *nissei* and *sansei* (second- and third-generation Japanese) from South America (primarily Brazil and Peru) to fill gaps in the labor force.⁵ The perceived failure of many of these migrants to integrate has fueled further skepticism; if those with Japanese roots failed to fully adapt, how can *gaikokujin* (foreigners) fit in? The failure of many more recent

Japanese Age Demographics (1940 to 2010) with projections from 2020 to 2060

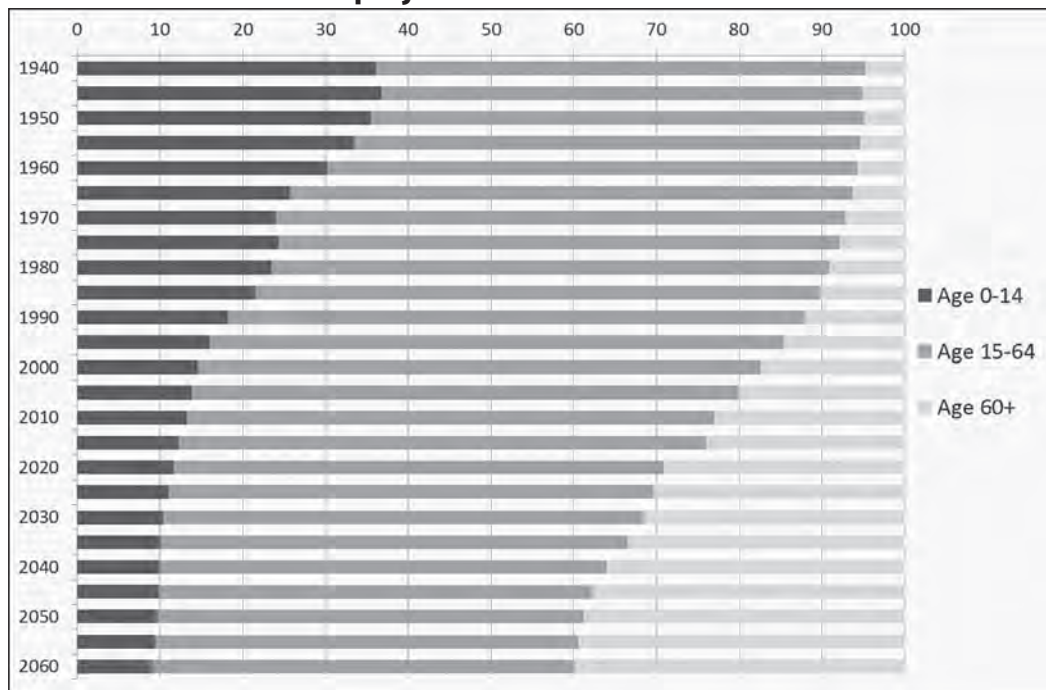
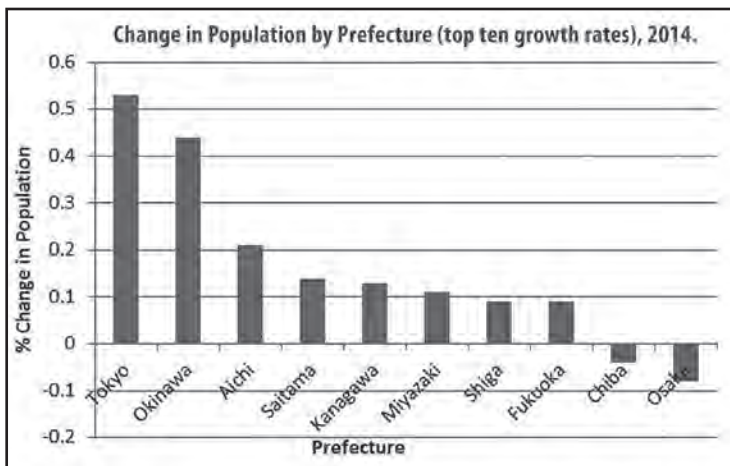


Chart by Jon McDonald, based on *Japan Statistical Yearbook*, Chapter 2: Population and Households, table 2-7 (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication, Statistics Bureau, retrieved January 13, 2016) and *Population Projections for Japan* (January 2012): 2011 to 2060, table 1-1 (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, retrieved January 13, 2016).

Source: Wikimedia Commons at <https://tinyurl.com/y92cogog>.

migrants, notably from the Philippines, to master difficult Japanese-language requirements for many skilled labor roles has further increased political resistance to immigration as an effective response to a shrinking workforce, particularly in growth areas, such as aged care and health care services. Despite the rising multicultural nature of modern democracies, such as Germany, the United States, Canada, and Australia, many in Japan—particularly the conservative older voters—continue to view immigration as a threat to social harmony, rather than a potential solution to the nation's demographic challenges.

Regional responses could include the actions of the Niigata prefectural government, which set aside US \$60,000 for the 2016 fiscal period for rural matchmaking or spouse-hunting events.⁶ Such actions are the result of a growing gender imbalance in rural Japan. During Japan's postwar period,



Source: From the Lowy Institute's *Interpreter* website at <https://tinyurl.com/ycb6lc54>.

the transition from agricultural to industrial society—a process that had begun decades prior—went into overdrive. As a result, rural-urban migration patterns saw generations of young men and women leave for urban areas in search of work and education opportunities. The net result, in recent times, has been a shortage of wives in rural areas, meaning significantly older ages of marriages, if at all.

While geography textbooks offer a number of rich resources, there are freely available interactive data sets regarding national and global population data. These data sets can be used to establish population change over time. Once students have established the underlying dynamics of a shifting population, they can then investigate various causes, impacts and responses. As discussed, these can be discovered through consideration of media material on a variety of causes and outcomes. These are often engaging and reveal insights into deeply held Japanese values and beliefs, ranging from social challenges and traditions, such as matchmaking as both cause and response, social infusion through seemingly economic and

political responses/impacts, immigration, and the rising political clout of the elderly. Furthermore, students can explore changing impacts that present opportunities, such as the growing adult diaper industry and potential for advanced technology. This is where the unit excels with higher-order thinking, as students are required to classify, rank (evaluate), and justify causes, impacts, and responses gleaned from press coverage. ■

NOTES

1. T. Douglas, et al., *Human Population: Trends and Issues* (Melbourne: Geography Teachers Association of Victoria, 2016), 104.
2. *Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis* (St. Louis FED), "Percent of Employment in Manufacturing in Japan," *St. Louis FED Economic Research*, accessed October 2, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/ybl3x94n>.
3. Adam Pasick, "In Rapidly Aging Japan, Adult Diaper Sales Are About to Surpass Baby Diapers," *The Atlantic*, July 11, 2013, <https://tinyurl.com/yvloffv9>.
4. Aaron Souppouris, "Explore the Hidden Japanese Village Where Dolls Replace the Departed," *The Verge*, May 2, 2014, <https://tinyurl.com/y7cgq5ve>.
5. "Japan's Trial Run for Migrant Workers," *BBC*, November 21, 2007, <https://tinyurl.com/2l9jyh>.
6. "Matchmaking Events Aim to Pair Rural Men with City Women Willing to Move," *The Japan Times*, June 5, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/y8mjuw08>.

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