

## Examining Child and Household Poverty From the Perspective of Food Security as Highlighted by the COVID-19 Pandemic

Prof. Sakiko Gan (Professor, Faculty of Management, Atomi University)

For the 102nd HGPI Seminar, we hosted Professor Sakiko Gan for a lecture titled, “Examining Child and Household Poverty From the Perspective of Food Security as Highlighted by the COVID-19 Pandemic.” Professor Gan is a member of the Faculty of Management of Atomi University whose research and policy recommendations focus on child and household poverty from the perspectives of providing school lunches and supporting school attendance. She spoke about the importance of school lunches, challenges encountered when attempting to make school lunches free, and future prospects.



### Key Points of the Lecture

- **Children’s dietary habits are affected by household poverty and the health of their guardians. This makes school lunches extremely important for households or children facing food insecurity. It will also be necessary to pay close attention to the impact of the ongoing Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic on child food security.**
- **Missed school lunch payments are an important signal of child poverty. Non-payment should not be dismissed as merely a lack of responsibility or general awareness among parents. Instead, it should be perceived as a sign of poverty, like truancy or abuse.**
- **One in seven children at public elementary and middle schools are currently enrolled in programs for helping children attend school called School Attendance Support programs. Due to reasons like lack of awareness toward support programs and stigma, there are households who do not use School Attendance Support programs even though they qualify for support.**
- **Free school lunch programs have a major role to play in addressing child and household poverty. It is desirable that the current system which covers school lunch fees and other fees on an individual basis through School Attendance Support is expanded to cover all students by making school lunches free. Moving forward, expectations are high for efforts to build public interest toward making school lunches free so the necessary funding can be secured.**

### ■ Children’s dietary habits are affected by household poverty and the health of guardians

In a 2017 survey conducted by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government,[1] many respondents who selected “I do not eat breakfast often” or “I never eat breakfast” were living in poorer or single-parent households. Additionally, in a 2015 survey conducted by Yokohama City that examined the health of guardians, among children who reported their guardians had “somewhat bad” or “bad” health, 18.0% also responded “I do not eat breakfast often.”[2] This was a greater proportion than those who reported “good,” “somewhat good,” or “normal” health for their guardians. These findings suggest that the health of guardians is having significant impacts on the dietary habits of children.

Recently, the impact of household poverty on children has been thrown into sharp relief by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. In a 2020 survey conducted by Save the Children Japan, 74.2% of respondents in single-parent households said “Our food expenses went up because school lunches were suspended,” while 54.5% said “We cannot afford enough food.”[3] During global disasters like the COVID-19 pandemic, we must keep a close eye on who is experiencing livelihood difficulties.

### ■ In Japan, school lunch provision rates are on the rise at middle schools and on the decline at part-time high schools

With this backdrop, we can also see that school lunches are extremely important for the health of struggling households and their children. Looking at national trends, an increasing number of public middle schools are providing full school lunches.[4] As of 2018, 85.3% of all public middle school students were being provided with full school lunches.[5] Conversely, the number of part-time night high schools providing lunches is declining. The reason for this is that even if students are able to afford a day’s meals through part-time work or other means, school lunch fees are collected in lump sums in advance, making them difficult to pay. There are also cases in which schools are having trouble providing school lunches because fewer students are eating them. Furthermore, an issue facing elementary and middle schools is some children lose weight during summer vacation, when school lunches are not provided. Some municipalities provide school lunches to students during the summer vacation, such as at summer out-of-school-time care programs.

## ■ Non-payment of school lunch fees is an important signal of child poverty

Only 0.9% of all school lunch fees are unpaid.[6] When schools were asked about the main causes of non-payment, about 70% said they were caused by “a lack of responsibility or general awareness among guardians,” while 20% were due to “guardians’ financial problems.” However, it must be noted that the former category might include cases of neglect. Regarding the latter category, there is a certain number of families who are eligible for support through livelihood protection or School Attendance Support programs but have not applied. Reasons they are reluctant to apply may include feelings of hesitancy toward receiving such support or concerns that receiving support will result in their children having negative experiences at school. Non-payment of school lunch fees can be taken as an important sign of poverty. It is a problem that many schools dismiss school lunch fee non-payment as “a lack of responsibility or general awareness among guardians.”

In a survey conducted in Yamanashi Prefecture in 2018, “non-payment of school lunch fees and other fees” was listed alongside “truancy,” “insufficient academic performance,” and “abuse” as situations in which poverty can be considered a potential factor.[7] From this perspective, non-payment of school lunch fees should be considered a sign of child poverty.

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## ■ The current situation and limits of School Attendance Support programs for helping children go to school

### • One in seven public elementary and middle school students are currently enrolled in a School Attendance Support program

A 2019 MEXT survey found that annual cost of a child just attending a public school was approximately 110,000 yen for elementary school and approximately 180,000 yen for middle school (school lunch fees included).[8]

In Japan, School Attendance Support programs help children go to school and are separate from the livelihood protection system. In these programs, local governments provide financial support to help children attend school with eligibility based on household income and earnings in the previous fiscal year. Although exact conditions vary among municipalities, in many cases, coverage is granted to households with incomes approximately 1.3 times higher than households enrolled in the livelihood protection program. While subsidies from the national Government cover three-quarters of the costs of livelihood protection, similar subsidies for school assistance ended in 2005 and became general funds for municipalities.

In 2019, the number of children receiving School Attendance Support increased to 1.36 million people, or 14.7% of all public elementary and middle school students.[9] One in seven children are receiving support to attend school.

Their number has trended upwards since data was first gathered in 1995, reflecting the state of child poverty in Japan. There are particularly large jumps in poverty after economic crises such as the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers in 2008. The scope of impact from the COVID-19 pandemic is a point of future concern.

