

Shrinking and Super-Aging Suburbs in Japanese Metropolis

Yoshimichi Yui^a, Tomoko Kubo^b, Hitoshi Miyazawa^c

Abstract

Japan's aging rate has exceeded 26%, ahead of any other country in the world. Aging is progressing rapidly in both rural and urban areas. Recently, super-aging in old suburbs is remarkable. Recently, Japanese old suburban housing estates are declining. They are facing several serious problems. Most serious problems are aging of residents and decreasing population, and these are caused by long-term dwelling. Because many Japanese think that "Japanese Dream" is occupancy of detached house in suburb. Japanese suburban residents tend to stay after child rearing. And another severe problem is the increasing vacant houses. In this study, the authors try to clarify the conditions of shrinking suburbs in Japanese cities and will introduce some activities for revitalization in suburbs. As for aging of suburban residents, in old housing estates, the first generation of migrants grew older and continued to live in their own house in suburban areas. Furthermore, their children grew up and moved out. These are caused by the failure of town planning, which supplied the same type of houses in short term. Furthermore, increases in vacant houses are seen throughout every old suburban housing estate, and it induces new uneasiness and social troubles and drop in housing price.

Keywords

Super-aging, suburbs, housing estates, revitalization

The proportion of elderly people in Japan is estimated at over 26%, which is a larger number than any other countries in the world. Aging is progressing rapidly in both rural and urban areas, and recently, super-aging in older suburbs has been remarkable. The suburbs are no longer dream destinations for all Japanese families, and depopulation has occurred in several metropolitan regions. In a traditional urban growth model, suburbs grow continually and population inflow occurs as they act as commuter towns for metropolitan regions. However, this trend has been changing, because the population of older suburban areas is decreasing, while populations in inner city areas tend to increase.

Older Japanese suburban housing estates, developed before the 1970s, are now in decline and

face several serious problems. The most serious problems are aging of residents and decreasing population, which are both caused by long-term dwelling. Many Japanese think that the "Japanese Dream" is occupancy of a detached house in suburbia; therefore, Japanese suburban residents tend to stay after rearing their children. Another severe problem is the increasing number of vacant houses. In this study, the authors try to clarify the conditions of shrinking

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suburbs in Japanese cities and suggest methods for revitalizing the suburbs. The authors also attempt to contribute to the revitalization of the suburbs from the viewpoint of geographical studies.

In older housing estates, the first generation of migrants have aged and continue to live in their own houses in suburban areas. However, their children have grown up and moved out; therefore, aging communities without young generations are common in the suburbs. This results from a failure of town planning, under which the same type of house was supplied in the short term. Furthermore, an increase in the number of vacant houses is evident throughout every old suburban housing estate; this induces uneasiness and social troubles and results in a drop in house prices. As a countermeasure, some suburban communities try to revitalize and promote community activities.

AN INCREASE IN HOUSING VACANCIES IN CITIES

In highly urbanized and globalized cities, an increase in dilapidated housing in specific areas is common. Given the cutthroat competition under the globalized economy, expulsions can lead to devastated neighborhoods throughout the world (Sassen 2014). Examples include foreclosed neighborhoods or shrinking cities in the Rust Belt region of the United States (Immergluch 2011; Pallagst, Wiechmann, and Martinez-Fernandez 2014); depopulated and abandoned neighborhoods in post-socialist cities (Glock and Haubermann 2004; Radzimski 2016); the “Spanish-paradox” that denotes simultaneous occurrence of high vacancy rates and high housing prices in local markets (Hoekstra and Vakili-Zad 2010; Piñeira Mantiñán 2010); abandoned, incomplete housing estates in Ireland (Kitchin, O’Callaghan, and Gleeson 2014); and ghost cities in China (Shepard 2015). Further, Davies (2006) highlighted an expansion of slum-like areas in metropolitan areas

of developed countries, consisting of cheaper rental apartments or social housing, and squatting or homelessness in informal housing sectors. These examples are often the result of over-supply of houses.

In the United States of America, suburbs are also changing to the place of diversification and declination now. The dwellers in old suburbs are diversified and many non-white or rather poor residents moved in (Anacker 2015; Hanlon, Short, and Vicino 2010; Nicolaides and Wiese 2006). Therefore, suburbs are no more attractive residential areas for every white family. In spite of these conditions, the number of vacant houses does not increase. That is why used houses are popular.

