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Child Poverty

VOCABULARY

social exclusion

=

To be excluded from normal societal activities

underprivileged

=

Not enjoying the same standard of living or rights as the majority of people in a society

uninhabitable =

Unsuitable for living in

utility =

Public services such as water, electricity, gas, sewage

Read the article overleaf and discuss these questions:

1. Were you surprised to read that Japan has a significant child poverty issue? Why? Why not?
2. Mrs. Watanabe said that in the UK schools, communities and families work together to provide equal education. Why do you think she was surprised by this?
3. Do you think high-school education should be free? Why? Why not?
4. What do you think about the definition of poverty as “households living on less than half of the national median household disposable income”? Is this a good definition? Why? Why not?
5. Do you think the government should do something about this issue? If so, what?

VOCABULARY

socially

marginalized =
Pushed to the edges of society

indispensable =
Absolutely necessary

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Japan's child poverty rate has improved amid a steady economic recovery, but experts say continuing support is vital to prevent **social exclusion**.

A Tokyo-based nonprofit organization called Kid's Door offers free education to children from single-parent families or on welfare that are living in relative poverty and often have to give up going to high school or college due to financial difficulties. Kid's Door volunteers, including college students, teach primarily to senior high school children who cannot afford after-school lessons, mainly in Tokyo.

"Those **underprivileged** children may look no different from others, but many of their parents are struggling to get even the day's food," Yumiko Watanabe, head of the organization, said. Kid's Door, founded by Watanabe in 2007, provides food to children who come to its lessons if they cannot afford to buy any. A student who once attended the classes had only 100 yen a day for food, she said.

Watanabe said she decided to create an organization to save poor children by offering them opportunities to study, raising their chance of getting high-income jobs and eventually getting out of poverty. Watanabe, who moved to Britain in 2000 due to her husband's work, said she was amazed with the country's educational system in which schools, communities and families all work together to provide equal educational opportunities to local children. Upon returning to Japan the following year, she was shocked by the cost of basic education. She also learned that the nation's child poverty rate was higher than the average among Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development member countries.

A 2015 survey report released recently by Japan's Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare found 13.9 percent of children under 18, were in households living on less than half of the national median household disposable income. The "relative poverty rate" was 2.4 percentage points lower than in the previous survey for 2012 when it was the worst ever at 16.3 percent. The improvement was the first in 12 years. But the latest figure was still higher than the 13.3 percent average among 36 countries including OECD members. The poverty rate among single-parent households was as high as 50.8 percent.

Alarmed by the situation, some local municipalities have also moved to help those children get out of poverty. In June and July last year, Tokyo's Ota Ward conducted a survey among children in their fifth grade at local public elementary schools and their parents to figure out how many of them are living in poverty.

In addition to surveying income levels of respondent households, the ward asked them if they failed to pay **utility** bills over the past year and if they spent money on recreation, among other questions. To find if families or children are **socially marginalized** as a result of poverty, the municipality asked the parents if they can afford to provide their children with allowances, Christmas presents, books, or opportunities to learn things they like such as sports and music.

The ward said 21.0 percent of respondents fall into the category of households living in financial hardship. A total of 46.8 percent of children in those households answered that they see themselves "not worth anything" or "not worth very much." It was about 10 points higher than among households classed as not poor.

Rika Ishikawa, director of the ward's child life support division, pointed out children in single-parent families tend to feel alone as their parents are often away working. "We believe they can feel more positive (toward themselves) if adults take care of them," she said.

Ota Ward said it plans to deal with the poverty issue through community-wide efforts to look after local children in poverty, seeking support from residents' associations or shopping malls.

Aya Abe, a professor studying child poverty and welfare issues at Tokyo Metropolitan University, welcomed the 2.4-point drop in the poverty rate among children in the 2015 survey as "a substantial improvement." But she added that further public support would be **indispensable** to tackle poverty and social exclusion of children, pointing out that the poverty rate among single-parent households still stands above 50 percent.

Abe stressed the need for continued government assistance and said public support should not be backpedaled because of the improvement in the latest survey. "We cannot afford to rely only on efforts of volunteers and local communities."