



UNIVERSITY OF STRATHCLYDE  
CENTRE FOR  
ENVIRONMENTAL LAW  
AND GOVERNANCE



UNIVERSITY  
of Prince Edward  
ISLAND



# COVID-19 Island Insights Series

No. 8, December 2020

## Okinawa Islands

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The COVID-19 Island Insights Series is an initiative spearheaded by the Strathclyde Centre for Environmental Law & Governance (SCELG) and the Institute of Island Studies (IIS) at the University of Prince Edward Island in collaboration with Island Innovation. The initiative brings together critical assessments of how specific islands around the world have performed during the COVID-19 pandemic and the extent to which their recovery plans can promote resilience and sustainability in the long term.

For more information on SCELG see  
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The Okinawa Islands, a chain of Japan's Ryukyu Archipelago, are located between Kyushu and Taiwan. The island group consists of forty inhabited islands, with the largest being Okinawa, followed by the Yaeyama and Miyako island groups. After 450 years of independent Ryukyu Kingdom, Okinawa became one of the Japanese 47 prefectures in 1879

Size: 2,281 km<sup>2</sup> (53% is Okinawa)

Population: 1.45 million (90% live in Okinawa)<sup>1</sup>

#### COVID-19 data and timeline (at 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2020)

First case detected on 4 February 2020

Number of confirmed cases until 3 November 2020: 3,392 (or 0.229% per capita vs 0.081% in Japan and 0.227% in Tokyo).

Number of fatalities: 63 (1,795 in Japan and 459 in Tokyo).

Schools closed during March 3-5 and August 16-30 on a selected basis.

The government requested voluntary restraint from travel based on the emergency declaration on 17 April and lifted on 25<sup>th</sup> May

The Go-To-Travel Campaign started on 22<sup>nd</sup> July

## Hiroshi Kakazu

Dr. Hiroshi Kakazu is a Professor Emeritus of the University of the Ryukyus and President Emeritus of the Japan Society of Island Studies. He wrote several books on island economies and sustainability. He is the Chairperson of the Remote Island Development Panel of Okinawa Prefecture, responsible for drafting a sustainable development plan for the coming decade.



**OKINAWA ISLANDS<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> Data obtained from the Okinawa Prefecture website, <https://www.pref.okinawa.jp/toukeika/>.

<sup>2</sup> Map downloaded from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ryukyu\\_Islands](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ryukyu_Islands).

## COVID-19 on the Okinawa Islands

The epicenter of the coronavirus in Japan was on the cruise ship *Diamond Princess* which visited

Okinawa Island on the way to Hong Kong. The first wave of COVID-19 cases in Okinawa started from 4 February to 2 May; after that, the new cases stayed at zero until 11 July, when the second wave started (see chart below). The first wave of COVID-19 cases from 4 February to 2 May was caused mainly by “corona refugees” and returnees from mainland Japan and abroad, particularly from Tokyo and Osaka, where about 50% of Japan’s infected cases were reported.

