

# KICCE POLICY BRIEF

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## The Current Status and Perspectives on Infant Abuse in South Korea

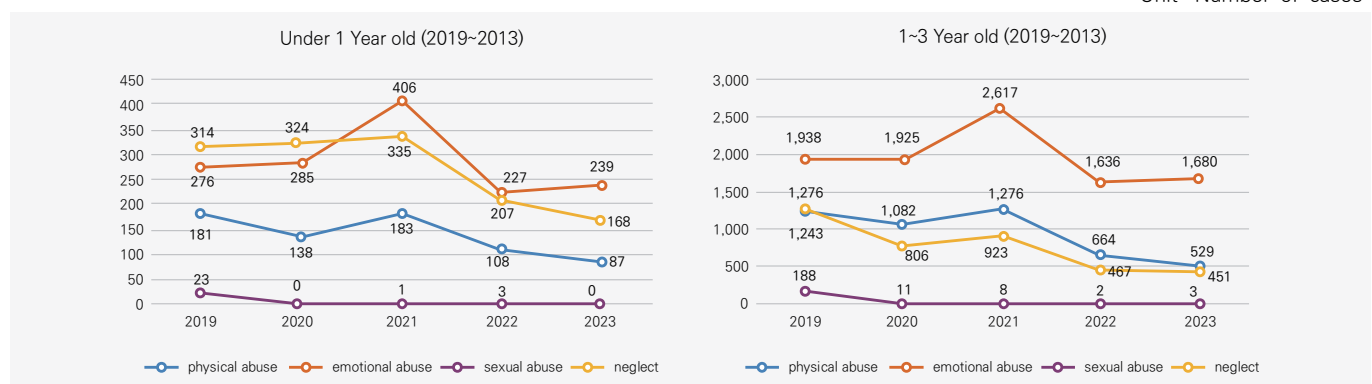
### I. Background

#### Current Status of Infant Abuse in Korea

- In 2020, the Ministry of Health and Welfare established the National Center for the Rights of the Child (hereinafter referred to as “NCRC”) to comprehensively implement child policies and effectively promote child welfare projects.
- NCRC is responsible for promoting child abuse prevention initiatives and generating statistics related to the prevention and the protection of child abuse (based on Article 22, Paragraph six of the Child Welfare Act and Article 23, Paragraph three of the Enforcement Decree of the Child Welfare Act).
- According to the annual statistics on child abuse, emotional abuse, neglect, physical abuse, and sexual abuse are the most common types of abuse in infants under one year old. Among infants and toddlers aged one to three, emotional abuse ranks the highest, followed by physical abuse, neglect, and sexual abuse. In contrast, neglect is the most common for infants under one year old.<sup>1</sup> [Figure 1].

[Figure 1] Statistics on Child Abuse Among Infants (2019~2023)

Unit: Number of cases



1. The 2023 Ministry of Health and Welfare report, Major Statistics on Child Abuse 2023, reveals that neglect accounts for 34.0% of abuse cases among children under the age of one, significantly higher than 17.0% among children aged 1 to 3, and 12.2% among children aged 4 to 6 (Source: Ministry of Health and Welfare, Major Statistics on Child Abuse 2023, p. 20, Table 1-3-10, “Types of Child Abuse by Age of Victim”).

- Infant motility rates due to child abuse in recent five years (2019~2023) are shown in the table 1. The infant motility rate due to child abuse was 42.0% for children under one year old and 18.0% for those aged one to three in 2022. The proportion of child mortality has remained high among infants under one year old in other years as well.

[Table 1] Current Status of Child Abuse Death Cases (2019~2023)

Year	Overall Count of Deceased Children		Under 1 year old		1~3 years old	
	N. of person	%	N. of person	%	N. of person	%
2019	42	0.19	19	45.2	9	21.4
2020	43	0.19	20	46.5	9	20.9
2021	40	0.15	13	32.5	13	32.5
2022	50	0.23	21	42.0	9	18.0
2023	44	0.22	10	22.7	8	18.2

### The Act on Special Cases Concerning the Punishment of Child Abuse Crimes

- In South Korea, the Act on Special Cases Concerning the Punishment of Child Abuse Crimes, commonly known as the Child Abuse Punishment Act, is in force. This law outlines special provisions for the punishment and legal procedures related to child abuse crimes, as well as measures for victim protection and rehabilitation programs for perpetrators. Its primary goal is to safeguard children and ensure their healthy development into responsible members of society. <Table 2>.
- However, there are several cases where birth registrations are delayed or infants are abandoned during the newborn period. In response, the government is seeking national-level alternatives to prevent and address such occurrences.

