

Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Activities of Toyoshikidai's Community Space

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【Abstract】 The Institute of Gerontology has been operating the Toyoshikidai Community Space as a preventive measure against social isolation regarding older adults. Community-dwelling older adults have hosted various types of events via renting this space. Additionally, many older adults living at the Toyoshikidai housing complex have participated in these events. In this research, we aimed to elucidate the effect of COVID-19 regarding social participation of older adults through questionnaire (N=26) and interview (N=5) surveys directed at events' hosts during the summer of 2020. Of these hosts, 70% kept contact with their management colleagues during the pandemic, while 60% kept contact with their event's participants. Although the activities were closed during the quarantine, the results suggest that event hosts can still exist as vital keys for keeping participants socially included. However, despite efforts hosts found difficulty in contacting participants. For example, although 28% of hosts had prepared to re-open activities, they still faced difficulties distributing the information of re-opening to the participants, since the information was paper based and only available when one visited or passed by the community space. Meanwhile, event hosts are also older adults that are providing their services voluntarily and cannot be forced to carry the burdens of contacting participants during this difficult time period. Therefore, creating an easy-to-understand manual that provides responsibility-free methods for keeping participants socially integrated could potentially lower such burdens.

【Keywords】 community space, event host, social participation, COVID-19

1. Introduction

Since January 2020, many countries have begun taking various measures in order to prevent the further spread of infections caused by the new coronavirus (COVID-19) throughout the world. In Japan, declaration of a state of emergency and subsequent preventive measures limiting the range of people's daily activities was issued from April 7th to May 25th, 2020. Specifically, the Japanese government proposed that citizens avoid the three Cs: crowds in closed locations, densely populated areas, and confined spaces [1]. These measures have restricted people's living spaces, narrowed their range of activities, and have increased the number of people who feel socially isolated.

Despite these efforts, the COVID-19 infection has continued to spread, and the period of restrained activities has been prolonged. Due to this, additional problems have now emerged in people's lives. Economically speaking, people who operate stores continue to suffer the burden financial loss due to people refraining from eating out. However, more generally and socially speaking, Japan is also a country with a large aging population

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whose older citizens require pertinent attention, as well.

For this, social participation has been cited as one of many factors correlated to the health of older citizens [2]. Importantly, their social isolation adversely affects the entire nation. Affiliates from each region, e.g. the municipality, has traditionally operated a community center in order to encourage their participation in society. However, the COVID-19 infection has reduced such opportunities of interaction. As participations rates decline, more and more elderly could become socially isolated. Under such circumstances, research related to the refrainment of elderly from activities is crucial. Thus, in this study we focused on community groups that are working to actively prevent older adults from becoming socially isolated. In this study, we assumed that the impact of self-restraint caused by COVID-19 on older citizens' activities is vital. The effect of the pandemic on social participation should be studied.

The purpose of this research can be described as 'to investigate what kinds of support mechanisms are necessary in order to promote social participation in irregular situations like this study's community group activities; and, what are the current state of operations in this situation.' In doing so, we can possibly become more aware of older adults most likely hindered by this situation, in addition to sustaining their health and quality of life.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Data

Toyoshikidai Community Space was selected as the research site. This space provided various types of events towards community-dwelling citizens of the area. We have enumerated 26 managers who provided activities at the Toyoshikidai Community Space. From the questionnaire survey, and 5 respondents from interview survey in the Toyoshikidai area in Kashiwa city, Chiba prefecture. The data used in this study comes from both questionnaire and interview surveys conducted from June to September 2020. The two surveys contain following points: activity operation, a detailed record of problems being faced, and support needed for resumption of activities.

2.2 Methodology

Quantitative and qualitative analysis method was utilized in this study to examine the impacts of the COVID-19 infection on community groups' activities in the Toyoshikidai area. Importantly, we mainly employed descriptive statistics: i) to analyze the characteristics of community activity groups, ii) to identify the problems that hosts are facing, and iii) to explore specific solutions for reopening group activities.

