

Karoshi: Overwork in Japan
A Significant Issue Among Workers of All Occupations

AP Seminar
28 November, 2023
Wordcount: 2092

“Karoshi” is a significant social problem in Japan first recognized in the 1970s, meaning induced death from overwork. Overwork is a global issue, however, white-collar workers in Japan are facing debilitating conditions of overwork made commonplace in companies. Chronic stress due to overwork can lead to death or disability as the body holds onto stress hormones, such as adrenaline and cortisol, for a long period of time. Prolonged exposure to these hormones can lead to hypertension, strokes, and heart disease. People also develop harmful habits to cope with chronic stress such as impaired sleep, a lack of exercise and socializing, smoking, and drinking. The severity of this issue is exemplified in the case of Joey Tocnang, a 27-year-old Filipino trainee who died of heart failure following 122 hours of overtime at a Japanese casting company (Dickinson). Of the offered stimulus sources, “The Dark Side of Resilience” suggests that the development of over-resilience would lead to tolerance in adverse circumstances despite the encumbrances that emerge from this choice. In parallel with this is the development of ‘Karoshi’ culture, where workers have adapted to overwork despite the numerous health issues that sprung from it (Chamorro-Premuzic and Lusk).

Karoshi is typically seen in high-stress white-collar occupations such as physicians, lawyers, and accountants. To illustrate this, one could look at the mental health of practicing physicians in Japan. Masatoshi Ishikawa, the President of the Tokyo University of Science, published in the *British Journal of Medicine* a questionnaire-based survey with a response pool of 4306 resident physicians. Of these respondents, 24.1% reported depressive tendencies and 5.6% reported suicidal ideation. These mental crises are a resulting variable of long working hours and insufficient workplace standards, with an insufficient amount of beds, inadequate allocation of labor, and low income. Thus, regulations and policies must be implemented on overtime work, the more viable of which being the inception of meditation in workplaces. These

factors constituting this can be analyzed through the perspectives of white-collar workers, the Japanese government, and corporations.

The main impact of this issue can be considered through the medical lens. Masaya Takahashi, the director of the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health in Japan, published a study on the “Sociomedical problems overwork-related deaths and disorders in Japan” in the *Journal of Occupational Health* on the various Cerebrovascular and Cardiovascular diseases (CCVDs), such as intracerebral hemorrhages, subarachnoid hemorrhages, cardiac arrests, and myocardial infarctions, that are amplified by aggravated amounts of stress that come with constant overwork. CCVDs follow a trend where their occurrence increases linearly with an increase in overtime work. Takahashi finds that CCVD rates have increased since 1998, with about 40 reported cases, while in 2017, 1750 cases were reported. Yamauchi Takashi, a professor with a Ph.D. in cognition and cognitive neuroscience further highlights this trend with his article “Incidence of overwork-related mental disorders and suicide in Japan” published in *Occupational Medicine*, where he similarly finds mental disorders resulting from overwork and work-related stress. He reports 1990 cases of mental disorders and suicide between January 2010 and March 2015. Furthermore, Junko Kitanaka, a professor with a Ph.D. in anthropology published her research in *Innovations In Clinical Neuroscience*, where she characterizes the heightened suicide rates in Japan. She finds that “there have been 3 to 5 more annual suicides in Japan than of people who die in traffic accidents.” Indeed, suicide due to dissatisfaction with work is so common that Japanese workers have come up with a specific word to describe it; “Karo Jisatu” refers to people who took their lives due to overwork. Middle-aged workers in Japan are committing suicide due to work-related stress and the Japanese economic recession of

2008. The recognition of mental issues, such as depression, is also an issue in Japan leading to heightened suicide rates (36).

When analyzing the issue, it is clear that white-collar workers are being exploited by corporations, specifically analyzed by Nobuo Takahashi in “Japanese work ethic and culture,” published in *Annals of Business Administrative Science*. In Japan, the economy revolves around the work-work theory of wages, where as people get more skilled at their work, their pay increases in parallel with the difficulty of their work (263). Conversely, countries such as the U.S. operate on the work-pay theory of wages, where “performing one’s job well simply leads to a higher pay (262). The structure of the economy correlates with the cultural emphasis on life centering around work through increased responsibilities on individuals. The model Japanese employee is a person who is enthusiastic about work and has a strong sense of responsibility and duty. This also models someone susceptible to depression, a mental disorder widely recognized to be closely associated with suicide (Kitanaka 37). This could be resolved with the establishment of meditation sessions in corporate workplaces. Meditation is scientifically proven to aid in cardiovascular health, recovery from stress, and mood improvement. In the study, “Recovery from stress: an experimental examination of focused attention meditation in novices” published in the *Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, a pool of 107 individuals were tested on the effect of meditation and audiobooks. From this study, it was concluded that meditation results in significantly higher feelings of relaxation and a decrease in stressful ruminative thoughts reported by the majority of participants (Borchardt 845). With the decrease in stress, there is a reduced prevalence of blood pressure and cardiovascular disease.

