

Ensure No Foreign Residents Are Left Behind in the Fight Against Covid-19



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Number of Foreign Residents Increasing

The spread of coronavirus infections (Covid-19) has temporarily reduced the flow of people into Japan from overseas, but since the beginning of this century the numbers of both visitors to Japan and long-term foreign residents have consistently continued to grow. As of the end of 2019, the last year not to have been affected by Covid-19, the number of foreign residents in Japan (not including tourists) had reached 2.93 million. Given that Japan's population is roughly 120 million, a foreign population of 3 million would mean that roughly 2.5% of the population (or 1 in 40 people) are foreigners.

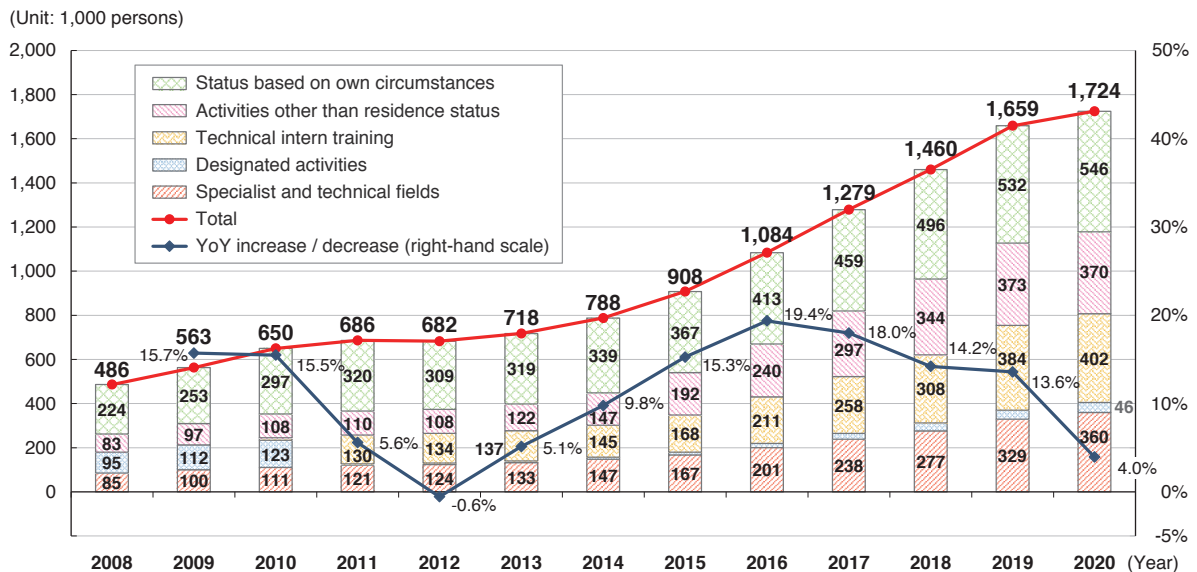
We can expect even 3% would be the case soon after Covid-19 is brought under control.

The current breakdown of foreign residents (as of 2019) shows that 83.9% are from Asia, mostly from China, South Korea, Vietnam, the Philippines, Nepal, Indonesia, Taiwan, and Thailand. An additional 9.4% are from Central and South America, and this includes a large number of Japanese Brazilians.

Of these foreign residents, 1.72 million, or approximately 60%, participate in the labor market, working with a variety of residence statuses (*Chart 1*).

CHART 1
Number of foreign workers by residence status

- The number of foreign workers in Japan stood at a record high 1,724,328 as of Oct. 31, 2020.
- By residence status, the highest growth rates have been among “Designated activities” (+10.9% YoY), “Specialist and technical fields” (+9.3% YoY), and “Technical intern training” (+4.8% YoY).



Note 1: “Specialist and technical fields” refers to managers, technicians, researchers, chefs of non-Japanese cuisine, persons with designated skills, etc. whose status for the purpose of work has been approved.

Note 2: “Status based on own circumstances” refers to permanent residents, non-Japanese persons of Japanese descent, etc. whose status is based on their own circumstances or position in Japan.

Note 3: “Designated activities” refers to non-Japanese persons engaged in activities that have been specially designated on an individual basis by the minister of justice.

