

# REGIONAL APPROACHES TO *KODOMO SHOKUDO* IN THE CHUGOKU REGION: INTEGRATED CHILDREN CARE AND COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES

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*Abstract* Established circa 2012 in Tokyo, *Kodomo Shokudo* are dining rooms offering free food to the children of poor families. Its numbers have increased rapidly to 6014 in 2021. *Kodomo Shokudo* is a private-sector initiative in which local volunteers and others participate in the operation and provide free and cheap meals to poor families and children eating alone. Recently, *Kodomo Shokudo* have come to be operated by various entities. This study aims to understand how *Kodomo Shokudo* contribute to community-based revitalization in non-metropolitan regions. In this study, we have attempted to clarify why such a difference occurred in the Chugoku region. The result of the interview survey demonstrate that many *Kodomo Shokudo* also conduct activities that combine learning support activities and creating places for children.

**Keywords:** *Kodomo Shokudo*, childcare, community activities, Chugoku region

## 1. Introduction

One in six children in Japan lives below the poverty line as of 2020, which is the worst level among developed countries. The reason behind this is poverty in families raising children, especially in single-parent families dominated by mother-child households and a poverty rate that remains high in Japan at 54%. In addition, the number of elementary and junior high school students receiving educational assistance has increased slightly since the late 1990s. According to Matsumoto (2019), the child poverty rate in Japan is high even by international standards and is on the rise, single-mother households have a high poverty risk, and mothers are employed or not employed. In other words, work is not a means of escaping poverty, and mothers' low wages are a serious problem.

What is the relative poverty of children and its impact? Child poverty occurs due to parental economic poverty. In particular, the financial distress of single-mother households is a serious issue. Financial poverty of parents deprives children of learning opportunities (e.g. prevents them from attending school) and causes children's low academic ability. Children's low academic scores and low education levels tend to result in low wages and precarious employment, subjecting them to social exclusion and creating a vicious cycle that leads to perpetual poverty (re-produce poverty).

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In this way, child poverty affects not only the generation in question but also the next generation (Yui *et al* 2022). Several measures exist against child poverty in Japan (Cabinet decision on August 29, 2014). Efforts to combat child poverty began with the "Act on the Promotion of Measures to Combat Child Poverty" (2013), which enacted key measures in the Outline for Combating Child Poverty (Cabinet decision on August 29, 2014). Ten years have passed since measures were taken to combat child poverty. Among these poverty countermeasures, initiatives in which local residents can be involved include (1) providing learning support to households in poverty and providing meals to children and (2) creating a place for children to stay. Many *Kodomo Shokudo* (1) not only provide children with meals and ensure their nutritional status (2) but also provide learning support and a place to stay, and it can be said that the support provided by local residents is an outstanding initiative.

This study focused on *Kodomo Shokudo*, which are thought to reflect regional characteristics, as a childcare support initiative involving local residents. According to the definition by the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, *Kodomo Shokudo* is an initiative in which local volunteers provide free or inexpensive nutritious meals, and warm social gatherings to children and their parents are also included. *Kodomo Shokudo* have the potential to develop into an exchange base for local residents, including older adults and people with disabilities, as well as providing food, education, and a safe space for children, furthermore it will play a major role in the realization of a community-based society.

The first purpose of this study is to give an overview of the development of *Kodomo Shokudo* in Japan and clarify the differences in regional development. The second purpose is to analyze the location and operating entity of *Kodomo Shokudo* in the Chugoku region, which includes urban and rural areas. Moreover, we will expound on how *Kodomo Shokudo* are being established not only for poverty alleviation but also for community development as a place for local activities. We will attempt to clarify the change in their roles.

Research on *Kodomo Shokudo* has focused more on learning support and creating a place to live than on the welfare aspect of providing meals to needy households. Many case studies have revealed that many initiatives are created through the volunteer activities of local residents involved in projects that also serve as a safe space for children to feel at home and support their learning. There is an accumulation of research from an urban planning approach that focuses on the distribution and use of facilities and from a sociology approach that focuses on individual *Kodomo Shokudo* businesses and volunteer activities of local residents. However, no studies have focused on regional differences such as regional background, to clarify the development of *Kodomo Shokudo*.