[Table 2] Investigation Results on Unregistered Children at Birth<sup>2</sup>

		Classification	N. of Children(%)	
Local Government Confirmation	Survival Confirmed	Birth Registration Completed	796(35.1)	884 (39.0)
		Overseas Birth Registration Completed	23(1.0)	
		Birth Registration Planned	65(2.9)	
	Death (Due to Illness, etc.)		228(10.1)	
	Medical Institution Errors (Stillbirth, Miscarriage, Misregistration, etc.)		36(1.6)	
Police Investigation Request Reasons	Abandonment (e.g., Baby Box)		618(27.3)	
	Incommunicado or Refusal of Visits by Guardians		238(10.5)	
	Adoption Prior to Birth Registration		89(3.9)	
	Denying the fact of birth		72(3.2)	
	Others		102(4.5)	
Overall			2,267(100.0)	

Note: Among the 27 deceased children, 7 were associated with criminal activity and were referred to the prosecution (as of July 14, 2023).

Source: 1) Ministry of Health and Welfare Press Release (July 18, 2023), [https://www.mohw.go.kr/react/al/sal0301vw.jsp?PAR\\_MENU\\_ID=04&MENU\\_ID=0403&CONT\\_SEQ=377321](https://www.mohw.go.kr/react/al/sal0301vw.jsp?PAR_MENU_ID=04&MENU_ID=0403&CONT_SEQ=377321) (Date Retrieved: September 18, 2023)

2) Ministry of Health and Welfare Press Release (August 16, 2023), [https://www.mohw.go.kr/react/al/sal0301vw.jsp?PAR\\_MENU\\_ID=04&MENU\\_ID=0403&CONT\\_SEQ=377733](https://www.mohw.go.kr/react/al/sal0301vw.jsp?PAR_MENU_ID=04&MENU_ID=0403&CONT_SEQ=377733) (Date Retrieved: September 18, 2023)

3) This table is from Kim Jayeun, Park Eun-jeong, Choi Yoon-kyung, Cha Seon-ja, and Yoon Soo-kyung (2023). Improving Measures for the Prevention and Post-management of Infant Abuse: Focusing on Infant Abandonment. Korea Institute of Child Care and Education. p. 62, titled '<Table III-1-2> Unregistered Children at Birth.'

2. The figure of 2,267 unregistered children includes 2,123 children born between 2015 and 2022, as well as 144 children born up to May 2023 who were only assigned temporary newborn numbers.

## II. Birth Notification Registration System<sup>3</sup> and Protected Birth System for Crisis Pregnancies<sup>4</sup>

- The Ministry of Health and Welfare conducted a comprehensive survey of 2,267 infants born between 2015 and May 2023 who had birth records but no corresponding birth registrations. Based on the findings, relevant laws were amended and enacted in July 2023 <Table 3>. In particular, the infant death case happened in Suwon, 2023 during the survey prompted policy discussions on potential policy initiatives.
- The Korean government has sought to strengthen the protection system in preparation for the implementation of the Birth Notification System and the Protected System for Crisis Pregnancies and Childbirths, aimed at safeguarding crisis pregnancies and newborns.

[Table 3] Details on the Birth Notification System and the Protected Birth System for Crisis Pregnancies

	Birth Notification System	Protected Birth System for Crisis Pregnancies
Implementation Date	July 19, 2024	July 19, 2024
Purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Aims to guarantee the rights of children and ensure their healthy development.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Aims to protect women (pregnant women in crisis) who are reluctant to reveal their pregnancy status and to ensure a safe environment for childbirth and child-rearing</li> </ul>
Contents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ If parents do not register the birth: The head of the relevant city (district) or township will register the birth with the approval of the supervising court based on the birth information reported by the medical institution.</li> <li>▪ In certain cases where parents are unable to register the birth: Obligated reporters, etc., can apply for a deferment of record registration to the head of the relevant city (district) or township.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Crisis pregnant women: Can request a protected birth application or a child protection application after childbirth</li> <li>▪ Head of the local counseling agency: Notifies the head of the relevant city (district) or township with anonymized pseudonyms and management numbers, including the birth information of the child's biological mother</li> <li>▪ Head of the city (district) or township: Conducts birth registration for protected children after obtaining permission from the family court for the provision of a name and surname</li> </ul>
Characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Regardless of the implementation of the Birth Notification System, parents are still obligated to register the birth.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Introduced as a supplementary measure to the Birth Notification System</li> </ul>

