

A Study on Countermeasures to the Problem of Lonely Deaths According to the Increase of Single-person Households

Shengbo Cui

Northeast Asian Economic Research Institute, Xi'an Peihua University, Xi'an 710000, Shaanxi, China

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Abstract: The issue of lonely deaths has become a significant challenge in today's society. It refers to dying alone without assistance from others on account of social isolation, and it is one of the serious problems that elderly people are facing, especially in rapidly aging societies. Along with the acceleration of population aging in today's world, the problem is no longer regarded as an individual issue but rather as a societal one. The core causes of this phenomenon include the absence of a social safety net, isolated living environments, and weakened family ties.

According to the United Nations, Japan currently has the highest proportion of elderly people in the world. Police data show that in the first half of 2024, a total of 37,227 people were found dead alone at home in Japan, with more than 70% of them aged 65 and older. About 40% of these lonely deaths were discovered within a day, but approximately 3,939 bodies were found more than a month after death.

Among these cases, the largest group was those aged 85 and older (7,498 people), followed by those aged 75–79 (5,920 people). The number of lonely deaths among people aged 70–74 was recorded as 5,635. In 2024, the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research of Japan projected that by 2050, the number of elderly people (aged 65 and older) living alone will reach 10.8 million. In the same year, the total number of single-person households is expected to reach 23.3 million, suggesting that society must prepare for various problems stemming from the rise in single living.

Although the Japanese government has long sought to respond to population aging, it is becoming increasingly difficult to manage these changes at the national level. Similar demographic challenges are also being faced by China and South Korea as well. In 2022, China's population declined for the first time after 1961, while South Korea has repeatedly recorded the world's lowest birth rate. The problems of low birthrates and population aging are becoming even more serious social issues, yet policies to address them remain ineffective. While many people hope to experience a happy and natural death in their later years, the reality is that an increasing number of individuals end their lives in miserable circumstances due to various reasons. Lonely deaths are not confined to the elderly. The problem has already emerged as a social issue across different groups in society. This study will focus on the case of Japan, a country known for its longevity yet facing a severe lonely death problem, and examine the types and causes of lonely deaths and also potential countermeasures for it.

Keywords: solitary death; isolation; policy limits; young people lonely death; type of lonely death; social relationship

Online publication: June 26, 2025

1. Introduction

In Japan, there was already a movement in the 1960s to zero lonely deaths for the elderly by the Social Welfare Council and members of the people's livelihood regarding the issue of lonely death and social policy. In the 1970s, the term "lonely death" was generally used, and in 1974, it was promoted as a joint movement by the Social Welfare Council and members of the people's livelihood, but the etymology of "lonely death" has waned due to the use of the categories of "the elderly with disease" and "the elderly living alone".

However, after 1995, the lonely deaths of victims of the Han Shin-Iwaji earthquake were covered by the media, which brought them back into the spotlight. Furthermore, with the continuing recession of the bubble economy, the number of unmarried, divorced, and unemployed people increased, they were placed in an environment prone to isolation from society. From around 2000, the issue of lonely deaths was frequently addressed as a daily social issue. Since 2007, the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare has specified a project to prevent lonely deaths (Zero Solitary Death Project), which was launched in 78 local governments across the country, but it has tended to be passive in coping with the lack of smooth national administration. Therefore, in 2021, the government office in charge of countermeasures was established in the Cabinet Office, which will be the second country in the world to be in charge of isolation and isolation after the UK. In April 2024, the Solitary and Isolation Measures Promotion Act will be implemented, and in the 2022 survey, isolation measures and party support welfare services will be expanded, including psychological loneliness supported by 40% of the people.

If you look at Figure 1, The 5th Phenomenal Report, released in 2022 by the Solitary Death Countermeasures Committee of the Small Short-Term Insurance Association of Japan, investigates the phenomenon of lonely death in Japan. The Solitary Death Countermeasures Committee is an organization that recognizes and realizes lonely deaths. Solitary death is becoming more recognized as a social problem, and the Japanese government has also been actively taking countermeasures. In addition, the etymology of 'lonely death' is not a legal definition. The 7th Phenomenal Report of the Solitary Death Countermeasures Committee defines a lonely death as a person who lives alone in a home whose death has been determined after death ^[1].

