
Housing study to coexist with the coronavirus

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1. Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the housing style

The spread of COVID-19 has had two impacts on housing policies. The first is the expansion of the housing crisis brought about by the loss of income due to employment adjustments and layoffs. The second is the creation of new ways of living brought about by changes in work styles in response to the "new normal."

This paper discusses the future of housing study in the era of coexistence with the coronavirus and the new era that comes after that from the above two perspectives, based on the current activities of the Housing Department.

2. Research in response to the growing housing loss crisis

According to figures released by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, the number of workers expected to be laid off or otherwise dismissed because of the COVID-19 pandemic was approximately 87,000 as of January 22, 2021. In addition, many workers also experienced a drop in income due to leaves of absence or employment adjustments. From April to October 2020, more than 110,000 cases of housing security benefits were paid to needy people who may lose their homes because of difficulties in paying rent. These numbers could increase further if the state of emergency is extended or repeated. In addition to natural disasters, there are always risks or threats that can lead to the loss of housing, such as the global financial crisis and the current COVID-19 pandemic.

In order to ensure housing stability and security in the face of a housing loss crisis, it is essential to strengthen the housing safety net function in normal times and to ensure institutional continuity to emergency situations, such as disasters. In October 2017, the Act on Promotion of Offering of Rental Housing to Persons Requiring Special Assistance in Securing Housing was revised. With that, a system to register private rental housing (hereinafter referred to as "the accepting housing") that accepts tenants, such as low-income earners, the elderly, and disaster victims who require special assistance in securing housing, was established. Based on these new systems, the Housing Department has developed a

program for estimating the future number of households requiring special attention in securing housing in order to assist in the appropriate calculation of the number of units required for public housing stock and the target number of units to be registered for housing to accommodate people requiring special assistance in securing housing.

In addition to theoretical research like this, practical research that is more in tune with issues in the field will be required in the future. For example, as of January 2021, there were approximately 205,000 registered accepting housing units. Given the demand from people requiring special assistance in securing housing, it is necessary to further increase the number of registered units. In order to do so, it is necessary to consider promotional measures based on the supply mechanism of private rental housing. Private rental housing in Japan is often short-term management properties supplied by small business owners who are not real estate professionals as part of their tax-saving measures. Some landlords think that it is better to leave the houses vacant than to let people requiring special assistance in securing housing, who may have some risks, move in, because even if the houses are vacant, it will not have a big impact on their rental business if the construction costs are repaid in a short period of time. To deal with these disincentives for registration, for example, NPOs and other organizations could lease vacant houses and sublease them to people requiring special assistance in securing housing in combination with the provision of housing support services.

This is only one example of how to deal with disincentives for registration. In the future, it will be necessary to accurately identify the various concerns that landlords have and conduct further research on how to supply accepting housing and provide housing support services that respond to each factor.

Table: Anxieties and countermeasures related to moving in for people requiring special assistance in securing housing (example)

	Anxiety	Housing support service
Unit contract signing are in a rented	- Difficulty in finding a guarantor - Inability to understand contracts, inability to understand the language	- Guarantor agency service - Contract procedure support service (accompanying contracting service, dispatching interpreter, etc.)
	- A risk of failure to pay rent	- Rent debt guarantee service - Rent subsidies, proxy payment of housing assistance fees for welfare recipients
Unit moving	- A concern about troubles with neighbors - A risk of sudden changes in health condition	- Daily life support services (watching over people, confirming their safety, providing various types of daily life consultation, etc.)
	- A risk of lonely death - A concern about troubles surrounding the restoration to the original state	- Arrangement and disposal of household goods and leftover items, funeral service - Restoration rules, witnessing and assessing when moving out by a third party

3. Research to respond to new housing values

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered changes in the way we work, such as the spread of teleworking. These changes enable new lifestyles, such as choosing a place to live that is not tied to one's workplace and living in two regions.

(1) Reevaluation of suburbs and revitalization of suburban residential areas

In the suburbs of cities, a large number of housing complexes have been systematically supplied since the period of rapid economic growth. Many of these residential areas are now facing a declining birthrate and an increasing elderly population due to the separation of households as the child generation gradually moved out over time, and their sustainability is often in jeopardy. Under these circumstances, the COVID-19 pandemic has triggered a reevaluation of suburban residential areas where people can enjoy spacious living areas and a good natural environment for raising children.

The Housing Department, together with the Building Department and the Urban Planning Department, is implementing the General Technological Development Project, Development of Technology for the Revitalization of Suburban Residential Areas to Accommodate a Mature Society (FY 2018–2022). In this research, technological developments are underway to realize revitalization through the following: (1) ensuring safety (ensuring the durability of housing), (2) creating mixed communities (promoting the influx of the child-rearing generation), and (3) improving the quality of life of residents (introducing daily life support functions).

In order to accelerate the revitalization of suburban residential areas through the influx of households of child-rearing generation, the housing distribution market

needs a system that can objectively evaluate not only the performance of individual houses but also the performance of residential areas. In fact, residents often say, "I didn't think it was such a good residential area until I lived here." It will be necessary to work on developing evaluation criteria for suburban residential areas from the overall perspective including safety, convenience, comfort, and sustainability.



Photo 1-1:
The number of vacant stores in shopping center districts in residential areas has increased, reducing the convenience of living.



Photo 1-2:
On the other hand, there are many spacious parks and rich green environment.

(2) Utilization of vacant houses to support regional development and two-area residence

Changes in the way of working may accelerate the practice of the UIJ-turn to rural areas and two-area residences between rural and urban areas. As this way of living goes into full swing, it is hoped that the effective use of the increasing number of vacant houses will lead to the realization of regional development.

As a countermeasure for the increasing number of vacant houses, a subject-based research, "Research on the Quantification of the Effectiveness of Preventive Measures against the Inadequate Management of Vacant Houses" (FY 2020–2022) is being conducted. The number of vacant houses with no purpose of use, such as renting or selling is on the rise, and there are concerns that they will become unmanageable in the future. Therefore, this research aims to develop a quantitative evaluation method for the effectiveness of measures to prevent the occurrence of unmanaged vacant houses (e.g., minimum management level and systematic removal).

By the way, there is usually a certain time lag between the time a house becomes vacant and the time it becomes available in the market and then reused. The longer the period and the worse the management condition during that period, the more difficult it becomes to be reused. In order to expand the variety of ways to live and the choice of places to live by using vacant houses, it will be

necessary to study the management level and methods with an assumption that the vacant houses will be distributed in the market. Meanwhile, there is no common system for the proper management of houses, unlike condominiums or apartment buildings, which require consensus building among many owners. To create a recycle-oriented market for existing houses, proper management must be practiced in all houses. Also, research is needed to establish mechanisms, such as long-term repair plans and reserve funds, especially for wooden houses. It goes without saying that it is important to take proper care of occupied houses as a matter of course, which will lead to the proper management of vacant houses.



Photo 2-1: A properly managed vacant house



Photo 2-2: A vacant house without proper management

☞ For more information:

1) NILIM Project and Research Report No. 62, Edition I
<http://www.nilim.go.jp/lab/bcg/siryou/kpr/pm0062.htm>