

Research Brief

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International Migration to Japan under COVID-19

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Introduction

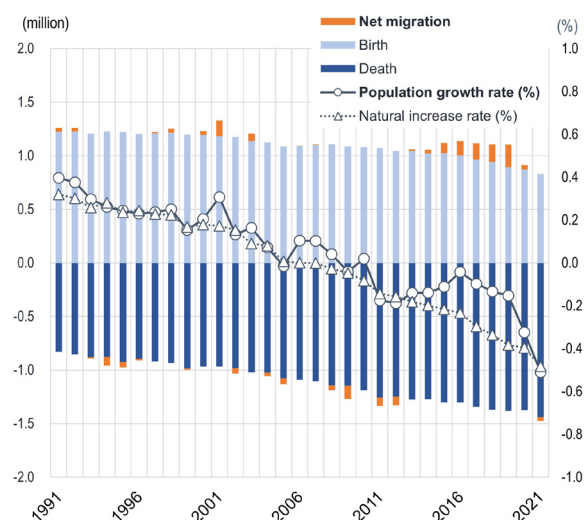
The National Institute of Population and Social Security Research (IPSS) is a national research institute affiliated with the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare. While conducting a wide range of independent research projects on population and related social and policy issues, one of the most important missions of IPSS is to carry out Japanese government's official population and household projections both at the national and sub-national levels. For the purpose of enhancing its research capabilities, IPSS launched the Migration Research Unit (MRU) within the Department of International Research and Cooperation in 2022. This new research initiative has been activated amid COVID-19 and its unforecasted demographic consequences, in which international migration has been the most significantly affected component. This brief report summarises background to the first project being conducted at the newly launched IPSS-MRU, examining the impacts of COVID-19 on international migration to Japan.

Pre-pandemic trends and patterns in international migration to Japan

After the decades of below-replacement fertility with the level of in-migration retained at the lowest among the developed countries, Japanese population entered the phase of long-term shrink just before 2010. During the decade prior to the global outbreak of COVID-19, at the same time, Japan experienced unprecedented growth of international migration to the country. While the world's "oldest" population structure accelerated the negative natural growth, increases in net gains from international migration contributed to slowing down the pace of depopulation (Figure 1). It is estimated that another 1 million would have been lost without international migration in five years from the beginning of 2015. During this period of the second half of the 2010s, the number of foreign residents increased by 40 per cent, reaching nearly 3 million in the end of 2019.

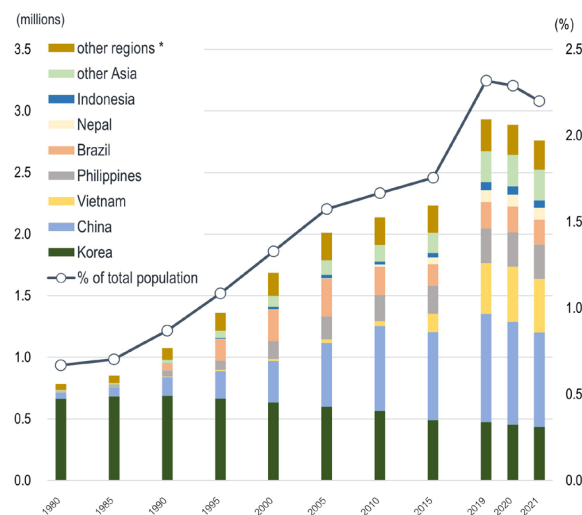
In addition to the sharp increases in net migration, there has been a growing diversity in the composition of foreign residents. Significant increases have been brought by young migrants from relatively new source countries to Japan, such as Vietnam, Nepal, and Indonesia while Chinese remained as the largest group in terms of nationality. For instance, the number of Vietnamese residents jumped from 42,000 in 2010 to over 210,000 in the end of 2019 and the Nepalese in-

Figure 1 Components of annual population change in Japan: 1991–2021



Source: Statistics Bureau “Population Census” and “Current Population Estimates”; Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare “Vital Statistics”; Immigration Services Agency “Immigration Control Statistics” (various years).

Figure 2. Stock of foreign population in Japan by nationality: 1980–2021



* other regions excluding Brazil.

Source: Immigration Services Agency “Statistics on Foreign Residents” (various years); Statistics Bureau “Population Census” and “Current Population Estimates”.

creased from 18,000 to 97,000 in the decade (Figure 2). These rapidly growing groups of migrants from these Asian countries consist mostly of students, technical intern trainees, and skilled workers. In terms of demographic impacts, therefore, they are more represented in younger age groups particularly from 20s to early 30s although foreign residents as a whole account for just over 2 per cent of the country’s total population.

