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## **The Impact of Rapid Urbanization on South Korean Family Composition and the Elderly Population in South Korea**

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### **Abstract**

This research uses data from the South Korean Census of Population to examine changes in population distribution across urban and rural areas of the country, and to examine changes in family composition. Findings are consistent with findings from similar published research in illustrating the impact of recent population and economic factors on traditional Korean Society. More specifically, the research examines movement of younger cohorts to urban areas, and an increasing proportion of individuals living in nuclear family households as opposed to the traditional stem family. The pattern of change in family composition has particular consequences for the elderly in Korean Society.

### **Keywords**

South Korea, aging, family composition, migration

## **Introduction and Background**

Review of recent research on socio-demographic changes in the Korean Republic reveals a salient theme of patterns associated with prevailing beliefs about modernization and its effect. For example, term "X-generation" emerged in South Korean public discourse in the early 1990s at about the time South Korea's first non-military government was installed. The new government was installed in 1993, and the country has experienced significant economic growth in the last decade (Kim, 1996; Rhee et al, 1994). A generation came to adulthood without the experience of military rule or economic deprivations that characterized previous generations. This recent generation of young adults knows the experience of leisure, self expression, and upward mobility. Cultural symbols and beliefs associated with the American X-generation phenomenon helped to infuse individualism into a society previously rooted in group-oriented, traditional Korean values. Lee (2003) refers to a "rare and uncharacteristic" struggle between old and young and describes this generation as the new face of South Korea. The foundations of this transition in Korean culture and values are discussed by Kim and Rhee (1999). These changes and transitions in government, cultural values, and economy have generated changes in other areas including changes in population distribution, family composition, and living situation of the elderly population. Of particular interest for this research is the shift in urban-rural distribution of the population and changes in family composition in South Korea. The research relies upon data published from the South Korea Census of Population (1960-2000).

The traditional family living arrangement in South Korea is similar to that described in many traditional cultures. The traditional living arrangement is an extended-family characterized by co-residence of the elderly parents with their adult children. As in many extended-family based cultures, this arrangement continued even after the children were married, thereby placing the welfare of the elderly within the extended-family (Sung 2001). The expectation for the care of elderly parents has been especially directed at the eldest son. Traditionally a daughter would take up residence with the family of her spouse. Indeed, living alone would have been considered unacceptable for elderly parents, and social pressure would force the adult children (both sons and daughters) to live with and care for their parents. Closely related to the expectations placed on sons is the imbalance in the sex ratio due to selective abortion. Kwon (2003) reports that 60 percent of families with one child have boys. Since girls are more likely to be born into larger families, the responsibilities can be shared among several siblings. This along with trends in age structure and population distribution in Korea indicates significant alterations in the traditional family support arrangement.

Korea experienced rapid economic development and modernization in the three decades following the Korean War (Kim, 1996; Chee, 2000). Recent research suggests that the traditional extended-family system and family centered life values are experiencing change (Kim & Rhee, 1999; Rhee et al, 1994; De Vos & Lee, 1993; Eu, 1991). An important observed change is that household structure has tended to move from an extended to a nuclear form as economic development proceeds (Cowgill & Holmes 1978; Martin 1989). Increasingly, highly educated and younger Koreans are

more likely to move to urban areas and form nuclear family households; a pattern that is predicted by modernization theorists (DeVos & Lee, 1993).

In order to examine changes in population distribution and family composition, the research examines changes in the proportion of the population living in urban and rural areas. It also examines changes in family composition, by type family, across two decades. The research uses several decades of data from the Population and Housing Census of Korea from 1960 to 2000, and data published by the Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs (Rhee et al, 1989, 1994; Korean Statistical Office). Data tables include frequency and percentage distributions from the national surveys. In addition, calculations were computed from published frequency distributions to show the percent of inter-censal change for selected variables.

## Age Composition and Residence

Table 1 shows the proportions of population in selected age groups from 1960 to 2000. Due to decreasing fertility and decreasing mortality, the population age 65 and over increased from 3.3 % in 1966 to 7.3 % in 2000 while the percentage of the population age under age 14 has steadily decreased over the last 40 years. The percentage of people between the ages of 15 and 64 increased from 52.9 % in 1960 to 71.7 % in 2000.

