

The Demographics of Foreign Residents and Government Efforts at Multilingual Disaster Information Dissemination: A Cross-sectional Analysis of 21 Japanese Cities

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1. Importance of the Topic

As people are increasingly mobile, there is growing concern that foreign nationals may be more vulnerable than resident populations when caught up in disasters. In Japan, recent disasters including the 2011 Great East Japan earthquake and the 2016 Kumamoto earthquake have illustrated the vulnerability of foreign residents. However, given the language barrier and Japan's reluctance to take in large numbers of immigrants, it remains a major challenge to try and understand what should be done to reduce such vulnerability.

One approach is to communicate the risks of disaster and encourage people to be prepared. Japan appears to be making significant preparedness outreach efforts in response to the rise in foreign visitors and residents (*Nikkei*, 2017). This is important because government preparedness can affect the degree to which people are harmed if disaster strikes (Cohen & Werker, 2008).

Yet what we know about disaster preparedness efforts targeting foreign residents is largely based on accounts by the media and Japanese government, suggesting a remarkably fast and empathetic consensus among governments to support the needs of non-citizens, a population viewed mainly as temporary, and none of whom vote or are represented by powerful interest groups (Ball & Piper, 2002).

A much-debated question in the literature on Japan and migration regards the extent to which Japan provides for the social welfare of its foreign residents. Surprisingly, this literature has yet to consider disaster preparedness. To date, there is no reliable evidence supporting the claim that Japan is systematically developing foreign resident disaster preparedness outreach as a response to changing demographics.

i. Current Literature

The literature on social vulnerability highlights how race, ethnicity, and cultural background play key roles in susceptibility to disasters (i.e. Lippmann, 2011; James & Paton, 2015). To protect vulnerable populations, government needs better understanding of minority groups (Morrow, 1999). Another growing body of literature has investigated the treatment of foreign residents by government in Japan, suggesting local governments have been ahead of the national government in providing support (Pak, 2001).

ii. Identification of a Knowledge Gap

Studies in these two bodies of literature indicate a need to investigate the provision of disaster information to foreign communities and the role of the Japanese government in such endeavors. However, studies on the social welfare of migrants in Japan remain narrow. Consequently, little is known about the relationship between foreign population and government efforts to prepare them for disasters.

2. Aims of the Study

The objective in our study is to examine the claim that Japan is making systematic efforts to support foreign residents in disaster preparedness. More specifically, we want to know how the demographics of the foreign population and past experience with disasters influence government efforts to disseminate disaster information to foreign residents.

3. Key Findings

Conducting a cross-sectional analysis of Japan's 20 largest cities and the Tokyo metropolitan area, our main findings are:

- There is no apparent relationship between the foreign population growth rate and efforts at disaster information dissemination
- No relationship between the frequency of disasters and efforts at disaster information dissemination
- A positive relationship between the relative size of the foreign population and efforts at disaster information dissemination

4. Implications

These findings have both theoretical and policy implications. The main theoretical implication is that Japanese local governments seem to be most responsive to the current size of their foreign populations, rather than foreign population growth. This may also indicate that cities with longer exposure to foreign populations will do more to provide for their welfare. The main policy implication is that we should be skeptical of claims that governments are making efforts at disaster information dissemination because of the rise in the number of foreign residents. Cities such as Tokyo, Osaka and Nagoya may be making greater efforts but they have also historically maintained large non-citizen populations. Smaller cities such as Kumamoto and Shizuoka seem to be making less effort at supporting foreign residents, possibly because they have less experience doing so.

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