The distribution of people across the Japanese territory is highly uneven. According to the latest census figures of 2005, total population density amounted to 343 persons per square kilometre (Sōmushō Tōkeikyoku 2006a, Internet), thus comparable with the density figures of Belgium or the Netherlands. Broken down by prefectures, population density ranges from 72 in Hokkaido to 5,751 persons per square kilometre in Tokyo Prefecture (see Figure 1). The highest densities can be found in a 1,000km stretch connecting the capital region with the old industrial area of north Kyushu. Apart from this “Pacific Belt”, in which most economic activities are located, there are only two other areas with higher-than-average densities: the island prefecture of Okinawa in the far south, and northeastern Miyagi Prefecture; the latter incorporates Sendai, the central city of the Tōhoku Region. The northernmost part of Japan as well as some remote prefectures of the southwest, on the other hand, are only sparsely settled.

It has to be admitted though, that conventional density figures such as those presented above are somewhat misleading, since the mountainous surface structure of Japan means that almost all settlements are restricted to a much smaller part of the land. Steep slopes with a gradient of 15 degrees or more occupy 47.9 per cent of the territory. When the population is related to the remaining land, this results in a real density of more than 650 persons per square kilometre. The actual spatial concentration of population in Japan, however, is even higher than it would be if natural limitations were the only factor. In 2005, 46 per cent of all inhabitants of Japan (about 58.8 million people) lived on 8.8 per cent of the territory, that is, the area occupied by the three large metropolitan regions of Tokyo, Nagoya and Osaka (own calculations, based on Sōmushō Tōkeikyoku 2006a, Internet). A

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1 This area includes the prefectures of Saitama, Chiba, Tokyo, Kanagawa, Aichi, Kyoto, Osaka and Hyogo.
Figure 1. The distribution of population by prefecture, 2005.

Source: Sōmushō Tōkeikyoku 2006a, Internet.