

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL POLICY AND SOCIAL WORK

Barnett House, 32 Wellington Square, Oxford OX1 2ER  
Tel: 01865 270325 Fax: 01865 270324



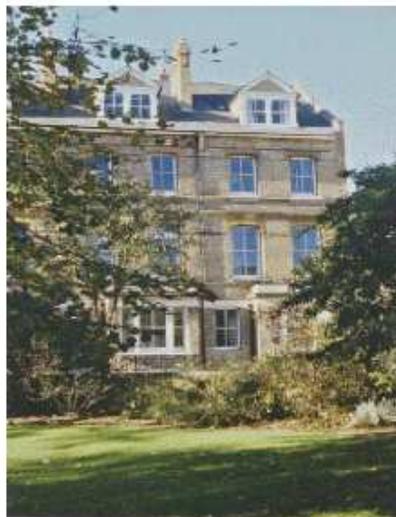
BARNETT PAPERS IN  
SOCIAL RESEARCH

**Tuukka Toivonen**

**Japan's first experiment with  
activation policy for young adults**

Does the 'Youth Independence Camp'  
reconfigure the public- private boundaries  
of social provision?

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Editor:

Dr Martin Seeleib-Kaiser

Department of Social Policy and Social Work

University of Oxford

Barnett House

32 Wellington Square

Oxford

OX1 2ER

[martin.seeleib@socres.ox.ac.uk](mailto:martin.seeleib@socres.ox.ac.uk)

**Abstract:**

The goal of this paper is to explore a notable new policy for young adults known as the Youth Independence Camp (*wakamono jiritsu juku*) and to consider in an open-ended fashion how it influences the public-private boundaries – the shift of which is ongoing – of social provision for youth in Japan. Who is this unconventional programme intended for, and what are its overt and covert objectives? Although a full appraisal of the situation is still premature, we find that the Independence Camp and other recent youth policies indeed signify a qualitative shift in social support for young adults in Japan. However, the risk of social exclusion remains essentially privatised, i.e. to be shouldered by the individual and his/her family rather than the state or other institutions.

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## **1. Introduction**

Various aspects of Japanese social policy – including the pension system, health care services, family policy and child protection institutions – have in the recent past been subjected to thorough analysis by foreign scholars of Japan (Campbell 1992; Goodman 2000, 2002; Peng 2002; Kasza 2006; Schoppa 2006). However, neither international nor Japanese researchers have yet provided systematic scholarly accounts of Japan's new *activation policies* for young adults.

It is clear that the Japanese state – via partnerships with civil society groups – has now indeed adopted some responsibility for the welfare of young (unmarried) adults at risk of joblessness and social exclusion. Various novel initiatives have been announced under the Plan to Foster a Spirit of Independence and Challenge in Youth (*Wakamono Jiritsu Chōsen Puran*) since 2003. While labour market activation has been portrayed as the main objective, in practice the new programmes also furnish extensive *social* support.

This paper takes as its first goal to explore a remarkable component of the above policy package known as the Youth Independence Camp (*wakamono jiritsu juku*). While this residential three-month programme – the stated aim of which is to provide training in 'everyday life' and basic work skills and to guide youth to suitable jobs – targets only a small subset of socially excluded youth in Japan, it demands attention as Japan's *first comprehensive support measure* for such young people. Scrutinising this measure for youth who occupy a peripheral area of society is furthermore a powerful way to highlight ongoing shifts in the public-private boundaries of social provision for young adults in Japan, which constitutes the second goal of the paper.

Before proceeding to our main analysis, the Youth Independence Camp must be situated vis-à-vis other related policies and the usage of the terms ‘public’ and ‘private’ clarified. First, there are two notable measures to support the employment of young adults that were enacted prior to the Independence Camp (that was itself launched in 2005): the Job Café (2003) and the Youth Job Spot (2003; discontinued in 2007 with two exceptions). However, these job counselling centres mainly target students and the so-called *freeters* (young part-timers who frequently switch jobs) and generally those able and willing to search for work by themselves. On the other hand, the Youth Support Station (*wakamono sapōto sutēshon*) that saw light in 2006 is charged with serving young people typically referred to as ‘NEETs’ who are not able to search for jobs by themselves for various reasons and with providing such youth with comprehensive welfare and mental health-related counselling. Hence, the Youth Support Station is broadly speaking similar to the Youth Independence Camp in terms of its target group but different in its format. The government’s goal is to have the former function as a hub in a network comprising various public and civil society youth support programmes while the latter is intended as one component in such a ‘menu’ of services.<sup>1</sup> This is consistent with the current relative scale of the services: the Youth Support Stations can accommodate well over 10,000 users per year while the Youth Independence Camp caters to less than 2,000 participants annually.<sup>2</sup>

The terms ‘public’ and ‘private’ can be defined in various ways in the field

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<sup>1</sup> It is clear, though, that this goal has not yet been realised and that many obstacles to building a well-functioning network remain.

