Geographical Distance and Frequency of Contacts between Elderly Parents and Children in Japan

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Background: The traditional living arrangement of Japanese seniors was co-residence with the eldest son. During a 40-year period from 1960, however, the frequency of co-residence has drastically decreased, and a new style of intergenerational solidarity has been emerging. In this study, in order to explicate the intergenerational relationships in today's Japan, "structural solidarity" (i.e., geographical distance and frequency of contacts) between seniors and their adult children was observed.

Methods: The survey was carried out in 1998 with a nationally representative sample of seniors aged 65 years and over, and 2,311 persons were successfully interviewed (the response rate was 77.0%). The respondents ranged in age from 65 to 100 years, with an average of 72.1 years; 45.1% were men, and the remaining 54.9% were women. The respondents were asked to name all their children, and to indicate geographical distance from and the frequency of contacts with each of the children.

Results: Among the children named (n=5,947), 26.8% co-resided with parents, and 22.0% lived within 30 minutes of distance (with usual of transportation) from their parents (Table 1). For the seniors, 58.1% had coresident child(ren); 38.4% had child(ren) not co-residing but living within 30 minutes of transportation time; 73.6% had child(ren), either co-resident or not, living within 30 minutes of distance (Table 2). Significant differences by city size were found for the percentage of seniors who had child(ren) living near, when the effects of other variables were partialled out (Table 3).
50.1% of the children living apart had face-to-face contacts at least monthly (Table 4), and 68.8% had mail and/or telephone contacts at least monthly (Table 5). Multiple logit analyses revealed significant urban-rural differences: children whose parents lived in the largest cities were more likely to have frequent contacts with their parents than their counter parts, when the effects of other variables were controlled (Table 6).

Discussion: In the highly urbanized areas, the percentage of seniors co-residing with adult children, as well as those who had children living near, was significantly lower than in the less urbanized areas. However, the urbanization positively affected upon the frequent contacts between generations. The findings seem to indicate the emergence of a new pattern of intergenerational solidarity among Japanese seniors living in urban areas.

Table 1. Distance of Children

City size of parents	Co-resident	> 30 min.	> 60 min.	> 120 min.	120 min. +	Total	(n)
Total	26.8	22.0	13.4	12.4	25.3	100.0	(5497)
Largest city	28.8	15.2	15.5	18.1	22.4	100.0	(763)
Large city	26.3	25.6	14.2	12.1	21.9	100.0	(1632)
Small city, town, village	26.5	21.9	12.6	11.3	27.8	100.0	(3102)

Figures are unweighted percentages based on the number of children.

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Table 2. % of Seniors Having Children

City size of parents	Co-resident	> 30 min.	> 60 min.	> 120 min.	120 min. +	No child	Total	(n)
Total	58.1	38.4	24.1	23.1	39.3	7.1	100.0	(2311)
	[58.1]	[73.6]	[81.0]	[86.0]	[92.9]	[100.0]		
Largest city	51.9	24.3	25.1	29.5	33.8	13.0	100.0	(370)
	[51.9]	[63.2]	[72.4]	[81.6]	[87.0]	[100.0]		
Large city	54.2	41.8	23.8	21.2	36.0	7.1	100.0	(706)
	[54.2]	[73.7]	[81.0]	[85.6]	[92.9]	[100.0]		
Small city, town, village	62.2	40.6	24.0	22.2	42.9	5.3	100.0	(1235)
	[62.2]	[76.8]	[83.6]	[87.5]	[94.7]	[100.0]		

Figures are unweighted percentages based on the number of seniors; figures in [ ] are cumulative frequencies.

Table 3. Effects of City Size on Having Children

	Co-resident child	Children living near (< 30 Min)	Either
Largest city (=1.0)	1	1	1
Large city	1.051	2.058**	1.55**
Small city, town, village	1.265	1.569**	1.498**

Figures are odds ratio when the other effects are controlled.
** $p < .01$.

Table 4. Frequency of Face-to-Face Contacts

	Everyday	Weekly	Monthly	> Monthly	Total	(n)
Total	6.5	17.1	26.5	49.9	100.0	(3996)
> 30 min.	19.7	40.3	29.3	10.7	100.0	(1197)
> 60 min.	3.0	18.8	49.3	29.0	100.0	(735)
> 120 min.	0.1	7.5	35.1	57.3	100.0	(681)
120 min. +	0.0	0.9	7.8	91.3	100.0	(1383)
Largest city	6.3	18.7	26.1	49.0	100.0	(541)
Large city	8.0	20.2	27.8	43.9	100.0	(1197)
Small city, town, village	5.7	15.1	26.0	53.3	100.0	(2258)

Figures are unweighted percentages based on the number of children living apart.

Table 5. Frequency of Mail / Telephone Contacts

	Everyday	Weekly	Monthly	> Monthly	Total	(n)
Total	5.6	27.0	36.2	31.2	100.0	(3975)
> 30 min.	12.8	37.5	23.7	26.0	100.0	(1191)
> 60 min.	4.7	34.5	40.1	20.8	100.0	(731)
> 120 min.	2.9	24.1	39.4	33.6	100.0	(681)
120 min. +	1.2	15.5	43.4	39.9	100.0	(1373)
Largest city	8.9	31.2	33.3	26.6	100.0	(538)
Large city	6.1	28.1	35.1	30.6	100.0	(1198)
Small city, town, village	4.5	25.5	37.5	32.6	100.0	(2239)

Figures are unweighted percentages based on the number of children living apart.

