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Population Aging in Korea: Social Problems and Solutions

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Aging in Korea is discussed in light of the rapid growth in numbers and proportion of the Korean population and has a great impact upon planning and policy development. The demographic transition has implications on the traditional family caregiving system. Living arrangements and employment status of the elderly will be described, and the economic implications on society will be addressed. There are many roles for the Korean Government to provide for the welfare of the country's growing elderly population.

Introduction

Korea experienced a major demographic transition, from a rapidly growing population to a moderately growing one, after the beginning of the 1960s. Population aging is a natural outcome of the demographic transition from high fertility and mortality to low fertility and mortality. Since the 1960s, while population growth became moderate, Korean society has been undergoing vast demographic changes including the rapid increase in both the proportion and the absolute number of the elderly. The interaction of rapid socioeconomic development and full-scale adoption of family planning programs facilitated the rapid process of demographic transition in Korea (Kim, I.K., 1987). During the period of the first five-year economic plan, 1962–67, the Gross National Product (GNP) grew at an annual rate of 7.0 percent. The GNP growth for the next five-year economic plan

was even higher, 11.4 percent. Since then, the Korean economy has consistently grown over time.

Sociological theorists of structural functionalism and modernization argue that with industrialization, urbanization, and overall economic development, household structure will shift generally from an extended to a nuclear form (Cowgill & Homes, 1978; Martin, 1989). It is argued that industrialization requires a flexible, mobile, and nuclear family because it is functionally more adapted to the new mode of production (Kim, I.Y., 1993). Modernization theorists have also argued that the status and well-being of the elderly are closely linked to their living arrangements, implying that modernization means the transformation of living arrangements from the type of living with children to that of living alone or living with spouse only (Cowgill, 1986; Cowgill & Holmes, 1978).

The rapidly changing socioeconomic and demographic characteristics, in conjunction with population aging in Korea, have created greater awareness and commitment among policy-makers and planners to concerns regarding the elderly (Kim, I.K. et al., 1997). A better understanding of the process of population aging will facilitate the development of policies and plans to ensure meeting the needs of the Korean elderly.

This article examines the process of population aging in Korea within the context of demographic transition. More specifically, it will deal with the changes in the characteristics of population and family structure, process of population aging, and changes in the demographic status and living arrangements of the elderly. In a conclusion, the socioeconomic implications of the aging population will be discussed.

Demographic Transition and Features of Population Aging

Demographic transition is defined as changes in the fertility and mortality of a specific society in the process of transition from an agrarian state to an industrialized and urbanized state (Coale 1973). According to this definition, modernization brings about demographic transition; that is, the reduction of both fertility and mortality.

In Korea, mortality continued to decline after 1960, but the reduction rate has been lowered. On the other hand, the level of

fertility for the period of 1955–60 was record high in the recent demographic history of Korea because of the baby boom that followed immediately after the Korean War (Kim, I.K, 1987). The fertility level slowly declined after the peak year (1959) up until 1965. Until this time, effective methods of fertility control were not widely practiced. The Korean government launched a five-year economic plan and adopted family planning as a national policy in 1962. In this sense, the demographic transition in Korea started in the mid-1960s (Kim, I.K. 1987).

The year 1960 marks a decisive turning point in the mortality trend. The Korean War during 1950–53 had great impact on the Korean population, especially on mortality. War casualties were estimated to be 1.6 million and the crude death rate rose sharply during this period (Lee 1980). The crude death rate in 1955 was record high at the level of 33 per thousand. Since then, the mortality level of Korean population has slowly but consistently declined (Korea National Statistical Office, 1997). The crude death rate in 1960 indicates 16 per thousand, which is decreased by 17 per thousand, compared to 5 years ago. The crude death rate continuously declined and reached 5.3 per thousand in 1996.

In accordance with the continuous decline of the crude death rate, life expectancy at birth has consistently increased over time (Korea National Statistical Office, 1997). Life expectancy at birth in 1960 was 51.1 years for males and 57.3 years for females. Life expectancy for males increased from 51.1 years in 1960 to 57.2 years in 1970, 62.7 years in 1980, 68.2 years in 1990, then to 69.5 years in 1996. Life expectancy for females increased at the same speed from 57.3 years in 1960 to 64.1 years in 1970, 69.1 years in 1980, 75.0 years in 1990, then to 77.4 years in 1996. Continual increase of life expectancy has brought about a consistent increase in the proportion of the elderly; that is, population aging.