**Table 1: Percentage of South Korean Population in Dependency Age Categories for 1960-2000**

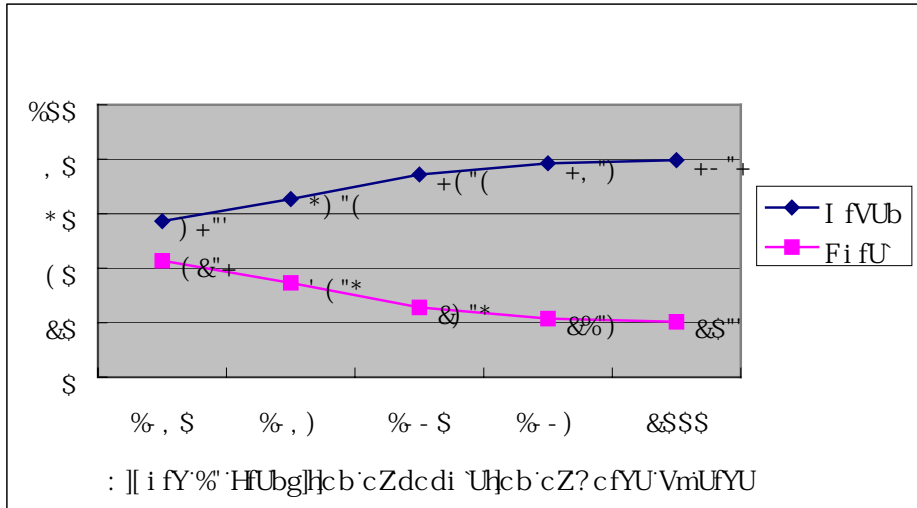
Age	1960	1966	1970	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000
0-14	40.6	43.5	42.1	38.1	33.8	29.9	25.7	23.0	21.0
15-64	52.9	55.1	54.6	58.4	62.3	65.8	69.3	71.1	71.7
65+	3.7	3.3	3.3	3.5	3.9	4.3	5.0	5.9	7.3

Source: Korean Census of Population and Housing Census (1960-2000)

The decreased percentage of persons age 65 and over between the years of 1960 and 1966 was due to the increase in the proportion of the younger population (Kim, 1996). A baby boom occurred in Korea after the Korean War (1950-1953) but was subsequently controlled when the Korean government began a five-year economic plan and introduced a family planning program as national policy in the early 1960s (Eu, 1991; Kim, 1996). Mortality and fertility also began to decline as a result of this policy (Chung, 1999).

Korean society experienced rapid urbanization in conjunction with the decline in fertility and mortality. Figure 1 shows changes in percent urban for the total population over two decades. In 1980, 57.3% of the population lived in cities. By 1985 it had grown to 65.4%, to 74.4% in 1990, to 78.5% in 1995, and to 79.7% in 2000. Much of this growth has been concentrated in a few large metropolitan areas such as Seoul and Pusan (Choi, 1993).

**Figure 1: Percent Change in Urban Population**



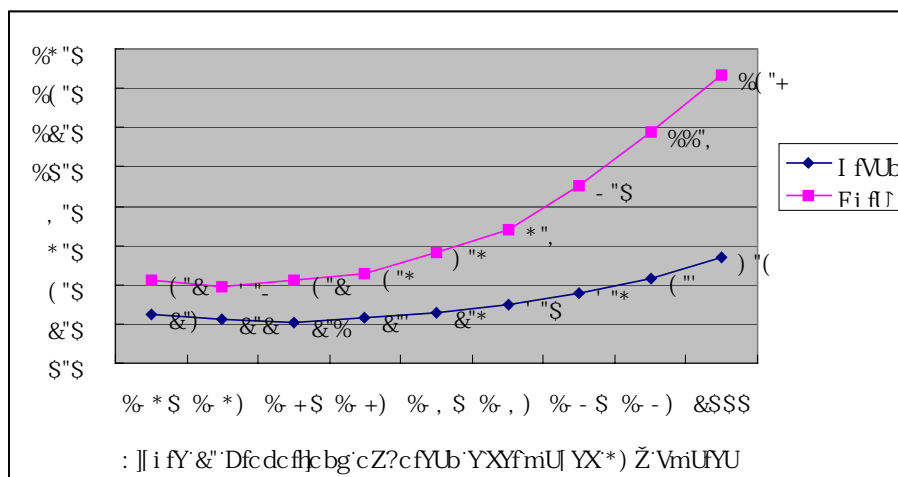
Source: Korean Census of Population and Housing Census (1980-2000)