However, the Japanese situation is different from other countries, as the increase in vacant houses has occurred in rural areas and suburban regions (see Figure 1). In the case of Japanese cities, the increase in vacant shopping areas and aged suburban neighborhoods can be understood as part of the expansion of slum-like areas under the globalized economy in a highly urbanized world (Shinohara 2011). Since the 1960s, many suburban housing developments have been constructed in Japan (Yui, Kubo, and Nishiyama 2016). Indeed, suburban life was a kind of dream that people shared in the latter decades of the last century. Suburban housing estates, however, have rapidly lost their appeal; in fact, potential homeowners now prefer condominiums in city centers, and younger generations get married later or continue single lives in inner city areas. Suburbanization has waned, and cities have started to shrink because of changes in socio-economic conditions, the housing market, and lifestyles. Currently, suburban neighborhoods are facing serious social problems, such as the aging of residents and a decline in living conditions. The number of empty houses has also increased, leading to lessened security and threats to the sustainability of residential settings.

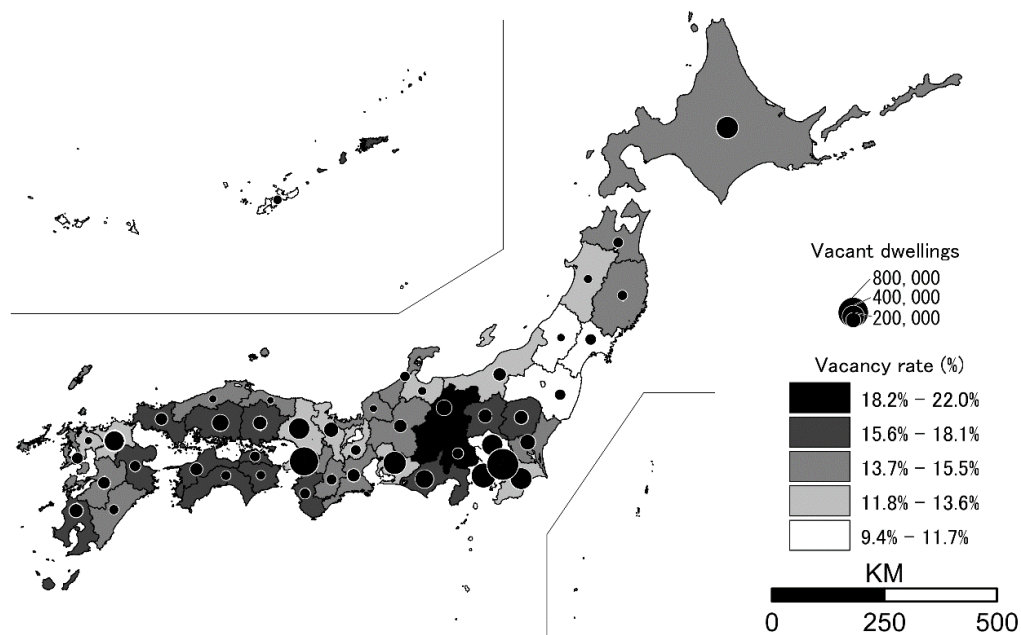


Figure 1. The Distribution of Vacant Dwellings in Japan.

Note: Source: “Housing and Land Survey, 2013”.

REASONS BEHIND THE INCREASE IN HOUSING VACANCIES IN JAPANESE METROPOLITAN AREAS

To understand the increase in housing vacancies in Japanese metropolitan areas, the authors examine the various reasons behind the phenomenon: post-war housing regulations and taxation systems on real property, the aging of residents, topographic barriers around suburban housing developments, and changes in the urban residential structure since the late 1990s. In Tokyo especially, institutional factors that caused changes in urban residential structure have played a crucial role in the increase in housing vacancies in suburban neighborhoods.

Under the rapid urbanization that took place from the 1950s to the 1970s, the Japanese government promoted suburban homeownership (Ronald 2008). The taxation system, including a reduction and exemption on the municipal tax on property, was also

established under the estimation that demands for newly built houses will continue. When people purchase old used houses, they cannot receive a tax break. Presently, homeowners usually pay one sixth of the tax, with the rate of exemption differing depending on certain conditions. This is regarded as one of the main reasons that homeowners tend to keep residential buildings even when they are vacant and dilapidated.

