

## THE RISE OF ONE-PERSON HOUSEHOLDS AND THEIR RECENT CHARACTERISTICS IN KOREA\*

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*This paper explores the rise in the proportion of one-person households which since 1960 was attributable largely to rural-to-urban migration of young people. The heavy migration of young people from rural to urban cities actually brought about the rural household division which contributed to the fall in household size, and contributed to the increase in one-person households of urban young singles, on the one hand, and the increase in one-person households of rural elderly widows, on the other. The rise in the aggregate propensity to live alone was also evident. However, it was not confirmative that growth in the propensity to live alone appears to be pervasive in recent Korean society. For instance, according to the findings in 1990, a large portion of young urban singles living alone were rural-to-urban migrants, and there was no evidence for increase in the propensity of urban-reared young singles to live alone. Although the rise in one-person households was evident and by 1990 about one out of every ten households was a one-person household, the findings on the recent characteristics of one-person households do not indicate any big change in the traditional family norms.*

### THE CHANGE IN FAMILY AND HOUSEHOLD STRUCTURE

The past trend of a steady increase in household size came to an end around 1960 (Lee 1974), and the period since 1960 was witnessed a new trend. Since that period Korean society has experienced the continuous change in household and family. The size of the ordinary household has fallen from 5.6 persons per household in 1960 to 3.7 in 1990. The average size of the family household has also dropped from 5.7 persons in 1966 to 4.0 in 1990. The fall in size of the ordinary household was much sharper than that of the family household (Kwon and Park 1993).

The fall in average household size since 1960 is viewed as largely the result of the decline in fertility, and the rapid urbanization mainly caused by heavy rural-to-urban migration. The decrease in number of children contributed greatly to the fall in family household size. And the heavy migration from rural areas to urban cities, especially of young people,

\*This article is based on part of the author's book, *Korean Household and Family Structure*, 1990 Korean Census Monograph Series 4-3, National Statistical Office of the Republic of Korea. The author would like to thank Prof. Tai-Hwan Kwon, co-author of the book, for his instructive comments.

actually brought about the rural household division which contributed to the fall in household size. In other words, the rural-to-urban migration of young people has contributed to the increase in one-person households of young people in urban areas, on the one hand, and the increase in elderly-only households in rural areas, on the other.

When we compare the household size of urban and rural areas, we find no big difference in average household size in both areas before 1960. But the difference widened after 1960 and recently has been narrowing again (Kwon and Park 1993). When we primarily consider the fertility factor as a most important one affecting the size of household or family, it is clear why it is evident. A large difference in household size between urban and rural areas during the period of 1960-1970 could occur as the result of large regional differentials in fertility level during that period. Afterward, the low fertility level in both urban and rural areas resulted in the fall in family size in both areas.

However, considerable speculation exists concerning the recent change in household structure of urban and rural areas. In spite of the narrowed difference in household size between urban and rural areas, a big difference in household and family structures between the two areas was also observed (Kwon and Park 1993). The best known proposition asserts a decline in household size and a breakdown of the family, especially in urban areas, in the face of modernization, and this proposition has been substantially qualified in many studies on western families and households (Hareven 1976; Michael *et al.* 1980; Pampel 1983; Burch and Matthews 1987). However, this proposition has not been quite true in Korean society.

It is clear from Table 1-A that steady decline in the proportion of people living in the family household is a distinctive feature of change in family and household structures in modern Korean society. During the 1960s the proportion of population living in family households had tended to fall sharply in urban areas, however, since 1975 the proportion has fallen sharply rather in rural areas. Even in 1990, the percentage of people living in family households was lower in rural areas.

The decline in the proportion of population living in family households was attributed to two factors: the rise in proportion of one-person households and the rise in non-relative households or institutional households. Among these two factors, the gradual fall in proportion of population living in family households was primarily due to the continuous rise in one-person households. Table 1-B shows substantial increase in proportion of people living alone, almost a six times increase from 0.40% in 1960 to 2.35% in 1990. It is more noticeable that, of ordinary households, the

proportion of one-person households increased from 2.3% in 1960 to 9.0% in 1990, which means that almost one out of ten households was a one-person household in 1990 (Table 1-C). The increase in one-person households in the early period was more substantial in urban areas, and young migrants living alone temporarily in urban areas contributed to the increase in one-person households in urban areas. On the other hand, in the recent period, as the data in Table 1-C suggest, the increase in one-person households has been substantial in rural areas and the rural proportion of one-person households (10.3%) among ordinary households was much higher than the urban proportion (8.55%) in 1990. The plausible explanation for this is that the continued heavy out-migration of young people from rural areas resulted in the increase in elderly-only households in rural areas, especially the increase in rural elderly people living alone. Then, if we consider the proportion of one-person households as an important index of the breakdown of family, the recent phenomenon of rapid breakdown of family