Table 6. Effects of City Size of Parents on Frequent Contacts

	Face-to-Face	Mail / Telephone
Largest city (=1.0)	1	1
Large city	0.67*	0.639**
Small city, town, village	0.526**	0.637**

Figures are odds ratio when the other effects are controlled.
* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

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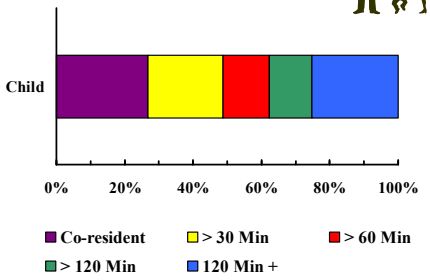
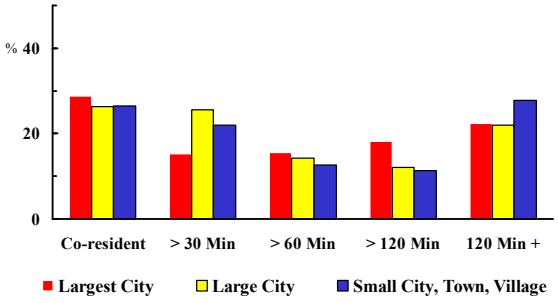
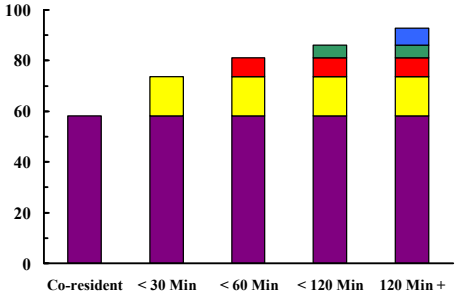
Distance of Children



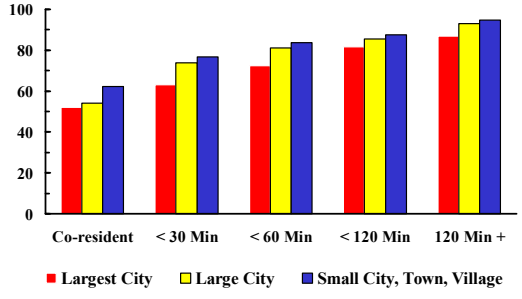
Distance of Children
(By City Size of Parents)



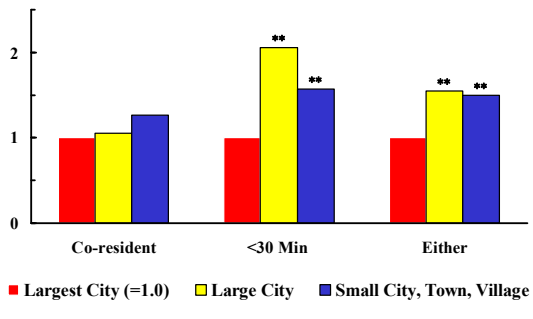
% of Seniors Having Children
(Cumulative Frequency)



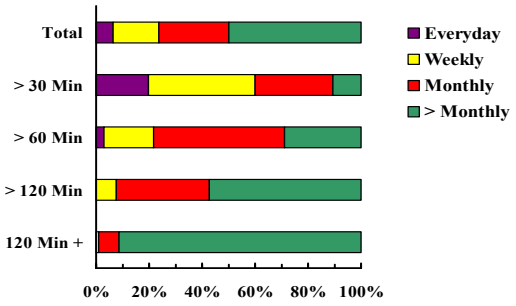
% of Seniors Having Children
(Cumulative Frequency by City Size)



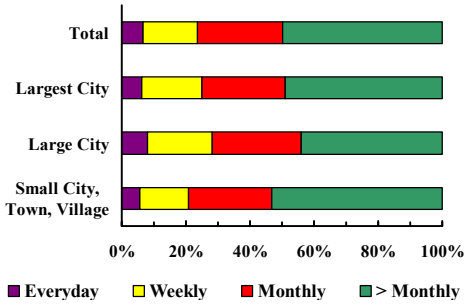
Effects of City Size on Having Children
(Odds Ratio; Other Effects are Controlled)



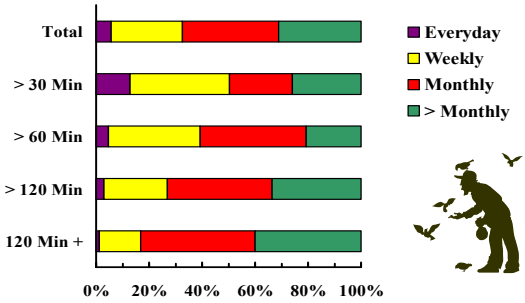
Frequency of Contacts
(Face-to-Face)



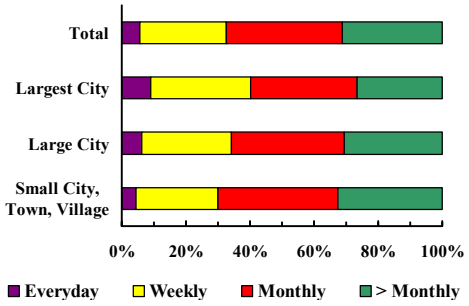
Frequency of Contacts
(Face-to-Face; by City Size of Parents)



Frequency of Contacts
(Mail / Telephone)



Frequency of Contacts
(Mail / Telephone; by City Size of Parents)



Effects of City Size of Parents on Frequent Contacts
(Odds Ratio; Other Effects are Controlled)