Although the population has grown in many metropolitan areas due to vast inflows of younger job-seekers from non-metropolitan areas (Tani 1997), a lack of appropriate land for housing developments in metropolitan regions has become a serious problem. To supply enough detached houses, disaster-prone areas or hill/mountainside lands have been transformed into residential areas. Suburban housing developments, which have gradually diversified in terms of price, size, and distance from city centers over time, accepted people from non-metropolitan areas. For instance, from the 1970s

to the 1980s, these developments in the Tokyo metropolitan area expanded as far as 100 km from the center, which means that it now takes more than two hours to travel from some suburbs to workplaces in central Tokyo.

In addition, dramatic changes in the urban residential structure caused the growth of metropolitan centers and a decline in residential environments in the suburbs, from the late 1990s onwards (Kubo 2015). Suburban neighborhoods, with long commuting times into cities, have become less popular as residential areas (Hirayama 2005). Many suburbs are also facing serious social problems because of aging populations (Naganuma, Arai, and Esaki 2006), which directly triggers an increase in housing vacancies (Kubo 2014a; Kubo, Yui, and Sakaue 2015). As the existing residents get older, the age of a housing district naturally increases, unless there is an influx of new, younger people (Yui 1999; Kubo et al. 2010).

Hirayama (2010a) indicated that long-term economic stagnation led to the stimulation of the Japanese housing supply as a measure to overcome it, and drove the Japanese housing market towards neo-liberalism, where the housing supply and mortgages were greatly dependent on private companies, and self-responsibility in lifestyle and homeownership were emphasized. Under such circumstances, middle-class nuclear families were able to safely purchase condominiums or detached houses and climb the so-called “housing ladder”. Conversely, minorities in the Japanese housing market, such as those with lower incomes, the elderly, single people, and young people, had to give up the “normal” housing pathways. In general, the Japanese earnestly desired to climb the housing ladder in order to gain social presence and security (Hirayama 2010b).

The younger generations currently tend to be double-income and keep smaller households, and there are enough single adults (both male and female) with stable jobs in city centers. They have better options for homeownership, with less commuting time,

cheaper housing prices, and diverse lifestyles in condominiums in metropolitan centers (Kubo and Yui 2011). As many younger generations prefer living in city centers, their outflow from the suburbs and the aging of existing suburban residents (their parents) resulted in an increase in housing vacancies. Old suburban housing areas are in danger of becoming ghost towns due to an increase in housing vacancies after the original homeowners leave or pass away, and when younger generations cannot maintain their parental homes.

A CASE STUDY OF THE TOKYO METROPOLITAN AREA

In periods of high economic growth, Tokyo has been the center of population growth in Japan. Many young people and nuclear families move to Tokyo to get jobs or to pursue the next stage of education. Tokyo, which continues to grow, has become a megacity. Its population began to increase after the rapid suburbanization of the 1980s. In that era, there was an extremely serious shortage of houses in Tokyo and many housing estates were developed in the surrounding areas (see Figure 2).

However, the condition of the housing market is changing. Young families and young single people prefer the urban core areas; they reject the suburban lifestyle in favor of convenience. Therefore, the housing market in Tokyo changed and there are now many high-rise condominiums in the Tokyo Bay areas and the core areas (Kubo 2014b). Their residents enjoy a convenient lifestyle, and have enough time for relaxation after work. Some elderly people also prefer to move from the suburbs to the urban core. Furthermore, some young people reject marriage in favor of maintaining their individual lifestyles, and do not want to purchase houses in the near future. Therefore, some suburbs begin to decrease in population, and societies start to shrink because of the aging of their residents.