**TABLE 1.** PROPORTIONS OF POPULATION LIVING IN FAMILY HOUSEHOLDS (A); PROPORTIONS OF POPULATION LIVING IN ONE-PERSON HOUSEHOLDS (B); AND PROPORTIONS OF ONE-PERSON HOUSEHOLDS AMONG ORDINARY HOUSEHOLDS (C), 1960-1990

Region	1960	1966	1970	1975	1980	1985	1990
(A) Proportion of Population Living in Family HHs (%)							
Whole Country	96.76	95.01	93.00	95.80	94.98	94.11	93.62
Urban	96.06	92.80	89.75	94.73	94.32	93.98	93.95
Rural	97.03	96.27	95.29	96.77	95.86	94.35	92.65
Eup	96.85	-	92.91	95.95	95.27	94.08	93.16
Myon	97.06	-	95.72	97.05	96.10	94.49	92.40
(B) Proportion of Population Living in One-person HHs (%)							
Whole Country	0.40	0.71	-	0.81	1.02	1.64	2.35
Urban	0.43	1.02	-	0.90	1.03	1.62	2.24
Rural	0.39	0.55	-	0.73	1.02	1.67	2.68
Eup	0.48	-	-	0.85	0.92	1.53	2.28
Myon	0.38	-	-	0.70	1.05	1.80	2.88
(C) Proportion of One-person HHs among Ordinary* HHs (%)							
Whole Country	2.30	4.01	-	4.23	4.80	6.91	9.00
Urban	3.39	5.36	-	4.52	4.71	6.75	8.55
Rural	2.26	3.26	-	3.93	4.93	7.20	10.30
Eup	2.68	-	-	4.44	4.48	6.67	8.90
Myon	2.20	-	-	3.39	5.11	7.53	10.92

\* The 1960 and 1975 censuses define ordinary households as including family households and one-person households. In 1966, 1980, 1985, 1990 censuses ordinary households include family households, one-person households and other non-family households.

Source: Kwon and Park (1993).

in rural areas should concern us more seriously.

## RECENT DEMOGRAPHIC ASPECTS OF ONE-PERSON HOUSEHOLDERS

We have shown that, in 1990, one-person households were about one-tenth of all ordinary households. The distribution of one-person householders by life cycle stage is presented in Table 2. In 1990, nearly one half of the persons who lived alone were young people under age 34, who were mostly single, and an additional one fifth were elderly persons aged over 65 years, who were mostly widowed.

The percent distribution by sex is also given in Table 2. From these data we can discover the quite different demographic aspects of male and female one-person households. Of the males living alone, a little bit more than 75% were young singles aged under 34, and more than one half were singles aged 25-34. On the other hand, the proportion of female one-person householders in this young age group was no more than 30 percent, and female singles aged 25-34 living alone constituted only 13.6 percent. Over one half of the females living alone were elderly women, mostly widowed, aged 55 and over.

From these findings it would seem that the effect of aging of the population, that is, the effect of low fertility and low mortality, is important for females. Women who, in general, outlive their husbands are more likely to live alone in old ages after the death of their husbands than men are.

TABLE 2. DISTRIBUTION OF ONE-PERSON HOUSEHOLDS BY LIFE CYCLE STAGE OF HOUSEHOLDERS, 1990

Life Cycle Stage	Total	Male	Female
Never Married			
15-24	19.2	22.6	17.0
25-34	29.0	53.4	13.6
35-54	4.9	6.3	4.0
55-64	0.2	0.2	0.3
65+	0.1	0.1	0.1
Formerly Married			
25-34	1.4	0.8	1.8
35-54	9.6	5.8	12.0
55-64	14.9	4.7	21.4
65+	20.7	6.1	29.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
(Number)	(18,886)	(7,319)	(11,567)

Source: 1990 Korean Population and Housing Census 2% Sample Tape.

And, these women in old ages have been increasing. On the other hand, the survivorship of males in the oldest ages has been less than that females have experienced, and also the increase in survived elderly males living alone is obscured by increases in remarriage. Therefore, a large part of males living alone are at the early stage of the life cycle usually between leaving their parents' home and founding another, while a large part of females living alone are at the later stage of the life cycle after their husbands' death.

To discover how the tendency to live alone varies with the demographic characteristics of the population, the proportions of one-person householders in each demographic group are presented in Table 3.