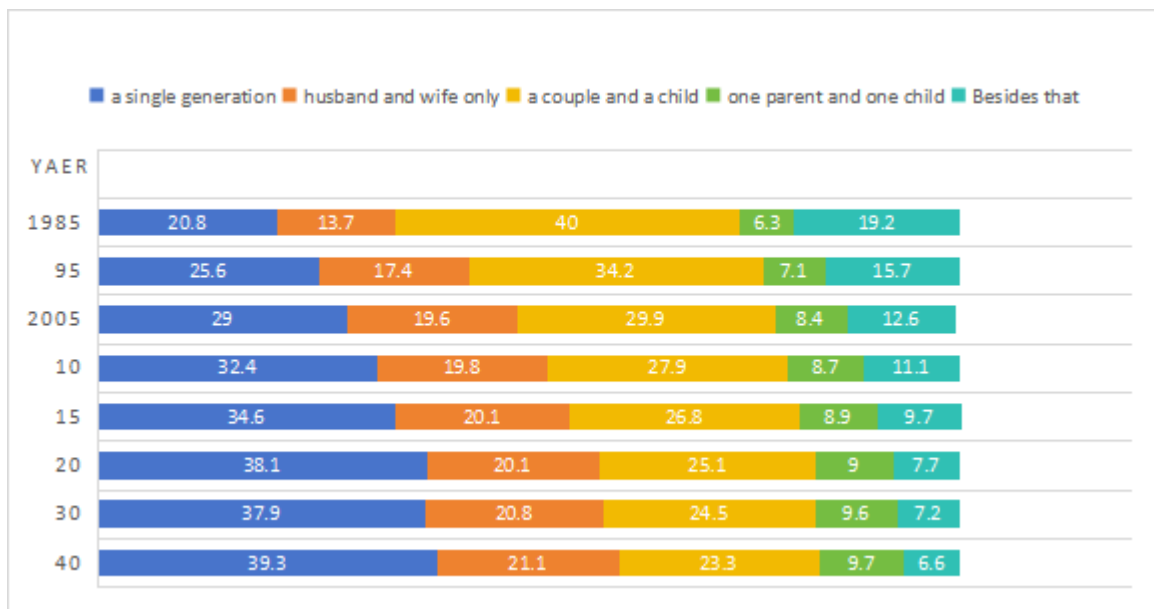


Figure 1. Trend of ratios by generation type^[2]

Among solitary deaths, the proportion of soldiers reaches 60% for both men and women. On the other hand, solitary deaths are characterized by more than seven times higher than the suicide rate in normal deaths. Solitary deaths in their 20s to 40s are much higher than the nation's suicide rate. In addition, the highest suicide rate is in their 20s. Until the 40s, the rate of lonely deaths is high, and the rate of suicides nationwide is also high. In addition, the average number of days from

a solitary death to discovery is 18 days. In addition, the rate of discovery within 3 days after a lonely death was 48.1% for women and 39.7% for men, which was about 10% higher for women than for men. This seems to be a time difference between women and men, as there is a difference in the frequency of other people-related in society. In addition, the scene of a lonely death can be said to be miserable. The days from discovery of the body are within 3 days, but it may take 2 weeks, 1 months, 3 months or more, and the body may be damaged in many cases.

The most common cause of discovery is the lack of communication, and the shortest number of days is 13 days for discovery. In general, 25% of the cases are found due to changes in the surrounding environment, such as leaks and strange odors. In addition, there are cases of discovering lonely deaths due to arrears of rent, but in this case, the discovery has been prolonged for nearly a month from the occurrence of lonely deaths. Now, the problem of lonely death is not just a problem for the elderly. Solitary death is a problem that can be seen even in the younger generation. Overall, 40% of active generations under their 50s suffer from lonely deaths. In particular, it is estimated that the cause of lonely deaths in their 40s and 50s is employment instability and an increase in the unmarried rate. During periods when it is difficult to go out due to COVID-19, people in their 20s and 30s often die alone due to hunger or mental illness due to poverty if they do not have friends or family to contact. As such, there is a risk of lonely death in the younger generation, so measures to cope with lonely death have become an important task for all generations ^[3].