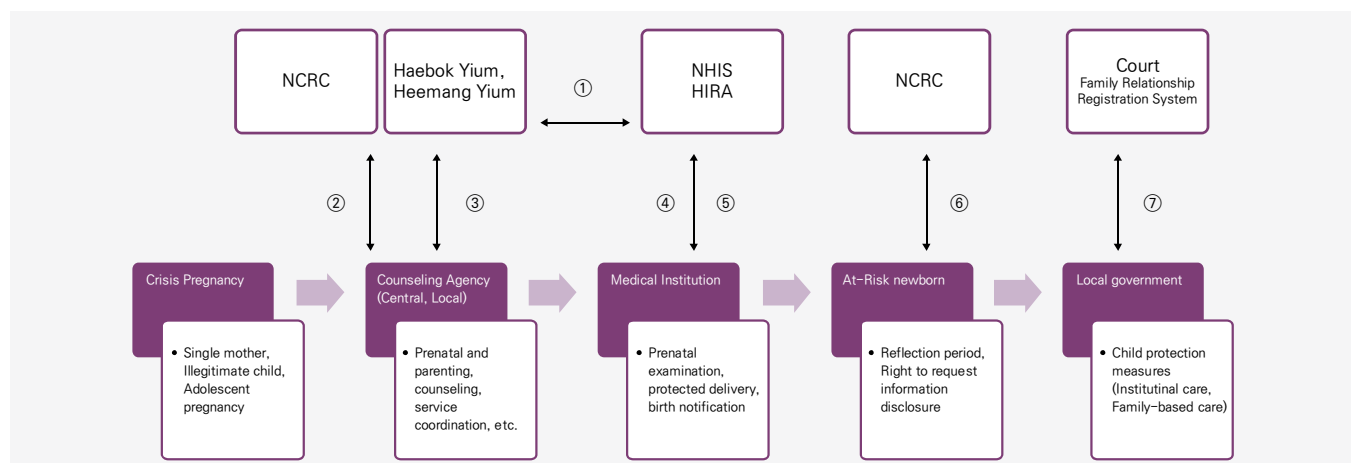
### Overview of Support for Crisis Pregnancies and Protected Birth System [Figure 2].

- The aim is to prevent out-of-hospital births and child abandonment to protect the lives and health of women and children.
- Pregnant women in crisis can receive support to give birth under a pseudonym in medical institutions after undergoing mandatory counseling, with financial assistance also provided.
- The newborn will be registered at birth and placed under protective care, while the NCRC will maintain the child's birth records.

3. The birth notification system is based on the Act on the Registration of Family Relations.

4. The Protected Birth System for Crisis Pregnancies is based on the Special Act on Support for Crisis Pregnancies, Protected Births, and Child Protection.

[Figure 1] Proposed Basic Framework for the Protected Birth System for Crisis Pregnancies<sup>5</sup>



Note: NCRC; National Center for the Rights of the Child, NHIS; National Health Insurance Service, HIRA; Health Insurance Review and Assessment Service, Haebok Yium and Heemang Yium are the name of welfare coordination information network in south Korea.  
 ① Name Information, Pseudonym, De-identified Number, ② Birth Certificate, ③ Pseudonym, Anonymous Identifier, ④ Qualification Verification, ⑤ Claim, ⑥ Public Disclosure, ⑦ Family name and given name, National ID Number

### Operation of 16 Regional Counseling Centers for Crisis Pregnancies Nationwide

- As of July 19, 2023, there are 16 regional counseling centers for crisis pregnancies operating across the nation.
- These regional counseling centers offer a variety of consultations and information to pregnant women in crisis through the counseling hotline number 1308 and facilitate connections to support services.

### Immediate Outcomes of the Systems<sup>6</sup>

- According to the Ministry of Health and Welfare's press release (dated July 30, 2024), approximately 5,000 birth notification reports were submitted by medical institutions to the *Health Insurance Review and Assessment Service* from July 19 (Friday) to July 29 (Monday), ten days after the implementation of the Birth Notification System and the Protected Birth System for Crisis Pregnancies.
- During the same period, 124 pregnant women in crisis sought assistance through the 1308 crisis pregnancy counseling hotline and received support such as facility admission, emergency assistance, and hospital accompaniment <Table 4>.

