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Community-Based Hypertension Control, Primary Care Governance, and Cardiovascular Risk Reduction: A Comparative Public Health Analysis of Finland and Japan

Laura Whitman[1]

Laura Whitman

Department of Global Health and Population
Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health
Email: laura.whitman@harvard.edu

***Corresponding Author:** whitman@harvard.edu

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ABSTRACT

Hypertension remains one of the leading modifiable risk factors for cardiovascular disease, stroke, chronic kidney disease, and premature mortality worldwide. This study examines how community-based hypertension control strategies influence cardiovascular risk reduction through a comparative public health analysis of Finland and Japan. The article argues that effective hypertension control depends not only on pharmacological treatment but also on primary care governance, dietary salt reduction, health literacy, community screening, behavioral adaptation, and institutional coordination across healthcare and public health systems. Using comparative health systems analysis, epidemiological synthesis, preventive medicine theory, and evidence-based policy evaluation, the study compares two high-income countries with historically elevated cardiovascular risks but distinct institutional pathways for population-level blood pressure control. Finland represents a community prevention model shaped by the North Karelia Project, primary care strengthening, and food-system reform. Japan represents a longevity-oriented health system with extensive screening, universal insurance, salt-reduction campaigns, and strong municipal health governance. The findings indicate that sustained hypertension reduction requires integration between clinical management, population prevention, behavioral change, and food-environment regulation. This article contributes to medical and health sciences scholarship by integrating epidemiology, cardiovascular prevention, behavioral medicine, health systems governance, and public health policy into a comparative framework for chronic disease control.

Keywords: hypertension; cardiovascular disease; primary care; public health prevention; Finland; Japan; salt reduction; community health; chronic disease management; health systems governance

INTRODUCTION

Hypertension is among the most important preventable determinants of global morbidity and mortality. Elevated blood pressure substantially increases the risk of ischemic heart disease, stroke, heart failure, chronic kidney disease, vascular dementia, and premature death (WHO, 2023). Although effective antihypertensive medications are widely available, global blood pressure control remains inadequate because diagnosis, treatment adherence, lifestyle modification, health literacy, and primary care continuity remain uneven across populations (NCD Risk Factor Collaboration, 2021). The World Health Organization estimates that hundreds of millions of adults with hypertension remain undiagnosed or inadequately controlled, making hypertension both a clinical and health systems challenge (WHO, 2023).

The global burden of hypertension reflects demographic aging, dietary sodium exposure, obesity, physical inactivity, alcohol consumption, psychosocial stress, urbanization, and unequal access to preventive healthcare (Mills et al., 2020). Cardiovascular diseases remain the leading cause of mortality worldwide, and hypertension is a major upstream risk factor linking behavioral exposures, social determinants, and clinical outcomes (GBD 2020 Risk Factors Collaborators, 2022). Consequently, hypertension control has become a central priority in global non-communicable disease prevention, universal health coverage, and primary care strengthening.

The scientific and institutional relevance of hypertension lies in its dual nature. Clinically, hypertension is measurable, treatable, and strongly associated with major cardiovascular events. Public health-wise, its distribution is shaped by food systems, social norms, primary care access, medication affordability, health literacy, and community prevention infrastructure. This duality means that successful hypertension control cannot rely exclusively on clinic-based prescribing. It requires coordinated action across health services, community settings, food policy, behavioral intervention, and long-term monitoring.

Finland and Japan provide analytically valuable comparative contexts. Finland historically experienced very high cardiovascular mortality, particularly in eastern regions, during the mid-twentieth century. The North Karelia Project became a landmark public health intervention demonstrating that community-based dietary change, smoking reduction, blood pressure control, and primary care engagement could reduce cardiovascular mortality substantially over time (Puska et al., 2009). Japan, by contrast, has achieved one of the highest life expectancies globally but has historically faced high stroke risk associated with elevated salt intake and hypertension (Ikeda et al., 2011). Japan's approach has combined universal health insurance, municipal health screening, public education, clinical treatment, and gradual salt reduction efforts.

These cases are scientifically important because both countries demonstrate that hypertension control

is not merely a clinical intervention but a population-level governance process. Finland illustrates the power of community mobilization and food-environment reform, while Japan illustrates the value of systematic screening, health insurance coverage, and municipal public health capacity. Their comparison enables evaluation of how different institutional pathways can reduce cardiovascular risk through primary care, prevention, and behavioral adaptation.