2. The type of lonely death

2.1. The lonely death of an old man

If you look at Figure 2, In 2024, 76,020 people died at home alone, 76.4 percent or 58,044 people were aged 65 or older. According to the Japanese daily's demographic, the number of deaths in 24 years is about 1.61 million. Of these, 3.6 percent of them died alone at home. The Japanese police agency counted the number of dead bodies (including suicide) handled by police in 2024 and by doctors. By age, 14,658 people aged 85 or older accounted for the largest number, followed by 12,567 people aged 75 to 79 and 11,600 people aged 70 to 74. Of the bodies aged 65 or older, 39.2 percent took the most days from the time of death to discovery, which was the largest number of days from the day of discovery. And 4,538 people, or 7.8 percent, were found for more than a month.

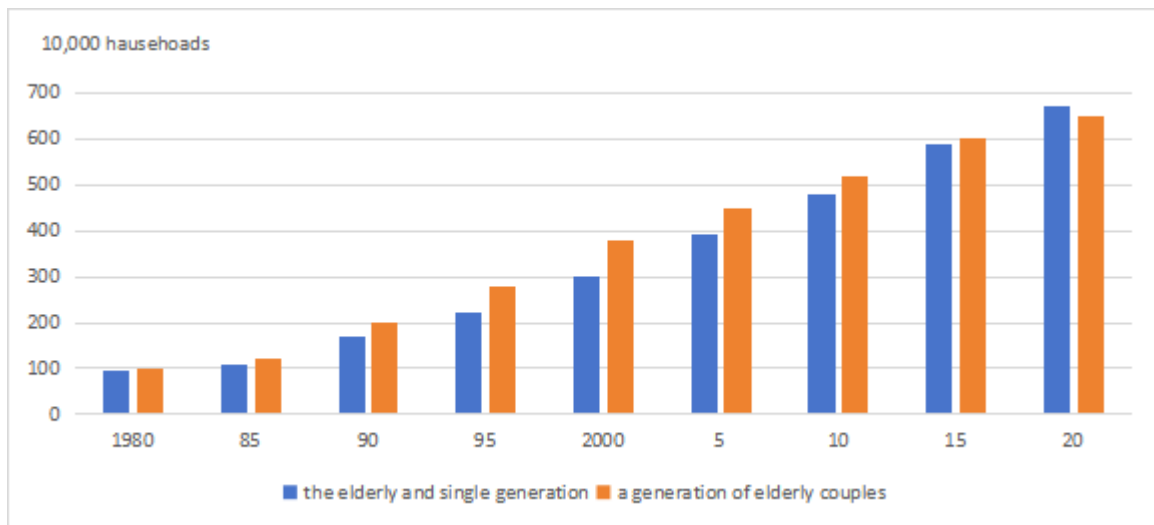


Figure 2. Trends in the generation of single elderly and married couples ^[4]

According to the police, there are cases where they have no relatives or acquaintances who regularly come to see the condition, and report that the mail is piled up unnaturally. The Solitude and Isolation Countermeasures Promotion Act, implemented in 2024, evaluates solitude or isolation as a “task of the whole society”. The Japanese government has formed a research group to understand the status of lonely and isolated deaths. The National Police Agency compiled data

to deepen the discussion ^[3].

The research group published in 2024 estimates that among the dead bodies at home, more than 8 days after death, they were socially isolated in their lifetime. In 2024, 21,856 people of all ages are eligible.

The research group points out that the number of elderly single-person generations is increasing, and there is a concern about the seriousness of solitude and isolation problems, and emphasizes the need to prevent losing the connection to society and leading to isolation deaths during life.