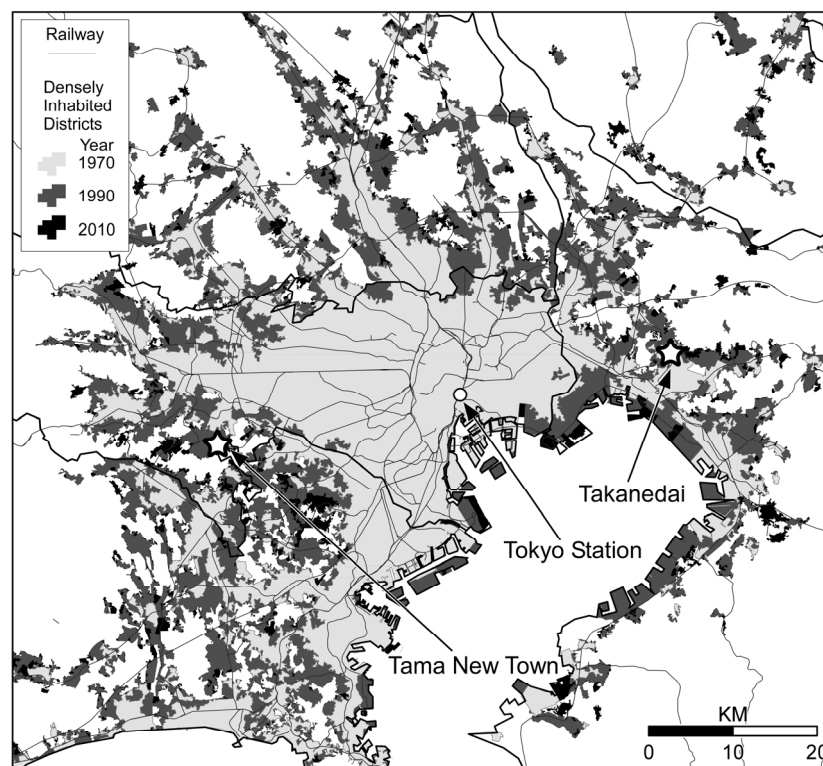


Figure 2. The Growth of the Tokyo Metropolitan Area.

Note: Source: The National Census in 1970, 1990, and 2015.

Shrinking suburbs cause several problems. One of the more serious problems is the safety of communities, which is maintained by its members. Squatters may invade vacant houses because nobody can maintain them, and aging residents may find it hard to keep their houses and gardens clean and in good order. Many public facilities and shopping centers have also been closed by the depopulation; people must then travel to shopping areas by bus or train, because elderly people often can no longer drive although they may have previously depended on their cars for transportation.

In the suburbs of Tokyo, redevelopment and revitalization projects are in progress for large-scale public housing estates threatened with decline. These projects are intended as a foundation to support the livelihood of residents, and to attract those who might

wish to move to live in a suburb. These projects include the redevelopment of housing estates like Takanedai (see Figure 3).

The Takanedai housing estate is a public housing estate developed by the Japan Housing Corporation (now the Urban Renaissance Agency) in the eastern suburbs of Tokyo. After initial migration into this estate in 1961, aging and decrease in number of residents have progressed over time. Deterioration of the housing stock itself started to be noticeable in the 1990s; for that reason, this estate was renovated over a period of more than 15 years since 1999. The redevelopment mainly comprised of rebuilding dilapidated medium-rise public collective housing as high-rise buildings. The surplus lots generated by the rebuilding were sold to a private property developer for construction of detached houses and condominiums.

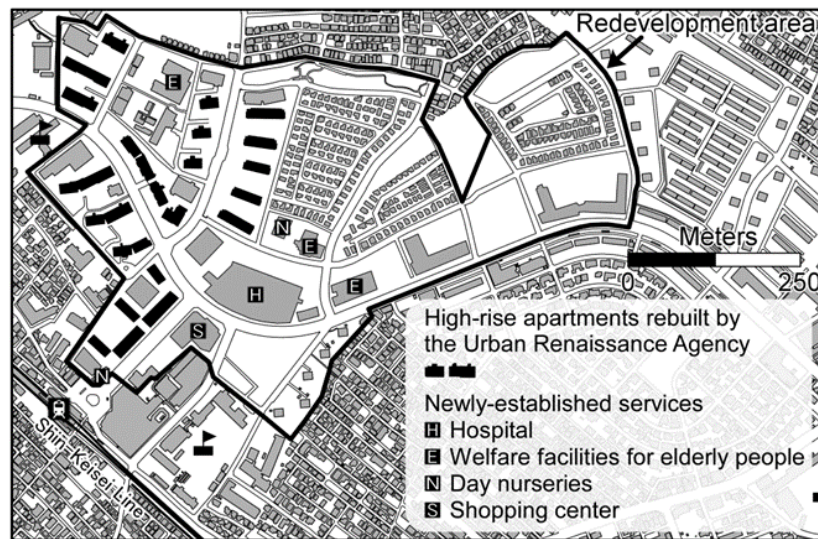


Figure 3. The Layout of Takanedai Housing Estate.



Figure 4. Service-Added Housing for Elderly People in the Takanedai Housing Estate (By Authors).

The social mix of the inhabitants was diversified by supplying these diverse residences. Child-rearing households were especially encouraged, and two authorized day nurseries were established so that the estate could be sustained permanently. Moreover, a general hospital and multiple facilities for the elderly were established to provide a community base for

medicine and welfare (see Figure 4). These hospitals and facilities also support in-home care for elderly people.