<sup>2</sup> As an adjunct to these initiatives, an awareness-raising campaign called *Wakamono no ningenryoku wo takameru kokumin undō* (A citizens’ movement for improving the youth’s ‘human skills’, nicknamed *wakachare*) was started in 2005. This campaign aims to recruit the cooperation of various companies, the mass media, schools and local administrations. For more information, see <http://www.wakamononingenryoku.jp>.

of social policy and their content may differ markedly depending on which society they are applied to. 'Public' refers in this paper to the state and the public sector, while 'private' denotes the family and the individual rather than companies or the civil society. Although the role of private companies and civil society as providers of social benefits and support is not to be underestimated (as they have indeed had major welfare functions in post-war Japan), focus in this paper is intentionally put on how the Youth Independence Camp acts as an intervention into the *family* and how it influences the social risks that individuals face.

It is correct to view this new programme as having appeared at a time when the role of companies as providers of welfare and occupational training and the role of families and schools as the socialising agents of youth have profoundly changed. It is often said that these three sectors formed a synergistic 'triangle' with human and economic resources circulating smoothly back and forth, but this arrangement has now clearly broken down. The state can thus be seen as a relatively new actor that is 'stepping in' to compensate for this malfunction while working together with the civil society.<sup>3</sup> Although the background underlying the birth of the Youth Independence Camp is hence complex, it is worthwhile in this paper to focus on the dimensions of the state and the family to analyse how their roles are being transformed in this new context.

## **1.1. Research questions, structure and methods**

In line with the two main objectives described above, this paper consists of two core

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<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the groups that deliver the Youth Independence Camp programme comprise NPOs and other pre-existing private organisations, many of whom used to portray themselves as support groups for socially withdrawn youth (*hikikomori*). I will describe the features of these organisations in a forthcoming paper.

sections that are preceded by a more detailed account of the context for Japan's new youth policies and followed by a brief discussion of issues for future research.

After reviewing relevant changes in the youth labour markets and the so-called 'NEET' debate in section two, section three explores the Youth Independence Camp by seeking answers to the following puzzles: Who is this programme truly intended for, and what are the exact conditions for enrolling in it? Moreover, what are the objectives the camp is expected to fulfil? Why are participants required to pay to attend this state-sponsored programme? Furthermore, as a fledgling intervention, what are the challenges it currently faces?

Section four critically discusses the implications of the Youth Independence Camp to the allocation of responsibility for the welfare of young adults in the Japanese society. Is the programme to be viewed as a public recognition of the insufficient functioning of pre-existing social institutions (or the 'triangle' described above) and as evidence of shifting public-private boundaries? In what sense is it an intervention into the 'private' realm of the family? Furthermore, as an additional consideration, should we see the Youth Independence Camp as a 'soft' or a 'coercive' social programme?

In terms of methods, this paper draws on semi-structured interviews of 17 experts and practitioners (including government bureaucrats in charge of the scheme; see appendix for details), official meetings, published and unpublished documents provided by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW) and the Japan Productivity Centre for Socio-Economic Development (*Shakai-Keizai Seisansei Honbu*; henceforth JPCSED), as well as short-term participant observation carried out at four youth independence camps. The paper thus aims to explicate empirical findings (as very little has hitherto been written about the topic),

but in an essentially sociological way. Effort is made to unlock central assumptions and underlying social categories. The approach adopted draws on the sociology of social problems and particularly on Schneider and Ingram's theorising on the *social construction of target populations* that suggests social constructions influence the policy agenda, the selection of policy tools and legitimising rationales in dynamic and complex ways (Schneider and Ingram 1993).

## **2. The context for new youth policies**

### **2.1. Pre-existing youth support measures and employment trends**

The general conception is that Japan had no formal policies for young adults in place before the early 2000s. This view is supported by data showing comparatively low spending on youth labour market measures (Table 1) as well as by most scholarly accounts.<sup>4</sup> Kosugi (2005), for instance, states in her book on *freeters* and NEETs that there was little need for such government interventions in Japan until recently since the youth's employment situation was highly favourable (Kosugi 2005:5). Miyamoto (2002) essentially agrees with this view while emphasising that even *after* the 'standard pattern of transition' from school to work in Japan – that was underpinned by the well-known system of near-automatic hiring of each cohort of youth at graduation (*shinki ikkatsu saiyō seido*) – had broken down in the 1990s, the strong safety net provided by parents significantly delayed the surfacing of youth's

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<sup>4</sup> It should be pointed out however that spending on labour market measures is hideously difficult to measure and compare across nations. Japan is known to have boosted labour markets via subsidies paid directly to private companies (see e.g. Rebick 2005 and Kasza 2006). However, Table 1 provides relevant information for the purposes of this paper since our analysis focuses exclusively on Japan's new activation policies for youth (that are directed at individuals instead of companies).

employment problems (Miyamoto 2002:44). Further factors that kept youth unemployment low included the relatively high prevalence of family businesses (*jieigyō*) and agriculture that could absorb youth who might not have been able to find other types of paid employment.