2.2. The active generation

In Japan, when you reach a certain age, you will face a job retirement age, where your job disappears before retirement. When you reach the job retirement age, your salary decreases, but you will also be replaced with job transfer and equipment used by the company. In other words, it is now in the atmosphere that is not very useful at work. If you look at Figure 3, The job retirement age is a system created for the purpose of suppressing labor costs and facilitating organization as the retirement age of companies increased from 55 to 60 from the '80s to '90s. Some companies have a job retirement age system of 16.7%, which is not very high. 27.7% of companies with 500 or more employees, and the larger the size, the higher the introduction rate. According to a survey of 52 relatively large companies by laboratories and players after retirement, 54% (28 companies) answered that they had a job retirement age.

After retirement, research institutes have a job retirement age regardless of the industry in the case of large companies. Companies that do not have a job retirement age are often demoted from managerial to manager and from manager to manager. In some cases, the class has fallen by two or three levels dynamically due to movement other than age. The content of the work remains unchanged, but there are cases where only the job is excluded. As a manager and manager without a subordinate, the contents of the work remain the same, but they are excluded from the job and are implicitly discriminated against at work, such as a drop in grade.

According to a Japanese government survey, the highest age of retirement for both the manager and the manager is 40 years old. For example, the position allowance is initially removed, but the salary grade remains the same. However, in the following year, although I am working, the grade decreases step by step, and finally, the salary for the manager falls from 36,000 yuan to 21,000 yuan. Eventually, the annual income, including the five months of bonuses, is almost halved from 592,000 yuan to 341,000 yuan.

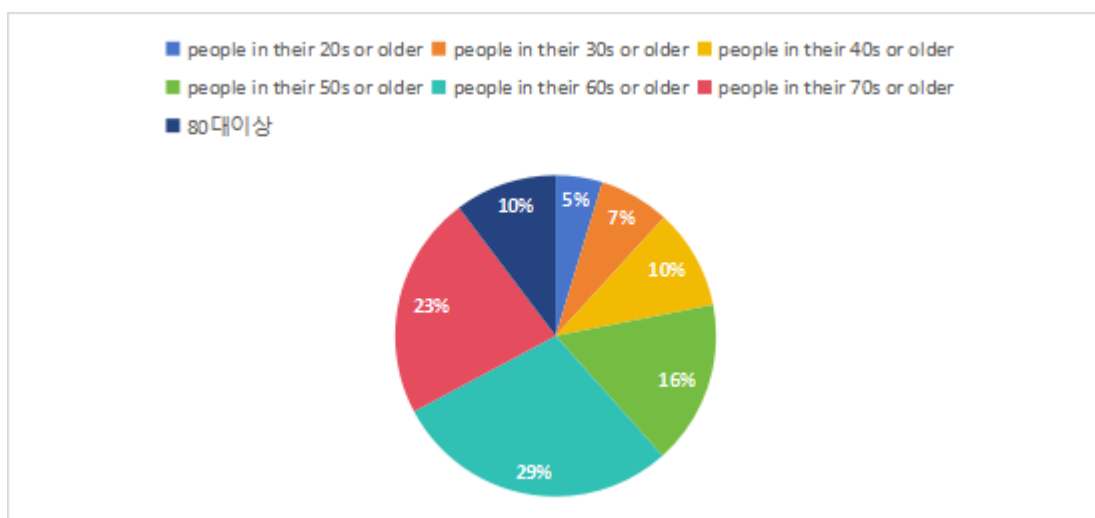


Figure 3. 40% of the current generation's lonely death rate ^[5]

For the company, the salary is reduced by the time difference by avoiding a sharp decline in salary. This phenomenon is that after the retirement age of 60, if re-employed, the annual income is 197,000 yuan, which is 40% lower than before

the retirement age. And I quit after two years. With full-time work, this salary is not motivating. Above all, it makes one feel regret that the company only recognizes this much of one's value. In Japan, those in their 50s are the halfway point of life. The retirement age of the rank gives a sense of loss. According to a survey by the Elderly, Disability, and Jobseeker Employment Support Organization (2018), 59.2% of the decline in motivation to work after quitting the rank reached 59.2%. In other words, the decrease in motivation for work decreases at the same time the loyalty to the company <Table 3>. In addition, the number of meeting meetings has also decreased, so in-house information is not known. They become awkward with their past subordinates and face a sense of loss and loneliness^[6].

