

## Factors Associated with the Separation of the Elderly from the Integrated Multi-generation Family in Korea

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〈Contents〉

I. Preface	III. Factors in Forming Separate Independent, Elderly Households
II. Increasing Elderly Households	IV. Conclusion

### I. Preface

Since the 1970s, the problem of the aged has emerged as one of the major social problems in Korea, due to such factors as : ① the rapid increase and structural changes in the elderly population(See Table 1), ② small family size and family nucleation parallel with the rapid fertility decline of the past three decades, ③ the breakdown of the traditional support system for the aged, ④ various conflicts between generations due to changing life styles, values and norms, ⑤ decline in the social status and alienation of the elderly in an industrial society, and ⑥ imperfect government's welfare policies for the aged. In these circumstances, one notable trend has been observed since the

1980s, the appearance of elderly households and their rapid increase.

The existence of elderly households has varying meanings according to the cultural environment. In case of Korean society, where the aged have traditionally been supported by their offspring within the family, the formation of elderly households which consist either of a single person or a couple is observed an exception, occurring when the aged do not have children or cannot acquire an adapted son from a near relative in order to have a successor in the family line. On the contrary, in case of Western society, in the process of formation-expansion-reduction-disorganization of family, when the children are grown up and leave home in the later stages of reduction and disorganization stage, the aged are inevitably left to form

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Table 1. Trends of Major Demographic Indices Relating to Elderly Population

Year	Total population (thousand)	Urbanization ratio (%)	TFR	Composition of 3 major age group (%)			Average annual growth rate by 3 major age group (%)			Dependent ratio(%)				
				0-14	15-64	65+	Total	0-14	15-64	65+	Total	Pop. under 14	Pop. over 65	Index of aging
1960	25,012	28.0	6.0	42.3	54.8	2.9	2.6	2.6	2.5	3.2	82.6	77.3	5.3	6.9
1970	32,240	41.2	4.5	42.5	54.4	3.1	1.7	-0.6	3.1	3.9	83.8	78.2	5.7	7.2
1980	38,124	57.3	2.7	34.0	62.2	3.8	1.2	-1.6	2.3	4.0	60.7	54.6	6.1	11.2
1990	42,869	74.4	1.6	25.8	69.2	5.2	0.9	-1.1	1.3	4.0	44.5	37.3	7.2	19.4
2000	46,789	78.3	1.6	21.2	72.0	6.8	0.6	-0.4	0.5	4.0	38.8	29.4	9.4	31.9
2010	49,683	-	-	19.1	71.5	9.4	0.2	-1.6	0.2	3.1	39.9	26.8	13.1	49.1
2020	50,578	-	-	16.0	71.5	12.5	39.9	22.4	17.5	78.2				

Source: National Statistical Office, *Population & Housing Census*  
National Statistical Office, *Population Projection, 1991*

of elderly household.

In this sense, the rapid increase in elderly households suggests that the aged are separating from traditional two or three generation families and the support system for the aged is becoming disorganized.

## II. Increasing Elderly Households

According to 1985 census data, in 9,570 thousand total households, there were 1,330 thousand household (13.9%) with people over 65 and of these 40.6 percent were couples and the rest, 59.4 percent were single, with 87.3 percent of these females (See Table 2).

When the elderly population is observed by type of family, 76.6 percent of these are found to be in the later stage of two generation and three generation families living with their children; and 23.4 percent of them are living in elderly households separate from their children. In these elderly households, over 40 percent are single elderly households and by number, over 70 percent, which is important to welfare policy implementation.