However, with regard to *Kodomo Shokudo* that fall under the safety net type described below, there were cases in which telephone interviews could not be conducted because either no description of each activities was available or their contact information was kept confidential. Thus, it was impossible to approach them. The target area of this study is five prefectures in the Chugoku region, which has both regional characteristics and is suitable for clarifying how *Kodomo Shokudo* operate differently in urban and rural areas. According to the network of *Kodomo Shokudo* in the Chugoku region, large regional differences exist in their numbers.

The research method was based on a database of detailed information listed on the website of the *Kodomo Shokudo* network in each ward, town, and village, and the non-profit organization (NPO) "Gaccomm Musubie Kodomo Shokudo Map" (<https://kodomo-shokudo.gaccomm.jp/>). Regarding points that were not clarified from the information posted on the website, we conducted telephone interviews with the local *Kodomo Shokudo* and their associated networks.

## 2. Definition of *Kodomo Shokudo*

A so-called *Kodomo Shokudo* is where local volunteers make efforts to provide children with free or cheap, nutritious meals and safe space. This includes initiatives that include not only children but also other local residents. According to the NPO Katariba, *Kodomo Shokudo* are the “Children’s cafeterias” or “Children’s dining rooms” initiated in Japan and offer free food to children from poor families. They provide hot meals to children who cannot eat a satisfactory meal at home for economic reasons. The first *Kodomo Shokudo* started operating in 2012 by Ms. Hiroko Kondo, the owner of “Kimagure Capricious Greengrocer Dandan” in Ota Ward, Tokyo. Possibly; it was launched to gather information on children who could not afford to eat breakfast or dinner. Having witnessed the “invisible poverty” within Japanese society, Ms. Kondo started the *Kodomo Shokudo* as something she could do with her own hands. Her initiative was adopted by Ms. Chieko Kuribayashi of the “Toshima Children’s WAKUWAKU Network” who was supporting children in Toshima Ward, Tokyo; subsequently, it spread rapidly (Katariba 2017).

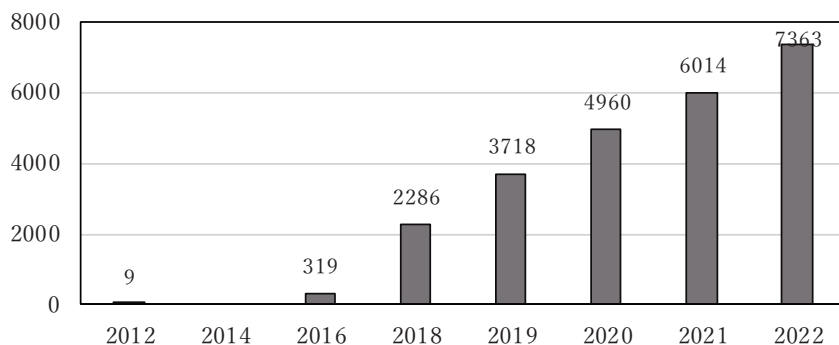
*Kodomo Shokudo* can be categorized into two categories according to the 1) target (limited or open) and 2) vision (community-oriented or individualized-oriented). Most *Kodomo Shokudo* are the “community-symbiotic type,” which focuses on community development without limiting the target, and the “safety-net type”, which focuses on care for children in poor families (Yui *et al* 2022). The safety-net type *Kodomo Shokudo* is free of charge and provides meals only to children in poor families. However, the community-symbiotic type provides meals to all children in the community. Almost all *Kodomo Shokudo* are involved in community-oriented regional development, and the vertical classification is rarely used as an axis for classifying their activities. However, according to Yuasa (2019 p.15), *Kodomo Shokudo* are not places where children from poor families gather to eat. The initiative may have started as a measure against child poverty, but in recent years its function has also expanded to become a base for regional exchanges. However, it is a limited assumption. From the very beginning, *Kodomo Shokudo* were established for the two purposes of “community exchange base” and “child poverty alleviation.”

