

Deaths from car accidents in Japan are steadily decreasing in number. A government white paper on traffic safety shows that road deaths in 2007 numbered 5,744, down 40% from 10 years before, falling below 6,000 for the first time since 1953. The decline resulted from the effectiveness of traffic safety measures taken since around 1970 when the country was combating sharply increasing road accidents in what was dubbed a “traffic war.” But it must be noted that, apart from the safety measures, the trend for young people not to possess cars is reflected in the decreasing traffic deaths. Changes in young people’s lifestyle and consciousness are having greater consequences on society than expected.

A survey on traffic accidents compiled by the National Police Agency shows that road fatalities topped 10,000 in 1959 and reached a peak of 16,765 in 1970, after which the number began to decrease thanks to the enhancement of safety functions of cars and tires, improvement in road conditions, the rising ratio of drivers using safety belts, the spread of traffic safety measures, and improvement in first-aid medical treatment, among others. After some fluctuations later, traffic deaths continued to plunge over the past 10 years. In particular, the 2002 revision of the Road Traffic Law, which tightened the penalty on motorists driving under the influence of alcohol, is considered a key contributing factor.

According to data from the Automobile Inspection and Registration Information Association, the number of motor vehicles in Japan, including motorcycles, jumped 5.8 times to 79.2 million in



from cars and the decline in traffic deaths is underlined by changes in the number of driving license holders. The number of license holders among people in the 16-29 age bracket dropped 15% to 14.77 million in 2006 from 17.43 million in 2001. This is partly attributed to a decrease in the young population. But given that the number of male license holders showed a greater decline than that of female holders, it is evident that some factors other than the shrinking young population contributed to the fall in traffic deaths among young people.

## Declining Traffic Deaths & Young People’s Alienation from Cars

By **Isao ADACHI**

2007 from 16.5 million in 1970. The decline in traffic deaths despite the sharp increase in the number of vehicles testified to the fact that roads and cars in Japan have become much safer.

Meanwhile, the relationship between the decrease in fatal traffic accidents and the tendency among young people to distance themselves from cars has hitherto been seldom mentioned, and I myself did not notice it until I was recently reminded of the fact by a senior police officer.

Data on fatal traffic accidents involving young people show that victims in the 16-24 age bracket in 2007 totaled 670, down 13% from the previous year and down a whopping 67% (1,356) from 2,026 in 1997. Those in the 25-29 age bracket have also declined significantly over the past 10 years, from 596 to 266. These figures show that great changes have taken place in the traffic accident data involving young people. Given that traffic deaths of people aged 16-29 accounted for 27% of the total traffic deaths in 1997, the decrease in this age bracket has brought down the total of such fatalities.

The relationship between the trend for young people to stay away

A survey on the passenger car market by the Japan Automobile Manufacturers Association shows that the ratio of car owners in Japan has been falling since 2001 and that this trend is pronounced among males in their 20s. The domestic car market shrank in 2007 from the previous year for the first time, a phenomenon attributed by market specialists to young people choosing not to own cars.

Young people these days tend to use public transport instead of driving personal cars, or renting one when necessary. This tendency is partly attributed to the heavy economic burden of owning cars. But some people hold that young generations are no longer attracted by car driving the way they used to be. In addition, they spend little money on things other than cellphones, the Internet and computer games, and many choose to save money.

The changes in young people’s consciousness have not been fully analyzed. They were forced to adopt a light-burdened lifestyle free from possessing things during the “lost decade” when they had a hard time finding jobs, and this way of life may have been inherited by generations that followed the “employment ice age” generation overlapping the “lost decade” and is now taking hold. **JS**

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