*Table 1: Public spending on youth labour market programmes in selected OECD countries, 1995-2002.*

	As a percentage of GDP		As a percentage of total expenditure on ALM programmes	
	1995	2002	1995	2002
Australia	0.06	0.08	7.5	16.9
Canada	0.02	0.02	3.3	4.4
Denmark*	0.14	0.10	7.7	6.2
Finland	0.15	0.17	9.9	17.2
France	0.27	0.40	20.8	32.2
Germany	0.06	0.10	4.2	8.6
Italy*	0.16	0.20	45.3	35.4
<b>Japan</b>	---	<b>0.01</b>	---	<b>1.8</b>
Korea	0.02	0.02	45.9	6.3
Netherlands	0.10	0.04	7.0	2.4
Sweden	0.02	0.02	0.7	1.8
United Kingdom	0.12	0.13	25.9	35.8
United States	0.03	0.02	14.8	17.2

Note: For Denmark, data refer to 2000 instead of 2002; for Italy, to 1996 instead of 1995.

Source: OECD database on Labour Market Programmes, as cited in Quintini, Glenda and Sebastien Martin (2006) Starting well or losing their way? *The position of youth in the labour market in OECD countries*. OECD social, employment and migration working papers Vol. 39 (table 6).

The comparatively low official youth unemployment rates – vacillating between 4 and 6 percent for 15-24-year-olds until the mid-1990s – lend credence to the above account (Statistics Bureau 2006). Hence, it is likely that until recently, combined with the safety nets provided by families, such low unemployment rates significantly reduced the pressure on the government to develop youth activation or support measures akin to those seen in Northern Europe.

However, following the burst of Japan's bubble economy, the employment situation deteriorated across the board in the late 1990s, becoming especially bad for youth. The unemployment rate for 15-24-year-olds leaped from 6.7 percent in 1997 to 10.1 in 2003, while for 25-34-year olds the jobless rate peaked a year earlier at 6.4 percent (Statistics Bureau 2007). The number of so-called *freeters* – defined typically as 15-34-year-olds unmarried workers who frequently hop from one part-time job to another – hit two million in 2002.

## **2.2. The 'NEET' debate**

In 2004, the increase in youth who were neither in education, employment or training was framed by various experts as a serious social problem and became a hot topic in the media. Statistics were used to show that the number of 15-34 year-olds falling into this group had risen to around 640,000 (Labour Force Survey, or *Rōdōryoku Chōsa*) or 840,000 (Employment Status Survey, or *Shūgyo Kōzō Kihon Chōsa*).

Such youth were referred to as 'NEETs', or *nīto* – a term that has now become common parlance in Japan. The NEET-category was first introduced into the Japanese context by two reports released by the Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training in March 2003.<sup>5</sup> The point that these reports made was that, unlike in countries such as the UK and Sweden, young people outside the labour force and educational institutions had not yet been singled out as a target for government policy in Japan.<sup>6</sup> They showed how this 'outside-the-labour-force NEET

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<sup>5</sup> Kosugi et al. (2003); Kosugi and Hori (2003).

<sup>6</sup> In the UK, where the social context is starkly different from Japan, this category is only applied to 16-18-year-olds and it includes both the unemployed as well as those outside the labour force and educational institutions (whereas the unemployed are not considered NEETs in Japan). It is not clear why the relevant age range of NEETs is usually set at 15-34 in Japan.

demographic' of 'youth with no motivation to work' (*shūgyō iyoku wo misenai hirōdōryokuka shita NEET-sō*) had grown drastically in size and argued that policy measures would soon be necessary to tackle the problem (Kosugi and Hori 2003:4).

Although a few magazine and newspaper articles on 'NEETs' appeared in early 2004, it was the publication of *Nīto: Furītā demo naku, shitsugyōsha demo naku* by Genda Yūji and Maganuma Mie in July of the same year that fully brought the issue into the public awareness in Japan. Pointing out a five-fold increase in those 15-24-year olds who expressed no wish to work (*shūshoku kibō ga nai nīto*) and reporting on the thoughts and experiences of jobless youth through qualitative interviews, the book argued that it was not that 'NEETs' did not *want* to work – they simply *could* not, for one reason or another. This statement provided a strong alternative to the predominant view (held especially by the older generations) of youth as lacking in work motivation and morale, but it hardly led to a consensus on the issue. On the whole, due partly to the mainstream media's influence, the term 'NEET' presently carries a starkly negative connotation in Japan.