In Japan today, the establishment of a community framework that can provide medical and social welfare services for those who require them continually has proceeded with the establishment of

an integrated community care system. The redevelopment of the Takanedai housing estate is regarded as a good example of this.

Tama New Town has a similar redevelopment project in progress, incorporating the development of an integrated community care system. Since its inauguration in 1971, Tama New Town, in the western suburbs of Tokyo, has become the largest new town in Japan with a population exceeding 200,000. The areas that were developed early are adversely affected by a gradual decrease in population and a low birthrate and longevity. Such areas are also confronted with the deterioration of their residences. The changes in population distribution have meant the closure of many redundant schools and shortages of facilities, stores, and residences for elderly people. The free space generated by the closure of stores in the estate's shopping districts has been used so far to establish nursing care service companies and to create space for the elderly. Collective housing was rebuilt in the early 2010s for the first time in Tama New Town. A large-scale redevelopment, which includes the rebuilding of municipal housing on the sites of unneeded schools, and the establishment of medical institutions and nursing care facilities for the elderly, is now underway in response to this. In addition, surplus residences and building lots are expected to be used for residences and facilities for child-raising households. The redevelopment plans for Tama New Town have been drawn up not only by administration and urban-planning experts but also with the participation and cooperation of inhabitants and local organizations. This project is based on the understanding that community formation must progress with the creation of an integrated community care system.

A CASE STUDY OF HIROSHIMA CITY

In the Hiroshima metropolitan region, old suburban neighborhoods which were developed in the 1960s to 1970s are also facing several serious social problems.

Many housing estates were developed on the slopes of hilly suburbs, because the price of land was cheaper than the built-up areas of the inner plain. When new housing estates were first developed, many young households moved in for the short term. The suburban neighborhoods therefore tended to have homogeneous communities of young households. However, 40 to 50 years on, the young couples have become old and their children have grown up and moved out. That is why age structures in the housing estates have changed from young families with children to older couples without children (Kubo et al. 2015; Yui et al. 2016).

It is difficult to maintain sustainable communities. This is why some old housing estates have become "shrinking towns" or "ghost towns". In these housing estates, the elderly leave their houses to reside in nursing homes. A large number of housing estates have aging populations and increase in vacant houses. Furthermore, aging in suburbs can cause serious social problems, such as lack of safety and susceptibility to disaster, because illegally occupied properties and dilapidated houses will be more susceptible to earthquake damage. Consequently, some old suburbs are facing decline and collapse of their communities.

The authors examine aging problems in suburban neighborhoods, and clarify the relationship between aging and the increase in vacant houses in several sample suburbs in the Hiroshima metropolitan region. After the World War II, Hiroshima began to reconstruct rapidly and grew up rapidly. Consequently, it became the center of the west part of Japan. The population is also recovered and many people moved to the metropolitan area.

Since the 1960s, the shortage of lodgings in city centers has led to high prices and the development of suburban housing estates. Each estate was developed in short term and supplied with a similar room layout for nuclear families. Therefore, the residents in each housing estate were initially similar in age, family

type, and socio-economic conditions. The problems of aging suburban populations are attracting considerable attention in Japan, which is a society of great longevity.

The aging phenomenon has also highlighted the unique characteristics of the housing market in Japanese cities. Households with similar life-stage characteristics, sizes, and economic statuses tend to show similar residential preferences. Homogeneity in terms of social class has been a hallmark of suburban neighborhoods, and is determined by housing submarkets and the period in which the neighborhoods were developed. Moreover, the decline in mobility after homeownership is another factor in the aging of the neighborhoods, since most residents stay in the same dwellings after purchase. Many Japanese people think that their own detached house in a suburb will be their “final abode”, and as time passes, these residents age in them. In the northern part of Hiroshima City, a high proportion of elderly people is distributed in the suburbs of the Yasufuruichi region which includes a concentration of old housing estates.

Aging in suburbs can cause serious social problems. The increase in housing vacancies, which is closely connected with a lack of security, sustainability, and bonds among residents in a community, is one conspicuous example.

Syowa district in Kure City is located in the eastern suburbs of the Hiroshima metropolitan region, and in this district, several housing estates started to develop on hill slopes in the 1960s. When migrants chose their houses in this district, they were young and did not find it hard to live on a steep slope. However, since becoming old, they find it hard to walk up steep slopes and stairs. It is also difficult for old people to drive themselves, though this is necessary when living in this area, for example, to go shopping (Yui, Sugitani, and Kubo 2014).