Decrease of the fertility level has also affected population aging. The crude birth rate in 1960 was as high as 45 per thousand. Since then, however, the rate has continuously declined over time (Kim, I.K., 1997). While the crude birth rate declined only by 3 per thousand during the period of 1960–65, it declined sharply from 42 per thousand to 32 during the period of 1965–70. The reduction of the crude birth rate by 10 per thousand for the five-year period is record high. Since then, the fertility level has steadily declined

without interruption. The crude birth rate declined to 23.4 in 1980, 15.6 in 1990, then to 15.2 per thousand in 1996.

During the period of demographic transition, Korea experienced a rapid urbanization process, as well (ESCAP, 1980). In 1960, only 28 percent of the population lived in cities. The urbanization rate increased to 41 percent in 1970, 57 percent in 1980, then to 74 percent in 1990 (Korea National Statistical Office, 1997). In contrast to the rapid increase of urban population, the rural population growth rate has continuously declined over time. The loss of rural population is totally due to the heavy out-migration. Such a heavy out-migration, especially of working age population, has resulted in a severe imbalance of the age distribution between urban and rural populations. The imbalance of the age distribution again results in different proportions of the elderly population.

Migration to cities, in conjunction with the process of industrialization, has broken down the traditional family system of agricultural society and thus expanded the nuclear family system (Bae 1987). The proportion of nuclear family has consistently increased, with the exception in 1970, whereas that of stem family has continuously decreased over time (Kim, T.H. et al, 1993). The proportion of nuclear family increased from 66.6 percent in 1966, to 72.9 percent in 1980, to 76.0 percent in 1990, then to 81.3 percent in 1995.

The rapid process of demographic transition has brought about the increase of both the absolute number and proportion of the elderly in Korea. Those aged 60 and over increased from 1.5 million in 1960 to 3.3 million in 1990, and are projected to increase to 9.9 million by the year 2020. This shows that the number of elderly population aged 60 and over doubled within the past three decades and is expected to increase by almost three times of the 1990 figure and more than six times of the 1960 figure. Table 1 shows the proportions of the elderly since 1966. The proportion of those aged 60 and over was 5.2 percent in 1966, then it consistently increased. However, it does not show notable changes until the 1980s. The proportion of those aged 60 and over was still 7.6 percent in 1990 but it is projected to reach almost 26.5 percent in 2030.

Increase of the proportion of the elderly has affected both dependency ratio and aging index in Korea since 1966. The dependency ratio of those aged 60 and over was 10.2 in 1966 and

Table 1
Proportions of the Elderly in Korea, 1966-2020

Year	1966	1970	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020	2030
Age													
10-14	43.5	42.1	38.1	33.8	29.9	25.7	23.4	21.6	21.2	19.5	18.4	17.2	16.0
15-59	53.2	52.5	56.3	60.1	63.3	66.7	67.5	67.4	66.3	66.5	65.1	62.8	57.5
60-64	1.9	2.1	2.1	2.2	2.5	2.7	3.3	3.9	3.9	4.2	5.2	6.9	7.2
65-69	1.5	1.4	1.6	1.7	1.8	2.1	2.3	2.9	3.4	3.4	3.9	4.7	6.7
70-74	1.8	1.9	1.9	2.2	2.5	2.9	1.7	1.9	2.4	2.9	3.0	3.4	5.7
75-79	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.8	0.9	1.0	1.3	1.5	1.9	2.4	2.5	3.5
80+	0.3	0.4	0.4	0.5	0.5	0.7	0.8	1.0	1.3	1.6	2.0	2.5	3.4
60+	5.2	5.4	5.6	6.1	6.8	7.6	9.1	11.0	12.5	14.0	16.5	20.0	26.5
65+	3.3	3.3	3.5	3.9	4.3	5.0	5.8	7.1	8.6	9.8	11.3	13.1	19.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Korea Statistical Yearbook, 1997.