The decrease in the rural population is due, in part, to the heavy out-migration of working-age people. Korean parents want their sons to get a good quality education in an urban area. The children who move to urban areas to attend universities usually do not return home but reside in an urban area after completing their schooling (Eu, 1991). The combination of migration of the young has brought about a severe imbalance in the age distribution between urban and rural areas. Kwon (2003) states that in rural villages in particular "... extended-families frequently dissolve due to migration of the children's family..." (p. 23). As a result of this pattern of migration the number of one-generation households has increased.

Figure 2 shows the proportion of the older population in rural and urban areas. In 1960 the population age 65 and over was 2.5% of urban areas and 4.2% of rural areas. The proportion increased to 5.4% in urban areas and 14.7% in rural areas by 2000. This figure shows an overall increase in the elderly population in both areas, but the rate of increase for the rural areas is much faster.

It is important to examine the effect of the above-mentioned changes in population characteristics on the size and composition of the Korean household. The increase in the proportion of individuals over the age of 65 brought about a change in the dependency ratio and the index of aging. Table 2 shows figures for the period from 1980 to 2000. In both urban and rural areas the dependency ratio increased over the selected decades. The data show a change from 4.0 in 1980 to 7.5 in 2000 for urban areas. Similarly, rural areas experienced a change from 9.6 for 1980 to 22.0 in 2000. The index of aging in urban areas was 7.9 in 1980 increasing to 13.6 in 1990 and to 25.3 in 2000, showing more than a three-fold increase from 1980 to 2000.

**Figure 2: Proportion of Korean Elderly Age 65+ by Area**



**Table 2: Dependency Ratio and Index of Aging in Korea, 1980-2000**

	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000
<b>Urban</b>					
Dependency Ratio 65+	4.0	4.5	5.2	6.0	7.5
Index of Aging	7.9	10.1	13.6	18.2	25.3
<b>Rural</b>					
Dependency Ratio 65 +	9.6	10.9	13.4	17.3	22.0
Index of Aging	15.7	22.5	38.3	58.4	78.7

Source: Korean Census of Population and Housing (1980-2000)

In 1990 the life expectancy at birth for Korean females was 75 years as compared to 68.2 for males (South Korea Statistical Office, 2000). The existence of female elderly persons who live alone is a new issue in Korean society. Elderly women are likely to have less income than do elderly men, and this situation is exacerbated by a lack of adequate public assistance programs for the elderly, the high cost of housing, extravagant spending on children's weddings and education, and early retirement (Eu, 1991).

Martin (1989) found that elderly Koreans who own their home and have some form of self-support are less likely to live with children. Mutchler (1990) observed that the concern about a place to live is usually based on long-term economic well being rather than short-term income.

## Changes in Household Composition

Table 3 shows the percentage of intercensal change in the distribution of male and female heads of household for two decades. Between 1990 and 2000, the percentage of the heads of household over the age of 60 increased by 5.3%. The increase was 4.5 % for males and 6.2% for females. The largest percentage increase of persons over the age of 60 was in rural areas. The number of elderly heads of household is increasing for males and females and in both urban and rural areas.

**Table 3: Proportion of Household Head**

VARIABLE	1990 (%)	2000(%)	Change (%) (1990-2000)	The Rate of Change (1990-2000)
Age 60+ Total	14.1	19.4	5.3	37.5
Male 60+	11.6	16.1	4.5	38.8
Female 60+	27.6	33.8	6.2	22.4
Urban 60+	20.2	25.0	4.8	23.7
Rural 60+	47.1	61.8	14.7	31.2
*	-16.0	-17.7		

Source: Economic Planning Bureau. Population and Housing Census (1990, 2000)

\* Percent difference between male and female

Typical Korean traditional family structures exist in two types (Kim et al, 1996; Chee, 2000; Sung 2001). One is the three-generation family that includes the eldest son and wife, elderly person(s), and grandchildren. The other type is a two-generation nuclear family consisting of a male other than the eldest son, his wife and children. Table 4 shows percentages of families by household composition for two decades.

