

Report on the actual situation of child abuse and responses to it under the pandemic of COVID-19 in Japan

Kayoko Ito

Abstract

During the COVID-19 pandemic, child-rearing families became more isolated and clandestine, leading to a concern that problems such as child abuse and domestic violence may have become more widespread. In addition, families in need of support prior to the pandemic, such as those suffering from economic distress, domestic violence and child abuse, have found it difficult to receive the necessary support due to restrictions on their behaviour imposed by infection prevention measures. In this article, we would like to introduce how Japanese local authorities and counselling services have responded to child abuse counselling and other issues during the COVID-19 pandemic and to share the challenges that have emerged in the process. This article aims to aid consideration, together and beyond national borders, of how to outreach to problems in the home, such as abuse that has become difficult to detect outside the home, and how support agencies and local authorities should look after families raising children while schools are in lockdown.

Keywords

COVID-19, child abuse, protection social work, Japan

Corresponding author:

Kayoko Ito, Professor, Osaka Metropolitan University, 1-1, Gakuen-cho, Naka-ku, Sakai-city Osaka, Japan, itokayo@omu.ac.jp

Introduction

In April 2020, a state of emergency was declared by the Japanese government following the spread of the COVID-19, with requests to close workplaces and refrain from going out. As a result, child-rearing families became more isolated and secluded, while unemployment and insecurity in their lives worsened, and child abuse and domestic violence also became more widespread.

In particular, child abuse increased, and opportunities for its detection outside the home decreased, as a result of school holidays, which increased contact time between parents and children and led to a life of high stress for both. In addition, the parental burden on parents raising children with disabilities increased.

Under these circumstances, support activities such as home visits by local authority advisory services were also restricted, making it difficult to intervene in a timely manner, which in some respects exacerbated the situation.

The purpose of this paper is to examine how to respond to child abuse after the COVID-19 pandemic by identifying the actual situation of child abuse consultations in Japan and how these consultations were handled.

Methods

A questionnaire was conducted with 39 local authority consultation bodies in the Kinki region (Western part) of Japan. The survey period was from March to November 2020. It should be noted that the child and family consultation system in local authorities in Japan is a dual system, with consultation agencies in municipalities and child consultation centres set up in a slightly wider area.

The questionnaire consisted of questions about the number of consultations on child abuse, etc., the nature of the consultations, and the innovations of the consultation and support system during the COVID-19 pandemic.

When requesting survey cooperation, the following points relating to ethical considerations were communicated in advance:

- Cooperation in the study must be voluntary and consent can be withdrawn at any time during the research period.
- The positions, names, etc. of survey respondents shall only be used for the purpose of enquiring about the content of the responses, and not for any other purpose.
- The results of the survey must not be used for any purpose other than research purposes and survey data should be stored securely in a locked locker in the laboratory.

Results

The total number of consultation notifications received in the 39 municipalities surveyed (16 child guidance centres and 26 municipalities) between March and November 2020 was 67,029, a decrease from 72,723 notifications received in the same period the previous year. This is thought to be due to the impact of the school holidays, which led to a decrease in consultation notifications from schools (Figure 1).