Existing literature provides extensive evidence regarding hypertension epidemiology and treatment. The NCD Risk Factor Collaboration (2021) documented global variation in hypertension prevalence, diagnosis, treatment, and control, showing that health system performance strongly influences outcomes. Mills et al. (2020) emphasized that hypertension control requires access to standardized care, affordable medications, patient adherence, and system-level quality improvement. The WHO HEARTS technical package highlights protocol-based treatment, access to medicines, risk-based management, team care, and monitoring as central to hypertension control (WHO, 2021). Other scholars emphasize dietary sodium reduction as a cost-effective population intervention for lowering blood pressure and preventing cardiovascular disease (He et al., 2020).

Behavioral and social science literature adds further insight. Marmot (2005) demonstrated that cardiovascular risk is shaped by social determinants, including income, education, work conditions, and social gradients. Michie et al. (2011) showed that behavior change depends on capability, opportunity, and motivation. These perspectives are essential because hypertension management involves daily behaviors such as medication adherence, salt intake, alcohol consumption, physical activity, weight control, and self-monitoring.

Health systems scholarship further indicates that primary care is central to chronic disease control. Starfield et al. (2005) argued that strong primary care improves population health by supporting first-contact access, continuity, comprehensiveness, and coordination. Kruk et al. (2018) emphasized that high-quality health systems must produce measurable health improvements rather than merely service availability. These arguments are directly relevant to hypertension because diagnosis and treatment require repeated contact, longitudinal follow-up, risk assessment, and patient-centered management.

However, current health sciences literature remains limited in explaining how community prevention, food policy, primary care governance, and clinical treatment interact across different institutional systems. While previous studies emphasize pharmacological control, existing scholarship often underanalyzes the role of community norms and food environments. Other medical scholars focus on national prevalence trends but provide limited comparative analysis of institutional mechanisms behind successful blood pressure reduction. Public health implementation literature also remains insufficiently integrated with cardiovascular epidemiology.

Several research gaps remain. First, the theoretical gap concerns inadequate integration of clinical hypertension management with population prevention and health governance theory. Second, the empirical healthcare gap concerns limited comparative explanation of how historically high-risk countries achieved

cardiovascular risk reduction through different pathways. Third, the institutional governance gap concerns insufficient attention to how primary care, municipal health systems, food industry reform, and national policy coordinate. Fourth, the behavioral implementation gap concerns limited analysis of how communities translate health information into sustained dietary and treatment behaviors. Fifth, the equity gap concerns the risk that hypertension control improves average population outcomes while leaving disadvantaged groups underdiagnosed or undertreated.

The novelty of this article lies in its interdisciplinary integration of cardiovascular epidemiology, primary care governance, behavioral medicine, community health promotion, and food-system policy. Rather than treating hypertension as an individual clinical condition only, this article conceptualizes hypertension control as a multilevel public health process linking institutional capacity, behavioral adaptation, clinical management, and population cardiovascular outcomes.

The analytical framework follows the causal pathway: healthcare governance → community prevention and primary care accessibility → behavioral adaptation and treatment adherence → blood pressure control → cardiovascular risk reduction and population health resilience. Governance shapes screening, reimbursement, medication access, workforce organization, data systems, and food policy. Community prevention influences salt intake, health literacy, and social norms. Primary care supports diagnosis, treatment, monitoring, and adherence. Clinical improvement is achieved when these elements operate together.

This study aims to analyze comparatively how community-based hypertension control strategies in Finland and Japan influence primary care performance, behavioral adaptation, blood pressure control, cardiovascular risk reduction, and population health resilience.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a comparative public health research design integrating cardiovascular epidemiology, health systems analysis, behavioral medicine, and evidence-based policy evaluation to examine hypertension control in Finland and Japan. These countries were selected because they represent two distinct yet influential models of population-level cardiovascular prevention: Finland demonstrates a historically significant community intervention and food-system reform pathway associated with the North Karelia Project and subsequent national prevention policies, whereas Japan demonstrates a universal insurance, municipal screening, and salt-reduction pathway within a long-lived aging society. The unit of analysis consists of national and community-level hypertension control systems, including screening, primary care follow-up, dietary sodium reduction, medication access, health education, municipal public health governance, and cardiovascular outcome pathways. Analytical variables include hypertension prevalence, diagnosis, treatment, control, salt intake, primary care accessibility, antihypertensive medication adherence, health literacy, community engagement, food-environment reform, stroke mortality, cardiovascular mortality, and equity-sensitive implementation.