Elaborating on the dilemma of white-collar workers in Japan, “The Dark Side of Resilience” by Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic and Derek Lusk defines resilience as the “capacity to

adapt to stressful situations.” The stimulus maintains that excessive hardship can make people “overly persistent.” As demonstrated through the integration of tremendous responsibilities in Japanese culture, this idea argues that people are accepting their circumstances instead of vying for better situations. In fact, it finds that in America, “75% of employees consider their direct line manager the worst part of their jobs,” but most are resigned to their job circumstances, demonstrating the regularity of this mindset outside of Japan. People are likely to put up with a bad job despite the various career opportunities offered by the digital revolution.

The Japanese government is also attempting to address the issue by passing ultimately ineffective laws that prevent the exploitation of workers. One such law is the “Work Style Reform” bill, which was the first policy that introduced a cap on working hours, being 80 per week. However, this amount of work is still perilously high. The “limit” is still twice the average global workweek, which is around 40 hours (Hunt). Furthermore, in April 2015, a policy targeting top-earning white-collar workers constitutes them being paid on merit rather than hours worked. The policy was intended to increase worker flexibility, however, it eliminated overtime pay among white-collar workers. Thus, they wouldn't be reimbursed for their time, leading to an unfavorable position in their perspective (“White-Collar Overtime Exemption”). Governments could address Karoshi culture by mandating 4-day workweeks which would offer employees more flexibility to manage personal responsibilities. Though benefiting white-collar workers, it would negatively impact company profit and further negatively impact the circular flow of the economy, making governments obtain less tax revenue from households and businesses. Contrarily, this solution is unreasonable to certain workplaces, as demonstrated by 60.1% in a poll of 800 participating employees in Mynavi Corp. finding their workloads too great and being

understaffed for the endeavor, making it inferior to the establishment of meditation sessions in the workplace (Shimizu).

While considering this solution, it would also be apt to debate whether the Japanese government should interfere in corporate affairs. Proponents of intervention find that it is necessary to mitigate the adverse impacts of unregulated commerce, which range from environmental damage to labor abuses. Certain governmental actions could provide clear guidelines, loans, and advice to businesses through more broad considerations. However, the overregulation of a country's economy could prevent development and cause long-term decline (Davis). Hence, the legitimacy of governmental activity in the economy comes into question. Nevertheless, the situation in Japan calls for government interference. This is as labor abuses are occurring in various unrelated corporations. Thus, to resolve the issue en masse, governmental action could address all issues at once, preventing further crises of white-collar workers.

Companies are benefiting from the overtime work performed by workers. However, they are attempting to overcome critically negative views of the general public by improving working conditions. With the rapid increase in suicide rates, companies lost respect among citizens concerning corporate social responsibility, the social and environmental concerns in business operations. Takahiro Shimizu, a research associate at University College London published a survey analyzing the social responsibility companies in Japan hold to their employees in *BioMed Central*. The survey involved all 2172 companies listed in the Tokyo Stock Exchange through the analysis of annually published corporate social responsibility reports. These reports were used to predict the average safety companies provided with their work environments, finding more details involving occupational safety and health (OSH) in reports published from companies in 2020 than 2012, meaning more companies are focusing their efforts on OSH than

in the past. An example of a company that has reviewed its labor practices is Dentsu, by reducing the monthly limit to overtime work and establishing a 10 pm cut-off time for work. Dentsu also gave newer employees more influence by establishing teams that consider the opinions of junior employees and middle managers ("Dentsu" 7). Corporations could also address Karoshi culture by devising more flexible work hours. Edward M. Shepard, with a Ph.D. in economics, published a study on the effect of flexible work hours on the productivity of the pharmaceutical industry in *Industrial Relations*. He found that flexible work hours may lead workers to "increase effort, reduce shirking, work harder or work smarter, cooperate more fully in training, assisting, and monitoring other workers..." (127). Correspondingly, this would increase productivity in corporations and boost Japan's economy, therefore benefitting the government and alleviating stress among white-collar workers. Opposingly, employees having flexible working hours could lead to miscommunication among teams that would not share the same work schedules. Therefore, certain corporations may not want to implement this solution with the assumption that it could lead to future complications. Instead, mandating meditation in workplaces is a solution that would not have any reason for corporate resistance, making its establishment relatively simple.

Through all considerations, mandating meditation sessions in the workplace to reduce occupational stress is the most comprehensive solution that addresses the essence of the issue. This would first lead to a lessened prevalence of mental and physical issues in white-collar workers, considering it would increase productivity in the workplace and prevent the stunt of economic growth, unlike if other governmental actions were taken. This solution does not solve the issue in the long term but is immediate enough in the short term to help address the issue before new, permanent policies could be enacted to prevent the exploitation of white-collar

workers. Of all considered solutions, this solution directly addresses the problems of physical and mental issues being common among white-collar workers in Japan. The alternative solutions do not address the crux of the issue; white-collar workers are suffering medical issues as a result of overwork.