[Table 4] Daily Number for the Birth Notification System and Encountered Numbers for the Protected Birth System for Crisis Pregnancies in 2024

	Total	Daily ave.	July.19 (Fri)	July.20 (Sat)	July.21 (Sun)	July.22 (Mon)	July.23 (Tue)	July.24 (Wed)	July.25 (Thu)	July.26 (Fri)	July.27 (Sat)	July.28 (Sun)
N. of birth notification	4,995	454.0	113	165	50	510	500	623	621	750	500	139
N. of crisis pregnancy counseling cases	124	11.3	14	5	6	7	16	14	13	17	11	8

5. Source: Ministry of Health and Welfare. Press Reference Material (dated February 22, 2024). "Central Government and 17 Provinces Collaborate to Prepare Support System for Pregnant Women in Crisis Without Any Disruption." Link (accessed on September 20, 2024).

6. This manuscript is based on the Ministry of Health and Welfare's press release dated July 30, 2024, titled "Ten Days Since the Implementation of the Birth Notification System and the Protected Birth System for Crisis Pregnancies: Supporting 124 Pregnant Women in Crisis!"

## Remaining Issues

- Alongside the expectations from the simultaneous implementation of the two systems, there are growing concerns. It has been suggested that inadequate support for pregnant women in crisis may result in an increase in anonymous births, rather than encouraging them to pursue direct parenting.<sup>7</sup>
- To apply for a protected birth, individuals must first receive mandatory counseling on policies and other support necessary for direct childbearing and undergo counseling at a local center. The time available for individuals to contemplate their choices regarding direct parenting or adoption may vary depending on when they received counseling after pregnancy. Therefore, support necessary during the pregnancy and early parenting period should be discussed through counseling as soon as possible after pregnancy.
- The financial support provided after childbirth is insufficient to encourage individuals to choose direct parenting. Additionally, there are concerns about the need for allowances or housing support during pregnancy, as many women struggle to maintain their livelihoods while concealing their pregnancy from the six- to seven-month mark onward.
- Concerns have been raised that, with the implementation of this system, most children born through protected births may be placed in facilities rather than given the opportunity to grow up in a family environment.

## III. Policy Suggestions

### Policy Improvement Measures

- As the Birth Notification System and Protected Birth System for Crisis Pregnancies have only been in place for a few months, there is a need to improve accessibility and expand support for policies related to pregnancy, childbirth, and parenting through greater dissemination and awareness of these systems.
- Given the isolated circumstances faced by pregnant women in crisis, practical solutions are needed that not only offer psychological and emotional support but also provide job assistance and help address the challenges of managing early parenting alone.
- There is a need for differentiated policies for single-parent families, particularly those led by unmarried mothers. It is because most current policies regarding childbirth and parenting primarily focus on newborns or infants, or are designed with two-parent households in mind.
- Despite being implemented only recently, the Birth Notification System and Protected Birth System for Crisis Pregnancies are expected to lead to an increase in the number of protected children who are not raised in a family environment, whether or not their births are reported by their biological mothers, as awareness of these systems grows. Thus, it is crucial to establish facilities where children in need of protection can grow up in environments as close to a family setting as possible, while also minimizing the time it takes to connect them with adoption opportunities.

### Establishing a Support System through Networking Among Local Governments

- Sixteen regional counseling centers offer a range of services for pregnant women in crisis, including: Childbirth and postpartum care support, Emergency financial assistance, Childcare and adoption or child protection facility linkage, Counseling and housing support, Educational support for single mothers (alternative schools), Employment support

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7. Hankyoreh press release (dated July 19, 2024). "Birth Notification System and Protected Birth System to Be Implemented on the 19th... Concerns About the 'Legalization of Child Abandonment'." Link (accessed on September 19, 2024).

through specialized agencies.

- A new budget has been allocated for the Emergency Protection Cost Support for Newborns from Protective Births project<sup>8</sup>. Key features include financial support for local governments (cities, counties, and districts) to ensure the safe care of newborns until protective measures are finalized and it is focusing on aiding local governments acting as guardians for children from protective births.
- However, financial and infrastructure disparities exist among the regional governments in terms of financial resources and infrastructure for supporting pregnant women and infants in crisis. Therefore, a flexible approach is needed to reduce regional disparities, ensuring optimal conditions through resource sharing and collaboration among multiple local governments.

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8. Source: Ministry of Health and Welfare. Press Reference Material (dated September 6, 2024). "Strengthening support for pregnant women in crisis through cooperation between the central and local governments." [https://www.mohw.go.kr/board.es?mid=a10503000000&bid=0027&list\\_no=1483025&act=view&](https://www.mohw.go.kr/board.es?mid=a10503000000&bid=0027&list_no=1483025&act=view&) (accessed on November 29, 2024)