

Strengthening the Child Guidance Functions in the Child Welfare System: Toward Early Solutions for Child Maltreatment and Delinquency Cases^{*}

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Abstract

During the past 20 years, the number of reports of child abuse in Japan has risen sharply. Currently, staff members at Child Guidance Centers, especially child welfare officers, are overwhelmed by child maltreatment cases. Consequently, since these centers are primarily responsible for child guidance with regard to delinquency, it has become more difficult to manage child delinquency properly in the child welfare system. In this paper, we examine ways to strengthen child guidance functions and promptly resolve child maltreatment and delinquency cases in the child welfare system. The results of this research may be applicable to community-based child welfare strategies not only in Japan but also in other countries and regions. Qualitative data based on case studies in major Japanese cities as well as quantitative data based on surveys and official statistics are utilized in this research. The results led us to propose the following appropriate and effective practical methods: 1) organizing to emphasize locality; 2) enhancing partnerships among the local agencies

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coping with child maltreatment and delinquency, such as child welfare agencies, schools, and police, through (a) improving physical accessibility among these agencies and (b) increasing opportunities for their staff to communicate with each other; and 3) building a seamless support system for troubled children.

Keywords: child maltreatment, child delinquency, child welfare

1. Introduction

The number of child abuse cases in Japan has sharply increased over the past 20 years. According to statistics from the Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare, the total number of cases of child abuse dealt with at Child Guidance Centers jumped from 1,101 in fiscal 1990 to 59,919 in fiscal 2011 (Figure 1).

Child Guidance Centers perform important functions in the Japanese

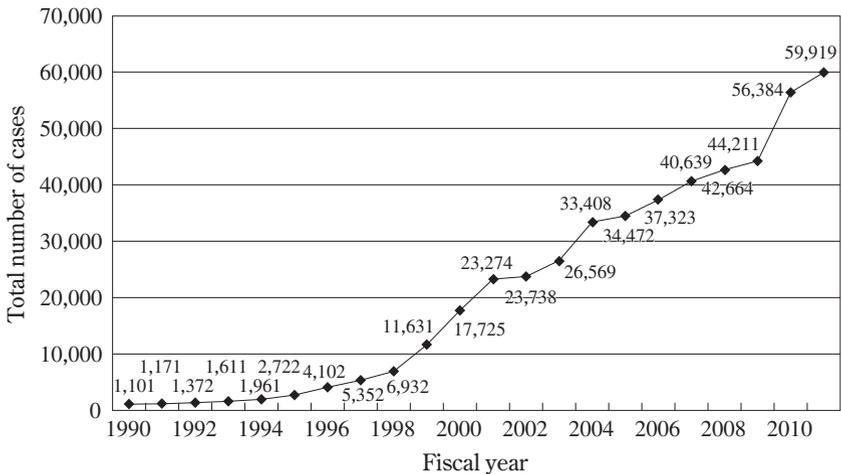


Figure 1. Total number of cases of child abuse dealt with at Child Guidance Centers (fiscal 1990–fiscal 2011)

Note: The total number of cases of child abuse dealt with at Child Guidance Centers in fiscal 2010 was tallied, with the exception of the number of cases in Fukushima Prefecture because of the aftermath of the Great East Japan Earthquake.

Source: Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, *Report on Social Welfare Administration and Services*.

child welfare system. These centers were set up after World War II throughout Japan under the Child Welfare Act of 1947. Prefectures and major cities — that is, government-ordinance designated cities with populations of half a million or more — are obliged to establish their own Child Guidance Centers. These centers provide children and their parents with counseling. According to assessments made in the counseling process, appropriate measures are taken (e.g., placement in a child welfare institution) to solve the problems surrounding these children. The counseling process is classified into six categories: protective care, mental and physical disabilities, health, delinquency, rearing children, and others. The category of mental and physical disabilities accounts for around 50 percent of total counseling. Recently, counseling on protective care, which includes child abuse consultation, has constituted a significant proportion of the remaining 50 percent.

Currently, staff members at Child Guidance Centers, particularly child welfare officers, are overwhelmed with child maltreatment cases. According to recent research on the workloads at these centers, the time required for counseling on protective care jumped from 19.7 percent in 1995 to 56.1 percent in 2004 (Saimura et al. 2005, p. 147). Consequently, since these centers are primarily responsible for child guidance with regard to delinquency, it has become more difficult to manage child delinquency properly in the child welfare system. According to the same research, the rate of counseling on delinquency declined from 19.7 percent in 1995 to 5.8 percent in 2004.