Without going into a comprehensive analysis of the media's treatment of 'NEETs' and the vast Japanese bibliography that emerged between 2003 and 2006, it is clear that as a result of this sudden surge of attention in 2004 and 2005, jobless young adults outside the labour force and educational institutions were successfully redefined as a legitimate *target group* for social policy. While it is questionable that this process paid sufficient attention to the diverse realities of such young people, that the issue was lifted on the media's and eventually the policy-makers' agenda can be seen as a strategic achievement on the part of the 'youth support industry' and

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Kosugi Reiko (2005) hints that this range was chosen as it corresponds to that for *freeters*, thus making analyses and comparisons easier.

its 'sponsors' (such as the pre-existing private youth support institutions and academics writing on the issue).<sup>7</sup>

### **3. The Youth Independence Camp**

Having briefly reviewed the relevant context, this section describes the Youth Independence Camp scheme in detail and critically addresses the puzzles raised in the introduction.<sup>8</sup> At the outset it must be reminded that this is a portrait of a new, emerging policy that was launched only in July 2005; hence, many aspects described below are likely to undergo changes in the near-term future.

#### **3.1. Key programmatic features**

Essentially, the Youth Independence Camp is a three-month-long training programme during which participants are required to live on-site while taking part in various types of 'basic' training activities. Although the specific contents vary between the 30 camps currently in operation, the three basic components of the programme are 'life training' (*seikatsu kunren*), practical work trials (*shūrō taiken*) and work training (*shūgyō kunren*). The assumption underlying 'life training' is that the targeted youth tend to have highly irregular day rhythms and are hardly able to handle daily routines such as cleaning and cooking by themselves due to having always lived in their parental homes. Therefore, it is vital to first help the participants restore a regular day rhythm before any actual work training is begun

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<sup>7</sup> See Honda, Naitō and Gotō (2006) for a critical deconstruction of the NEET concept and debate.

<sup>8</sup> Due to limitations of space, this paper omits the actual policy-making process that led to the Youth Independence Camp. I will investigate this and other important questions that are not addressed here in a subsequent research paper.

(E2, E3).

Practical work trials may comprise agricultural work, nursing care, or work at small restaurants or bakeries owned by the delivering organisation. Work training may consist of similar activities in addition to classroom-based training in basic IT skills and English. Since there is wide consensus on the lack of communication skills among the targeted youth, practical communication training is also an important part of the programme. Camp staff come from many generations but apart from the leaders and managers, the majority of those most directly involved with the participants appear to be in their 20s and 30s.

Although similar youth training is provided in many other developed countries such as Finland and Germany, the residency requirement is a unique aspect of the Youth Independence Camp. The rationale for this arrangement derives partly from the fact that most of the targeted youth – even those in their late 20s or early 30s – typically reside with their parents. Hence, participation in a camp may be the first time the youth live away from home for an extended period of time and mingle with non-family members on a daily basis. Accordingly, although the explicit priority of the Youth Independence Camp is on guiding youth to appropriate jobs so as to support economic independence, in practice the policy may also promote *independence from parents*.

Somewhat paradoxically, however, in the majority of cases it is the parents who must shoulder the enrolment fees that average 280,000 yen for households that earn over four million yen per annum and around 210,000 yen for those households whose earnings fall below this line.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, enrolment at a camp depends

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<sup>9</sup> The maximum regular fee charged currently is 444,000 yen in contrast to a minimum fee of 180,000 yen; lowered fees range from 315,000 yen to 105,000 yen. As a rule, the government pays a subsidy that equals the regular participation fee and a higher subsidy per each enrollee

largely on the ability and willingness of a youth's parents to act as sponsors. It thus makes sense for the hosting organisations to actively liaise with parents and seek to ensure their understanding regarding the contents and merits of the programme.

*Table 2: Youth Independence Camp enrolment and subsidy data.*

Year	Enrolment capacity	Number of enrollees	Occupancy rate	Government subsidies (yen)	Subsidy exhaustion rate
2005	1200	506	42 %	900 million	30 %
2006	1720	698	41%	970 million	33.5 %
2007	1584	-	-	1 billion	-
2008	<b>1200</b>	-	-	<b>600 million (tentative)</b>	-

Source: MHLW (2007) *Wakamono Jiritsu Juku sōshutsu suishin jigyo no shōreihi nado no jōkyō* (The situation regarding the establishment of the Youth Independence Camp and subsidy expenses etc. A handout distributed to participants at the Wakamono Jiritsu Juku Renraku Kaigi, Tokyo, 28 September 2007).

Table 2 summarises key data on enrolment at the Youth Independence Camps as well as on government subsidies. It is evident that, at least for the time being, we are dealing with a very small programme in terms of enrolment figures. Furthermore, a crucial point is that over the past two years, the Youth Independence Camps have attracted *less than half as many participants than had originally been intended*, with many individual camps running far short of the designated 20 participants at any one time. Directly related to this outcome is the fact that in 2005 and 2006, a mere third of the government subsidies allocated for the camps could actually be claimed by the delivering organisations. Hence, the total value of subsidies planned by the MHLW for fiscal 2008 is being reduced by 40 percent compared to the previous year (Wakamono Jiritsu Juku Renraku Kaigi, 28 September 2007).

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from a household earning less than four million yen per annum (although not all of the camps have a lowered fee system in place). See Japan Productivity Centre for Socio-Economic Development (2007a).

