

KICCE POLICY BRIEF

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Characteristics of North Korean Defectors and Their Families Living in South Korea

I. Introduction

- In the early 2000s, North Korean defectors started to emigrate to South Korea in large numbers.
 - North Koreans, who had primarily relocated to China for survival during the “March of Ordeal Period,” started to relocating South Korea during the mid-1990s.
- Currently, approximately 33,000 North Korean defectors are living in South Korea.
- This paper examines characteristics of North Korean defectors who have stayed in South Korea since the 2000s and how they have lived.

[Figure 1] Number of North Korean defectors entering South Korea since 1998

Unit: persons



Source: Ministry of Unification homepage: https://unikorea.go.kr/eng_unikorea/whatwedo/support/ (extracted on Sep. 1, 2021)

[Table 1] Number of North Korean Defectors by Age and Gender

Unit: persons, %

	0-9 years old	10-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	Over 60	Sum
Male	608	1,630	2,654	2,128	1,460	600	364	9,444
Female	601	1,961	6,780	7,605	4,788	1,547	1,034	24,316
Sum	1,209	3,591	9,434	9,733	6,248	2,147	1,398	33,760
Female ratio	3.6	10.6	27.9	28.8	18.5	6.4	4.1	100

Source: Ministry of Unification (2021). 2021 North Korea Defector Settlement Support Practical Handbook. p.10.

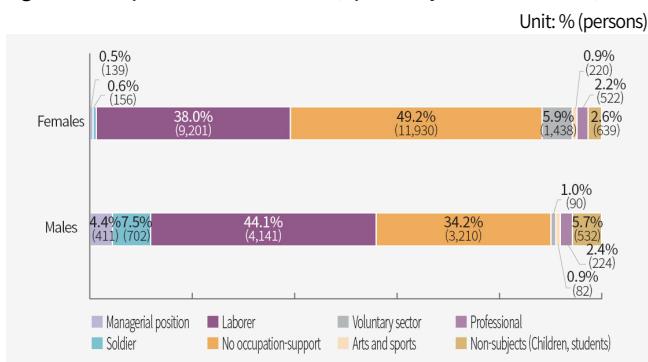
Note: 1) Excluding some people who recently entered the country and are in protective facilities

2) As of the end of June 2021

- Regarding the age distribution of defectors, the largest proportion was of persons in their 20s and 30s, followed by those in their 40s. Specifically, most (c. 75%) North Korean defectors were between the ages of 20 and 49. Among women, the largest proportion was of persons in their 20s-40s (Table 1).

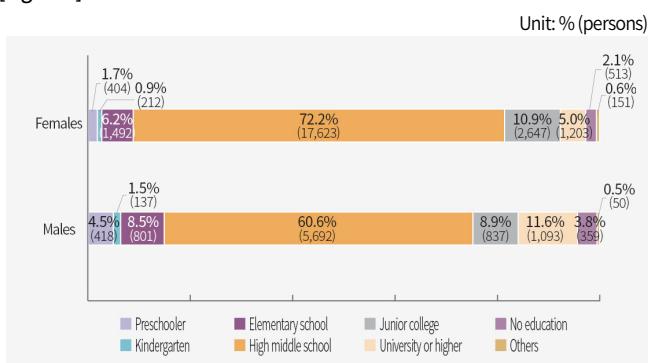
- Regarding occupations in North Korea, the no occupation-support¹ and laborer segments represented the largest proportion of both men and women. The no occupation-support segment was slightly more frequent among women, while laborers were slightly more common among men (Figure 2).
- With respect to education in North Korea, high-middle school² graduates formed the largest percentage of both men and women. Among women, most were junior college graduates and elementary school graduates, whereas there were more university or higher graduates and junior college graduates among men. Therefore, the men's level of education was slightly higher than that of the women (Figure 3).

[Figure 2] Occupations in North Korea (upon entry into South Korea)



Source: Ministry of Unification (2020). 2020 Manual to Support Settlement of North Korean Defectors. p.11.

[Figure 3] Level of Education in North Korea



Source: Ministry of Unification (2020). 2020 Manual to Support Settlement of North Korean Defectors. p. 11.

- The main reasons for escaping North Korea were “lack of food and economic difficulties” and “complaints about the North Korean system”. However, the response that defectors escaped North Korea to provide a better future for their children was relatively frequent in recent years (Table 2);

therefore, the motivation for escaping North Korea is changing. This implies that the characteristics of North Korean defectors are changing.