When these facts are compared with data in the 1975 census and the World Fertility Survey conducted in 1974, the following changes during the past decade become apparent: ① the proportion of the elderly in in-

**Table 2. Trends of Households in Which the Elderly over 65 Dwell Together**

	1975	1985
Total no. of household (10 thousand)	675	957
No. of household elderly dwell (10 thousand)	103	133
Proportion to total household (%)	15.3	13.9
No. of household elderly couple dwell (10 thousand)	36 (35.0%)	54 (40.6%)
No. of household single elderly dwell (10 thousand)	67 (65.0%)	79 (59.4%)
Household male elderly dwell	10 (9.7%)	10 (7.5%)
Household female elderly dwell	57 (55.3%)	69 (51.9%)
Prportion of elderly population by family type (%)	100.0	100.0
2 generation family	15.6	76.6
3 generation family	76.0	
1 generation edlerly family { single	8.4	23.4 { 6.6
couple		

Source: NSO, *Population & Housing Census*, 1975, 1985

J.J.Yoon, "A Study of Family Type and Family Cycle in Korea," *Journal of Population Problems*, Vol. 24, 1983.

\* Calculated using 1974 World Fertility Survey data.

dependent households compared with the total number of elderly has increased drastically from 8.4 percent to 23.4 percent, ② rural areas have a larger elderly population, 29.8 percent than urban areas, 15.7 percent (See Table 3). The number of households in which there are elderly people has increased from 1,030 thousand to 1,330 thousand, ③ the proportion of households in which the elderly reside compared with the total number of households has declined from 15.3 percent to 13.9 percent due to the rapid nucleation of the family, ④ the

proportion of households in which elderly couples reside has increased from 35.0 percent to 40.6 percent due to increased life expectancy, and ⑤ the proportion of households in which elderly single females reside has declined from 55.3 percent to 51.9 percent (See Table 2).

### III. Factors in Forming Separate Independent, Elderly Households

Main reasons for forming independent elderly households by separating the genera-

**Table 3. Status of Cohabitation of Elderly over 65 with Their Children (1985)**

	Whole country			Elderly over 65		
	Total	Urban	Rural	Total	Urban	Rural
No. of household (thousand)	9,571	6,331	3,240	677	293	384
Proportion by area (%)	100.0	66.1	33.9	100.0	43.3	56.7
Proportion of elderly household (%)	100.0	100.0	100.0	7.1	4.6	11.8
Proportion by generation (%)	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
1 generation household	9.6	9.4	9.9	21.7	14.7	27.1
Single independent household	6.9	6.8	7.2	16.9	12.9	20.0
2 generation	67.0	69.8	61.4	35.0	40.8	30.7
3 generation and over						
Others	1.6	1.9	1.1	1.2	1.5	1.1
Population (thousand)	40,420	26,418	14,002	1,750	793	957
Proportion by area (%)	100.0	65.4	34.6	100.0	35.3	54.7
Proportion of population by generation	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
1 generation household	—	—	—	16.8	10.9	21.8
Single independent household	1.6	1.6	1.7	6.6	4.8	8.0
Over 2 generation and others	—	—	—	76.6	84.4	70.2

Source: NSO, *Population & Housing Census*, 1985, Vol. 1—Whole Country.

tions are: ① the separation of generation in rural areas is due to the rural-to-urban migration flow in the course of industrialization and urbanization, ② the trend to small families parallel with the recent fertility decline, ③ younger generation's preference for a nuclear family, ④ various conflicts among the generations due to rapid social changes, and ⑤ the government's social security-oriented public assistance welfare policies for the aged.

The rapid economic development and industrialization of Korea during the last several decades has brought enormous changes to Korean society from its traditional agrarian society to a modern industrialized society. Today, 74.4 percent of the Korean people live in urban areas; Korea has become an urban society in a very short time. Furthermore, the effective family planning programs initiated since the early 1960s have resulted in a drastic fertility decline from 6.0 to 1.6 in total fertility rate (TFR) which has in return given a strong push toward a small family size attitude (See Table 1).