The empirical foundation consists of peer-reviewed cardiovascular epidemiology studies, WHO hypertension and non-communicable disease reports, OECD health system indicators, national public health evidence from Finland and Japan, population risk factor studies, and systematic reviews on salt reduction, primary care, and hypertension treatment. No individual-level patient records, interviews, or identifiable clinical data were used. Comparative analysis was conducted through structured synthesis of epidemiological trends, institutional policy evidence, and clinical prevention literature. Triangulation was achieved by comparing international health reports with peer-reviewed longitudinal and population studies. Ethical considerations include avoidance of fabricated clinical data, recognition of population heterogeneity, and attention to equity in hypertension diagnosis and care. The study is limited by differences in national measurement methods, historical data comparability, and the complexity of attributing cardiovascular trends to single interventions; nevertheless, it provides analytically transferable insight into multilevel hypertension governance and chronic disease prevention.

Findings and Discussion

1. Healthcare Governance and Institutional Pathways to Hypertension Control

The comparative evidence demonstrates that hypertension control depends on institutional coordination across healthcare delivery, public health policy, and community-level prevention. Finland and Japan achieved cardiovascular risk reduction through different but complementary governance pathways.

Finland's approach emerged from a period of exceptionally high cardiovascular mortality, particularly in North Karelia. The North Karelia Project mobilized community organizations, primary care providers, schools, food producers, media, and policymakers to reduce major cardiovascular risk factors, including high blood pressure, smoking, and saturated fat intake (Puska et al., 2009). The intervention was not limited to clinical treatment; it transformed community norms, food availability, and preventive health behavior.

Japan's approach has been shaped by universal health insurance, municipal health examinations, employer-based screening, and public health campaigns targeting salt intake and blood pressure awareness. Japan's historical stroke burden was strongly linked with hypertension and high sodium consumption, particularly in regions with traditional salty diets (Ikeda et al., 2011). Systematic screening helped identify elevated blood pressure earlier, while health education and treatment access contributed to long-term risk reduction.

The comparison shows that Finland's strength lies in community mobilization and food-environment transformation, whereas Japan's strength lies in systematic screening and institutionalized health surveillance. Both systems demonstrate that hypertension control requires governance beyond individual clinical encounters.

These findings align with WHO HEARTS guidance emphasizing standardized treatment, monitoring, and system-level organization (WHO, 2021). They also extend primary care theory by showing that community health governance and food policy are essential complements to clinical management.

The public health implication is that hypertension programs should not be designed as isolated screening campaigns. Screening must connect to follow-up care, medication access, dietary support, and community-level environmental change.

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2. Dietary Salt Reduction, Behavioral Adaptation, and Cardiovascular Risk

Dietary sodium intake is a major modifiable determinant of blood pressure. High sodium intake increases extracellular fluid volume, vascular resistance, and blood pressure, particularly among salt-sensitive individuals and older adults (He et al., 2020). Finland and Japan both recognized the importance of salt reduction, but implemented strategies through different institutional mechanisms.

In Finland, dietary reform was closely connected with broader cardiovascular prevention. Public health campaigns encouraged reduced salt intake, lower saturated fat consumption, increased vegetable use, and healthier food production. Collaboration with the food industry helped reformulate products and shift population dietary norms.

In Japan, salt reduction has been especially important because traditional foods such as pickles, miso soup, soy sauce, and salted fish historically contributed to high sodium intake. Public health education emphasized reducing salt in household cooking and processed foods. Municipal health workers and community programs played important roles in translating dietary guidance into daily behavior.

The comparative evidence indicates that behavior change is more effective when individual education is supported by food-environment modification. Telling patients to reduce salt is less effective if affordable, culturally acceptable, low-sodium alternatives are unavailable. Conversely, food reformulation can reduce sodium exposure without requiring constant individual decision-making.