[Table 2] Changes in Motivation of North Korean Defectors

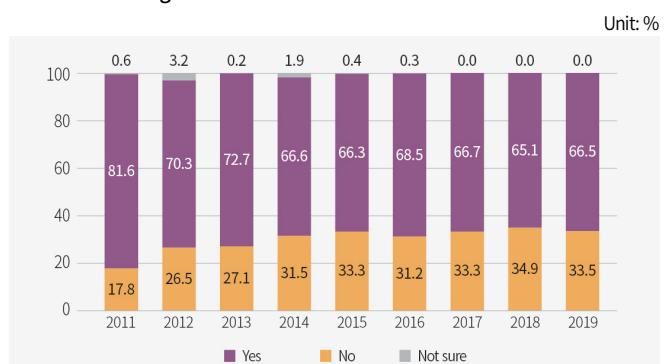
	2012	2014	2016	2018	2019	Unit: ranking, %
1 Ranking	Lack of food and economic difficulties	Complaints against the North Korean system	Lack of food and economic difficulties	Complaints against the North Korean system	Lack of food and economic difficulties	
2 Ranking	Complaints against the North Korean system	Lack of food and economic difficulties	Improvement of income	Lack of food and economic difficulties	Complaints against the North Korean system	
3 Ranking	Improvement of income	Improvement of income	Complaints against the North Korean system	To provide a better future for children	To provide a better future for children	
4 Ranking	To follow family	To follow family	To follow family	Improvement of income	To find family or for a reunion	
5 ranking	To find family or for a reunion	Improvement of income				

Source: Korea Hana Foundation (2021). In-Depth Research of Fact-Finding Survey Data of North Korean Defectors. p. 45.

- Over 60% of defectors lived in a third-party country, including China, before coming to South Korea (Figure 4). More defectors remained for 3 years than less than 3 years (Figure 5).

- In many cases, female North Korean defectors married Chinese nationals and gave birth to a child (children) while in China. They have complex family relationships even after coming to South Korea due to the family they formed previously.

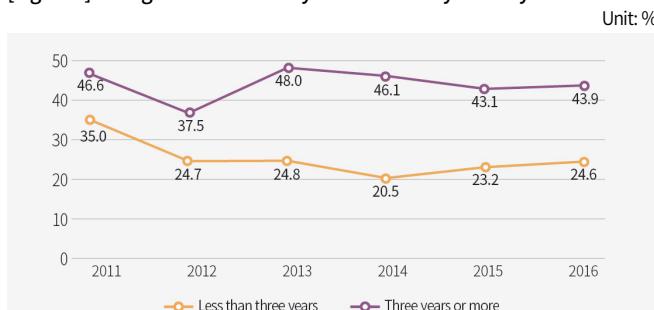
[Figure 4] Change in Experience of Stay in a Third-Party Country before Coming to South Korea



Source: Korea Hana Foundation (2021). In-Depth Research of Fact-Finding Survey Data of North Korean Defectors. pp. 51-52 (schematized table).

1. No occupation-support denotes being engaged in informal livelihood activities, which is a concept different from Korean unemployment.
2. High middle school based on the South Korean educational system denotes high school.

[Figure 5] Change in Period of Stay in a Third-Party Country



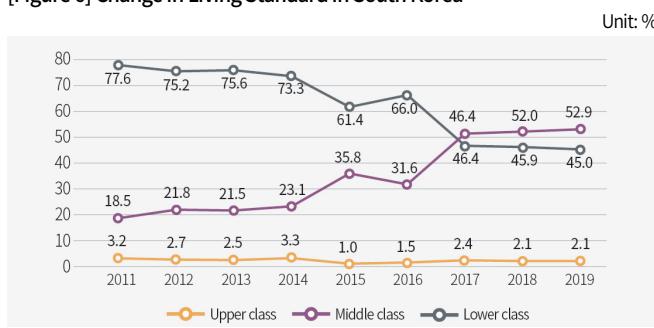
Source: Korea Hana Foundation (2021). In-Depth Research of Fact-Finding Survey Data of North Korean Defectors. pp. 51-52 (schematized values limited to those who stayed in a third-party country).

Note: Value classification of 3 years before and after 2017 was not made.