13.5 in 1995 but it is projected to triple in the future, increasing to 46.1 in 2030 (Korea Statistical Yearbook, 1997). The aging index of those aged 60 and over also shows a drastic increase. The index was 12.0 in 1966, increased to 38.9 in 1995, and is projected to reach 165.6 in 2030. The aging index indicates that in 2030 the population aged 60 and older will be larger by 66 percent than the population aged 0–14.

The dramatic demographic transition within a short period of time has accelerated the population aging in Korea. Korea, which has already experienced large declines in fertility and mortality, has a tremendous momentum for further population aging. The projected declines in fertility and mortality will add to the momentum for even further population aging in Korea (Kim et al., 1998).

According to Chung (1998), the aging speed of the Korean population is apparently faster than that of developed countries. The year when the proportion of those aged 65 and over reached 7 percent of the total population was 1865, in France 1890, in Sweden, and 1970 in Japan. In Korea, the proportion is expected to reach 7 percent in 2000. The time required to double this proportion was 115 years for France, 85 years for Sweden, and 25 years for Japan. It is projected to take 22 years in Korea.

Changes in the Demographic Status of the Elderly

This section examines the changes in the demographic status of the elderly in conjunction with the aging process. Table 2 illustrates the proportions of currently married among the elderly during the period of 1966–95. For both sexes, the proportions have slightly but consistently increased over time. The proportion of currently married for the population aged 60 and over was 48.0 percent in 1966, but increased to 57.2 percent in 1995. Also, the proportions are higher in the categories of younger cohorts. One notable thing in this table is that there have been big differences in the proportions of married between male elderly and female elderly. The proportions have been much lower for females than for males all through the age groups.

While the population in Korea has experienced rapid urbanization, the urbanization rate for the older population has been

Table 2

Proportions of the Currently Married Elderly in Korea, 1966–1995

<i>Year</i>	<i>1966</i>	<i>1970</i>	<i>1975</i>	<i>1980</i>	<i>1985</i>	<i>1990</i>	<i>1995</i>
<i>Age</i>							
<i>Both Sexes</i>							
60+	48.0	50.3	52.0	53.0	55.9	54.9	57.2
65+	41.3	41.6	44.6	45.0	47.0	47.2	47.6
<i>Male</i>							
60+	77.5	80.3	83.3	84.7	86.5	86.3	87.9
65+	71.0	73.5	77.6	79.9	82.2	82.6	83.6
<i>Female</i>							
60+	28.7	29.4	31.0	31.6	35.2	34.5	36.8
65+	22.0	21.7	24.3	24.3	27.4	26.0	26.5

Source: Economic Planning Bureau, Population and Housing Census Report, each year.

lower than that for the total population (Kim, I.K., 1997). Among the total population, the proportion of urban residence was 33.5 percent in 1966. This proportion continued to increase during the following three decades and reached 78.7 percent in 1995. For those aged 60 and over, however, the proportion of urban residence increased from 23.3 percent in 1966 to 58.5 percent in 1995. A closer examination of the differences in the share of old population in rural and urban areas reveals that, throughout the past three decades, the proportion of old people in rural areas constantly outnumbered the corresponding proportion in urban areas.

Socioeconomic Situation of the Elderly

Table 3 indicates the living arrangements of the elderly by region in 1994. One of the most notable features in this table is the sharp increase in the proportion of the elderly living alone. The proportion of the elderly living alone in 1994 is 11.9 percent, which is increased by 8.6 percent compared to 1981 (Kim, I.K. et al., 1992). The proportion of the elderly living alone or with their spouse is only 41.0 percent, which is greater by 21.3 percent

Table 3

Living Arrangements of the Elderly by Region, 1994 (%)

<i>Living arrangements</i>	<i>Region</i>		
	<i>Total</i>	<i>Urban areas</i>	<i>Rural areas</i>
Living alone	11.9	9.6	15.0
Living with spouse only	29.1	21.6	39.0
Living with children	53.8	64.1	40.1
Living with others	5.2	4.7	5.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
	(2,056)	(1,170)	(886)

Source: Rhee, K.O. et al., 1994, p. 38.

than that in 1984 (Eu, 1991). The proportion of the elderly living with children is 53.8 percent, which is decreased by 24.0 percent compared to 1984 (Kim and Choe, 1992).