### **3.2. Objectives: ‘Independence’, discipline, or the creation of new tax payers?**

The government’s stated objectives for the Youth Independence Camp as a policy consist essentially of guiding enrollees to suitable jobs through training and through improving their ‘work motivation’ (*shūrō iyoku*) and ‘confidence’ (*jishin*) (MHLW 2005; 2006a; 2007). A quantitative policy goal that is known to the hosting organisations (but not reported in government white papers) is that 70 percent of the enrollees should attach themselves to employment within half a year of completing the programme (E2, E3). This achievement target thoroughly shapes the execution of the Youth Independence Camp and acts as the main yardstick by which its performance is measured.

Typically, social policies come vested with many implicit, normative objectives, and the Youth Independence Camp is certainly no exception. However, considering that there is hardly a general consensus regarding the nature of the ‘NEET problem’ and that the actors involved in the original policy-making process were diverse, we can expect many competing objectives to exist simultaneously.

One implicit goal on the part of the government – clearly its most powerful justification for investing tax money into the Youth Independence Camp – is to *pre-empt an increase in livelihood assistance recipients* by reducing the number of ‘NEETs’. The bureaucrats I interviewed at the MHLW believed that, without intervention, many ‘NEETs’ would inevitably become reliant on welfare benefits and thus a significant burden on tax payers in the future.<sup>10</sup> Hence, it is wiser to guide

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<sup>10</sup> “...Nīto no kata ga sono manma oiteoku to, seikatsu hogo no taishō ni narikanenai. Shōraiteki na futan ga mikomareru” (If NEETs are left unassisted, they will inevitable become targets for livelihood assistance. Thus, a future burden is anticipated) (E7, E8, E9).

them to the labour markets at the earliest instance (E7, E8, E9).

It is debatable whether the disciplining of ('morally deficient') youth – i.e. re-socialisation by way of various corrective and disciplinary, potentially harsh measures – may be seen as an objective of the Youth Independence Camp. According to a key informant at the MHLW who oversaw the making of the policy, requests to enact a disciplinary programme for jobless youth were first made to him in the Autumn of 2003 by a prominent politician from the House of Councillors who at the time acted as the head of the House of Councillors' Health, Labour and Welfare Committee (E11). At the same time, voices calling for a re-introduction of the draft system or a military-style training programme resurfaced in political circles. However, the bureaucrat in charge rejected such suggestions and argued that as a fully voluntary scheme, an emphasis on 'Spartan-style' discipline would not be feasible as it would deter the majority of prospective enrollees. Therefore, it seems likely that while the early proposals that eventually led to the Youth Independence Camp bore disciplinary overtones, these features did not survive to the subsequent phases of the policy-making process. Based on field visits to camp sites, the actual programmes that I have observed so far do not emphasise discipline beyond waking up at a set time in the morning and partaking promptly in group activities.<sup>11</sup>

### **3.3. Eligibility criteria and the actual 'target group'**

Although born as a response to the 'NEET crisis', closer scrutiny reveals that the Youth Independence Camp actually targets a small, finely-defined subset of this demographic. The portal site of the *Wakamono Jiritsu Juku Shien Sentā* states that as

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<sup>11</sup> However, I intend to evaluate finer aspects of how discipline operates at the camp sites through repeated participant observation visits.

a rule, eligible applicants are those who have completed compulsory education, been outside of employment, schooling and work training continuously for over a year without (formally) seeking for jobs in this period. Moreover, they must have sought for jobs in the past and should be unmarried and under 35 years old (Japan Productivity Centre for Socio-Economic Development 2007a). The goal seems therefore to be to target mainly those 'long-term NEETs' (whose problems are likely to compound with time in the absence of support) with the best prospects of attaching themselves to jobs at the end of the training period.

JPCSED officials in charge of directly overseeing the running of the scheme stated in an interview that being at a risk of *social exclusion* is a main criterion for admittance to the programme.<sup>12</sup> In the Japanese context, this means generally that married individuals are not targeted (as marriage is associated with 'social inclusion', especially for women; E2, E3). Those who have looked for work in the past are prioritised as they are more likely to succeed in finding employment following the camp programme, but there are exceptions to this rule. Ultimately, the organisations hosting the Youth Independence Camps decide independently who to admit although they may consult the JPCSED in ambiguous cases. While in principle only healthy youth are allowed to enrol, these consultations exceedingly concern applicants with a background of mental illness and/or disability.

The MHLW officials presently in charge of the Youth Independent Camp clarified that, while the scheme was indeed intended as a 'NEET response' (*nīto taisaku*), it was not created for those presently living as *hikikomori*, i.e. youth who withdraw into their rooms or apartments for extended periods of time. Instead, the

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<sup>12</sup> It should be noted that the term 'social exclusion' is not (yet) commonly used in Japan even among most of the experts involved with designing and running of youth support programmes.

camps were designed to serve youth who possess the will to work but for one reason or another are unable to seek jobs or feel insecure about their communication abilities (E7, E8, E9). This could include youth who have previously experienced periods of social withdrawal but have since made efforts to change their circumstances (by themselves or prompted by their parents). The officials admitted that this circumscribing was largely dictated by the impossibility of reaching most withdrawn youth who do not take initiative themselves: even if accurate survey data on the prevalence of the *hikikomori* existed, there would be no appropriate institutional means to reach them, and developing new ones would risk human rights violations.