III. Life of the Family of North Korean Defectors Staying in South Korea

- Although North Korean defectors evaluated their standard of living in South Korea as lower class, more people responded that they considered themselves to be middle class rather than lower class starting in 2017 (Figure 6). Their satisfaction with life has risen from over 60% to over 70% since 2017 (Figure 7).

[Figure 6] Change in Living Standard in South Korea



Source: Korea Hana Foundation (2021). In-Depth Research of Fact-Finding Survey Data of North Korean Defectors. pp. 61-62.

[Figure 7] Change in Satisfaction with Life in South Korea



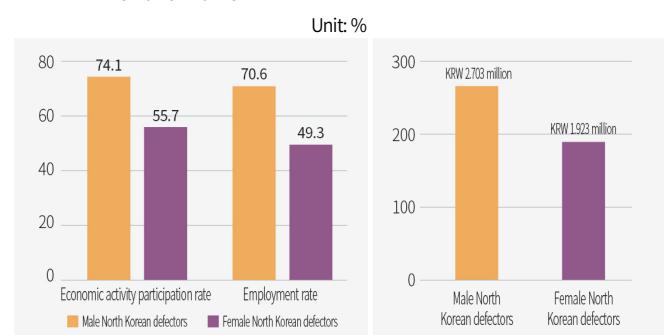
Source: Korea Hana Foundation (2021). In-Depth Research of Fact-Finding Survey Data of North Korean Defectors. p.54.

Note: Satisfaction includes "very satisfied" and dissatisfaction includes "very dissatisfied"

- North Korean defectors' standard of living is lower than general South Korean people's standard of living; women's economic level, such as their economic activity participation rate, employment rate, and monthly average wage is lower than that of men (Figure 8).

- Based on the monthly average wage, North Korean defectors' income was KRW 2.161 million, while that of the general population was KRW 2.643 million. The ratio of livelihood benefits among North Korean defectors was 23.3%, which is considerably higher than that of the general population at 3.3%.

[Figure 8] Economic Level of North Korean Defectors: Comparison between Men and Women

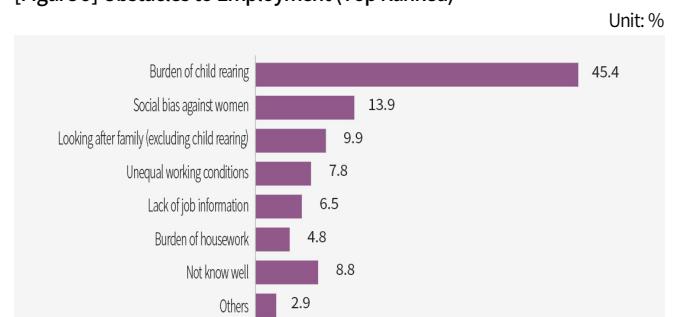


Source: 1) Korea Hana Foundation (2021). 2020 Fact-finding Survey of North Korean Defectors' Settlement. p. 111.

2) Ministry of Unification (2020). 2020 Manual to Support Settlement of North Korean Defectors. p. 11.

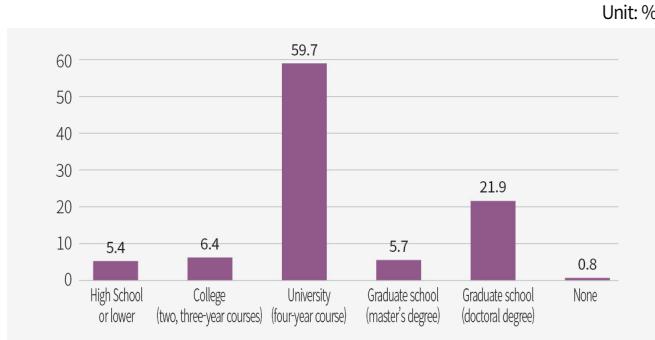
- The primary reason for North Korean defectors' relatively low economic level was the child-rearing burden (Figure 9). Despite economic difficulties, 60% of the North Korean defectors wanted their children to attend a four-year university, and 22% wanted them to finish graduate school or earn a doctoral degree (Figure 10).

[Figure 9] Obstacles to Employment (Top Ranked)



Source: Korea Hana Foundation (2021). 2020 Fact-Finding Survey of North Korean Defectors' Settlement. p. 81.