3. Results

3.1 Statistics of interpersonal communication

The change in the number of activities provided at the community space is shown in Figure 1. The numbers increased from about 20 to 35 during 2019. The decrease in the number was observed in January due to the new

year holiday. The Japanese government declared state of emergency February 2020 to April 2020, and again from January 2021. Community space was also closed during this season, which led to decline in the activity number.

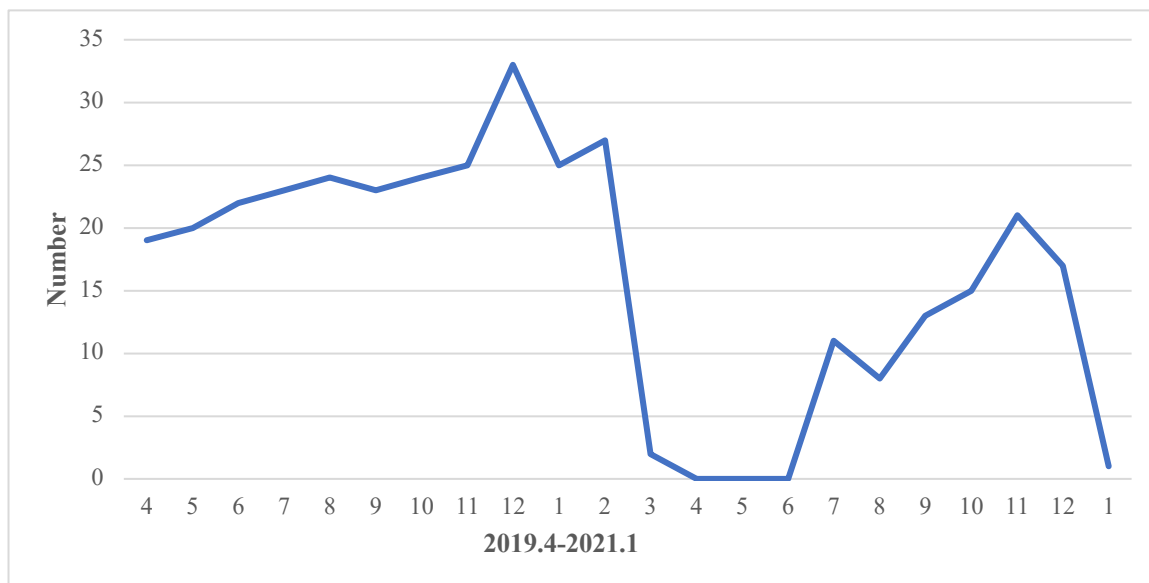
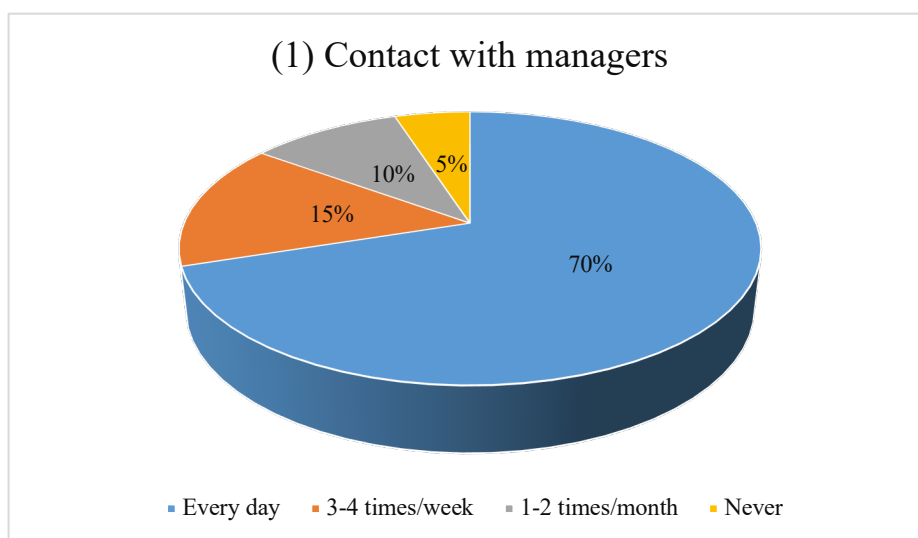