The majority of the households contain two-generation nuclear families which include couples and their children. But the two-generation family, which occupied about 66 % of households in 1990, decreased to 63 % by 1995, and to 60.8 % by 2000. The three-generation family that includes a couple, their children and parent(s), decreased from 12.2 % in 1990 to 8.2 % by 2000. Single person or married couple households increased. More detail on household composition is presented in table 5.

**Table 4: Percentage Distributions of Households by Generational Composition (South Korea: 1990, 1995, 2000)**

<b>Country Total</b>	1990 (%)	1995 (%)	2000(%)
One Generation	10.7	12.7	14.2
Two Generation	66.3	63.3*	60.8*
Three Generation	12.2	9.8*	8.2*
Over Four Generation	0.3	0.2	0.2
One Person Household	9.0	12.7	15.5
Non-relatives Household	1.5	1.4	1.1*
<b>Urban</b>			
One Generation	9.6	10.6	12.0
Two Generation	69.4	67.0*	64.5*
Three Generation	10.6	9.0*	7.6*
Over Four Generation	0.2	0.2	0.1
One Person Household	8.6	11.8	14.6
Non-relatives Household	1.6	1.5	1.1*
<b>Rural</b>			
One Generation	14.1	19.8	22.1
Two Generation	57.2	50.6*	47.3*
Three Generation	16.8	12.4*	10.4*
Over Four Generation	0.6	0.4*	0.3*
One Person Household	10.3	15.6	18.9
Non-relatives Household	1.1	1.2	1.0*

Source: Korean Census of Population and Housing (1990, 1995, 2000)

\* Indicates percentage decrease.

The data presented in table four also show changes for urban and rural areas. The same pattern holds with increases in one and two generation households and decreases in extended-family households. The largest increase is among one-person households in both the urban areas and rural areas. While there are more extended-family households in rural areas than in urban areas, the numbers are decreasing in both instances. One-generation households in urban areas increased from 9.6 % in 1990 to 12.0 % in 2000. On the other hand, one-person households were 14.6 % in 2000 compared to only 8.6 % in 1990. Rural areas demonstrate a decrease in multi-generation households and an increase in one-generation or one-person households. About 30% of all households were one-person or one-generation in the year 2000.

Table 5 shows changes in specific household composition. On the whole, the nuclear family type characterizes the majority of all types. The percentage of representation of nuclear family households increased from 76% in 1990 to 82% in 2000. By contrast, the extended-family, especially the typical stem family type that consists of a couple, parent (or parents) and children, decreased from 9.4 % in 1990 to 6.7 % in 2000. Both rural and urban areas showed percentage increases in the proportion of the nuclear family households during this same period. In rural areas, a nuclear family, which consists of a couple and an unmarried child, showed 48.1% in 1990 and 43.5 % in 2000? The family which consists of a single parent and an unmarried child decreased from 8.4 % in 1990 to 7.4 % in 2000. The traditional stem family decreased in both urban and rural areas and for the country as a whole.