2. Purpose

This paper proposes ways to strengthen child guidance functions and promptly resolve child maltreatment and delinquency cases in Japan's child welfare system. The research on which this paper is based was undertaken to develop early solutions for child maltreatment and delinquency cases from a legal and administrative standpoint. The daily efforts of local governments to improve the processing of cases of child maltreatment and delinquency were scrutinized in this research. In this paper, I recommend practical, institutional solutions to problems involving the well-being of children.

Criminological inquiries have shown that child maltreatment is highly

correlated with juvenile delinquency (Farrington and Welsh 2008, pp. 65–67). Therefore, we need to realize early solutions for these cases, such as the “early detection, rapid cure” approach used in the medical arena. Furthermore, the function of administrative agencies has been differentiated by modernization. Consequently, in addition to the Child Guidance Centers, various community agencies cope with child maltreatment and delinquency. However, these agencies have been beset by bureaucratic sectionalism. For “early detection,” horizontal relationships, not vertical divisions, among these agencies are necessary.

The results of this research may be applicable to community-based child welfare strategies not only in Japan but also in other countries and regions.

3. Methods

This research utilized both qualitative data based on case studies in major Japanese cities and quantitative data based on surveys and official statistics.

This study is focused on the activities of Child Guidance Centers and their relationships with other agencies, particularly police organizations and educational institutions. Police organizations include Juvenile Support Centers, which are a section of prefectural police. Recently, these centers have become bases for tackling juvenile misbehavior (Konishi 2007, p. 11). Educational institutions include elementary and junior high schools and boards of education.

Official statistics, such as those compiled by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, are used as data in this research. In addition, three types of national and local surveys were carried out: surveys of elementary and junior high schools in Kitakyushu and Sapporo, Child Guidance Centers that hire police officers and schoolteachers who are active or retired, and Child Guidance Centers in major cities.

Among the 20 major cities in Japan, case studies were conducted in three of these cities: Kitakyushu City in Fukuoka Prefecture, Sapporo City in Hokkaido Prefecture, and Yokohama City in Kanagawa Prefecture. With regard to demographics, the estimated populations as of October 1, 2010 were 966,953 in Kitakyushu, 1,906,669 in Sapporo, and 3,635,244 in Yokohama. The estimated numbers of persons under 15 years of age as of

October 1, 2010 were 126,391 in Kitakyushu, 224,212 in Sapporo, and 486,262 in Yokohama. These cities are known for their progressive approaches in their child welfare systems.

4. Results and Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on the results of the data analysis: 1) Organize to emphasize locality; 2) Enhance partnerships among local agencies coping with child maltreatment and delinquency; 3) Build a seamless support system for troubled children.

4.1 Organize to emphasize locality

First, it is essential for officials to organize with an emphasis on locality. The Child Welfare Act was partially revised in 2004. In this revision, municipalities and special wards were provided with primary child guidance and assistance. It was intended that Child Guidance Centers would concentrate their human and material resources on difficult cases. Since the officials of municipalities or special wards have many opportunities to meet local residents on a regular basis, their early detection of problems that involve children living in their municipalities or special wards is expected.

Establishing Child Guidance Center branches has proven effective in the early detection of problems in child behavior. By setting up new subordinate offices, or merging existing offices with another department (e.g., education), these branches can easily be established. For instance, in Yokohama, in addition to the city's central Child Guidance Center, subordinate branches have been set up in three areas. On the other hand, in Kitakyushu, the city's five educational consultation centers, under the umbrella of the board of education, were integrated into its Child Guidance Center and became subdivisions of the latter. The newly merged branches of Child Guidance Centers in both cities meet the needs of the children and parents living there.

In addition, unifying administrative zones related to child affairs, including child welfare and compulsory schooling, is an important measure to improve the early detection of problems relating to the well-being of children.

Using these methods, administrative agencies could accurately meet

the needs of local residents, especially the children and their families residing in the community.

4.2 Enhance partnerships among local agencies coping with child maltreatment and delinquency

Second, it is necessary to enhance partnerships among local agencies coping with child maltreatment and delinquency, such as child welfare agencies, schools, and police. The problems of child maltreatment are many-faceted and complex. Thus, in order to solve these multiple, complex problems, the tools of each local agency that copes with child maltreatment and delinquency should be combined.