Figure 1 Change in the number of activities held at the community space

As shown in Figure 2, the contact status regarding activity management after the outbreak of the COVID-19 is presented. The results of Figure 2-(1) reveal that around 70% of hosts are keeping contact with management colleagues every day. Additionally, around 15% of hosts contact their colleagues three to four times a week, while about 10% of them do so once or twice a month. However, 5% of hosts have not contacted their partners during COVID-19 period. Most (55%) hosts are keeping in touch with their participants once or twice a month and 40% of managers do not contact their participants (Figure 2-(2)).



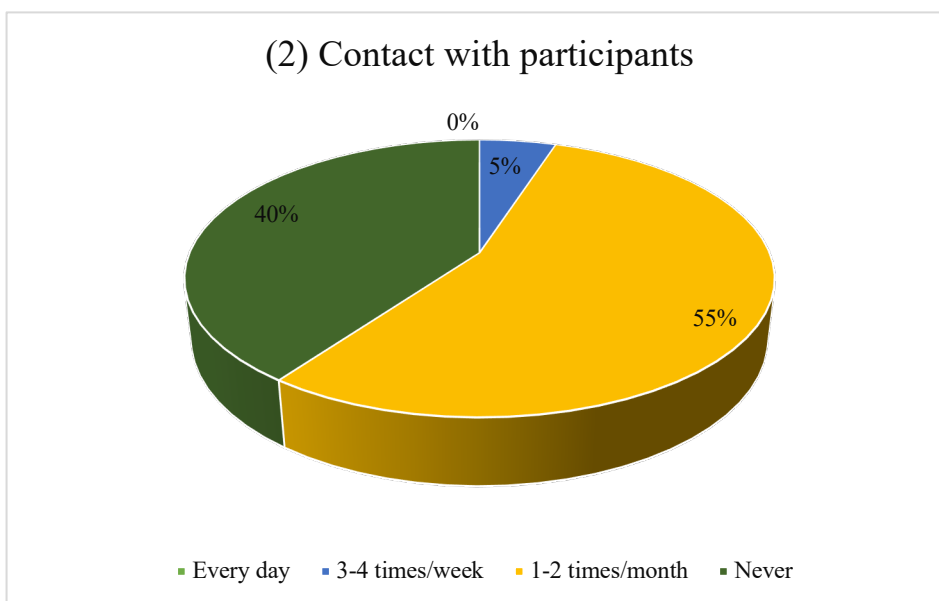


Figure 2. The contact status regarding activity management after the outbreak of the COVID-19

3.2 Problems extracted from analysis

Table 1 summarizes the problems of activities extracted from interview analysis. Difficulties were observed regarding contact between activity host and the participants. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the following activity would be announced at the end of a current activity. However, naturally it is now difficult to inform participants regarding activity times in such a manner. One activity host utilized websites to inform participants about status of activity outside the Toyoshikidai Community Space. Despite this attempt, this may have also caused doubts and distress for elderly unable to use the internet. Therefore, hosts have also tried to distribute leaflets in order to inform participants of the latest activities. However, since the leaflets are placed only in designated places, activity information cannot be obtained unless participants specifically go there. In particular, it is difficult to obtain information from leaflets for people with disabilities or those who avoid going out due to the COVID-19.

Table 1. Summary of the problems in the activities.