### • Some households do not enroll in School Attendance Support programs due to stigma or a lack of awareness

The rates at which children receive School Attendance Support vary greatly among municipalities. In some regions, less than 10% of children receive support, while in Kochi Prefecture, 25.8% of children receive support, or one in four.[10] A survey conducted in Shizuoka Prefecture found that 58.3% of households in the poorest quintile were not enrolled in any support program.[11] When asked why, many provided answers like, “I did not know about the program,” “I need it but did not fit the criteria,” “I did not understand the application procedure,” and “I need it but did not apply because I was worried what others would think.” In other words, it is still difficult for children to receive support from School Attendance Support programs. Furthermore, the criteria local governments use to define “low income” are not necessarily the same as those for determining eligibility for School Attendance Support. It is clear there are cases in which children cannot receive support to attend school even if their household is in the poverty bracket.

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## ■ What we can do to achieve planetary health

We must take a close look at how making school lunches free will help respond to these issues. In Japan, the number of municipalities introducing free school lunch programs is on the rise. While they account for less than 5% of municipalities nationwide, if we include municipalities that provide partial support rather than completely free school lunches, their figure increases to approximately 30%.[12] There are also municipalities that began free school lunch programs in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

There are three main goals for making school lunches free:

- Lessen economic burden on guardians and support child-rearing
- Promote dietary education and human resource development
- Counteract falling birthrates, encourage current residents to stay while attracting new residents, and develop communities[13]

To address child poverty, the most important of these goals is lessening the economic burden on guardians and providing support for child-rearing. As people are bothered by the attention drawn to them by receiving in School Attendance Support, the implications of relieving psychological burdens are highly significant for guardians and children in the poverty bracket. In addition, providing school lunches is a more reliable method of ensuring children get food than providing cash payments to guardians.

Korea made school lunches free and is now making progress on improving dietary education through measures like stationing nutritionists at schools and including organic foods in school lunches.

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### ■ The biggest hurdles to making school lunches free are attracting public interest and securing funding

However, there are various issues to address that arise when making school lunches free. In Korea, the topic of free school lunches became a point of debate during elections, which started a major change in the system. While there is a cultural background to the emphasis on food, the program was developed with an emphasis on universal implementation – that is, providing free school lunches for all. When implementing welfare programs like School Attendance Support that work on the individual level, it is impossible to avoid stigma. That is why it is important services that provide essential support to children like school lunches are universal.

The estimated annual cost of providing free school lunches in Japan is 500 billion yen.[14] Just as the system for subsidizing children’s healthcare expenses was expanded to all prefectures in the past, I hope all of society will turn its attention to school lunch fees and support making school lunches free.

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[1] Tokyo Metropolitan Government, 2017. “Children’s Living Conditions Survey Report.”

[2] Yokohama City, 2015. “Report on Results of Current Living Conditions Survey (FY2015)”

[3] Save the Children Japan, 2020. “Results of Single-Parent Household Support Box Applications.”

[4] Here, “full school lunches” refers to school lunches that contain bread or rice (including foods made with flour, processed rice foods, and similar foods), milk, and side dishes. There are also “supplementary school lunches,” which contain milk and side dishes, and “school milk,” which are supplementary meals consisting of milk only. (Source: the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) website.)

[5] Based on annual “School Meal Provision Surveys” conducted by MEXT.

[6] MEXT, 2018. “Report on FY2016 School Lunch Fee Collection Status Survey Results.”

[7] Yamanashi Prefecture, 2018. “Yamanashi Child Livelihood Survey Report”

[8] MEXT, 2019. “Survey of Children’s Educational Expenses FY2018.”

[9] MEXT, 2021. “Trends in Numbers of Children Requiring Social Protection and Preliminary Cases.”

[10] MEXT, 2021. “Report on Numbers of Children Requiring Social Protection and Preliminary Cases, FY2019”

[11] Shizuoka Prefecture, 2019. “Children’s Lifestyle Survey Report.” Shizuoka Prefecture, 2016. “Child Poverty Action Plan.”

[12] MEXT, 2018. “Current Implementation Status of Free School Lunch and Similar Programs.”

[13] MEXT, 2018. “Current Implementation Status of Free School Lunches and Similar Programs, FY2017,” and “Survey Report on the Provision of Full School Lunches.”

[14] Cabinet Office, March 11, 2016. “The Third Meeting of the Council on Economic and Fiscal Policy in 2016, Explanatory Reference 2.”

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## Overview

Date & time: Friday, December 3, 2021; 14:00-15:15 JST

Venue: Zoom Webinar

Language: Japanese

Participation Fee: Free

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## Profile

**Prof. Sakiko Gan** (Professor, Faculty of Management, Atomi University)



Professor Sakiko Gan was born in Ichikawa City, Chiba Prefecture and graduated from the Department of International Relations Law of the Faculty of Law at Sophia University. She earned a Master of Science in Policy and Planning Sciences degree from the University of Tsukuba and holds a Doctor of Laws degree. As a staffer for the House of Councillors, she has been involved in surveys and other research to support legislative activities in the Diet, including the revision of the Act on the Prevention of Spousal Violence and the Protection of Victims, for 27 years. In 2012, she began teaching Public Administration as a member of Atomi University’s Faculty of Management. Her current research is focused on child poverty and women’s poverty. Her major works include Child Poverty and Unequal Educational Opportunities: Issues Related to School Admission Assistance, School Meals, and Single Mother Households (Akashi Shoten) and Unpaid School Meals: Child Poverty and Food Inequality (Kobunsha).

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