### **3.4. The imposition of participation fees**

All the practitioners and officials I have interviewed acknowledge that the enrolment fees may be a barrier to participation especially for youth from low-income families. If this is the case, why were fees imposed in the first place?

At least four reasons can be discerned: First, it is evident that the prospective participants – who are generally equated with ‘NEETs’ in the eye of the public as well as in parts of the government – are not viewed as a group deserving of government support or tax money. The JPCSED officials as well as a key analyst of jobless youth at the University of Tokyo emphasised in interviews that, around the time when the NEET debate emerged and the Youth Independence Camp was originally designed, it was assumed that most jobless youth came from affluent middle-class families and were merely ‘playing around’ (E2, E3, E5). Therefore, as long as this image of the target group remains dominant among the general public and sections of the government, a decision to provide feeless support to the Youth

Independence Camp participants would be likely to draw heavy criticism. It has in fact been shown that youth falling within the 'NEET' category in Japan exceedingly come from low-earning households, but it is doubtful whether this has influenced the social image of such youth (Genda 2007).<sup>13</sup> (Indeed, it may be very difficult to do so now that the peak of the 'NEET crisis' has passed and the media pays less attention to the issue).

The second reason for fees has to do with the nature of the programme itself. The MHLW officials I interviewed stressed that the charges exist mainly because of the live-in requirement and should be seen as 'hotel fees' rather than training costs.<sup>14</sup> The third reason expressed by the same officials in interviews and official meetings has to do with the reluctance of the Ministry of Finance to allocate more funds to the programme for various reasons (including the general view of NEETs as 'undeserving' of generous public support). The structure and orientation of the Japanese social security system suggests a fourth reason: employment-related benefits are typically paid only to those who have made contributions continuously for several years in the past, and since the employment insurance account is operated separately from the general account for social expenditures, securing funds for a new training programme with no predecessors is difficult.

### **3.5. Pressing challenges: mental health, recruitment and programme survival**

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<sup>13</sup> According to the Cabinet Office's data cited in Genda (2007), in 2002, 46 percent of 'NEETs' were from households earning less than four million yen annually.

<sup>14</sup> This reflects the fact that youth are in practice excluded from the employment insurance system (*koyō hoken*) that covers living costs during bouts of unemployment for eligible persons.

The Youth Independence Camp faces serious challenges on several fronts. These can be roughly divided into unanticipated mental health issues, problems regarding the recruitment of participants and issues of programme survival and continuity.

Indeed, perhaps the greatest unexpected finding since the launch of the Youth Independence Camp in 2005 has been the discovery that around half of the participants so far have had a background of mental health treatment.<sup>15</sup> This is problematic first of all because the programme was not originally designed to provide care for such youth (whom the 'NEET' debate all but ignored) and therefore the delivering organisations are not equipped with the capacity or resources to respond adequately to enrollees with mental illnesses and/or disabilities.

It is often difficult to ascertain the mental health of an applicant prior to enrolment since many hide such facts from the camp staff at this stage. This issue was one of the key points raised at a recent national meeting of practitioners and policy-makers, and many called for the drafting of clearer standards regarding how to handle mental health-related matters (Wakamono Jiritsu Juku renraku kaigi, 28 September 2007). The approach taken by most delivering organisations seems to be to dismiss a participant in the event she/he is found to have a serious mental condition requiring professional treatment.

It will be of central importance to further investigate the extent to which the predominant image of 'NEETs' and the assumptions that underlay the design of policy for this target group are at odds with empirical reality, and whether this has hampered the establishment of effective responses. Although it is tempting to

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<sup>15</sup> According to a recent report, 49.5 percent out of 418 enrollees surveyed had received psychiatric treatment in the past (JPCSED 2007b:7; appendix). This figure is consistent with data from interviews with camp staff. However, I am not aware of any studies that have analysed the prevalence of specific mental illnesses and disorders among the participants. I plan to investigate this topic further in a subsequent paper.

suggest this has indeed been the case, the opposite is also possible: Even if the dominant perceptions of the target group are found to have been inaccurate, the end-results may nevertheless be favourable. This is due to the possibility that the Youth Independence Camp (along with the Youth Support Station) may begin to play a 'sensor function' via exposing previously unrecognised challenges and conditions faced by the youth and communicating these findings to the wider society, and the ability to later re-adjust target group considerations and the features of the policy.

As testified by Table 2, recruiting enough participants is a fundamental challenge for the Youth Independence Camp. Without a rise in enrollee numbers, the utility of the programme will no doubt come into question and its funding may be cut further in the future. Unsurprisingly for a new programme, it appears that the Youth Independence Camp is not yet well-known to the general public, although it has enjoyed some coverage in national and local newspapers. While the fees may act to deter prospective enrollees (especially those from low-earning households), it may simply be that the majority of Japanese youth – especially those with a background of social withdrawal – may find communal living an unattractive if not a frightening idea. Furthermore, the camps may be perceived negatively as 'disciplinary institutions', and potential participants may be worried that as enrollees, they would be made visible as 'NEETs' and stigmatised as a result.

