

# Hikikomori: Japan's Silent Sufferers

*How the condition defined by extreme isolation is engulfing many more than previously estimated.*

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Hikikomori is a condition of extreme isolation. It is a social condition defined by the Japanese Government as people who haven't left their house or interacted with other humans for more than 6 months. This may be a debilitating concept to get your head around, but in Japan's ever-expanding cities, official surveys and Government officials are only recently addressing the reality of this phenomenon.

In the 1990s, Japanese psychiatrist *Tamaki Saito* theorised the term, primarily attributing it to groups of Japanese youths and using it to address and understand reclusive behavior.



(photograph sourced at: <https://abstractcube.wordpress.com/2011/03/30/ひきこもり-hikikomori/> )

However, in 2015, a survey uncovered that there are over half a million sufferers between the ages of 16 and 40. Contrary to common assumptions, it has been indicated that the condition is not exclusive to young people. A study published in March this year revealed an estimated 613,000 people aged between 40 and 64 suffer from the debilitating social condition, with 73.3% of these being male.

With over 1 million estimated sufferers, these figures forcefully suggest that government intervention is hastily needed.

Amongst younger sufferers, it has been continuously associated with academic pressures, with many individuals abstaining from attendance at their schools or Universities, before spiraling into months of isolation.

More broadly, it is suggested to be linked to debilitating experiences of human interaction and relationship, Japanese media has exacerbated the situation through misrepresentation. Acts of terror and criminality have been unjustifiably tied to Hikikomori, with 43 cases of violent crime being claimed associates to social reclusion by popular media corporations and news outlets.

This has undoubtedly transformed the stigmatised image of Hikikomori from lazy young people who are addicted to video gaming to far more sinister assumptions. This sort of coverage also relies on uncertainty behind the specifics of each case and the wide application of the term social recluse. Nonetheless, popular media outlets have exacerbated society's image of the condition and forced sufferers further into the shadows.

The phenomenon is a by-product of growing pressures, economic advancements and urban growth, yet with these factors only expanding, how the Japanese Government will tackle reintegration issues is still unknown and despite the questionable validity of claims tying violent crime to Hikikomori, supporting sufferers needs to be at the forefront of Government concerns.

From a Western perspective, the relatively youthful discovery of the issue's extent in Japan may indicate a need for research, concerning the possibility of this phenomenon having reaches in our own Societies, particularly given that in the UK, given the concerns regarding levels of loneliness particularly amongst older demographics (65+).