[Figure 10] Expected Education Level of Children

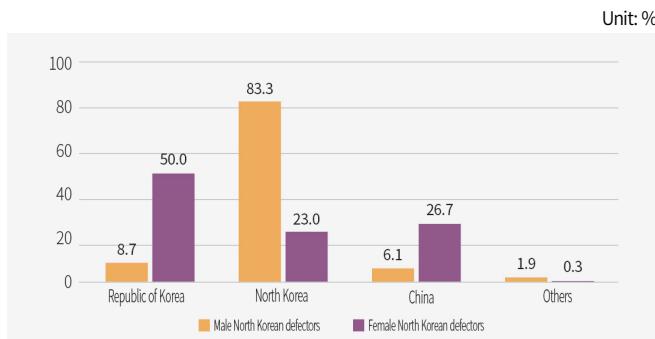


Source: Korea Hana Foundation (2021). 2020 Fact-Finding Survey of North Korean Defectors' Settlement. p. 148.

- Although there were some cases of maintaining a home in North Korea, most defectors formed a new home in South Korea. In particular, approximately 50% of the female defectors had South Korean spouses (83.3% of the men had North Korean spouses; Figure 11). Most infants (89.7%) in the North Korean defectors' homes were born in South Korea (Figure 12).

- The family members of North Korean defectors consisted of people from North Korea, China, and South Korea. In some cases, the children's nationality was different. In general, female North Korean defectors have an economically disadvantaged life because it is difficult to conduct child-rearing and work simultaneously.
- Although there are no accurate statistics, it is assumed that many North Korean defectors were single parents. This is because the number of household members of the North Korean defectors was 2.3 on average, which is smaller than the number of general single parent's household members of 2.9.³

[Figure 11] Countries of Origin of Spouses: Comparison between Men and Women

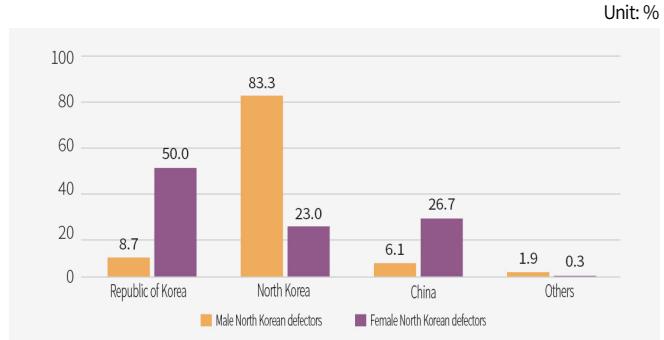


Source: Korea Hana Foundation (2021). 2020 Fact-Finding Survey of North Korean Defectors' Settlement. p. 155.

3. Korea Hana Foundation (2021), 2020 Social Integration Survey of North Korean Defectors. p. 154.

4. This chapter extracts and summarizes some contents of the Korean KICCE Policy Brief Issue 88 (September, 2021).

[Figure 12] Birth Countries of Preschool Children



Source: Lee, Y., Lee, J., & Kim, K. (2012). An Investigation of Potential Policy Measures to Support Children of North Korean Migrants. KICCE. p. 68.

IV. Suggestions for Support of North Korean Defectors' Family⁴

- The Korean government is primarily protecting North Korean defectors on humanitarian grounds under 「The Act for North Korean Defectors' Protection and Settlement Support」 (Article 4 of the Act). The government offers various settlement support programs, including settlement benefits, housing, employment, social welfare, education, and settlement assistants, differentiating North Korean defectors from immigrant wives (belonging to multicultural homes) and foreign workers who have a common migration factor.
- The policy supports individual North Korean defectors, but policy support for the home unit is insufficient. Specifically, the amount of policy dedicated to child-rearing is significantly low.
 - When considering the 22 projects of the Master Plan for “The Second North Korean Defectors' Settlement Support (2018 -2020)” and “The 24 Projects of the Master Plan for the third North Korean Defectors Settlement Support (2021-2023)”, no child-rearing support is specified, and only one project to provide childcare support through a public nanny service for female North Korean defectors exists.
- North Korean defectors who emigrate to South Korea for their children's future have been recently increasing in number, and the level of education they expect for their children is high.
 - The government's interest and policy support are necessary so that toddlers in underprivileged homes will not experience an educational gap from the initial stage of their lives.

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