That only 23 percent of enrollees surveyed in 2006 were women may be related to the fact that parents are less likely to view the joblessness or inactivity of their daughters as a problem due to cultural reasons and may thus be less willing to 'invest' in their training at a Youth Independence Camp. Moreover, the paucity of female staff may make the camps less approachable to women and less suited to

catering to their needs. Alongside communal living, the particular training activities carried out at individual sites (farm work, waste collection, cleaning etc.) may seem too 'masculine' to many women, although there are now some organisations that provide 'female-friendly' work sites such as bakeries and restaurants. The camps themselves may be more hesitant to actively recruit women as it is generally harder to find work for them in the Japanese labour markets (E1).

The long-term survival of the Youth Independence Camp as a government-supported programme is a key concern for all the practitioners I have interviewed and talked to. Many fear that the subsidies will be withdrawn as the media's attention on 'NEETs' fades and turns to newer issues such as the working poor and 'Net café refugees'. Indeed, most camp managers express a strong wish to become independent from government support not only to make their activities sustainable in the long term, but to free them from government-imposed rules and achievement targets (such as the goal that 70 percent of enrolees must find paid work). While the more established among the delivering organisations (that have been in the field for years or decades before the introduction of the scheme) are likely to survive even if the Youth Independence Camp is abolished, the newer ones would face grave difficulties in continuing their activities. The MHLW is ambiguous about how long it will support the programme, but emphasises that it was originally intended as a five-year project. After this period, its future will be decided based on an evaluation of its performance and fiscal responsibility for the programme may be transferred onto local governments or the hosting institutions.

#### **4. The Youth Independence Camp and shifting boundaries of social provision for young adults**

This paper has so far reviewed the underlying context for changes in Japanese youth policy as well as the salient features of the Youth Independence Camp. Although by no means a full analysis, this section will discuss the implications of this programme to the public-private boundaries of social provision for young adults in Japan.

#### **4.1. A recognition of the limits of pre-existing institutions?**

The Youth Independent Camp may be viewed not only as a response to the increase in 'NEETs' per se, but as a recognition of the fact that core social institutions are no longer able to sufficiently socialise and integrate a subset of young people who consequently are put at a high risk of social exclusion. The policy acknowledges that in the changed circumstances, some responsibility for youth support must now be shouldered by the public sector together with civil society organisations, if only to avoid an increase in unskilled labourers and welfare recipients in the future. Hence, a qualitative shift has verifiably taken place.

However, in quantitative terms, this shift in responsibility has been slight and partial, especially if we consider that the number of so-called 'NEETs' is typically put at over 640,000 whereas the Youth Independence Camps can collectively accommodate less than 2,000 participants a year at maximum capacity. Nevertheless, taken together with the Youth Support Station, the total number of youth benefiting from the government's new support policies could soon climb to the region of 100,000.<sup>16</sup> If this service successfully takes root and operates as the policy-makers intended, it is conceivable that a comprehensive youth support

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<sup>16</sup> The Yokohama Wakamono Support Station alone had around 600 users in 2007 (who made a total of over 8,000 visits), and the government's goal is to have over 70 such support stations in operation across Japan by the end of 2008.

‘system’ – of which the Youth Independence Camp is one component – may emerge in Japan over the near-term future (E11, E14).

#### **4.2. An intervention into the family?**

Still, despite the low number of enrollees, the Youth Independence Camp remains an extraordinary policy in the Japanese context, not merely because it provides basic training in work and life skills, but because it functions as an intervention into the *family*. This measure in effect removes adult children (the average age of participants being 25) from their parental homes for several months, providing them with a new social environment, comprehensive care and daily guidance by previously unknown non-family members. While the explicit goal of the Independence Camps is to aid youth on their way to *economic* independence, in practice the enrollees are also taught psychological independence from their *parents* as well as elementary communication and group work skills considered necessary for participation in the wider society. This, if anything, makes it clear that families and other core social institutions (notably, companies) are no longer seen as able to teach some youth how to function in society.

However, this is far from saying that the state has adopted full responsibility for preventing youth joblessness and/or social exclusion in Japan. No formal ‘guarantees’ have been issued and the Youth Independence Camp remains a fee-charging scheme (although the Youth Support Station is feeless). The imposition of a fee has led to a situation where parents as the financial sponsors are in a position to determine whether to allow their child to participate in a camp or not, in some cases preventing prospective participants from enrolling.

