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## Letter to the Editor

# The need to devise government-spearheaded measures to prevent loneliness and isolation in conjunction with the spread of COVID-19 in Japan



On February 19, 2021, the Japanese Government created the Office for Measures to Combat Loneliness and Isolation in the Cabinet Secretariat.<sup>1,2</sup> The Office employs 31 personnel from the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare and the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology to oversee these measures.<sup>2</sup> The Office is tasked with responding to loneliness and social isolation in women, younger people, and the elderly owing to the spread of COVID-19.<sup>1,2</sup> The definitions and indicators of loneliness and isolation are vague, and some experts are uncertain as to whether immediate preventive measures can be implemented.<sup>1</sup> As far as we investigated, there were no academically precise definitions of loneliness and isolation at this point. One study<sup>3</sup> stated that 'scientific research on unattended deaths has made no progress,' that 'government agencies' efforts to study unattended deaths are insufficient,' and that 'about 70% of municipalities nationwide are conducting studies of unattended deaths without precisely defining the term.' Thus far, individual municipalities have implemented measures and efforts to prevent unattended deaths,<sup>4</sup> but the various efforts differ considerably by municipality in terms of whom they target and differences in the compositions of the households served. Implementing measures to prevent loneliness and isolation at the national level would be extremely difficult right now.

Government-spearheaded measures to prevent loneliness and isolation in conjunction with the spread of COVID-19 have been proposed by multiple ministries and agencies. These include 'obviating the need for care among the elderly and daycare for the elderly,' 'childcare, low-cost or free meals for children, and food banks,' 'suicide prevention,' 'measures to help the indigent and housing assistance,' and 'support to deal with social withdrawal.'<sup>1</sup> These proposals are being designed despite a lack of a detailed field survey, and devising a protocol for effective and specific responses by the relevant agencies may be difficult. In addition, high-level key individuals need to be promptly trained so that they can accurately direct reported tips about lonely or isolated people to relevant agencies.

In Japan, government agencies, medical personnel, welfare personnel, economists, nutritionists, cooks, and non-profit organizations should develop a system of cooperation and then implement effective measures to prevent loneliness and isolation. Moreover, similar success stories from overseas (if they exist) could be analyzed in detail to serve as valuable references.

## References

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