Another notable feature in Table 3 is the big differences in living arrangements between the urban and rural elderly. The proportion of the elderly living alone is 9.6 percent in urban areas but 15.0 percent in rural areas. The proportion of the elderly living with their spouse is only 21.6 percent in urban areas but 39.0 percent in rural areas. On the other hand, the proportion of the elderly living with children in rural areas (40.1 percent) is less by 24.0 percent than that in urban areas. This is due to the massive out-migration of children from rural areas.

The living arrangement is a very important mechanism to the elderly because it is closely related to the support for them. Co-residence with family members seems to be the best way of supporting the elderly because most types of support (financial support, emotional support, assistance in activities, etc.) are possible with co-residence. Of course, living alone does not necessarily mean a lack of support from family members. However, the elderly living alone or with their spouse normally only have a limited access to these types of support.

In Korea, there have been big gender and age differences in educational attainment (Kim, I.K., 1997). The proportion of the male elderly reporting "no school" is only 23.6 percent while the

proportion for the female elderly is 55.7 percent. Similarly, the proportion of high school graduates or over for male elderly is 25.0 percent but only 4.8 percent for the female elderly. Moreover, with increasing age, educational attainment for both sexes consistently decreases. The proportion of middle school graduates or over is 33.0 percent for the elderly aged 60–64 years, 21.2 percent for the elderly aged 65–69 years, 13.3 percent for those aged 70–74 years, 8.8 percent for those aged 75–79 years and 5.8 percent for those aged 80 years and over.

The employment status of the Korean elderly is not so favorable (Rhee et al., 1994). As of 1994, only 36.7 percent of the elderly are employed. The proportion of the employed among male elderly (53.9 percent) is much higher than that among female elderly (25.3%). The proportion of the employed elderly is consistently decreasing, in comparing older age groups. The proportion for the elderly aged 60–64 years is 53.1 percent, whereas that for the elderly aged 75 and over is 9.5 percent.

According to Rhee et al. (1994), the most important reason for working among the employed elderly is “need money” (72.2%), followed by “just want work” (8.2%), “to keep healthy” (7.0%), “to kill time” (4.8%) and “to feel ability to work” (4.0%). Among the currently employed elderly, 79.9 percent of the elderly want to continue to work mainly because they need money.

In terms of the support for the elderly, almost 20 percent of the respondents receive no financial support in 1997 (Kim, I.K., 1997). Most of the financial support comes from family members. The proportion of receiving financial support from family members is 77.6 percent. The proportion from formal support is only 2.6 percent and that from friends and neighbors is 0.8 percent. On the other hand, the proportion of receiving emotional support is greatest among those who receive it from friends and neighbors (57.7%), followed by from family members (36.5%). In the case of physical support, 58.0 percent of the respondents do not receive any support. The proportion of receiving physical support from family members is the greatest at 39.2 percent. The proportion receiving support from friends and neighbors is 2.7 percent and that from formal sources is almost zero (0.2%).

Then, who is responsible for the elderly support? According to a survey done in 1997 (Kim, I.K., 1997), the greatest portion (49.6%) of the elderly indicates that the eldest son should support

them. The proportion of the elderly who think that sons (including the eldest son) should support them is 63.7 percent. The proportion of the elderly who think that children should support them is totally 78.2 percent. Only 17.1 percent of the elderly think that they themselves are responsible for their lives.

Socioeconomic Implications of Population Aging

Analysis of changes in the characteristics of the Korean elderly over the past three decades reveals the following phenomena (Kim et al., 1996): an increase in the absolute size and proportion of the older population; an increase in the proportion of older people reflected in the dependency ratio; an increasingly imbalanced sex ratio; and substantial sex differences in the proportions of currently married elderly.

In addition, the educational attainment of the elderly has consistently increased over time. However, improvement in the educational attainment is projected to be greater for older women than for older men. The literacy rate for older women was in Korea 20 percent in 1980 but it will increase to over 95 percent by 2020 (Hermalin and Christenson, 1991). The proportion of males aged 60 and over who receive at least a secondary education will also steadily increase by the year 2020. These changes will significantly affect the role of the elderly both in the family and the society, and will also influence the pattern of the support for the elderly.