One way to enhance partnerships among local agencies is to improve the physical accessibility of these local agencies to each other. The location of offices is an important factor in enhancing partnerships among the agencies (Konishi 2013, p. 15). If they are located in the same building or better still on the same floor, they can work together easily. For example, in Kitakyushu, the city's Child Guidance Center, the student guidance section of the city's board of education, and the Juvenile Support Center of the Fukuoka prefectural police are located on the same floor. This proximity has facilitated information sharing among these agencies. In this working environment, staff can contact each other on a daily basis. Moreover, in February 2013, the Tokyo Metropolitan Government also constructed a seven-story building to house the offices of the Child Guidance Center, the Education Consultation Center of the Board of Education, and the Juvenile Support Center.

In Japan, the legal framework for regular meetings of agency staff was established in 2004 through the partial revision of the Child Welfare Act (Shirakashi and Aburatani 2005). The Act directs each municipality or special ward to set up a "local council for dealing with children in need of protection" in order to realize early solutions for child maltreatment and delinquency cases. In fact, currently, almost all municipalities and special wards have established these councils. The "children in need of protection" include both abused and delinquent children. Usually, the council has a tripartite structure: "conference of representatives," "conference of practitioners," and "meeting for examining an individual case" (Figure 2). First, conferences of representatives from the relevant

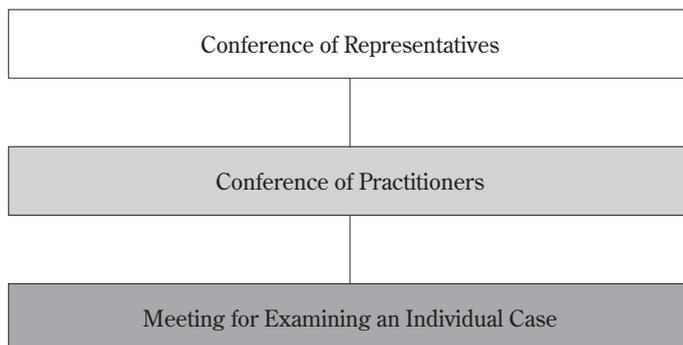


Figure 2. Tripartite structure of “local council for dealing with children in need of protection”

bodies (e.g., Child Guidance Center, board of education, and police) convene once or twice a year. In these conferences, the representatives decide on a policy of dealing with children in need of protection. Second, regular conferences of practitioners from the relevant bodies are held. The practitioners review precedential and informative cases of children in need of protection at these conferences. Third, meetings are held at which individual cases of a child in need of protection are examined by the practitioners as the occasion demands. Through these meetings, the practitioners cooperate to work out the best solution to the case.

The second way to enhance partnerships among local agencies coping with child maltreatment and delinquency is to increase the number of opportunities for staff to communicate with each other.

Personnel exchanges among local agencies coping with child maltreatment and delinquency are effective (Konishi 2013, pp. 15–16; Takahashi 2012, p. 249). For example, in Kitakyushu and Sapporo, active and retired schoolteachers and retired police officers work with child welfare officers in the Child Guidance Centers. In both cities, these personnel exchanges have made it easier for these centers to cooperate with the schools and the police. Furthermore, when a child welfare officer meets the assaultive parents of a child in need of protection, a retired police officer working in a Child Guidance Center accompanies the child welfare officer and assists him/her in dealing with the parents.

In addition, an extended training workshop with communal lodging would be useful in promoting the communication of staff from various local agencies (Konishi 2013, p. 16). The use of these methods would lead to breaking down the barrier of jargon or technical terms used by local agencies coping with child maltreatment and delinquency. This barrier often generates a state of mutual distrust among local agencies.

4.3 Build a seamless support system for troubled children

There is a compelling need to build a seamless support system for troubled children, including those who are abused or neglected.

Under the Child Welfare Act, the Japanese child welfare system aims at ensuring healthy and stable lives of children less than 18 years of age. However, it is also necessary to provide continued support for troubled youths 18 years and older. Because they lack social skills, these youths often face tremendous difficulties in getting along in society. In Yokohama, for example, the “Triangle for Youth” project, in which the city’s Child Guidance Centers are involved, provides job assistance to the young, including troubled adolescents. In this three-sided project, youths can attend job-training courses, receive job guidance from specialists, and find a job that suits them.

5. Conclusion

In January 2012, the Administrative Evaluation Bureau of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications officially announced a policy evaluation of the prevention of child abuse in Japan. The report to the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare recommended the vitalization of “local councils for dealing with children in need of protection.”

The results of this research led us to propose three appropriate and practical methods to strengthen child guidance functions in the child welfare system. It seems necessary to adopt the recommendations made here in order to vitalize these councils and realize early solutions to problems of child maltreatment and delinquency. These methods could be valuable for improving the child welfare system not only in Japan but also in other countries and regions.

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