Note 4: “Activities other than residence status” refers to students working part time, etc. who are engaged in employment other than the original purpose of their residence status (in principle, up to 28 hours per week for students).

Source: “Foreign Worker Reporting Statistics”, Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (released annually, as of the end of October)

Technical Intern Training Program

As *Chart 1* shows, roughly one-third (32%) of foreign residents are living in Japan based on their own circumstances (permanent residents, spouses or children of Japanese nationals or permanent residents, and other long-term residents), roughly one-fourth (23%, or 400,000 people) are technical interns, close to one-fourth (21%) are students from abroad, and close to one-fourth (21%) have specialist skills (residence status “Engineer/Specialist in Humanities/International Services”). Of the 400,000 technical interns, whose presence has been increasing in recent years, close to 10,000 (more than 2%) escape from their workplace with their whereabouts unknown (referred to as missing people) each year. According to the Japan International Trainee and Skilled Worker Cooperation Organization (in the JITCO White Paper 2019), the number of interns who went missing in 2018 was 9,052, of which the majority, at 5,801, were Vietnamese.

Social concern about the issue of missing interns has recently been growing with the production of several movies on the theme, including *Complicity* (2018), directed by Kei Chikaura, about a Chinese trainee who goes missing, and *Along the Sea* (2020), directed by Akio Fujimoto, about Vietnamese trainees who go missing.

The media, civil society organizations, lawyers’ organizations, and others have repeatedly pointed out that these interns go missing for reasons including harsh working conditions and low wages, and every year in its Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, the US Department of State criticizes the Technical Intern Training Program as “modern slavery”. This is not to say that all workplaces that employ technical interns are inferior, but, for example, the NHK news program *Nonare* (“No Narration”, episode broadcast on June 24, 2019) shocked viewers with the harsh working conditions of technical interns from Vietnam in the towel-producing region of Imabari.

Low Rate of Recognition of Refugees

Japan has also seen an increase in the number of people whose status is uncertain while applying for refugee status. Japan signed the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees in 1981. This was in response to growing criticism of the fact that during the 1970s, when large numbers of “boat people” were leaving Vietnam and surrounding countries and being accepted as refugees by countries in Europe and the Americas, Japan did not accept them despite being located in Asia. (Japan accepted its first refugee from the Indo-Chinese peninsula in 1978.)

This was also the same time as the beginning (in 1981) of the program to repatriate Japanese people who had been abandoned as children in China at the end of World War II. This program included Japanese language education and programs to adapt to daily life for those children who were reunited with their families, and policies to integrate refugees into Japanese society began to be fully put into place.

Nevertheless, despite the fact that the number of refugee applications subsequently grew, the annual number of people recognized as refugees remains in the double digits. In 2018, for example, 10,493 people applied for refugee status, of whom 42 had their applications accepted, for a recognition rate of only 0.4%. As a result, many people who have their refugee applications denied repeatedly reapply, and although they are not held at Immigration Services Agency detention facilities, their status is “provisional release”, meaning they are not allowed to work and their social standing is extremely vulnerable. This issue was addressed in the movie *Tokyo Kurds* (2021), directed by Fumiari Hyuga, about the uncertain state for young people in the Kurdish community in greater Tokyo who repeatedly reapply for refugee status. There was also a great deal of criticism from within and outside Japan in 2021 over the death in a detention facility of the Sri Lankan woman Ratnayake Liyanage Wishma Sandamali, who did not receive adequate attention while complaining of ill health.

Impacts of Covid-19

The first diagnoses of Covid-19 in Japan were in early 2020, and the negative effects on foreign workers became evident from around March.

First, technical interns from Asian countries were not able to return home when their contracts concluded because their home countries were in lockdown, and were forced to remain in Japan with no work or place to live. Students who were earning their living expenses through part-time work also lost their jobs when their workplaces closed under states of emergency. Many students had no choice other than to leave school because the loss of income meant that they could not pay their tuition, but that also meant the loss of their student visa, nullifying their residence status.