Both “community-symbiotic type” and “safety-net type” *Kodomo Shokudo* provide meals (food support) to children and create a place for them to stay. On the one hand, in terms of the people they provide meals to, the “community-symbiotic type” *Kodomo Shokudo* accept any child in the community. The “safety-net type” *Kodomo Shokudo* cater mostly to children from poor households, and they have a strong sense of ownership. Regarding the frequency of meetings, most “community-symbiotic type” *Kodomo Shokudo* hold events once a month and collect a participation fee, whereas “safety-net type” *Kodomo Shokudo* hold events more frequently and either do not collect a participation fee or only collect a small amount. Consequently, their service acts as a safety net for children from poor households. In the “community-symbiotic type” *Kodomo Shokudo*, the organizers actively interact with the children and parents, and the aim is not only to prevent children from eating alone but also to encourage multi-generational and community exchanges. It has become a place for community development through activities.

## 3. Outline of *Kodomo Shokudo* in Japan and the Chugoku region

The first *Kodomo Shokudo* was established in 2012. There were only 9 *Kodomo Shokudo* in Japan in 2012, which increased rapidly from 4960 in 2020 to 7363 in 2022 (Figure 1) due to the increase in government subsidies in 2017 and volunteer activities by individuals and various social

groups. Considering the distribution of *Kodomo Shokudo* across the country. Many exist in large metropolitan regions such as the Tokyo and Osaka metropolitan regions (Yui *et al* 2022). The sufficiency rate in terms of the number of *Kodomo Shokudo* to that of elementary schools is high not only in metropolitan areas but also in non-metropolitan areas such as Kochi, Nagano, and Tottori prefectures. It started as a project aimed at eliminating child poverty, but in reality, there are more *Kodomo Shokudo* in high-income metropolitan areas compared to low-income non-metropolitan areas.



**Fig. 1** The Changes in the number of *Kodomo Shokudo*.  
Source: "Musubie" <https://musubie.org/news/6264/>

**Table 1** The number of *Kodomo Shokudo* in the Chugoku region

Prefecture	2018yr	2020yr	2021yr	2022yr	increasing rate in 2020–2022
Tottori	27	60	68	70	2.59
Shimane	19	18	25	71	3.74
Okayama	25	51	50	62	2.48
Hiroshima	26	86	101	137	5.27
Yamaguchi	14	82	110	143	10.21

Source: "Musubie; NPO corporation, National Support Center of "*Kodomo Shokudo*"  
<https://musubie.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/baec3e96d94fcd591e3650248dcef834.pdf>

The number of *Kodomo Shokudo* is rapidly increasing in Shimane, Yamaguchi, and Hiroshima prefectures. Yamaguchi Prefecture, which does not have a large population, has the largest number of *Kodomo Shokudo* in the Chugoku region (Table 1). In Shimane Prefecture, the number of *Kodomo Shokudo* has nearly tripled in one year from 2021 to 2022.

As for the sufficiency rate, the Chugoku region includes both the top (Tottori and Yamaguchi) and bottom (Shimane and Okayama) prefectures. However, the actual situation of *Kodomo Shokudo* in the two prefectures in the San'in region forms a contrast. Tottori Prefecture actively supported the creation of places for children to live; thus, the number of *Kodomo Shokudo* per elementary school increased. However, in many depopulated areas in Shimane Prefecture, which has many rural and mountainous areas, few *Kodomo Shokudo* exist.

**Table 2** Management bodies of *Kodomo shokudo* in Chugoku region

Management bodies	Tottori	Shimane	Okayama	Hiroshima	Yamaguchi	Total
Community Volunteer	19	14	23	46	48	150
NPO	14	3	15	13	31	76
Religious Organization	2	2	5	6	17	32
Social Welfare Corporation	12	1	2	7	3	25
Social Welfare Council		2	3	8	8	21
Restaurant Manager	1	1	2	7	8	19
General Incorporated Association/Public Interest Incorporated Association etc.	6		2	4	6	18
Private persons		1	1	15		17
Community Association/Residents' Council	1	2	3	2	5	13
Private Companies				2	4	6
Others	5		2	3	4	14
<b>Total</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>113</b>	<b>134</b>	<b>391</b>

Source: Created from "NPO Nationwide *Kodomo Shokudo* Support Center/Musubie"

<https://musubie.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/baec3e96d94fcd591e3650248dcef834.pdf>