Overworking is a significant issue, not only in Japan nor the professional workspace. Students also face notable stress in both high school and college. Paris Strom, a professor with a Ph.D. in Educational Psychology published in the *School Community Journal* a study detailing the results of a poll of 349 high school students. The study found that students had prominent stressors out of school such as high parental expectations and relationships with relatives. Likewise, Helen Payne, a professor with a Ph.D. in Psychotherapy published in *Innovations in Education and Teaching International* a study that found that students in college may feel out of control due to increased academic demands and isolation. Poor mental health is prevalent in disadvantaged populations, whether of economic, political, cultural, or social means, where people may feel more pressure to succeed as a means of escape. Moreover, mental health difficulties peak between 16 and 24 years, the typical age at which students pursue higher education. It is important to consider the application of meditation to reduce stress not only in Japan, but rather globally. This is because stress is a universal feeling that applies to more than one stage of life. Both students and employees face various catalysts of stress that range from teenage parental expectations to a treacherous amount of work in a week. Thus, by meditating, people of all ages and occupations can mitigate the adverse effects of stress.

References

- Borchardt, Amy R., and Peggy M. Zoccola. "Recovery from stress: An experimental examination of focused attention meditation in novices." *Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, vol. 41, no. 6, 2018, pp. 836–849, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10865-018-9932-9>.
- Chamorro-Premuzic, Tomas, and Derek Lusk. "The Dark Side of Resilience." AP Seminar Performance Task 2: Individual Research-Based Essay and Presentation, College Board, 2023, p. 41 – 42. Originally published in Harvard Business Review, 16 August 2017.
- Davis, Marc. "Government Regulations: Do They Help Businesses?" *Investopedia*, Investopedia, 17 Mar. 2022, www.investopedia.com/articles/economics/11/government-regulations.asp.
- "Dentsu Moves To Change 'Karoshi' Culture." *Campaign Asia-Pacific*, Nov. 2016, pp. 7.
- Dickinson, Kevin. "The World Must Learn from 'Karoshi,' Japan's Overwork Epidemic - before It's Too Late." *Big Think*, 14 Sept. 2023, bigthink.com/the-learning-curve/karoshi/.
- Hunt, Elle. *Japan's Karoshi Culture Was a Warning. We Didn't Listen*, Wired UK, 2 June 2021, www.wired.co.uk/article/karoshi-japan-overwork-culture.
- Ishikawa, Masatoshi. "Relationships between overwork, Burnout and suicidal ideation among resident physicians in hospitals in Japan with Medical Residency Programmes: A nationwide questionnaire-based survey." *BMJ Open*, vol. 12, no. 3, 10 Mar. 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2021-056283>.
- "Japan to Work with Labor on White-Collar Overtime Exemption." *Nikkei Asia*, Nikkei Asia, 10 July 2017, asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Japan-to-work-with-labor-on-white-collar-overtime-exemption.
- Kitanaka, Junko, and Steven D. Targum. "Overwork suicide in Japan: a national crisis." *Innovations in Clinical Neuroscience*, vol. 9, Feb. 2012, pp. 35–38.
- Payne, Helen. "The bodymind approach® to support students in higher education: Relationships between student stress, medically unexplained physical symptoms

- and mental health.” *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, vol. 59, no. 4, 2021, pp. 483–494, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2021.1878052>.
- Shepard, Edward M., et al. “Flexible work hours and productivity: Some evidence from the pharmaceutical industry.” *Industrial Relations: A Journal of Economy and Society*, vol. 35, no. 1, 1996, pp. 123–139, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-232x.1996.tb00398.x>.
- Shimizu, Ayano. “Focus: Japan Inc. Turns to 4-Day Workweek to Offer Flexibility to Employees.” *Kyodo News+*, KYODO NEWS+, 3 May 2022, english.kyodonews.net/news/2022/05/5daa8e6f3231-focus-japan-inc-turns-to-4-day-workweek-to-offer-flexibility-to-employees.html.
- Shimizu, Takahiro, et al. *Occupational Safety and Health Aspects of Corporate Social Responsibility Reporting in Japan: Comparison between 2012 and 2020*, 15 July 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1101/2022.02.15.22271007>.
- Strom, Paris S., et al. “High School Student Stress and School Improvement.” *School Community Journal*, vol. 32, 2022, pp. 205–228.
- Takashi, Yamauchi, et al. “Incidence of overwork-related mental disorders and suicide in Japan.” *Occupational Medicine*, vol. 68, no. 6, 2018, pp. 370–377, <https://doi.org/10.1093/occmed/kqy080>.
- Takahashi, Masaya. “Sociomedical problems of overwork-related deaths and disorders in Japan.” *Journal of Occupational Health*, vol. 61, no. 4, 2019, pp. 269–277, <https://doi.org/10.1002/1348-9585.12016>.
- Takahashi, Nobuo. “Japanese work ethic and culture.” *Annals of Business Administrative Science*, vol. 14, no. 5, 2015, pp. 261–278, <https://doi.org/10.7880/abas.14.261>.