In addition, because of instructions to avoid the “3Cs” (closed spaces, crowds, and close-contact settings) to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, and to prevent the emergence of infection clusters in detention facilities, these people were released despite having no way to earn a living.

Against this backdrop, infection clusters began to appear in foreign communities from the spring of 2020. The mechanisms were

as follows.

First, financially strapped foreign non-regular workers who had lost their jobs often found themselves living in crowded conditions in acquaintance's apartments. Next, if someone began showing signs that suggested infection, language barriers made it difficult for them to get PCR tests, and their symptoms and condition worsened. We cannot blame medical facility staff, because their hands were already full treating Japanese patients, and they had no extra time to deal properly with foreign people who require more attention because of language handicaps. In addition, foreign communities did not receive sufficient information like avoiding the 3Cs to prevent infection, so in some cases they continued their religious and other practices without taking proper preventive measures, and infection clusters emerged.

Difficulties in Accessing Healthcare Information

There are several reasons for this undesirable situation. First, necessary information did not reach foreigners' communities, meaning that the people in foreign communities did not use advice centers set up by the government. Second, even if they were able to access one of those advice centers, it is very difficult to connect foreigners to health centers and medical institutions, because of vertical bureaucratic structures and a lack of coordination between advice centers and medical facilities. Third, even if they could reach a medical facility, they could not get diagnosed because they cannot speak Japanese, or were charged high medical fees because they did not have national health insurance. Fourth, interns who had gone missing, students who had left school, and others who lost their residence statuses avoided examinations out of fear that immigration authorities would be informed, and this fear contributed to worsening their conditions and infections spreading.

Against this backdrop, the Institute of Developing Economies (IDE-JETRO) and the National Center for Global Health and Medicine (NCGM) began joint research in October 2020 to improve access to information for foreigners' communities in Japan, and they were later joined by other organizations including the medical NGO SHARE, and began operating as the *Minna No Gaikokujin* Network (Everybody's Network for Foreign Residents; MINNA).

MINNA worked to provide foreigners' communities in Japan with information regarding how to prevent infections and treat symptoms in ways acceptable to their respective cultures and lifestyles, as well as information for advice centers for foreigners that they could contact without fear. MINNA also identified good practices that the patient succeeded in getting smooth health care and medical services, and prepared materials to pass on the lessons learned to

other regions. A portion of the funding was provided by the Toyota Foundation (Special Subject Grant, Migrants and Japanese Society).

Facebook as an Information Source

In recent years, technical interns have expanded beyond urban locations to rural areas because of worker shortages in the agricultural and fishery industries. Some local governments in places where a significant number of technical interns live have begun posting information about municipal services on their websites in the native languages of these interns (in addition to the previous Chinese and Korean, this can include languages like Vietnamese, Indonesian, Nepali, and Burmese).

Nevertheless, we have learned that during times like the current pandemic, foreigners "almost never" access the multilingual pages on their local government's website to obtain information. One reason is that they do not know that this information exists, and even if they do, the quality of translation into languages other than main languages like English, Chinese, Korean, Portuguese, and Spanish is not necessarily very high, and we often heard the complaint that the "message is unclear". If city or village offices do not have staff who are able to provide supplementary explanations in those languages, the foreigner seeking advice reaches a dead end. One outstanding good practice is the city of Mimasaka in Okayama Prefecture, which engages a Vietnamese prefectural employee to support its Vietnamese interns.

The information source on which most foreign residents of Japan rely is, in fact, social media, with Facebook in their native language being particularly important, and this is common across many nationalities. However, even if there are many foreigners coming from the same country, they will not necessarily be using the same Facebook page, and we need to pay attention to the fact that foreigners' communities are divided into subcommunities.

Taking Vietnamese as an example, most students studying in Japan are from the south of the country and are relatively highly educated, while most technical interns are from poorer agricultural regions in the north, with a relatively low level of education. These two groups, therefore, do not make up one single community of Vietnamese people in Japan. In the case of Myanmar as well, the country has many ethnic minorities and they live in communities of their respective ethnic groups in Japan. In Nepal, the effects of a caste system remain, and we can see division by caste among Nepalis in Japan as well.