Support is crucial to the elderly, especially after their retirement. Living arrangements of the elderly are critical in the support for the elderly. Living together with the elderly is considered as the best way of providing support for the elderly because living together makes possible every kind of support. In recent years, however, the proportion of the Korean elderly living alone has increased while the proportion of those living with family members has decreased (Kim and Choe, 1992).

The elderly living alone suffer from serious economic problems. Thus, although the proportion of the Korean elderly receiving support is still relatively high, an increasing proportion of the elderly living alone might indicate that the tradition of strong family support is somewhat weakening owing to the rapid socioeconomic transformation.

Economic difficulties are not confined only to the elderly living alone. The majority of the elderly suffer from economic problems. The 1984 Korea Elderly Survey revealed that about half of the elderly people aged 60 and over had financial difficulties (Lim et al., 1985). According to the 1988 Korea Gallup Survey (Korea Gallup, 1990), the proportion of those who reported financial difficulties had increased to almost two-thirds of the elderly respondents.

As a consequence of the rapid changes both in socioeconomic development and population aging, the role of the government should be extended in providing welfare for the elderly. However, welfare services of the Korean government for the elderly are very limited. An Elderly Survey in Korea shows that the proportion of the elderly receiving public assistance is less than 2 percent and those receiving medical insurance and pension benefits account for only 3 percent and 2 percent, respectively (Rhee et al., 1994).

The limited services of the Korean government are well indicated in the national budget. Table 4 indicates composition of Korean national budget for the welfare services. The proportion of the budget for social security among Gross National Product (GNP) is 0.86 percent in 1995, which has slightly decreased compared to that in the early 1990s. The proportion of the budget for welfare services for the elderly among national budget is only 0.12 percent in 1995. This proportion is extremely lower than the proportion in Japan (17.3%) and even much lower than the proportion in China (2.9%) (Rhee et al., 1994). The proportion of the budget for the welfare services for the elderly among total social welfare in 1995 has been lowered compared to that in 1990. Despite the fact that the absolute number and proportion of the elderly have increased, the proportion of the welfare services for the elderly has decreased. This will bring about serious social problems to the elderly in the future.

To make the matters worse, the role of the government would be limited to some extent because it is impossible for the government to take full responsibility if the number of the elderly unlimitedly increase. In this situation, the family should continuously take part in the care of the elderly. Without increased filial piety, supporting the elderly in the family would be very difficult. Most Korean elderly take it for granted that they will

Table 4

Composition of Korean National Budget for the Welfare Services

	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995
Social security/GNP	0.7	0.8	1.0	1.0	0.9	0.9	0.88	0.86
Social security/ national budget	4.5	5.2	6.6	7.0	6.4	6.4	6.1	5.8
Welfare for the elderly/national budget	0.02	0.03	0.14	0.13	0.17	0.22	0.11	0.12
Welfare for the elderly/total social welfare	8.8	10.5	33.3	28.2	30.2	37.7	22.3	22.9

Source: Kim, I. K. 1995.

receive financial help from their own children. Contrary to this expectation, however, there are many circumstances under which such support is not available from their children (due to recent socioeconomic transformations).

Mason (1992) argues that norms about the care of the elderly by their children were traditionally strong in most of Asia and appear to remain strong; but despite this, traditional patterns of co-residence are eroding in many countries. The further economic growth and urbanization are likely to erode the family's ability to care for the elderly. It is really a dilemma whether the elderly should be taken care of by the family or by the government.

Furthermore, massive out-migration of young people from rural areas due to industrialization and urbanization has brought about different patterns of living arrangements between urban and rural settings. Modernization theory hypothesizes that urban residence is negatively associated with living with children (Martin, 1989). In Korea, however, rural residence is negatively related to living with children because of the massive out-migration of young population (Kim, I. K. 1998).

Patterns of the living arrangements of the elderly are quite different in urban and rural areas (Kim, I.K. 1998). The most salient finding here is that more than half of the rural elderly live alone or only with a spouse. The proportion of the elderly

living alone or spouse only in rural areas is much higher than that in urban areas. Age differentials in the living arrangements of the elderly are more distinctive in rural areas than in urban areas. Sex differentials in the living arrangements are also more distinctive in rural areas, especially among the elderly who live alone or with spouse only. Marital status is another important variable which differentiates the living arrangements in urban and rural areas. It is especially notable that in rural areas the proportion of the elderly living alone or with spouse only is extraordinarily higher among the more educated elderly. Likewise, home ownership, employment status and income status are also important variables influencing the determinants of the urban-rural differentials in the living arrangement of the elderly. The urban-rural differentials in the living arrangements of the elderly would make the lives of the rural elderly more disastrous.