2.3. The employment ice age group

The employment ice age generation refers to a generation that has experienced employment at a time when recruitment of new employees sharply declined due to the collapse of the bubble economy. The general definition is the generation who graduate from college from 1993 to 2004. These generations faced brutal and miserable times due to the employment ice age after 2008, when the global financial crisis (Limon shock) occurred as well as the collapse of the bubble economy. When notified of the dropout of employment, they may leave the job front as if they were branded as unnecessary human beings in society. In addition, the Great East Japan Earthquake occurred in the conflict path of life. In this environment, young people often made extreme choices. Young people who enter college after having social experience are already 29 at the time of graduation. In some cases, they are eliminated from the screening because of their age. At that time, young people were so stressed that they could not live without taking medicine. They lived with a sense of loneliness that they did not know. Now, they live together at their parents' house to save on living expenses, but one day, they become single elderly and there is a high risk of living in isolation due to a sense of loss and loneliness.

2.4. A middle-aged divorcee

In Japan, the divorce of married couples for more than 20 years is increasing. Of the 183,808 divorces in 2023, the number of middle-aged divorces is 39,812, which is 20% of the total. The total number of divorces tends to decrease, but middle-aged divorces are increasing. In the '60s and '70s, men were in charge of work and women were in charge of housework alone, and they had no choice but to endure irrational events from their husbands or their relatives. For this reason, the reason why middle-aged divorce does not decrease is because of the strong demand from women that they cannot wait until the day their husbands die while demanding freedom from oppression.

A glimpse of such a short story is the increase in the number of divorced women after the husband's death. If you look at Figure 4, According to the Ministry of Justice's family register statistics, the number of post-divorce cases reached 17,772 per year in 2005. Women are dissatisfied with their husbands. According to a 2017 survey by Anchorage, which manages joint graves, about 25% of 242 married women do not want to enter the same grave as their husbands. The reason for this increase in middle-aged divorce is that the first is unbearable because of the husband at home after retirement. Originally, as the husband with dominant or patriarchal values got older, his personality became urgent. Unbearable to her angry husband, wives make middle-aged divorce decisions. Parting is often within a few years of retirement. A husband who only works, has no friends or hobbies stays home 24 hours after retirement. When he is in a bad mood, he instructs his wife, and sometimes gets angry. A short temper can be considered as menopausal period, but it is not easy to improve mental violence or temperament of abuse, or a sense of patriarchy. Second, mental violence = DV was recognized in society. In the past, many people advised us to endure marriage. There was also a social atmosphere that divorce is impossible without violence. However, divorce is possible due to a change in social perception that mental violence is aggravated. The reason behind the change of consciousness is that with the spread of mobile phones, an environment where wives can collect information on the Internet has been created^[7].