First of all, we can see that the propensity of single persons to live alone increases with their age. This seems because, in general, older singles are more economically affluent than younger singles so that they can buy "privacy" in living when they want. It is also probable that older singles would have less probability to eventually marry than younger ones. On the other hand, young singles, especially around average marriage age, are not only economically dependent, but they and their parents usually have high expectations of their marriage. Parents of young singles sometimes insist on their children's staying in the family household at least until they get married. The relatively low proportion (14.1% for males, 14.3% for females) of singles living alone among singles aged 25-34 supports this.

Sexual difference in the propensity of singles to live alone is also evident. For all age groups, female singles have a higher propensity to live alone. This is explained by the traditional sex-role differentiation in the household. Because, in general, traditionally males are not supposed to do housework, and they need somebody doing the housework in the household. Therefore, the probability of male singles to live with parents or other relatives would be higher than that of female singles.

The sexual difference in the propensity to live alone among singles is somewhat reversed in the case of the widowed population. Data in Table 3 show that widowed males are more likely to live alone than widowed females. But the clearly higher propensity of widowed males to live alone disappears in old ages, and even in the oldest age group widowed females have a rather higher propensity to live alone. The data also indicate that the proportion of people living alone among all the widowed or divorced population in each age group from 15-24 to 60-64 increases with age. The reason for this would be that younger widowed or divorced people usually have young children to take care of and are more likely to live with their children than older widowed or divorced people.

**TABLE 3.** PROPORTION OF ONE-PERSON HOUSEHOLDERS IN EACH POPULATION GROUP BY AGE, SEX, AND MARITAL STATUS, 1990

Age	Sex	Marital Status		
		Never Married	Divorced	Widowed
15-24	Male	2.3	-	-
	Female	2.7	-	-
25-34	Male	14.1	11.8	10.9
	Female	14.3	26.4	6.6
35-44	Male	24.6	15.6	13.3
	Female	36.3	32.0	5.7
45-54	Male	34.6	20.6	13.9
	Female	43.8	33.4	10.9
55-64	Male	28.3	35.7	23.3
	Female	38.7	39.5	20.6
65-74	Male	30.0	32.3	22.3
	Female	51.5	56.9	20.8
75+	Male	-	-	10.2
	Female	-	-	11.7

\* "-" is for a cell with less than 5 cases.

Source: 1990 Korean Population and Housing Census 2% Sample Tape.

## YOUNG SINGLES LIVING ALONE

We have seen that the never-married young population group was one of the important demographic groups which had a high proportion of population living alone in 1990. The period since 1960 has witnessed profound changes in social and economic life of Koreans mainly due to urbanization and industrialization. The consequences of this have been the increase in female labor force participation, the increase in quality and opportunity in education, changes in marriage and divorce, and decline in fertility and mortality. These dramatic changes are considered likely to affect the household or family formation of adults. The rise in the aggregate propensity of young singles to live alone was also attributable to these social and economic changes.

To investigate the effects of the characteristics of young singles on the propensity to live alone, using the most recent 1990 census data, the estimates of factors affecting the propensity to live alone are presented in Table 4. All the variables (place of residence, education, economic activity, migration status) except sex exhibited statistical significance.

Urban residence had the expected positive effect on young singles' propensity to live alone. The results in the effect of education indicate that

low level of education, middle school education or less, had a significantly positive effect on living alone. Michael *et al.* (1980), in their analysis of the changes in the propensity of American adults to live alone, pointed out that education typically reflects several influential forces including financial and probably psychological independence. The effect of education on the propensity to live alone is closely related to that of economic activity status. The regression results show that full-time work status of young singles had the significantly positive relationship with the propensity to live alone. On the other hand, partially working status or looking for work, although economically active, was negatively related to the propensity to live alone. And, the recent work by Kwon and Park(1993) showed that, among all working male singles aged 25-34, workers in service occupations or in production related occupations had the highest propensity to live alone, and one out of every five young male singles in these jobs lived alone in 1990; the findings for females were similar to those for males, except the very high propensity of young female singles working in the service sector to live alone. Notably about one out of every three young female singles in service occupations lived alone in 1990.

Migration, in general, is related to the opportunities of employment, education etc. in the areas. The usual theory of selective migration is that migrants are generally young single adults. Young single adults sometimes move with their families. But, in most cases young single adults move by themselves away from their families. From this point of view, increase in migration of young single adults is supposed to contribute to the increase in one-person households in the area of destination. Regression results in the effect of migration status on the propensity of young singles to live alone show that migration<sup>1</sup> had a positive effect on the propensity to live alone. Especially the effect of migration during the five-year period 1985-90 appeared to be more significant than that of migration during the shorter one-year period 1989-90. The findings seem to imply that living in the area of destination, especially in urban areas, for at least five years enables young singles to be economically and psychologically independent so that they live alone.

