

EDITORIAL

Poverty in Japan

Japan's relative poverty rate as of 2007 stood at 15.7 percent, the Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry announced last October. This marks the first time the government has officially released its own data on the subject. Past rates were known only through surveys conducted by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. The public announcement of this data is a welcome end to the willful denial of previous administrations, but one demanding a response and action.

The 2007 relative poverty rate, up from 14.9 percent in the 2004 OECD survey, is the fourth-highest among OECD's 30 member nations. With half the median income for all income earners in the nation serving as the dividing line, the relative poverty rate is likely to have worsened in the past few years, but we will never know until more recent data is forthcoming. For now, though, the reality is that 19 million Japanese are living below the poverty line, or nearly one in every six citizens.

Japan may imagine itself as middle class and, compared with other OECD countries, the distribution of income before redistribution has remained better than many, but Japanese society is increasingly becoming pear-shaped. The elderly, older workers, recent unemployed graduates and especially single mothers and their children make up an ever-larger portion of those in poverty. According to the OECD survey, some 59 percent of those below the poverty line are single parents. This figure was one of the worst of all OECD countries in 2004.

Now that the administration has announced its base figure for the first time, it will have a clear, public benchmark. Once ministries start announcing statistics, academic researchers, independent organizations and the press can check these figures. That will help to hold the current and future administrations accountable. Admitting the problem is the first, big step, but finding solutions is the more important second step.

As welcome as this announcement was, facts are sometimes not as visible as the human beings in poverty. Last year's "temporary workers village" in Hibiya Park over the new year holidays caused the administration to scurry around this year to find shelter and extend unemployment benefits to over 230,000 people.

The hard work of creating a fair and just economic system will demand a substantial readjustment of Japan's past socioeconomic norms and practices. Now that the government has admitted there is poverty, action must follow.

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