

A growing number of Japanese have become **recluses**

About a year ago Mika Shibata's youngest son returned to the family home and went wordlessly upstairs. He has yet to emerge from his bedroom. At the age of 26, he sleeps during the day and stays awake at night. His mother feeds and shelters him, hoping he will emerge from this state. But she **frets** he never will. "The longer this situation continues, the harder it is for him to step back into society," she says.

fret 烦恼; 焦急

The Shibata family's pain is shared by many others in Japan. The government says there are more than 1m hikikomori, or **recluses**, defined as people who have played no part in society for at least six months. Many have barely stepped outside their homes for decades.

recluse 隐士; 隐居者

More than half of Japan's recluses are now aged over 40, according to a **Cabinet** Office survey this year. That shocked the government, which had assumed the condition mainly **afflicted** the young. Tamaki Saito, a **psychiatrist** who popularised the term hikikomori, says the government is partly to blame for turning a blind eye. Now the problem has grown. If it is not tackled seriously, many more might become recluses, he says.

cabinet 内阁; 私下的

afflict 折磨; 使痛苦

psychiatrist 精神病学家

Yet luring isolated people in their 40s and 50s back into society is hard. The city can send counsellors out to homes only if asked. But often families themselves cannot communicate with their reclusive children. Mrs Shibata speculates that her son was bullied at work, but cannot be sure. He has not said a word since he returned. One day the bright, sensitive man she knew will bounce back, she hopes. But many may never come out of their shells.