This finding aligns with behavioral medicine theory, which emphasizes that behavior depends on capability, opportunity, and motivation (Michie et al., 2011). Salt reduction requires knowledge, taste adaptation, family support, food labeling, product reformulation, and clinical reinforcement.

Clinically, salt reduction can enhance antihypertensive medication effectiveness and reduce cardiovascular risk. Public health policy should therefore combine clinical counseling with food labeling, industry targets, school education, and community nutrition programs.

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3. Comparative Matrix of Healthcare Governance, Clinical Intervention, and Health Outcomes

Table 1. Comparative Matrix of Healthcare Governance, Clinical Intervention, and Health Outcomes

Variable	Case 1: Finland	Case 2: Japan	Empirical Evidence	Analytical Interpretation

Governance model	Community prevention integrated with primary care and food reform	Universal insurance with municipal screening and preventive health programs	WHO, OECD, and national cardiovascular evidence	Institutional design shapes hypertension control pathways
Historical cardiovascular risk	Very high coronary heart disease mortality	High stroke burden linked with hypertension and salt intake	Longitudinal cardiovascular studies	Baseline risk influenced intervention priorities
Primary intervention mechanism	Community mobilization, dietary reform, blood pressure control	Screening, salt reduction, treatment access, municipal health guidance	North Karelia evidence; Japanese public health studies	Different mechanisms can produce cardiovascular risk reduction
Clinical pathway	Primary care diagnosis and treatment with population prevention	Routine health checks and follow-up treatment through insured care	Health system indicators and epidemiological studies	Screening must connect to treatment continuity
Behavioral focus	Reduced saturated fat, smoking, and salt	Reduced salt intake and improved hypertension awareness	Nutrition and prevention literature	Behavior change requires culturally embedded strategies
Implementation strength	Strong community engagement and food-system change	Strong screening infrastructure and health surveillance	Public health program evidence	Prevention effectiveness depends on institutional continuity
Equity concern	Regional and socioeconomic cardiovascular gradients	Aging population and regional dietary variation	Social determinants literature	Average improvement may mask unequal control
Population health outcome	Large long-term decline in cardiovascular mortality	Long-term decline in stroke and improved life	WHO and OECD indicators	Sustained prevention reduces population risk

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The table demonstrates that Finland and Japan achieved hypertension-related cardiovascular improvements through different but complementary strategies. Finland shows that community-level prevention and food reform can transform population risk. Japan shows that systematic screening and universal health coverage can support early detection and treatment.

Analytically, the comparison reveals that hypertension control requires both population-wide and high-risk strategies. Population-wide salt reduction shifts average blood pressure distribution, while clinical treatment reduces risk among individuals with diagnosed hypertension. Neither strategy alone is sufficient.

This interpretation extends previous hypertension scholarship by integrating clinical pathways with public health governance. It also shows that cardiovascular prevention is cumulative: long-term mortality reductions result from sustained changes in diet, treatment, smoking, cholesterol, emergency care, and broader social conditions.

Clinical implications include the need for standardized treatment protocols, home blood pressure monitoring, medication adherence support, and risk-based management. Public health implications include salt reduction policy, community education, and equitable screening access.

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4. Primary Care, Medication Adherence, and Long-Term Treatment Continuity

Hypertension is often asymptomatic, making medication adherence and long-term follow-up difficult. Effective control requires repeated measurement, patient education, appropriate drug therapy, dose adjustment, and monitoring for side effects. Primary care is therefore central to hypertension management.

Finland's primary care system supported cardiovascular prevention through community health centers, nurses, physicians, and health education. Long-term follow-up allowed clinical management to reinforce population prevention messages. The integration between community health campaigns and clinical care strengthened legitimacy and continuity.

Japan's healthcare system provides broad access to physicians and routine health checks. However, frequent access does not automatically ensure optimal chronic disease management unless follow-up, risk stratification, and adherence support are coordinated. Japan's aging population increases the importance of polypharmacy management, renal monitoring, and cardiovascular risk assessment.

The comparative evidence suggests that medication adherence depends on patient understanding, trust, affordability, side-effect management, and continuity with healthcare providers. Public health systems must therefore support both pharmacological and behavioral interventions.

This aligns with chronic care models emphasizing informed patients, prepared care teams, decision support, and clinical information systems (Wagner et al., 2001). It also supports evidence that protocol-based hypertension

care improves treatment quality and control rates (WHO, 2021).