Group	The main problems
A (craft)	<i>Activities at the Toyoshikidai Community Space</i>
	○ Difficult to contact with others.
	<i>Activities outside the Toyoshikidai Community Space</i>
	○ There are some problems in the English conversation class. a) It is difficult to balance the payments b) During online lessons, students are not reflected or pronunciation. c) Even in the classroom, it is difficult to hear because of the use of masks. d) It is difficult to prepare the disinfection materials.
B	<i>Activities at the Toyoshikidai Community Space</i>

(café)	○ When there are many people, we tried to prevent the seats from becoming crowded.
	○ I'm curious about the opinions from participants.
<i>Activities outside the Toyoshikidai Community Space</i>	
	○ Many elderly people find it difficult to go out (shopping agency required)

3.3 Preparation status for reopening

Figure 3 describes the preparation status for reopening during the declaration of a state of emergency. The result implies that only 28% of event hosts are preparing to resume their activities. The factors that led to the resumption of activities consisted of psychological, social, and technical reasons. Hosts were afraid to cause the COVID-19 cluster themselves but many of the participants looked forward to having a place to interact again. Many hosts did not use on-line platforms because they preferred interpersonal interaction, however even when they did, some participants would not be able to participate due to technical difficulties such as not having Wi-Fi system at home, or not owning a smartphone. It is considered that the stronger the connection between these three factors, the faster the resumption of activities.

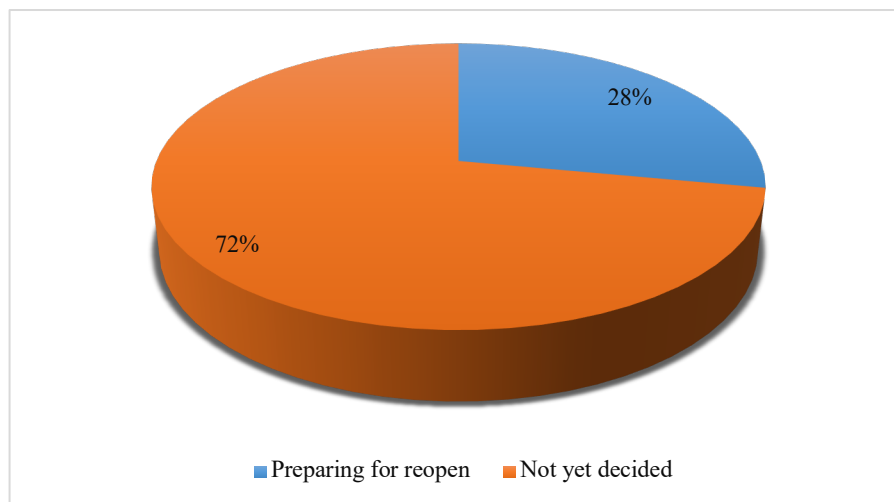


Figure 3. Preparation status for reopening

3.4 Possible factors towards activity resumption

Table 2 shows possible factors that could contribute to activity resumption. The event hosts can take many measures in order to reopen community activities. For example, managers can improve communication means via platforms such as LINE and/or Facebook. Meanwhile, event hosts can also deliver a ‘brain training menu’ to be done at home by participants.

Table 2. The possible factors contributing to activity resumption

Group	Measures
B (café)	<i>Add daily communication</i>
	<input type="radio"/> Utilizing communication ways, such as Line, Facebook among hosts <input type="radio"/> Deliver a brain training menu that can be done at home to activity participants by letter
C (music)	<i>Improve or maintain the motivation for activities</i>
	<input type="radio"/> Keeping the motivation that "I can't just stay at home" and "I want to connect with people"
	<i>Take on new challenges</i>
	<input type="radio"/> Perform role-playing online to resume activities <input type="radio"/> Confirm rules for resuming activities (e.g. understand the activity guidelines presented by the city and the Council of Social Welfare) <input type="radio"/> Try to limit the number of people (e.g. introduction of 2 shifts)
D (exercise)	<i>Leverage your experience</i>
	<input type="radio"/> I was able to smoothly disinfect, and make use of my work experience as a childcare worker.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that the emergence of COVID-19 pandemic has negatively affected the normal operation of older adults' group activities at the community center. A majority of activities became suspended soon after the first spike in cases documented in the country. However, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic these activities were held at least twice a month. Additionally, similar negative impacts on older adults' group activities caused by COVID-19 have been reported in other countries. For instance, a study in the USA conducted amongst professionals hosting social activities in community settings found that the onset of COVID-19 has additionally resulted in the cancellation of other groups' activities/events as well [3].