The impacts of the entry restrictions under COVID-19

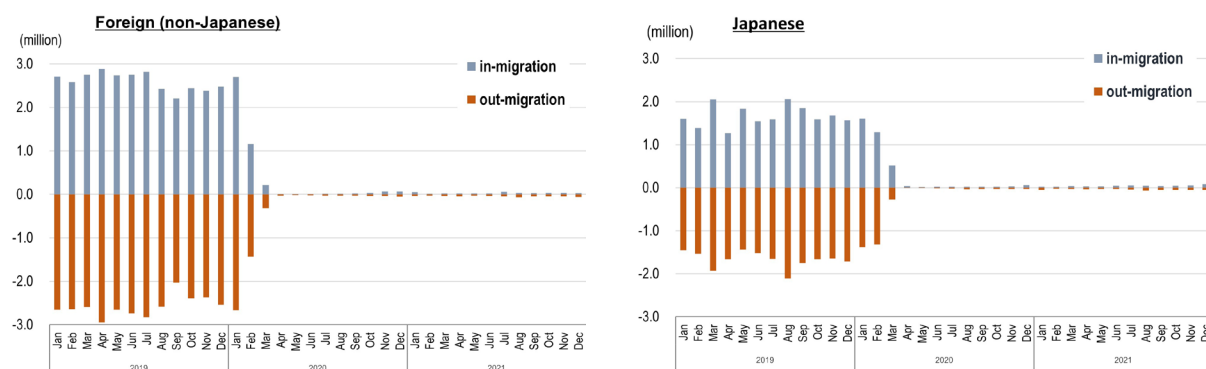
The entry restrictions that were introduced in response to the COVID-19 pandemic suddenly and drastically diminished migration flows to Japan (Figure 3). While the border was barely kept open to re-entry of permanent residents and family-based visa holders (e.g., spouse) as well as return of Japanese nationals from overseas, the restrictions to new entry were applied to foreign nationals from substantially all countries and regions

in April 2020. Since then, Japan implemented and retained one of the strictest and longest entry restrictions among the major destination countries in the world (Ghaznavi et al. 2022).

The most affected flows were those from Asia, particularly from the above-mentioned new source countries of young migrants. Annual inflows (excluding short-term visitors) from Vietnam, for instance, declined by 55 per cent from 2019 to 2020, and 80 per cent from 2020 to 2021. Those from Indonesia and Philippines also shrunk by over 70 per cent respectively from 2020 to 2021. With regard to residential status, the most significant impacts were recorded for entries of students, which declined by 80 per cent, followed by 75 per cent for technical intern trainees. With the restrictions on their entry relaxed in mid-2020, on the other hand, those with permanent or long-term residency are observed to suffer relatively moderate impacts.

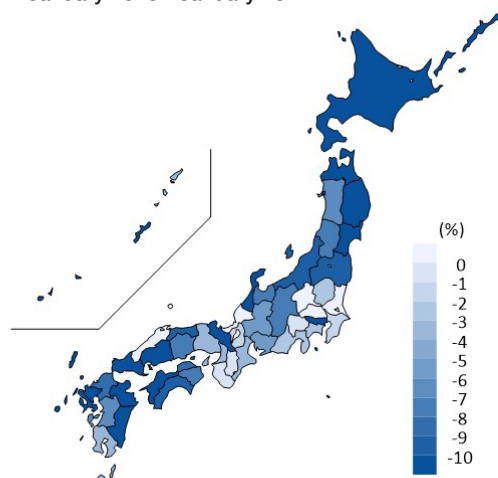
These differences between the migrant groups are reflected in regional variations in changes in the number of foreign residents (Figure 4). While almost all prefectures experienced decreases in the stock of foreign residents, there are greater decreases in the non-metropolitan regions as well as the inner areas of Tokyo. Hokkaido and other prefectures located in the East-Northern (Tohoku) region experienced more than 10 per cent decline during the two years of the pandemic. Significant

Figure 3. Monthly flows of international migration to/from Japan: 2019–2021



Source: Immigration Services Agency “Immigration Control Statistics” (various years).

Figure 4. Changes in stock of foreign residents by prefecture: January 2020 – January 2022



Source: Resident Registration System

losses are also observed in West–Southern regions, including the islands of Kyushu and Shikoku. These non-metropolitan regions had experienced rapid growth in inflows of young migrants mostly from Asian countries, particularly those with the residential status of students or technical intern trainees. On the other hand, the impacts seem to be relatively limited in the prefectures surrounding Tokyo and those in the central region (Tokai), where permanent and long-term residents account for a larger proportion of foreign residents.

Key issues for further research

Due to the entry restrictions under the COVID-19 pandemic, international migration to Japan recorded net losses for the first time since the aftermath of the Great Earthquake in 2011–2012. The variations in the impacts among migrant groups and sub-national regions reflect the pre-pandemic trends and patterns in the unprecedented expansions in inflows. The strict controls were lifted in early 2022 for new entry of temporary migrants such as students and technical intern trainees, who were the fastest growing migrant groups in the pre-pandemic period. However, the recovery in inflows particularly of technical intern trainees have been lagging behind, presumably due to a combination of several factors such as the measures at the sending countries and the recent depreciation of the Japanese yen against the major currencies. With regard to regional variations in the impacts of COVID-19, further research is needed to examine the shifting patterns of internal migration of foreign residents as well as geographical distributions of new arrivals.

References

Ghaznavi, C., Eguchi, A., Tanoue, Y., Yoneoka, D., Kawashima, T., Suzuki, M., Hashizume, M., Nomura, S. (2022) “Pre- and post-COVID-19 all-cause mortality of Japanese citizens versus foreign residents living in Japan, 2015–2021”, *SSM Population Health*, 18, Article 101114. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmph.2022.101114>