Another housing estate in other suburbs of Hiroshima metropolitan region shows the vast extent

of changes in the demographic characteristics of the suburbs over 30 years. In the early stage of a new development, most residents are people in their 30s to 40s and live with their children. At that time, there were very few old people in the suburbs. However, the demographics have changed drastically in all housing estates. The first migrants stayed and became old, and their children grew up and moved out. The dominant age group in the housing estates in this district is the over-65 age group. The rate of elderly people in several old housing estates is over 30% (see Figure 5).

This aging directly relates to the occurrence of vacant houses in housing estates. The ratio of vacant houses to all houses in Syowa district ranges from 4.1% to 15.2%. In many old housing estates, the ratio of vacant houses is higher than that in the new ones. This is why most housing estates were developed in short term and are only composed of detached houses. A few housing estates have mixed housing, composed of both apartment houses for young families and detached houses for middle-aged families. Generally, mixed housing will create a sustainable community.

Half of the vacant houses in this district are maintained in a good condition; their gardens are well maintained by the owners or by the neighborhood. However, over 30% of vacant houses are dilapidated (Yui et al. 2016). Their gardens are neglected, and some houses are damaged. The authors researched the reasons for vacant housing by interviewing those living next to the vacant houses. According to the authors' previous study, over half of the vacant houses can be attributed to the aging of their residents. The most common response was “death of residents” (33%). The next most common response was “purchasing a new home” (26%). The third most common response was “moving to hospital or elderly nursing-care facilities”. This results from the fact that living in housing estates in hilly areas is very difficult for older people.

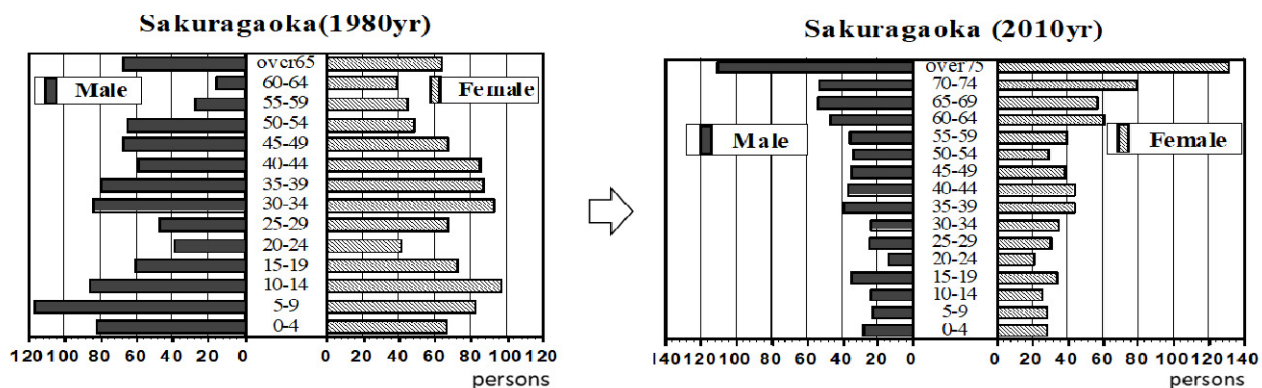


Figure 5. The Change of Age Structure in the Housing Estate.

Note: Source: The National Census 1980 and 2010.

CONCLUSIONS

As discussed above, house purchases are a result of an increasing number of people with the financial ability to own residential units moving into, or remaining in, the urban core and its surrounding areas. Their children, who are second generation immigrants in the suburbs, have different preferences compared to their parents in terms of lifestyles and housing; they prefer to remain closer to the urban core (near their places of work, night life, leisure activities, and shopping) rather than in detached suburban houses accompanied by long commutes. Also, many elderly people move from the suburbs to the urban core, because they cannot drive their cars, and many neighborhood shops have recently been closed. The suburbs have become inconvenient living places. Changes in the housing market supply, especially the explosive growth in condominiums, have facilitated the establishment of this new lifestyle trend.

The development of these new housing units has attracted nuclear families, elderly couples, and single people—especially the growing number of single women in their 30s and 40s. This trend, which has also been observed in other Asian megacities such as

Bangkok and many western countries, has led to high concentrations of single women in city centers.

This paper examined both the background and the direct reasons behind the suburban abandonment associated with the increase in housing vacancies in Japan. The authors first illustrated the geography of housing vacancies in Japan and in the Tokyo metropolitan area. They found that both housing supply and attitudes to housing have changed in Japan. They confirm that this phenomenon is caused by Japanese gentrification.

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