<sup>1</sup>Migrants here are people whose current place of residence in 1990 and residence of one year(1989)/or five years ago(1985) are different.

**TABLE 4.** MAXIMUM LIKELIHOOD LOGISTIC REGRESSION ESTIMATES OF LIVING ALONE OF SINGLES AGED 25-34, 1990 (N = 38,555)

Variable	Estimate
<i>Dependent Variable</i>	
0 = Living Alone	
1 = Not Living Alone	
<i>Independent Variables</i>	
Place of Residence	
Urban	0.421***
Rural	
Sex	
Male	-0.033
Female	
Education	
Less than Middle School	0.317***
High School	0.142***
University	-0.220***
Graduate School	
Economic Activity	
Full-time Work	0.476***
Part-time Work or Looking for Work	-0.031
Not Working	
Migration Status(1)(1989-90)	
Non-migrant	-0.267***
Rural to Urban Migrant	0.055
Urban to Rural Migrant	-0.094
Urban to Urban Migrant	0.177**
Rural to Rural Migrant	
Migration Status(2)(1985-90)	
Non-migrant	-0.957***
Rural to Urban Migrant	0.245***
Urban to Rural Migrant	0.269***
Urban to Urban Migrant	0.009
Rural to Rural Migrant	

\*\* p < 0.01, \*\*\* p < 0.001.

Note: Estimation method for the maximum likelihood logistic regression was the CATMOD procedure (SAS) which is a procedure for categorical data modeling. In CATMOD, the last category of variable omitted in the estimation is not the reference category for the contrasts among different categories of variable. The last category is not needed just because CATMOD constrains all parameters to sum to 0. The last parameter estimate can be computed by adding up all estimates including the last one to sum to 0, but we are unable to calculate the significance level of the derived estimate.

Source: 1990 Korean Population and Housing Census 2% Sample Tape.

## ELDERLY WOMEN LIVING ALONE

Another important demographic group which had a high proportion of population living alone was the elderly population. Increase in the proportion of people living alone among the elderly population<sup>2</sup> indicates the changes in family life of elderly people, and would be interpreted as increase in elderly people who live lonely and alienated from the family in their later stages of life.

By 1990, among the elderly population aged 60 and over, the proportion of one-person householders was 9%. The proportion of elderly males(60+) who lived alone was only 3.2%, whereas the proportion of elderly females (60+) who lived alone was 12.8% (Table 5). The proportions among the elderly population aged 65 and over appeared to be larger. The propensity of elderly people to live alone was considerably different among two regions, urban and rural. The proportion of elderly population who lived alone was much larger in rural areas than in urban areas. Especially, the proportion of the rural female elderly population turned out to almost double the proportion of their urban counterparts (Table 5).

The regression analysis to explore the effects of the characteristics of the

TABLE 5. PROPORTIONS OF ELDERLY PEOPLE LIVING ALONE BY REGION AND SEX, 1990

Region/Sex	Elderly People	
	60 +	65 +
Whole Country		
Total	9.0	9.5
Male	3.2	3.4
Female	12.8	13.1
Urban		
Total	6.8	7.0
Male	2.8	2.9
Female	9.3	9.2
Rural		
Total	11.6	12.4
Male	3.6	4.0
Female	17.1	17.9

Source: 1990 Korean Population and Housing Census 2% Sample Tape.

<sup>2</sup>According to the national survey data conducted by the Korean Institute of Population and Health in 1988 (Lee *et al.* 1989), the proportion of one-person householders among the elderly population(60+) was 7.6%. According to the 1990 census data, the proportion increased to 9.0%.

elderly population on the propensity to live alone includes only the female elderly population aged 60 and over. Because of the sex differentials in mortality, usually females are dominant in the sex distribution of the elderly population. Moreover, the propensity of female elderly population to live alone was about four times higher than that of the male elderly population (Kwon and Park 1993). The estimates of factors affecting the propensity of female elderly people to live alone are presented in Table 6. The results in the effect of residential place indicate that urban residence had a significantly negative effect on one-person household formation of elderly women, contrary to the findings for young singles. In other words, rural residence positively affected the formation of one-person households among elderly women. The living arrangement of the elderly population is

**TABLE 6.** MAXIMUM LIKELIHOOD LOGISTIC REGRESSION ESTIMATES OF LIVING ALONE OF ELDERLY WOMEN (60+), 1990 (N = 40,272)

Variable	Estimate
<i>Dependent Variable</i>	
0 = Living Alone	
1 = Not Living Alone	
<i>Independent Variables</i>	
<i>Place of Residence</i>	
Urban	-0.336***
Rural	
<i>Marital Status</i>	
Currently Married	-2.330***
Widowed	0.565***
Divorced	
<i>Number of Living Children</i>	
None	1.221***
One	-0.301***
Two or More	
<i>Economic Activity</i>	
Full-time Work	0.794***
Part-time Work or Looking for Work	-0.052
Not Working	

\*\*\*p < 0.001.