The small family size trend and the urban way of life prevailing among the younger generation has accelerated the process of nucleation of the family, which has caused the proportion of two generation families increase from 66.1 percent in 1974 to 81.9 percent in 1985. According to a nation-wide survey conducted in 1988, elderly households are formed mainly for the following reasons: ① separation due to the marriage of children

(30.3%), ② separation related to job-place and education of children (21.3%), ③ conflicts between the older and younger couples in the case of cohabitation (24.6%), ④ no offspring and spouse's death (13.0%), ⑤ willingness to stay where they have lived all their lives (6.8%), and ⑥ others (4.0%)<sup>1)</sup>. These trends show no significant differences, in general, by respondent's educational level or residential areas (rural and urban), even though the proportion of reasons related to children's job and education is higher in rural areas (23.6%) than in urban areas (14.3%) and the proportion relating to conflicts between generations is, on the contrary, higher in urban areas (32.1%) than in rural areas (22.0%). In other words, in rural areas the elderly households seem to be formulated involuntarily because children leave their parents for such reasons as marriage, job and educational opportunities in urban areas, while in urban areas, they are formed voluntarily because the elderly themselves with higher educational attainment and growing economic power avoid conflicts resulting from the differences in values and norms between generations.

In the elderly households, 62.7 percent prefer to continue their lives separately from their children, the younger generation's attitudes toward their own old age are: ① 53.2 percent wish to live separately from their children, and ② 86.6 percent are preparing to be self-supporting in their old age<sup>2)</sup>. This indicates that elderly households will increase

1) Korea Institute for Population and Health (KIPH), A Fact-finding on Independent Elderly Households, 1989.

2) KIPH, Fact-finding on the Elderly Life in Korea, 1985.

corresponding to the increase in the elderly population and will be the future common family type for the aged.

Korean public welfare policies for the aged can be traced to the period after the World War II and liberation, and can be classified in three stages, the periods of ① poor relief work initiated mainly by Christian philanthropic bodies during the 1940s and 50s, ② nominal government intervention during the 1960s and 70s, and ③ government active involvement in welfare measures for the aged. During the 1960s and 70s corresponding to the early stages of economic development, several laws related directly or indirectly to the aged were promulgated such as Law on Aid for the Poor (1961), laws on pensions: government officials (1960), military personnel(1963), and private school teachers(1973), Medical Insurance Law (1976), Medical Protection Law(1977), but, pensioners are limited, 2.6 percent of the total elderly population as of 1988; the number of poor subject to the Poor Law is also limited and the level of aid is low.

The Welfare Law for the Aged was promulgated in 1981 and revised in 1989; The National Pension Law was enacted in 1986, the national medical insurance system was established and went into effect in 1989; the welfare section for the aged was established and went into effect in 1989; the welfare section for the aged was established in the government administrative organization in 1990, and a Special Welfare Committee for the Aged was established in the Office of the Prime Minister in 1991, all of which reflect the government's determination to solve the pro-

blems of the aged. During the period of the 7th Five Year Plan for Economic and Social Development(1992-1996), the government will tackle such problems related to the welfare of the aged as: ① establishment of an income security system, ② expansion of health and medical services, ③ expansion of housing policies, and ④ improvement of protection facilities and level of aid. It is thought by some that these public assistance measures for the aged may weaken the traditional care of the aged within family and encourage abandonment of the traditional way of supporting the aged.

#### IV. Conclusion

The enormous socio-cultural changes due to the rapid economic development and industrialization of Korea have brought with them many social problems in many fields. The appearance of independent elderly households through separation of generations is expected to increase rapidly for such reasons as: ① continuing trend of small family size attitude accompanying fertility decline to under the replacement level, ② nucleation of the family parallel with the acceptance of the urban way of life, ③ a fundamental breakdown of the traditional support system for the aged due to small family size and nuclearization of the family, ④ preference among the elderly themselves for separating from their children and for an independent household, and ⑤ exodus from traditionalism prevailing nowadays among members of the younger generation

In an era of transition from a traditional to a modern industrial society, the government

should pay keen attention to implementing any policy for solving problems to integrate dif-

ferent cultural elements and find a way of harmonizing them.