

Social security and divorce in Japan

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explain variations in the divorce rates across prefectures in Japan over the 20-year period between 1982 and 2002. This paper examines the various factors which may affect divorce rates including: the effects of the generosity of social welfare; the income of females relative to males; the female employment rate; the vacancy rate; a shift to no-fault divorce; and social stigma. There are three major findings of this paper. First, the generosity of a particular prefecture in approving the livelihood protection benefits (LPBs) has a statistically negative impact on the divorce rate. Moreover, social stigma has negative impacts both on the divorce rate and the generosity of social security benefits. Finally, political conservatism has a negative impact on the proportion of needy people who receive LPB. The findings of this paper imply that in order to become eligible for the social security benefits, married couples may be more likely to dissolve their marriage in those prefectures where the provision of the LPB is not so generous.

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1. Introduction

Over the past 60 years, family structure in Japan has changed remarkably. One of the important changes relates to the number of divorces and the divorce rate. As in many other developed countries, the Japanese divorce rate has gradually increased.

There is large literature relating to divorce in the United States (for example, Refs. [2–4,19,20]). In contrast, despite the attention that has been given to divorce in the Japanese media in recent years, there are very few empirical studies relating to divorce in Japan [10,11,16,17].

One of the interesting aspects of Japanese divorces is that there is great deal of diversity in divorce rates across regions and prefectures in Japan. An examination of the divorce rates across prefectures over time shows that particular prefectures (for example, Fukuoka and Hokkaido) consistently appear to have high divorce rates (see Table 1a). This trend is not so pronounced among those prefectures with the lowest divorce rates (see Table 1b). A key question for economists is whether these regional differences are caused by differences in culture across regions or are caused by

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Table 1a

Crude divorce rates: top five prefectures.

	1970		1980		1990		2000	
1	Hokkaido	1.43	Hokkaido	1.86	Okinawa	1.90	Okinawa	2.74
2	Kochi	1.36	Okinawa	1.85	Hokkaido	1.73	Osaka	2.63
3	Aomori	1.24	Fukuoka	1.58	Fukuoka	1.61	Hokkaido	2.51
4	Fukuoka	1.22	Kochi	1.53	Osaka	1.58	Fukuoka	2.42
5	Yamaguchi	1.16	Aomori	1.52	Tokyo	1.53	Miyazaki	2.32

Source: Vital Statistics.

differences in economic conditions or a mixture of the two. None of the existing empirical studies for Japan cited earlier have examined regional differences in divorce rates across Japan.

The purpose of this paper is to examine what causes the regional variations in the divorce rates in Japan. This paper particularly looks into the relationship between the divorce rate, and the income of females relative to males, the female employment rate, the business cycle and the accessibility of social security benefits. Unlike the United States, the Japanese legal system is unitary, and, therefore, it is very difficult to find any major legal or systematic differences across prefectures (Akabayashi and Toda [1] provide an example of a rare exception). However, there is a clear difference in the accessibility to some social security benefits across prefectures/regions.

In the United States, there is a sizeable literature investigating how the social security system affects decisions on marital dissolution. Previous studies in this field have examined the extent to which the generosity of the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program has had an impact on marital dissolution, and how social welfare reform in the 1990s affected marriage and divorce. Moffitt [15] and Bitler et al. [5] find a statistically significant positive relationship between divorce and social welfare. On the other hand, Blackburn [6] and Hoffman and Duncan [7] contend that the effects of the AFDC program on divorce are limited.

In Japan, it is often claimed that in order to become eligible for livelihood protection benefits (LPBs), couples with low income intentionally dissolve their marriage even though they do not have problems with their marriage. However, there is little empirical evidence to support such a claim. This paper seeks to uncover whether regional differences in divorce rates can be partly explained by regional differences in the generosity of accessibility to social security benefits.

There are three major contributions of this paper. First, it is found that there is a significant negative relationship between divorce and the generosity of social security benefits. Second, this paper examined the effects of political conservatism on the generosity of social security benefits. Finally, the empirical results suggest that stigma can play an important role influencing both divorce and the approval of social security applications.

Section 2 provides a brief discussion of social security benefits provided by the livelihood protection law (*Seikatsu hogoho*) in Japan. Section 3 discusses the economic variables that might be expected to affect the divorce rate, while Section 4 details the definitions of the variables used and data sources. Estimation results are reported in Section 5, and Section 6 contains a brief conclusion.

2. Livelihood protection law (*Seikatsu hogoho*)

The legal framework for assistance to the poor and needy in Japan is provided by the national livelihood protection law (*Seikatsu hogoho*). It is a system designed to help the needy maintain a minimum standard of living and to provide

Table 1b

Crude divorce rates: bottom five prefectures.

	1970		1980		1990		2000	
1	Shiga	0.58	Hiroshima	0.74	Osaka	0.81	Kyoto	1.45
2	Nagano	0.59	Yamagata	0.79	Kanagawa	0.83	Oita	1.47
3	Shimane	0.60	Chiba	0.80	Saga	0.87	Ishikawa	1.55
4	Niigata	0.62	Akita	0.81	Okayama	0.92	Aichi	1.58
5	Ibaragi	0.63	Tokushima	0.82	Chiba	0.94	Saga	1.62

Source: Vital Statistics.

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