



Death penalty's impact on families: Japan

This is a submission by CrimeInfo, a Japanese NGO specializing in the provision of information concerning the death penalty and criminal justice issues in Japan.

This report provides information on the situations of family members of those sentenced to death.

I. Harms to families

During the period from September 2023 to March 2024, CrimeInfo conducted a survey by interviewing family members of death row prisoners with support from the Delegation of the European Union (PI/2021/428-535, 2022–2024). The interviewees are parents, grandparent, child, and siblings of prisoners whose death sentences have been finalized¹.

A. Attack from the media

One interviewee said that right after the arrest of his family, the media reporters opened the entrance door without permission and came into the house. He guessed that they had wanted to film him and other family members getting angry. He recalled that he didn't have the strength to be angry.

Another interviewee said that since the reporters came to her house, her mother had been bedridden.

B. Isolation and discrimination

Several interviewees said that after the arrests of their family members, they avoided people as much as possible and stayed inside the house. None of the interviewees had someone to talk to about their worries.

One interviewee said, "not only the media but even supporters and lawyers all looked like 'enemies' to me, when the death sentence was finalized."

Several interviewees told us that they had moved to remote places after incidents. One did so to avoid neighbors' eyes. Another was pushed to do so by people of the community.

¹ The report of the survey will be soon available at <https://www.crimeinfo.jp/death-penalty/>

C. The fear of execution

The condemned person is informed of their execution only on the morning of the day itself, and it is carried out immediately afterward. Families are never notified in advance. They only receive a phone call from the detention center after the execution.

Almost all the interviewees expressed their fear for the executions. Several interviewees said that 'the death penalty' are the most frightening words and in the daily news, the words 'death sentence confirmed' or 'execution carried out' always caught their eyes. Another said that she wanted to die before the execution.

II. Return of remains to families

In July 2018, Chizuo Matsumoto, former guru of the Aum Shinrikyo Cult commonly known as Shoko Asahara, was executed. After that, Matsumoto's second and fourth daughters disputed over the possession of the remains. The Tokyo Family Court decided in favor of the second daughter and the Supreme Court upheld it in 2021.

However, the government of Japan refused to hand over the remains to the second daughter, arguing that successor groups to Aum Shinrikyo would use them as an object of worship. The second daughter filed a lawsuit against the government, and the Tokyo District Court ordered the government to hand over the remains to the second daughter in 2024. On 5 February 2026, the Tokyo High Court upheld the lower court's decision. But on 18 February, the government appealed to the Supreme Court.

The second daughter says that she only wants to quietly grieve as a daughter.

For further information, please contact CrimeInfo (info@crimeinfo.jp).