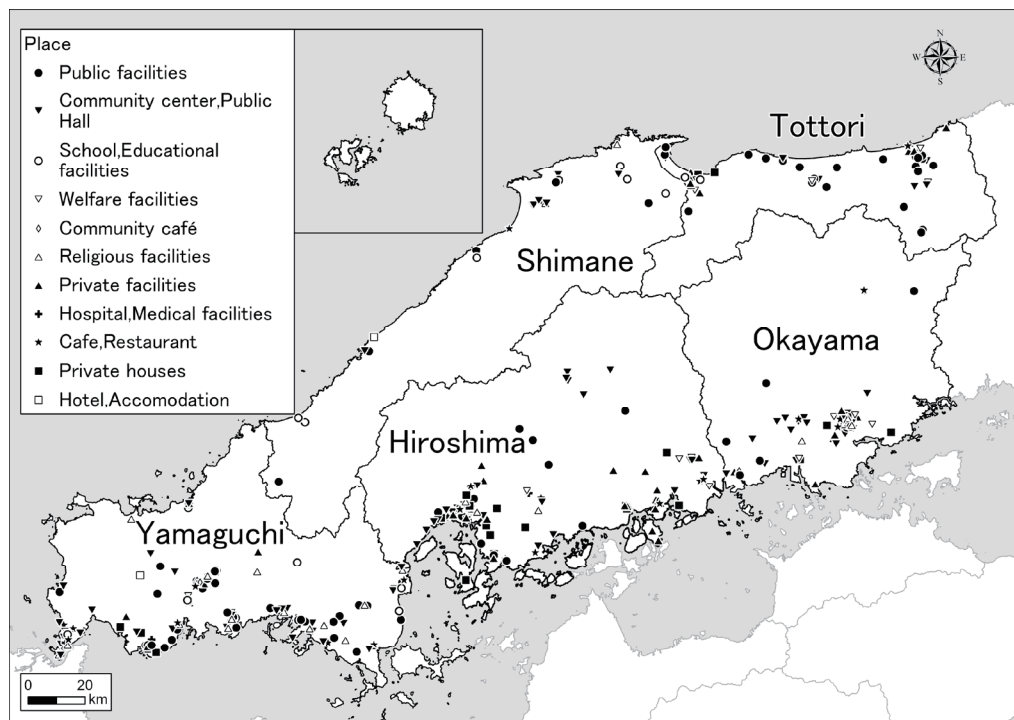
As pointed out by Yuasa (2019), *Kodomo Shokudo* are not only an anti-poverty measure for households in poverty but also an initiative by local people to create a safe space for children; they have, thereby, become a place for community formation. In Tokyo, most of the *Kodomo Shokudo* operators are NPOs and local community volunteer organizations related to community development, which primarily include “community-symbiotic type” *Kodomo Shokudo*. Considering the regional characteristics of the operating entities, in the eastern and western regions of the special wards, there are many businesses run by restaurant managers and private companies, while in the suburban areas outside the special wards, there are many local community volunteer organizations in Tokyo (Yui *et al* 2022). As for the Chugoku region, there are 182 local community volunteer organizations, which include voluntary groups such as older adult groups, mothers' groups, community center activity groups, and so on, and only a few are managed by neighborhood associations (Table 2). In addition, four locations are run by student volunteers. Furthermore, in the Chugoku region, many *Kodomo Shokudo* are primarily operated by voluntary groups such as local community's volunteers, followed by NPOs. In Yamaguchi Prefecture, many *Kodomo Shokudo* are run by religious groups.

*Kodomo Shokudo* are often held once a month in each prefecture, which may not be enough to provide meals for children. In Yamaguchi Prefecture, many *Kodomo Shokudo* are held weekly. However, many of the operators of *Kodomo Shokudo* find it more meaningful to interact with local people and provide a place for children to gather, rather than for local children to eat together.

#### 4. Places and Locations of *Kodomo Shokudo* in the Chugoku region

There are 185 public facilities (98 community centers and 87 public halls) where *Kodomo Shokudo* operations are carried out (Table 3). It is the same as Tokyo. However, the rates of private facilities and restaurants in the Chugoku region are lower compared to those in Tokyo. Many

*Kodomo Shokudo* use public facilities in Tottori and Yamaguchi Prefectures.