Due to the fact that this study's data collection commenced soon after the end of the initial state of the declaration of a state of emergency, it can be argued that the declaration contributed to the suspension of activities at this study's community center. Despite being a valid argument, it is more likely that an increased fear of infections spreading during activities played a greater role in hindering activities. This is based on what the hosts reported when asked about plans to resume activities. The hosts for the majority (about 70%) of the activities didn't have plans to restart activities soon after the initial declaration was lifted. One of the reasons for delaying was that they were scared of becoming infected together with participants.

The importance of engaging older adults in other social activities while at home when it's not possible to hold on-site group activities during the pandemic has been emphasized widely. This is one way of preventing social isolation and promoting connectivity amongst older adults amid COVID-19 and other similar pandemics. In some settings, older adults have been participating in various home-based activities via online platforms [4,5]. On the contrary, the results of this study show that the hosts and participants at the community center faced some challenges which prevented them from interacting virtually. Some participants had limited access to the internet,

while others were unable to use online applications. This made it difficult to hold home-based activities online using platforms such as Zoom or Skype. Most hosts had materials which could have been used for offline home-based activities, yet lacked the support of distributing them to participants. On a positive note, more than half of the hosts checked on their participants once or twice a month via phone or email. This may have helped the older adults not to feel isolated; however, further studies are needed in order to determine the impact of phone calls on older adults. One study suggests that phone calls to older adults during the pandemic were beneficial as they were likely to prevent them from feeling socially isolated [6].

All of the hosts were enthusiastic to restart their on-site group activities. However, the qualitative results reveal that most encountered problems communicating the latest information regarding activities to their participants. For example, they found it challenging to communicate when and where the activities would be held during this period of COVID-19. In normal circumstances, this information would be announced at the end of each activity. A calendar of activities was also made available inside the community center. But since the center became closed, it became difficult to reach out to all participants. Some hosts utilized their websites in order to convey any information regarding activities. However, this method most likely failed with those with no access to the internet. Therefore, others were distributing leaflets in particular places. But older adults who have been bound to home due to COVID-19 may not have been able to be reached through this means of communication.

Based on the findings, this study makes note of what can be done to support both hosts and participants of group activities at the community center. To begin, since there were problems engaging with older adults at home upon the suspension of group activities, a manual or guidebook can be developed that outlines other activities fit for preventing social isolation in times like this. The activity hosts can act as facilitators of communication at times like this by providing on-line or off-line communication measures. However, since hosts are also older adults who are volunteering to operate events, they are not obliged to do so. If a manual which explains procedures that can easily facilitate communication at this time of pandemic are made, participants could face lower risk of social isolation. Supplementing this, a participatory study can also be conducted in the process of creating such a guide to ensure that the views of the hosts are incorporated, and that it can be utilized without any problems.

Secondly, regarding the communication challenges between hosts and participants, other ways of conveying information regarding activities can be tested. One suggestion is to install a message board at the community center in which the hosts can use to update participants regarding the status of activities. This board can also be used to advertise events in order to recruit new participants.

Lastly, for older adults with limited digital skills, support can be provided by offering technology classes in order to improve their capacity regarding usage of various platforms and applications. One method could be linking hosts with students or volunteers willing to host such classes. Such an approach is currently being used in other settings [7,8].

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【Received】 30 March 2021