Influential Social Media

Therefore, if we want to spread information in foreigners' communities, and taking into account the existence of these subcommunities, we need a careful strategy for disseminating information in those various languages. Before Christmas 2020, MINNA prepared a video showing how to prevent the spread of infections at parties in English, Vietnamese, Burmese, and Nepali, and loaded the video to Facebook pages in each of those languages with the hope that it would spread. The video was easy to follow, used likeable animation, and was of high quality, but in the end it did not spread to the extent we had hoped. The main reason was that people did not go to social media when they wanted information about preventing the spread of infections. For students who had lost their part-time jobs and technical interns who had gone missing and were looking for work, information about job possibilities was much more important than information about preventing the spread of infections.

Nevertheless, people were still concerned about getting infected, so MINNA then prepared an illustrated chart explaining what you

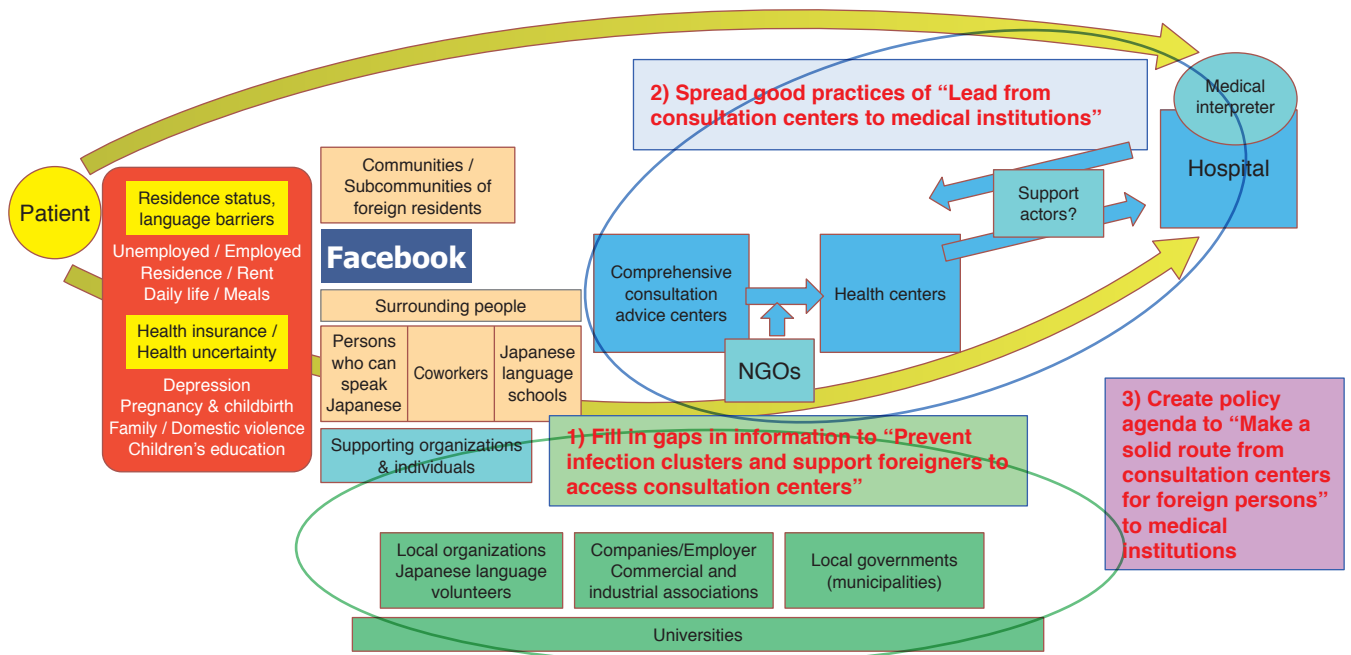
should do if "you thought you might have contracted, or have contracted, Covid-19". This chart appears to have been circulated among the Japanese people who are supporting those vulnerable workers rather than the foreign residents themselves.

Going into 2021, MINNA found the information Facebook page TAIHEN, which is very popular among Vietnamese, and operated on a commercial basis. After the operator agreed to post information about things like vaccinations, the Facebook page began being accessed tens of thousands of times. This showed the necessity of making the effort to directly contact influencers and produce content together with them.