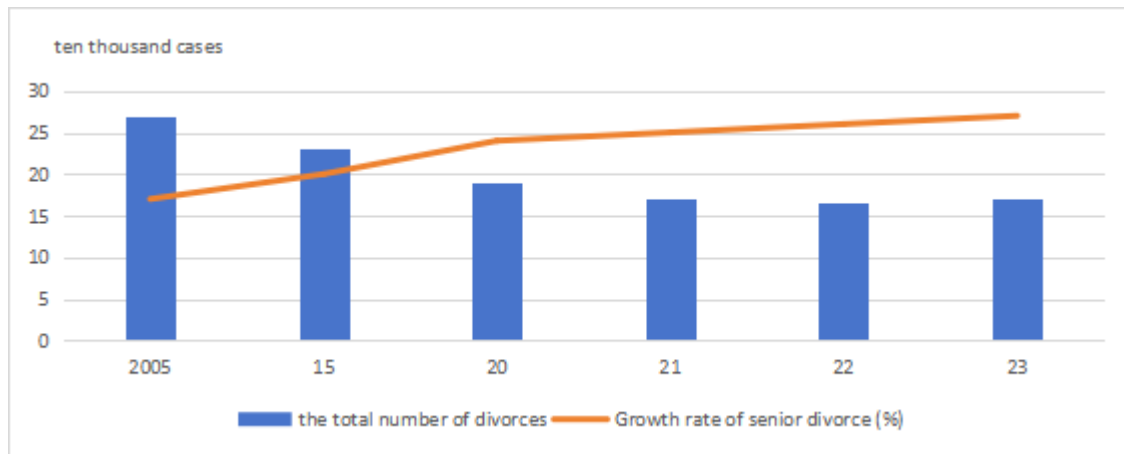


Figure 4. Changes in the ratio of elderly divorces^[8]

The husband may think that he got divorced out of the blue, but the wife is the result of her long patience. A survey found that Japanese women spend more than five times as much time housekeeping and childcare as their husbands do in recent years, with more than 70 percent of joint social activities between men and women. Improvement is urgently needed as the wife and the wife discuss each other equally. If husbands do not reform their consciousness, it leads to feelings of loneliness and loss at work.

2.5. Conspiracy theories and a sense of loss

Conspiracy theory is an unusual way of thinking that when an event or event occurs, it is interpreted as a ploy or plot. The idea is that it becomes a political and social decision as a secret ruse that the average person never mentions. Conspiracy theories have shaken countries around the world since the 2010s. Whenever a big social change occurs due to the new COVID-19 epidemic, conspiracy theories are being created. Conspiracy theories are an attraction that can lead to fantasy. It can be fun to daydream in your head. But it is affecting people who live in reality and not just stay in their head. For example, the January 2021 storming of the U.S. Capitol. People who took President Trump's remarks that he was fighting the shadow government deep state occupied the Congress, shouting election fraud.

Conspiracy theories can sometimes lead to a sense of loss in relationships between men and women. For example, a man and a woman have a hobby or personality, so they promise to get married, travel together, and have completed a mortgage review at a bank to purchase a newlyweds house. But something unexpected happened. The two watched a news program and they argued for the legitimacy of the war between Russia and Ukraine. The man argued that he was joking, but the woman's face was serious. As the opponent sheds tears, the U.S. dollar has ended and become the gold standard. This story can be extended elsewhere. Former U.S. President Obama's wife Michelle was turned into an aggressive fiancée. Even if the man points out, people in the world are deceived. I did not listen to the man saying that I was just telling the truth.

The reason for the change in attitude is the COVID-19 epidemic, and it is often assumed that working from home is the cause. It changed as I started my daily life watching computers or cell phones all day long at home. It is largely influenced by X or YouTube. The man studied with books on shadow government or conspiracy theories. Because he understood the change in thinking that fell into conspiracy theories and wanted to bring her back to reality. I tried, but it was too late. If we had lived together, we could have known and dealt with the change at a faster stage. Since we lived separately, when the signs appeared, we were already in a zone where we did not listen to other people's points. COVID-19 was cured and returned to our daily lives, but the gentle personality of our fiancé did not return. Eventually, the two separated. They could not escape from the swamp of shock and loss from conspiracy theories. Eventually, the wrong social view causes them to isolate themselves^[9].