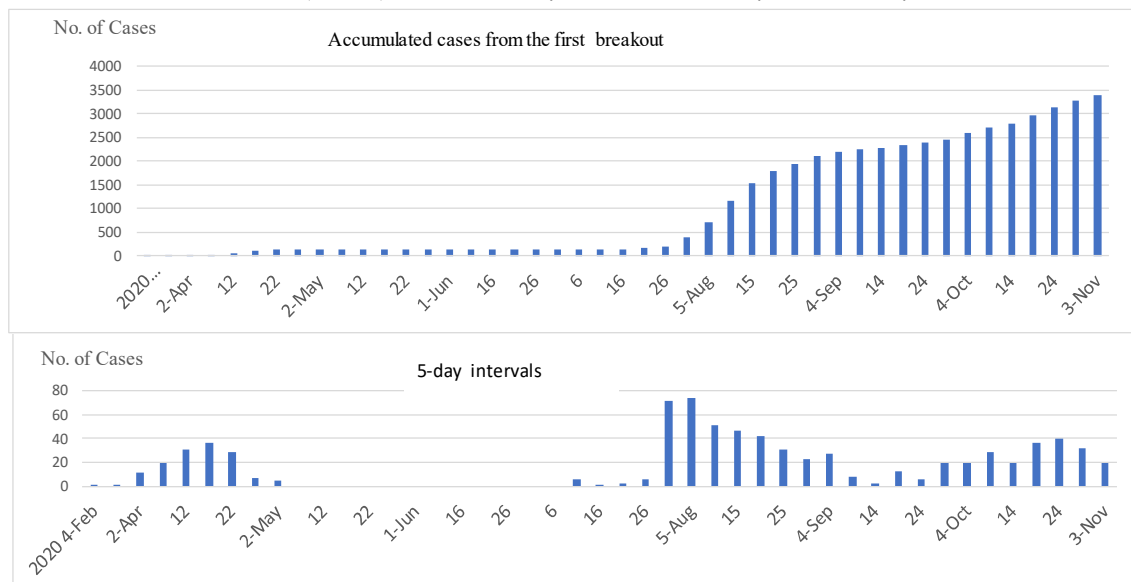
The Japanese government declared a state of emergency to all Japanese prefectures on 17 April, including Okinawa. The virus roared back after the lift of the emergency declaration on 25 May, followed by the Go-To-Travel Campaign started on 22 July to help boost, in particular, local tourism and hospitality operators. The coronavirus jumped to 3,392 cases, an increase of 21 times from 22 July to 3 November,

making Okinawa the worst case among all Japanese prefectures.

The second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic was accelerated by a specific factor in Okinawa, namely the presence of the huge U.S. military bases on Okinawa Island. Since the U.S. military authority in Okinawa reported the first positive coronavirus case on 2 July, the virus surged to 429 cases on 3 November 2020. U.S. bases highlight the “loophole” in Okinawa’s quarantine measures because of the U.S.-Japan security arrangements<sup>3</sup>.

Although the infection is concentrated in the Naha City of Okinawa Island, the virus has spread to Okinawa’s remote island areas—Miyako Island, Ishigaki Island, Iriomote Island, and Yonaguni Island, about 300-400 km south of Okinawa Island. Although the infected are mostly young and middle-aged persons under fifty with mostly unknown routes of transmission, the cluster infection cases in elder homes and medical facilities have been rising. Sixty-three persons had died in Okinawa from the infection as of November 3. The Okinawa Prefec-

Number of Coronavirus (Covid-19) Cases in Okinawa by Selected Months and Days: 2020 4 February ~ 3 November



Okinawa Prefectural Government website (Accessed on 4 November, 2020)

[https://www.pref.okinawa.jp/site/hoken/chiikihoken/kekka/covid19\\_hasseijoukyou.html](https://www.pref.okinawa.jp/site/hoken/chiikihoken/kekka/covid19_hasseijoukyou.html)

<sup>3</sup> *Okinawa Times*, “COVID-19 Special Report.” 20 August 2020.

tural Board of Education announced school closures during March 3-15 in the first wave and August 16-30 in the second wave of coronavirus. School closures and their durations have been implemented on a selective basis according to the regional stage of infectious conditions. Some schools cut short their summer breaks.

### *COVID-19 Containment Measures*

The Japanese government announced its coronavirus preventive measures without implementing lockdowns. The preventive measures are implemented on a voluntary basis, instead of mandated lockdown. Examples of outings that are not covered by preventive measures would include activities essential for maintaining daily life such as visiting hospitals, purchasing food, medicine, and daily necessities, going to work as necessary, exercising outdoors, or taking a walk. On Okinawa Island, medical facilities and staff are overwhelmed by the increasing number of infected patients. The Japanese government dispatched emergency medical staff in October at the request of the Okinawa governor. The local governments rented hotel rooms to accommodate mild patients or those required to stay-at-home without the need for medical care.