Clinically, hypertension management should combine lifestyle counseling, home monitoring, medication simplification, fixed-dose combinations where appropriate, and team-based care. Health systems should monitor control rates rather than only diagnosis or treatment rates.

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5. Health Equity, Aging, and Population Health Resilience

Hypertension control is strongly influenced by social determinants. Income, education, occupation, food access, health literacy, housing, stress, and healthcare access shape risk exposure and treatment outcomes (Marmot, 2005). Finland and Japan both demonstrate population-level success, but equity challenges remain.

In Finland, regional and socioeconomic differences in cardiovascular risk require ongoing prevention targeting disadvantaged groups. Community-based strategies are valuable because they can address social norms and local food environments rather than relying solely on individual clinical behavior.

In Japan, population aging increases hypertension prevalence and complicates management through multimorbidity, frailty, and polypharmacy. Regional dietary differences and rural aging may also influence hypertension risk and healthcare access. Municipal public health systems are therefore important for sustaining prevention among older adults.

The comparative evidence indicates that population health resilience depends on sustained institutional capacity. Hypertension prevention must adapt to demographic aging, food system changes, sedentary lifestyles, and healthcare workforce constraints.

The theoretical implication is that chronic disease resilience emerges from the interaction between individual behavior, primary care systems, and social environments. Hypertension control is therefore a test of whether health systems can manage long-term risk rather than episodic illness.

Policy implications include equity-sensitive screening, community nutrition programs, access to affordable medications, support for older adults, home blood pressure monitoring, and integration of cardiovascular prevention into primary care performance indicators.

Clinical/Public Health Propositions

Proposition 1: Hypertension control improves when primary care governance is integrated with community-level prevention.

Clinical treatment is more effective when supported by screening systems, community education, dietary reform, and long-term follow-up.

Proposition 2: Dietary salt reduction mediates the relationship between public health intervention and population blood pressure decline.

Food-environment reform and culturally adapted nutrition education reduce sodium exposure and shift cardiovascular risk distribution.

Proposition 3: Treatment continuity mediates the relationship between hypertension diagnosis and cardiovascular risk reduction.

Diagnosis alone is insufficient; sustained medication adherence, monitoring, and clinical adjustment are required.

Proposition 4: Equity-sensitive hypertension governance strengthens population health resilience.

Programs must address regional, socioeconomic, aging-related, and access-related disparities to prevent unequal cardiovascular outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This study analyzed how community-based hypertension control strategies in Finland and Japan influence primary care performance, behavioral adaptation, blood pressure control, cardiovascular risk reduction, and population health resilience. The comparative evidence demonstrates that hypertension control is not simply a matter of prescribing medication. It is a multilevel public health process involving healthcare governance, dietary environments, behavioral adaptation, primary care continuity, and institutional prevention capacity.

Finland demonstrates the effectiveness of community-based cardiovascular prevention and food-system reform. Its experience shows that population risk can change when public health interventions mobilize communities, primary care, schools, media, and industry. Japan demonstrates the importance of universal coverage, municipal screening, salt-reduction campaigns, and long-term preventive health infrastructure. Its experience shows that systematic detection and culturally adapted dietary intervention can support cardiovascular risk reduction in an aging society.

The theoretical contribution of this article lies in integrating cardiovascular epidemiology, chronic care theory, behavioral medicine, and health systems governance into a comparative framework. The empirical contribution lies in explaining how two countries with historically elevated cardiovascular risks used different institutional pathways to improve population health.

Clinically, the findings support standardized hypertension protocols, home blood pressure monitoring, medication adherence support, and primary care follow-up. From a public health perspective, salt reduction, food reformulation, community education, and equity-sensitive screening are essential. Policy systems should monitor hypertension control rates and cardiovascular outcomes rather than focusing only on service volume.

The study is limited by reliance on secondary evidence and by difficulty attributing long-term cardiovascular mortality changes to single interventions. Future research should use comparative longitudinal datasets to examine blood pressure control by age, sex, region, socioeconomic status, and comorbidity. Further work should also assess digital blood pressure monitoring, fixed-dose combination therapy, and community pharmacist involvement.

Ultimately, this article argues that sustainable hypertension control requires coordinated clinical and public health governance capable of transforming both individual treatment pathways and population risk environments.

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