Note: Estimation method for the maximum likelihood logistic regression was the CATMOD procedure(SAS) which is a procedure for categorical data modeling. In CATMOD, the last category of variable omitted in the estimation is not the reference category for the contrasts among different categories of variable. The last category is not needed just because CATMOD constrains all parameters to sum to 0. The last parameter estimate can be computed by adding up all estimates including the last one to sum to 0, but we are unable to calculate the significance level of the derived estimate.

Source: 1990 Korean Population and Housing Census 2% Sample Tape.

very closely related to the stage in family life cycle. Old people, after the death of or divorce of their spouse, usually live with their married children's family or their unmarried children, or sometimes with any other relatives, or they live alone. According to the regression results on the effect of marital status, widowhood had a significantly positive effect on living alone for elderly women. Fertility of elderly women is also supposed to affect their living arrangement. Having no living child, used as an index of fertility, was positively related to the propensity to live alone. When we consider the low fertility level of women and the increase in tendency of couples to remain childless in the recent period, we may expect that the propensity of widows in old ages to live alone would increase in the future. With respect to the effect of the last variable economic activity on the propensity of elderly women to live alone, the results show that the effect of full-time work status of elderly women was significantly positive.

#### IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECENT CHARACTERISTICS OF ONE-PERSON HOUSEHOLDS

Rise in one-person households was evident in Korea. By 1990 about one out of every ten households was a one-person household. And, the proportion of the population living alone increased substantially from 0.4% in 1960 to 2.35% in 1990. Adults living alone accounted for 3.16%<sup>3</sup> of the total adult population(15+) in 1990. We also have shown that, in 1990, nearly one half of the adult population living alone were single young persons under age 34 and an additional one fifth were elderly persons, mostly widowed. The rise in the aggregate propensity to live alone was attributable to the social and economic changes mainly due to urbanization and industrialization. However, it was not clear that growth in the propensity to live alone appears to be pervasive in recent Korea.

First of all, it seems still likely that in Korea young single persons usually live in "the family of orientation" until they eventually marry. The tendency of single persons to live with their family decreases with their age. According to the findings in 1990, a large portion of young singles living alone were rural-to-urban migrants who lived away from their families. However, rural-to-urban migration has been decreasing recently, and there is no evidence for increase in the propensity of urban-reared young singles to live alone. Therefore, although we have observed the rise in the

<sup>3</sup>According to the 1990 Population and Housing Census Report, the total number of adult population(15+) was 32,256,159, and the number of adult population living alone was 1,020,269.

proportion of urban young singles who lived alone, it is hard to conclude that growth in the propensity of young singles to form one-person households or non-family households before marriage appears to be pervasive.

Old singles, especially female old singles, can be regarded as "permanent singles" who are not expected to marry easily or to eventually marry. In this perspective the households these old singles live in might be regarded as their permanent ones. Old singles, if economically independent, would form their own households either alone or with non-relatives such as single friends. Therefore, the factors such as decline in marriage rate, increase in female labor force participation, and increase in preference of "privacy" of the young generations might operate in the direction to increase the single population and the proportion of singles who live alone. However, the rise in one-person householders among singles does not yet appear to be a reflection of the change in family norms.

Another demographic group with a large proportion of people living alone were elderly women. The results indicated the increase in elderly women who lived alone, but they did not confirm any critical change in the traditional ideology of the "extended family" system. The big increase in the proportion of rural elderly widows living alone, almost doubling that of the urban elderly widows, was mostly due to rural-to-urban migration of their children. In general, elderly people are reluctant to change the living environment which they used to live in, and they feel more comfortable in the place of origin. So, elderly people usually insist on staying in rural areas. On the other hand, a relatively small proportion of urban elderly widows living alone is explained in part by economic reasons, and also by the urban setting itself which is not favorable for the elderly, especially elderly people living alone. Therefore, when we consider the rise in elderly people living alone and the serious problem of their economic instability, more social and political concerns about these elderly households are needed.

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