### **4.3. A 'soft' or 'coercive' social programme?**

To what extent can the Youth Independence Camp be viewed as a 'coercive' as opposed to a 'soft' social intervention? It could indeed be held to be coercive in a direct sense if participation was (under some circumstances) mandatory or if it was made into a requirement for receiving unemployment or labour market benefits, but we have seen that this is indeed not the case. Furthermore, my observations so far suggest that the nature of actual training at the camps is hardly 'disciplinary' in nature and that continued participation is completely voluntary.<sup>17</sup>

Yet, to the extent that the Youth Independence Camp programme aims at changing the behaviour and orientation of the participating individuals so as to match the needs of mainstream labour markets instead of creating alternative (work) opportunities that might be preferred by them, we may legitimately characterise this programme as socially coercive. If the government is not simultaneously making concrete efforts to increase such diverse alternative opportunities, the Youth Independence Camp is ultimately consistent with the *privatisation* of the risk of social exclusion. It sends a message that, in the last instance, it is the individual's responsibility to adjust to whatever opportunities or conditions the current labour markets may offer, and that the government is not responsible for ensuring a sufficient variety of jobs (that might be government-subsidised) to suit the needs of those who are not well-served by the current mainstream labour markets.

### **4.4. Conclusion and issues for further research**

In conclusion, our tentative findings imply that the shift in the boundaries of social

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<sup>17</sup> It is apparent of course that a range of training styles exists and that some camps take an extremely 'tolerant' approach where others may enforce stricter rules and schedules etc.

provision for young adults in Japan has been both partial and ambiguous. Nevertheless, a *qualitative* change can be observed as the state – via a partnership with the civil society – has now begun to accept some responsibility for supporting and caring for youth outside their parental homes. Further research is necessary to substantiate many of the arguments made here and to pursue the questions raised, not least regarding whether alternative ‘social’ labour markets may already be emerging and absorbing youth such as those who attend the Youth Independence Camp.

Indeed, if we assume (as seems reasonable) that there is a high prevalence of mental illness and disability among camp participants, the existence and development of alternative working opportunities will determine whether we should perceive the Youth Independence Camp as a homogenizing, ‘coercive’ measure or as a ‘soft’ and genuinely supportive programme. The types of jobs found and the income-levels enjoyed by those who complete the camp must be investigated to see how the programme interacts with labour markets. Does it succeed in connecting youth with a diverse range of ‘decent’ jobs (at companies and civil society organisations etc.) that yield liveable wages, or is the cynic right in condemning the Youth Independence Camp as just another tool to increase the pool of cheap labour, or the ‘working poor’ (*wākingu pua*), in an ever more polarised capitalist society?

Finally, a key area left unexplored in this paper is that of the concept of independence (*jiritsu*) itself and the meanings assigned to it by various stakeholders. Is ‘independence’ used as a mere proxy for (entering) paid employment and attaining financial autonomy from parents, or do we find more diverse – and potentially conflicting – interpretations of this term? The data I have gathered so far hints that the way *jiritsu* is understood in the government is in stark contrast with the

way practitioners see it, which in turn appears to differ from the views of the youth themselves. It is clear that no thorough account of Japan's new activation policies for youth can omit this central issue and I will thus investigate it in a future paper.

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*Appendix: List of expert and practitioner interviews.*

<b>Identi- fier</b>	<b>Position, affiliation and location</b>	<b>Date (Year: 2007)</b>
E1	Director, Sodate-age Netto (Tokyo-to), member of the Youth Independence Camp Expert Committee	16 April
E2 E3	Officials in charge of running of the Youth Independence Camp, Wakamono Jiritsu Juku Shien Sentā, Japan Productivity Centre for Socio-Economic Development (Tokyo)	17 April
E4	Director, Seishōnen Jiritsu Enjo Sentā (runs a Youth Independence Camp; Tokyo-to)	22 April
E5	Professor, University of Tokyo, Member of the Youth Independence Camp Expert Committee	Several occasions (April-September)
E6	Chief researcher, The Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training, member of the Youth Independence Expert Committee (Tokyo)	17 May
E7 E8 E9	Section chief Assistant chief Sub-section chief, Career Keisei Shienshitsu, Shokugyō Nōryoku Kaihatsukyoku, MHLW	30 May
E10	Section chief, Wakamono Koyō Taisaku Shitsu, MHLW	30 May
E11	Former chief, Career Keisei Shienshitsu, Shokugyō Nōryoku Kaihatsukyoku, MHLW	4 July
E12	Youth Independence Camp chief, K2 International (Yokohama, Kanagawa-pref.)	11 May
E13	Director, Peaceful House Hagurekumo (runs a Youth Independence Camp; Toyama-pref.)	15 June
E14	Former chief, Career Keisei, Shienshitsu, Shokugyō Nōryoku Kaihatsukyoku, MHLW (second interview)	27 September
E15	Youth Independence Camp chief, Kurume Zemināru (Fukuoka-pref.)	31 October
E16	Director, Chishingakujuku (runs a Youth Independence Camp; Fukuoka-pref.)	1 November
E17	Youth Independence Camp chief, CLCA (Odawara, Kanagawa-pref.)	4 December

*Tuukka Toivonen*  
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