### **Key socioeconomic pressures in the Okinawa Islands during COVID-19**

Okinawa is facing a looming economic crisis because of its heavy dependence on the travel and tourism industry as a key driver of economic activities. In terms of GDP, overall economic growth is expected to decline by about 10% this year, which is the worst growth rate since the Pacific War<sup>4</sup>. I live in Okinawa's most

tourist-concentrated area. My anecdotal observations are that the tourists have returned at about 20% of their pre-COVID levels after the implementation of the Go-To-Travel Campaign in July, which offers subsidies to cover half of the eligible travel expenses.

There is a huge chunk of the informal sector in Okinawa Islands, particularly in the tourism-related service sector, where part time and single-mother workers are concentrated<sup>5</sup>. According to *The Okinawa Times* report, the COVID-19 pandemic hit these households and individuals the hardest economically as well as mentally, causing considerable distress and impaired ability, leading to social anxiety disorders or mental illness<sup>6</sup>. These households and individuals are mostly excluded from the public subsidy system. Psychologists or licensed mental therapists are conducting stress tests and advising these distressed people through a website. Mental care of school children living in social isolation during the school closure is a particular concern. Although online learning programs help mitigate atresia and encourage children to catch up with their learning, some remote islands are not even connected to the Internet. It is ironic that digital technology is expected to overcome the "tyranny of distance"<sup>7</sup> of remote islands, but the pandemic has revealed that technology has created further disparities, as evidenced by the disadvantages of these island societies.<sup>8</sup> Anecdotaly, it appears as though the stay-at-home policy, even on a voluntary basis, is generating domestic violence and abuse of children. Prejudice and discrimination against corona-infected families and persons are on the rise in all Japanese prefectures.

<sup>4</sup> *Okinawa Times*, "COVID-19 Special Report." 10 October 2020.

<sup>5</sup> See Kakazu, H. 2012. *Okinawa in the Asia Pacific*. Okinawa Times.

<sup>6</sup> *Okinawa Times*, "COVID-19 Special Report." 15 October 2020.

<sup>7</sup> The term was first coined by a geographer, William Bunge, and popularized by historian Geoffrey Blainey's bestseller

book. See Bunge, W. May 1961. "The Structure of Contemporary American Geographic Research." *The Professional Geographer*. 13(3): 19–23. Blainey, G. 1966. *The Tyranny of Distance: How Distance Shaped Australia's History*. London: Macmillan. This author used the term in the modern economic context of small islands in his books on island sustainability.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 30 October 2020.

## Post Covid-19 recovery and the Sustainable Development Goals

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The COVID-19 pandemic is providing us with a good incentive to change islands' lifestyles and sustainable policies. Islanders realize the risk of heavy dependency on imported food supply and the inbound tourism industry and have been forced to thinking about diversifying their industrial structure in line with the sustainable and environmentally friendly approaches and strategies. Notably, improved food security systems, sustainable energy and tourism, and remote work should become focal points for the post-COVID-19 era.

Okinawa depends on fossil fuels for about 90% of its energy needs. Our clean and sustainable energy policy is far behind that on the other prefectures. Sustainable tourism is also part of Okinawa's post-COVID-19 agenda. Some Okinawan islands are already suffering from over-tourism, resulting from the increasing number of tourists beyond their carrying capacities. Our food self-sufficiency rate declined from 40% to 27 % in 2019 on a calory basis<sup>9</sup>. In this sense, the pandemic is providing us an excellent opportunity to reconstruct our island lifestyles<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> See footnote 1.

<sup>10</sup> See Kakazu, H. 2011. "Challenges for Sustainable Tourism: The Case of Okinawa." In J. Carlsen and Butler, R.

eds. *Island Tourism Development: Journeys to Sustainability*. London: CABI Publication: 171-185.

### Published COVID-19 Island Insights Papers

#1. Malta. November 2020

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#3. Grenada. November 2020

#4. Trinidad and Tobago. November 2020

#5. Shetland Islands. November 2020

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#8. Okinawa Islands. December 2020



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