Conclusion

Far East Asian countries including Japan, China, Taiwan, and Korea have shared the ideas of filial piety (Hyo in Korean; Hsiao in Chinese; Ko in Japanese) for many generations (Sung 1990). Filial piety is composed of two concepts; one as a family-based concept which indicates that children should care for the elderly as a response to the love and benefit given by their parents, another one as a society-based concept which indicates that the society should pay back the contribution which the elderly gave to the society while they were young. In Korea, the family has, so far, taken the full responsibility of caring for the elderly. In accordance with the industrialization and urbanization, however, society should share the responsibility to a certain extent. Not only the family; but the government, social organization, and the company where the elderly had worked for a lifetime; should have the shared responsibility of taking care of the elderly.

Respect for the aged has strong roots in Korean culture; it is a value based on filial piety which has not yet been undermined by socioeconomic and demographic changes. Despite the forces of industrialization and urbanization, the family still retains its role as the backbone of old age support (Kim et al. 1992; Liang et al. 1992; Martin 1988; Sung 1990; Tu et al. 1989).

As mentioned earlier, however, the proportions of the elderly living alone have sharply increased while the proportions of those living with family members have consistently decreased. Several projections indicate that the elderly population will continue to grow and the share of old people in the dependency ratio will become greater than that of children by 2020. Thus, an increasing number of Korean elderly would suffer from financial difficulties because of their children's avoidance or inability to provide financial support (Choi 1992). The emergence of this problem is reflected in rising demand for social welfare for the elderly and increasing government's responsibility to support the elderly.

Nevertheless, the role of Korean government in the welfare services for the elderly has been limited to a great extent. The role of government in the welfare services for the elderly will be more limited as the number of the elderly continuously increase not only in Korea but in other Asian countries. A recent projection indicates that the contribution rate for Japan's largest public pension scheme will have to rise from 17 percent of wages in 1995 to 30 percent in 2025 for all anticipated benefits (Ogawa and Retherford, 1997). Population projections suggest that the much newer pension systems in Korea and Taiwan will also encounter operating deficits soon after they become fully functional, requiring an increase in contribution rates, government support from tax revenues, or both (Westley, 1998).

As a way of responding to population aging, the Japanese government is seeking to shift some of the burden of caring for the elderly back to families and to the elderly themselves (Westley, 1998). The Japanese government launched a 10-year project to expand nursing-home capacity and to improve social services for the elderly who live at home. The main focus of the plan is to improve both day-care services and short-term stays in nursing homes and to help families who are looking after elderly relatives at home. Home nursing services are also considered. However, Westley (1998) predicts that the Japanese government's efforts to shift some of the responsibility for elderly care back to families are not likely to be very successful because of the increase of elderly population and the shrinking availability of

family caregivers. Korea and Japan have shown similar patterns of demographic transition and socioeconomic development with some time lag (Kim, I.K. 1992), Japan's experience would thus be a good implication in applying the programs in Korea.

Another serious social problem in relation to the population aging in Korea is urban-rural differentials. As indicated, the proportion of the elderly living without children has continuously increased due to rapid socioeconomic transformation in recent decades, especially in rural areas. This is a critical sign that the tradition of strong family support in Korea has been changing and that the strong tradition of support for elderly family members could continuously weaken in the future. In Korea, the family ties have traditionally been much stronger in rural than urban areas. In this context, the elderly in rural areas are facing a crisis.

The trend of rural-to-urban migration of young populations has continued until recently mainly due to the relatively worsening socioeconomic conditions in rural areas. In addition to the rapid process of population aging, this tendency of continuous out-migration of young people would make the situation of the elderly in rural areas more serious. As a consequence of changes and rapid process of population aging, special measures for the welfare of the elderly would be necessary in both urban and rural areas (Choi, 1992; Rhee et al., 1993). Nonetheless, the measures for the welfare of the elderly should be more emphasized in the rural areas.

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