**Fig. 2** Locations of *Kodomo Shokudo* in the Chugoku region.

Source: Created from "NPO Nationwide *Kodomo Shokudo* Support Center/Musubie"

**Table 3** Place/ Facilities of *Kodomo Shokudo*

Place/ Facilities	Tottori	Shimane	Okayama	Hiroshima	Yamaguchi	Total
Community center, Public Hall	9	7	22	31	29	98
Public facilities	27	5	6	13	36	87
Private facilities	10		8	23	11	52
Café, Community café, Restaurants	3	2	5	16	14	40
Religious facilities	1	2	6	9	21	39
School, Educational facilities	2	9	1		12	24
Private houses	2		4	13	5	24
Welfare facilities, Hospital	6		5	6	2	19
Others		1	1	2	4	8
Total	60	26	58	113	134	391

Source: Created from "NPO Nationwide *Kodomo Shokudo* Support Center/Musubie"

<https://musubie.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/baec3e96d94fcd591e3650248dcef834.pdf>

As for the places of *Kodomo Shokudo* in each prefecture (Figure 3), Tottori Prefecture has a high sufficiency rate. Many *Kodomo Shokudo* exist in rural areas other than urban areas such as Tottori City and Yonago City. In Tottori Prefecture, many *Kodomo Shokudo* use public facilities. Compared to the neighboring Tottori Prefecture, Shimane Prefecture has a significantly fewer number of *Kodomo Shokudo*. More *Kodomo Shokudo* exist in Izumo City than in Matsue City, the prefecture's largest city. In addition, *Kodomo Shokudo* are rarely located in rural areas in Shimane Prefecture. The sufficiency rate of *Kodomo Shokudo* in Okayama Prefecture is remarkably low, ranking 45th in Japan. *Kodomo Shokudo* are concentrated in the urban areas of Okayama City and Kurashiki City and are not held in inland rural areas. Most *Kodomo Shokudo* use community centers and public facilities. In Hiroshima Prefecture, *Kodomo Shokudo* are concentrated in Hiroshima City, and very few exist in other municipalities.

Mountainous areas host even fewer locations for *Kodomo Shokudo*, which are often held at community centers and public facilities. In Yamaguchi Prefecture, the number of *Kodomo Shokudo* has increased rapidly, and the sufficiency rate is ranked 11th in Japan. Few *Kodomo Shokudo* exist in Hagi City and Nagato City in the San'in region, but many exist in municipalities along the Seto Inland Sea coast such as Shimonoseki City, Shunan City and Hofu City. As mentioned above, large regional differences can be observed in the distribution of *Kodomo Shokudo*, with some concentrated in urban areas and others widely distributed in rural areas.

## 5. Conclusion

*Kodomo Shokudo* across the country are often run by NPOs in collaboration with social welfare councils, and most are community-symbiotic types that collaborate with local community activities and are often distributed in large metropolitan areas. In the Chugoku region, a large number of *Kodomo Shokudo* are managed and are run by local community volunteers. This shows that *Kodomo Shokudo* have led to community-building activities by NPOs, such as local community volunteering, which include older adults and local residents.

The spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 has had a major impact on many *Kodomo Shokudo*, making it difficult for large groups to gather together for meals. Consequently, many *Kodomo Shokudo* are canceling their operations; even among those that are continuing, an increasing number of *Kodomo Shokudo* are now distributing "bento lunches" for free or selling them at low prices. In many places, it has become difficult to create a place for communal meals.

*Kodomo Shokudo* are often run by regional volunteer groups and NPOs, and most of them are community symbiosis type and are distributed in metropolitan regions. The Chugoku region is also characterized by the large number of *Kodomo Shokudo* that coexist with the local community and are run by local community volunteers. Subsequently, it has become clear that *Kodomo Shokudo* are more common in urban areas than in rural areas, not because there are more poor households in urban areas but because more local residents want to contribute something to children. Few *Kodomo Shokudo* exist in rural areas as there are many large families, and child-rearing is preferably done by family members rather than the community providing child-rearing support. The most important factor is whether local governments are willing to support the establishment of *Kodomo Shokudo* through the subsidiary program.

*Kodomo Shokudo* not only provide meals but also support learning, creating a place for children to belong. Subsequently, whether in urban or rural areas, these activities such as local volunteer activities by non-profit organizations by older adults and local residents are connected to

community-building, triggered by *Kodomo Shokudo*. Local volunteer and senior groups are happy to provide a place for children to eat together, but some local government officials request creating a place for children to belong. Many *Kodomo Shokudo* are open to anyone, not just children from poor households. This allows children from poor households to use it without prejudice or stigma.

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(\*: in Japanese)