<b>Table 5: Changing Patterns of Family Type by Composition (1990, 2000)</b>				
<b>FAMILY TYPE</b>	<b>1990</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>Change (%) 1990-2000</b>	<b>Change rate (%) 1990-2000</b>
<b>Country Total</b>				
Nuclear Family	76.0	82.0	6.0	7.9
Couple	9.3	14.7	5.4	58.1
Couple + Unmarried child	58.0	57.7	0.3*	0.5*
Mother (Father)+ Unmarried child	8.7	9.4	0.7	8.0
Stem Family	10.2	7.9	2.3*	22.5*
Couple + Parents	0.2	0.2	0.0	0.0
Couple + Mother (Father)	0.7	0.9	0.2	28.6
Couple + Parents + Children	1.9	1.4	0.5*	26.3*
Couple + a Parent + Children	7.5	5.3	2.2*	29.3*
Others	13.8	10.0	3.8*	27.5*
<b>Urban</b>				
Nuclear Family	77.5	83.1	5.6	7.2
Couple	7.4	11.7	4.3	58.1
Couple + Unmarried child	61.3	61.4	0.1	0.2
Mother (Father)+ Unmarried child	8.9	9.9	1.0	11.2
Stem Family	8.5	6.9	1.6*	18.0*
Couple + Parents	0.2	0.1	0.1*	50.0*
Couple + Mother (Father)	0.4	0.5	0.1	25.0
Couple + Parents + Children	1.4	1.1	0.3*	21.4*
Couple + a Parent + Children	6.5	5.0	1.5*	23.1*
Others	14.0	9.8	4.2*	30.0*
<b>Rural</b>				
Nuclear Family	71.4	77.5	6.1	8.5
Couple	14.8	26.5	11.7	79.1
Couple + Unmarried child	48.1	43.5	4.6*	9.6*
Mother (Father)+ Unmarried child	8.4	7.4	1.0*	11.9*
Stem Family	15.5	11.7	3.8*	24.5*
Couple + Parents	0.4	0.4	0.0	0.0
Couple + Mother (Father)	1.6	2.3	0.7	43.8
Couple + Parents + Children	3.3	2.2	1.1*	33.3*
Couple + a Parent + Children	10.2	6.7	3.5*	34.3*
Others	13.2	10.6	2.6*	19.7*
Source: Korean Census of Population and Housing 1990, 2000				
* Indicates percentage decrease. Stem family is Extended-family				

## Conclusion

Household composition and living arrangement is very important to the well-being of the elderly in Korea because well-being is closely connected to physical, psychological and financial support. Co-residence with family members has been the traditional way of supporting the elderly because most types of support e.g., financial support, emotional support, assistance in activities, is possible with co-residence. While living alone does not necessarily mean a lack of support from family members, elderly who live alone will usually have more limited access to these types of support (Eu, 1991). Kwon (2003) states that the number of elderly households has increased, and that many of these individuals are poor, ailing and not eligible for income subsidies. The problem of poverty among the elderly was recently exacerbated by a government policy lowering the retirement age for some teachers and persons who work in the public sector (Kwon, 2003). Kim and Kim

(2003) addressed the issue of quality of life of the elderly in Korea and found it to be related intergenerational support and the financial resources of the elderly parents. A stronger case is presented in the work of Choi (1993), whose research findings suggest that non-cultural factors, including financial factors, outweigh cultural factors in assessing the burden of caregivers to the elderly Korea.

The larger proportion of the elderly living in rural areas appears to be increasing. According to the surveys conducted in 1989 and 1994 one of the most notable changes regarding the elderly is the increase of the proportion living alone or living only with spouse (Rhee, et.al., 1994). Among the elderly living with children, rural elderly are less likely to live with their children, especially with unmarried children. Some of this change can probably be attributed to the migration of unmarried children from rural to urban areas, a phenomenon consistent with patterns of modernization and urbanization in many places. Reduced mortality and fertility have also contributed to the age distribution of the population. While the modal family type is the nuclear family, the traditional extended-family remains as the most representative living arrangement among the elderly people in Korea.

Traditional values and beliefs in Korea, rooted in Confucianism, stressed children's unconditional obedience to their parents (Eu, 1991). As the strength of the extended-family diminishes with economic development, this belief is being supplanted by a type of individualism more characteristic of American society. Moreover, as labor force participation of married women increases, the need for daily care of elderly and infirm parents cannot be solved by co-residence. Given this, the need for alternative living arrangements for the elderly becomes apparent.

The Korean Government introduced a plan for sharing economic responsibility for caregivers through its national pension plan. These benefits, however, are limited to an almost subsistence level of maintenance (Kim, 1996). Since, the Korean public attaches a negative view to alternative living arrangements for the elderly such as independent living facilities or nursing homes (Eu, 1991), these options have not gained acceptance. While the old system is being dismantled, a new one is not yet in place.

These changing patterns suggest the need for a systematic and formalized social welfare policy for the elderly. This situation may eventually lead to increased responsibility on the part of government even for those elderly with adult children (Kim, 1996). This need will increase if the strength of cultural norms for the family being the primary source of support of the elderly continues to diminish.

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