3. Measures to prevent the loneliness of modern society

3.1. A social problem of lonely death

Solitary death is not only a problem of dying alone, but also a variety of problems arise by being left unattended for a long time after death. For example, first, cleaning and processing costs. In general, decomposition of the body begins about 3 days after death. Therefore, when decomposition progresses, body fluids permeate the floor or insects form and smell so-called special cleaning is required. Unlike general cleaning, special cleaning is also high in cost because it is cleaned using dedicated equipment and drugs. Second, the value of the object is reduced. According to the ‘Standards on Notification of Death of Persons by Housing Site Building Traders’ released by the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport in 2021, it is obligated to notify even natural death or death due to unexpected accidents when a special cleaning is performed, and there are many cases where it is treated as an accident object. In general, when it becomes an accident object due to a lonely death, the price of the object falls by 1-2% from the market price. Third, it causes inconvenience to the neighbor. As one of the circumstances in which a lonely death is discovered, even a shared space of apartment houses such as apartments may be found by nearby residents with an odor. At this time, the surviving family left behind causes inconvenience to those around them, putting on a psychological and mental burden. Fourth, the inheritance process is difficult. Due to a lonely death, you must find an heir to go through the inheritance process. In the case of lonely deaths, there are many cases where parents have already died or there are no spouses or children. In addition, it becomes difficult to grasp the inherited property when the person who died alone is the heir. In situations where the lifestyle of the deceased or whether there is a property or money dispute is unknown, a difficult decision must be made as to whether there is no problem with inheritance or whether the inheritance should be destroyed. In addition, if the relationship with the deceased is thin, the party’s consciousness may be low, and the inheritance process may take time.

3.2. A countermeasure

Solving the problem of lonely death requires not only personal efforts but also social measures. The central and local governments, and local communities should pay attention to the problem of lonely death together and come up with various preventive measures. First, strengthening the role of local communities. Local communities can play an important role in preventing lonely death. It is necessary to strengthen communication between neighbors and provide regular visit services or caring services for the elderly or single-person households living alone. In addition, it is necessary to alleviate their loneliness by providing isolated people with opportunities to participate in social activities. Second, prepare preventive measures through technology. There are more and more attempts to prevent lonely death through recent technological advances. For example, there is a need to introduce a system that monitors the health condition or daily pattern of an elderly or single-person household living alone using smart home technology, and allows immediate help in case of an abnormal situation. These technical tools can be an effective means of preventing lonely death. Third, emotional support and counseling services. Emotional support is important to prevent lonely death. It is necessary to increase the sense of emotional stability by providing counseling services or psychological support to people who feel social isolation. This can be done through various mental health programs or telephone counseling services provided by the government or non-profit organizations. Fourth, economic support. Economic difficulty is one of the main causes of lonely death. In the case of low-income families, social activities are reduced and they tend to be isolated due to economic pressure, so active economic support from the government is required. It is important to relieve economic difficulties by strengthening welfare policies such as housing support or living expenses support for low-income families. Fifth, it is a change in social perception. To solve the problem of lonely death, a change in social perception is essential. A culture in which people take care of each other’s well-being and social relationships must be spread. To this end, media and educational institutions should also prepare campaigns and educational programs to prevent lonely deaths.

4. Conclusion

Solving the problem of lonely death requires not only personal efforts but also social measures. The central and local governments, and local communities should pay attention to the problem of lonely death together and come up with various preventive measures. First of all, the role of local communities should be strengthened. It is necessary to strengthen communication between neighbors and provide regular visit services or caring services for the elderly or single-person households living alone. In addition, it is necessary to alleviate their loneliness by providing isolated people with opportunities to participate in social activities. Second, there are more and more attempts to prevent lonely deaths through recent technological advances. For example, it is necessary to introduce a system that monitors the health condition or daily pattern of the elderly or single-person households living alone using smart home technology and allows them to receive immediate help in case of an abnormal situation. These technical tools can be an effective means of preventing lonely death. Third, emotional support is important to prevent lonely death. It is necessary to increase the sense of emotional stability by providing counseling services or psychological support to people who feel socially isolated. This can be done through various mental health programs or telephone counseling services provided by the government or non-profit organizations. Fourth, economic difficulties are one of the main causes of lonely death. In the case of low-income families, they tend to reduce social activities and isolate due to economic pressure, so active economic support from the government is required. It is important to ease economic difficulties by strengthening welfare policies such as housing support and living expenses support for low-income families. Finally, there is a need to raise awareness of lonely death and spread a culture in which people take care of each other's well-being and establish social relationships. To this end, media and educational institutions should also prepare campaigns and educational programs to prevent lonely death.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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