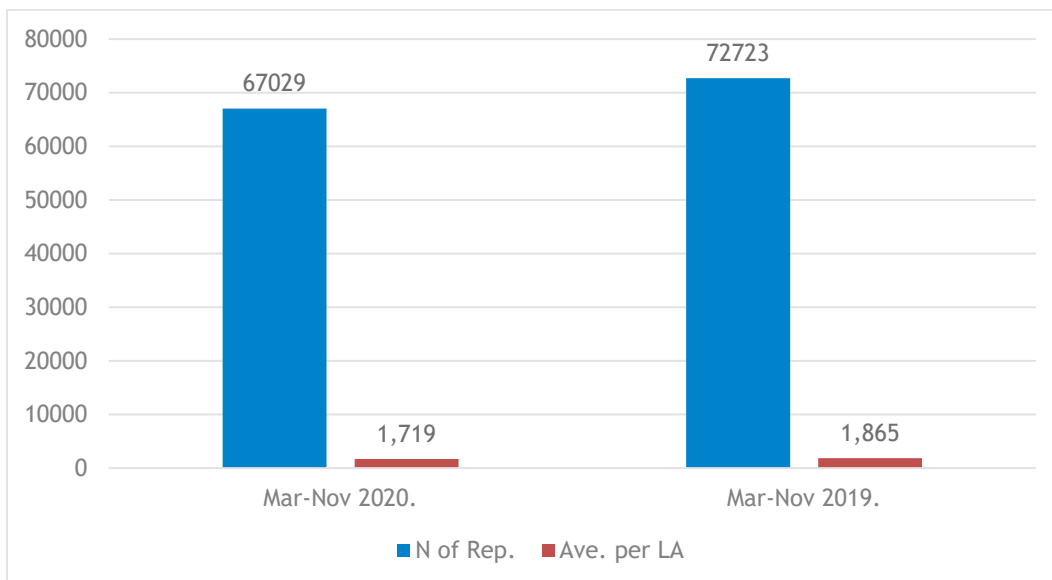


Figure 1: Number of child and family consultations

Looking at the number of consultations by type of consultation, there has been a decline in all types except parenting and abuse consultations. The decrease in

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consultations on disability, discipline and truancy is particularly significant (Table 1). The decrease in the number of discipline consultations is thought to be influenced by the decrease in truancy consultations due to the school holiday period. Looking at specific examples of consultations, the most common complaint was that they had become dependent on social networking and smartphone games, followed by a number of consultations to the effect that parent-child relationships had deteriorated. There were also a number of reports that telecommuting had caused marital quarrels, fights between parents and children, and family violence to become more serious.

	Public child guidance centres			Municipalities		
	Mar-Nov 2020.	Mar-Nov. 2019.	Percentage change	Mar-Nov 2020.	Mar-Nov. 2019.	Percentage change
Nursing	24,802	25,512	2.8%.	7,461	7,316	△ 2.0
Abuse	21,806	22,502	3.2%.	4,567	3,931	△ 16.2%.
Others	2,996	3,010	0.5%.	2,894	3,385	17.0%.
Delinquency	1,118	1,040	△ 7.5	3,232	3,206	△0.8
Disability	21,004	17,461	△ 14.6%.	1,534	1,382	△ 11.0
Discipline	4,694	3,795	△23.7	933	716	(30.3%)
Others	1,108	1,114	0.5%.	649	551	△ 17.8%.

Table 1: Number of consultations by type

Next, regarding abuse consultations, by type of abuse, in municipalities there was a slight increase compared to the previous year, except for sexual abuse, which is a concern for latent abuse. In child guidance centres, there was a slight increase in reports of psychological abuse, which may be due to the increase in face-to-face DV (Figures 2 and 3) child abuse consultations in municipalities.