There are also people in foreign communities who have lived in Japan for a long time and have close connections with Japanese society, such as Filipino Roman Catholic priests and Buddhist monks in Japan from countries like Myanmar and Vietnam. They carried out activities based at their religious facilities to support people in need. We also saw some types of self-help groups with leaders of foreigners' communities in rural areas using their personal networks to support their compatriots. However, these circles encompass only limited geographies, and cannot be expected to disseminate

CHART 2

Necessary steps for foreigners to reach health services



Source: MINNA

information to foreign communities in other areas.

Vaccine Information

Japan's full-scale, nationwide vaccine rollout began in the summer of 2021, and foreign residents who wanted to be vaccinated tried to obtain information. Foreign people with a valid residence status and registered with their local government were able to use the same procedures as Japanese residents. They receive vaccination vouchers from their local government according to the schedule by age, so they should have had no particular problems. Nevertheless, the vaccination vouchers and questionnaire were in Japanese only, so they needed to have someone who understood Japanese to explain procedures to them.

Students at relatively well-run schools could be vaccinated through their school, and technical interns working for large corporations had opportunities for workplace vaccinations. However, short-term residents, interns who had gone missing, and other foreign people who were not registered with a local government were initially not eligible for vaccinations (this was the case for diplomats as well). In terms of preventing the spread of infections it is preferable that everyone who wants to get vaccinated should be able to receive the vaccine, regardless of residence status.

In Tokyo, the metropolitan government's first focus of attention was on Japanese people who were homeless and not registered at ward offices. In some wards, they would be issued vaccination vouchers if it could be confirmed that they did in fact live in a particular ward, even if they did not have a certificate of residence. Similarly, some wards looked at ways to issue vaccination vouchers to foreign residents without a valid residence status using the address of a support organization. Nonetheless, staff at health centers are obligated as civil servants to report persons who do not have a valid residence status to immigration authorities, and many foreigners without valid visas did not want to take the risk of accessing a medical institution.

For the sake of preventing infections of a communicable disease, it is not desirable that there are barriers to access to medical examinations and vaccinations for these people. Therefore, in June 2021 the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare issued a directive to health center staff and others that they could use their own judgement in deciding to report vaccine recipients without a valid residence status to immigration authorities (meaning that they could decide not to report the person). Subsequently, support organizations in various regions began working with local governments to provide people without valid residence statuses with vaccination vouchers, and this achieved some degree of success.

The town of Oarai in Ibaraki Prefecture, for example, has a large number of unregistered foreign workers and the municipal office simplified its requirements for vaccination vouchers and responded flexibly on-site, issuing vouchers to overstaying Indonesian residents who had been identified by support organizations.

Toward True Universal Health Coverage

These good practices are to some extent carried out as "emergency measures" that place a priority on infection control. However, they could be criticized as leading to "opening the door to immigration" by "anti-immigration" people. Nevertheless, the UN's International Organization for Migration (IOM) has issued a policy stating that based on the principle of non-discrimination, impartial access to coronavirus vaccines should be guaranteed for all migrants and their families, regardless of nationality or residence status, meaning that those good practices are the correct policy in terms of infection control as well as human rights.

Japan is proud of providing universal health coverage, which is in accordance with the Sustainable Development Goals. Then it is not desirable that access to health and medical care in Japan is limited by language and residence status.

Foreign workers are indispensable in Japan for avoiding industrial decline from labor shortages. The government's official position is to "have no immigration policy" and it emphasizes that it will accept only "highly skilled professionals". But looking at examples around the world, no country has been successful in selectively accepting only highly skilled professionals. In the first place, Japan will not be "chosen" by ordinary workers who are not highly skilled if they cannot live there comfortably, and highly skilled professionals will certainly not come to a country that is not chosen by ordinary workers.

The spirit of the SDGs is to ensure "no one will be left behind". How to support the lives of foreign workers, who tend to be forced into vulnerable positions, is truly being tested now during the Covid-19 pandemic, and this problem is the flip side of the coin as to whether Japan itself can create a sustainable society in the face of a declining birthrate and aging population. **JS**

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