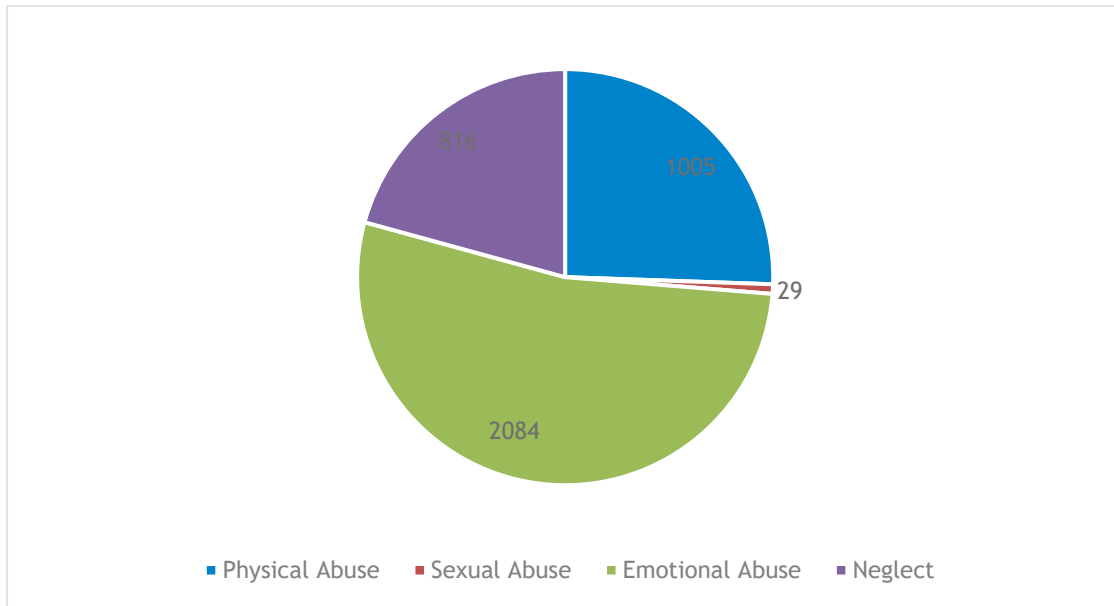


Figure 2: Child abuse consultation in municipalities

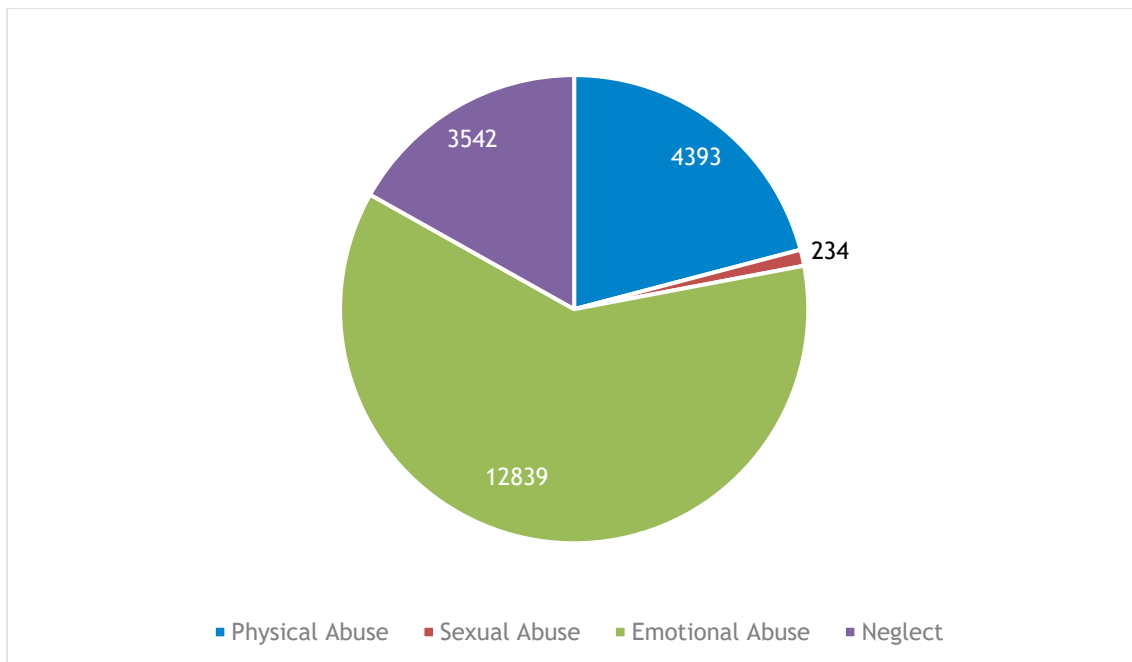


Figure 3: Child abuse counselling in child guidance centres

In Japan, the authorities that issue temporary protection orders and foster care orders for children in need of social care are the public child guidance centres. A comparison of the number of care orders and other legal responses by child guidance centres in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic with those before the pandemic shows that on-site investigations and requests for assistance from police officers have decreased, while applications under Article 28 of the Child Welfare Law in Japan (a procedure to obtain an order from the family court when the biological parents do not agree with placements for parent-child separation such as foster care placement) increased (from 49 to 63). This is thought to be a result of the impact of the pandemic, which made it impossible to conduct home visits and other activities, and to provide careful explanations and social work to persuade parents to consent to a care order.

In terms of the number of temporary protection cases, although the number of protection cases themselves is lower than before the pandemic, the number of temporary protection consignments to foster carers and children's homes has decreased, while the number of cases to protection centres attached to child guidance centres has increased. This is thought to be an effect of the refusal or impossibility of each children's home or foster family to take action for new children during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The next section deals with the actual systems that were put in place to deal with COVID-19. The most common responses were 'provision of protective clothing to social workers' and 'thorough disinfection at temporary shelters.' Many municipalities also asked private hotels to cooperate, as it was difficult to secure emergency temporary shelter for children for the aforementioned reasons.

Discussion

The results of the survey suggest the following five issues

On the first point, it became clear that there was a need to change and devise the nature of the child and family consultation and support system during the COVID-19 pandemic. Until now, support plans have only been formulated on the

basis of face-to-face consultations and interviews at home visits and in person, but equipment and staff training are needed with a view to actively utilising online, telephone and internet consultations. It has traditionally been pointed out that social work settings in Japan are weak in terms of IT. Overcoming this is an urgent issue.

Second, while home visits are not possible, how to intervene with families in need of outreach should also be carefully considered in the future. For example, it will be important for each municipality to strategically develop home visits under the guise of 'delivering relief supplies' such as masks and food. It will also be essential to provide protective clothing for visiting social workers.

Third, the study suggested the importance of a watchdog system and network for the early detection of child abuse during school closure due to lockdown, as well as cooperation with the independent organisations or NPO and so on. While notifications of abuse consultations from schools decreased during school closures, notifications from children's cafeterias and local learning support agencies for poor families increased. In addition, Japan has volunteer-like watchdog staff called 'child committee members' assigned to each school district. The pandemic has shown that the independent organisations or NPOs play a significant role when schools are unable to fulfil their function of early detection of child abuse.

Fourth, as emergency temporary shelters were in short supply during the pandemic, it is necessary to be prepared, for example, for neighbouring accommodation facilities and local authorities to sign an agreement in advance on the provision of accommodation in the event of an emergency. In this case, the issue of how to secure temporary shelter in municipalities that are not tourist destinations remained to be addressed.

Fifth, the need for publicity and awareness-raising for the prevention of addiction on a daily basis was suggested in response to the acceleration of problems such as gaming and alcohol dependence.

The recent COVID-19 pandemic has had a greater impact on families who are particularly vulnerable and in crisis due to poverty and abuse. By sharing experiences around the innovations and difficulties of child and family counselling and support during the COVID-19 pandemic, both domestically and with other countries, it will be possible to take the necessary measures for child and family social work and social care in possible future crisis situations.

Dominelli (2021) notes, for example, that the UK's Civil Contingencies Act 2004 designates social workers and health professionals as 'key response personnel' and that 'in many countries social workers have a formal role in the emergency response system, with legislation specifying their role and conduct'. She also stated that in the context of this pandemic, the pressure of helping people who are ill has fallen on health professionals, and there is a growing appreciation and respect for them. On the other hand, people are not so aware of what social workers do. People in the field should call on conventional and social media as much as possible to give their work the proper recognition it deserves (p. 3).

The findings from this experience should be consolidated and used for future system development and manual preparation.

References

Dominelli, L. (2021). Fight against COVID-19. *Kansai shakaifukushi Kenkyu, Journal of Kansai Welfare Study*, 7.

About the author

Kayoko Ito is a professor at Osaka Metropolitan University, Japan. She holds national qualifications as a social worker and childcare worker and is currently a foster parent.

She is a board member of the Japan Society of Social Welfare, the Japan Society of Child and Family Welfare, and chairperson of the NPO CAP Centre JAPAN. She is also a member of the Child Welfare Council of Osaka Prefecture/Osaka City/Sakai City/Amagasaki City/Nara City, a child abuse advisor for Hyogo

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Prefecture, and a supervisor for a number of government child and family
welfare agencies.