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PROBLEMS OF THE ELDERLY IN KOREA:

A Socio-demographic Overview

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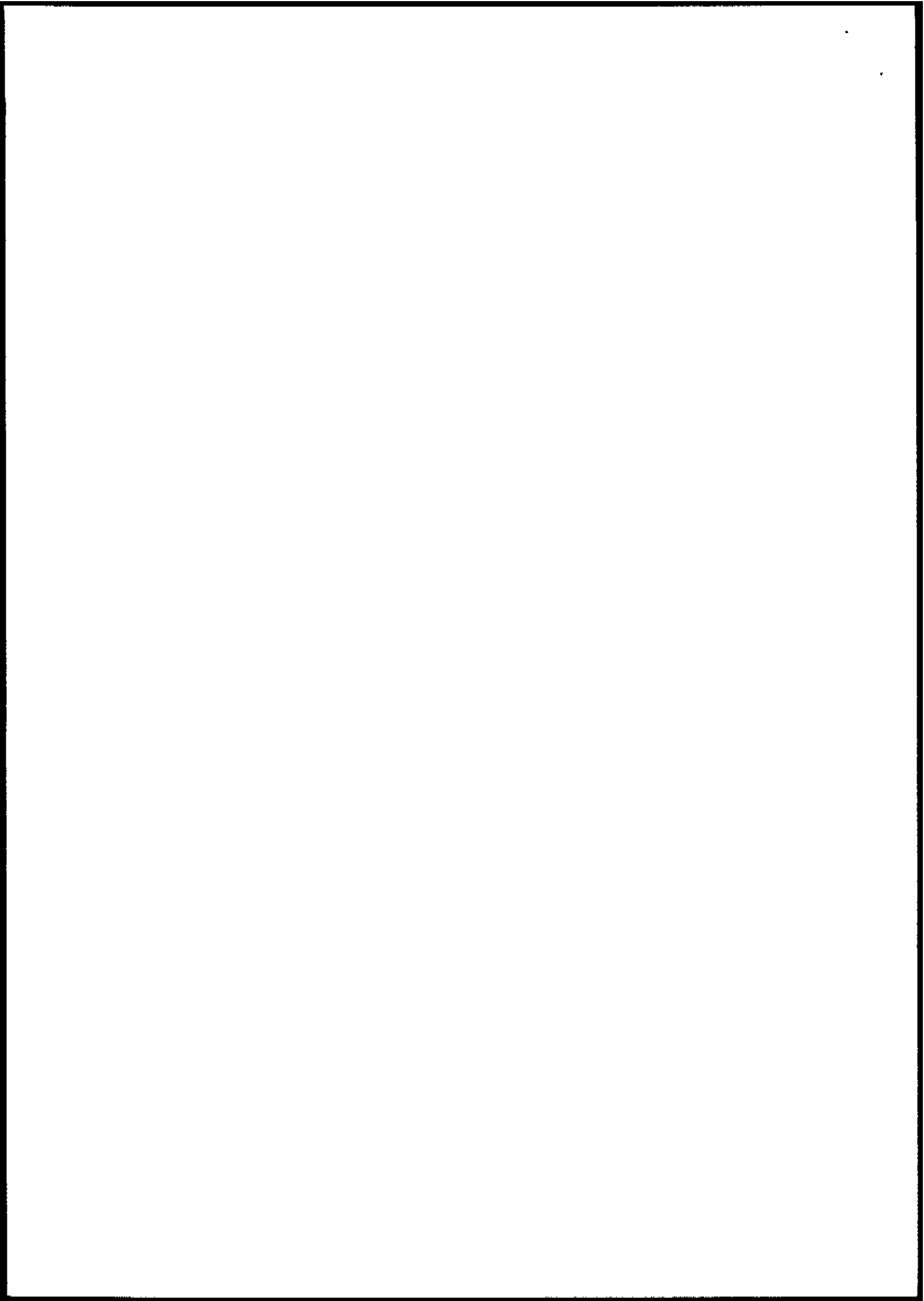
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INTRODUCTION

In traditional Korea, age was one of the major determinants of social prestige, and was regarded to be an index of maturity and integration of men as moral beings. Age forty (in Korean age) was referred as "age free from vacillation". The sixtieth birthday was invariably celebrated with a big feast. The elderly were socially respected and had exercised strong authority not only in family affairs but in community life. Traditional family and social norms were stipulated in favour of old age in every respect. They assumed the headship of their own extended family and were entitled to manage economic as well as kinship affairs even in very high age. Accordingly no concept of retirement was developed. Proper treatment of, or paying respect to, the aged was particularly supported by the idea of "filial piety" which consisted of the very cardinal norm in traditional Korea. The idea smeared into every aspect of social life. For the familistic orientation of the past Korean society, the image of the elderly to the public mind was linked with that of "parents or grand parents".

Since the early 1960s, Korean society has undergone overall transformation which is marked with demographic transition, urbanization, industrialization and modernization. The transformation has undoubtedly undermined the traditional

settings of social and family life and inflicted the changes in the normative system. Such changes are known to have exerted a profound impact upon the status of the elderly and caused various problems to the aged.

With this brief background information, now let us review the current status of the elderly from a socio-demographic point of view.

POPULATION COMPOSITION

In Korea, the rising concern in the problems of the elderly coincided with a rapid population growth in the 1960s and the latter has often been mentioned as the prime cause of the former. The general belief is that a substantive mortality decline during the past two decades has resulted in a growing proportion of the aged and this is the onset of the problems of the elderly. However, the relationship is not confirmed by any kind of demographic data. According to the 1975 census of Korea, the proportion of population at age 50 and more was reported to be 13 %, while the population at age 60 and onward consisted of 6.4 %. The 1975 census disclosed the corresponding figures as 11.4 % and 5.3 % respectively (Table 1).

On top of this decreasing proportion of old age population, the aged dependency ratio has also dropped somewhat since the 1960s, pointing to the fact that the

shift in age composition has rarely produced new burden to Korean economy to care for the elderly. It is also observed that the proportion of the widowed among old persons has decreased and vice versa with the proportion of the currently married (Table 2).

Demographically adverse situation in age structure began to notice only very recently. All population projections invariably indicate increasing proportions of the populations at age 50 or more. The percentage of persons is expected to reach at least 10 % for age 60 and more and 4 % for 70 and more by 2,000. Yet, in view of the changing age concept of "elderly persons", still controversial is whether the shift in age composition would have significant implications in understanding the future problems of old age in Korea.

PERCEPTION AND CONDITIONS OF HEALTH

The social concept of "elderly" in terms of age is not self-obvious, but varies in accordance with demographic situation, health conditions, social system and subsistence patterns, of a society. In traditional Korea, persons aged 50 were considered as "old" enough to retire from farming. They usually had grown-up grandchildren due to the universal early marriage system and were physically feeble because of poor health conditions and medical care. The physical conditions as well as social, family status of a person

has been altered completely during the last two decades if corresponding age groups are compared. Due to the general improvement of health condition, old persons has become ever healthier. Nobody calls nowadays "elderly" with a person aged 50, and it is frequently heard that a 60 years old man is a youth and a man at 70 is in the prime of life. In a word, the age limit for "elderly" has greatly lifted in the recent past and is expected to be raised further in the coming years.

Although elderly persons are known to suffer senility diseases to a great extent, proper health care for the elderly was rarely raised as a "social issue" in Korea. This may be blamed partly for the awareness of the problems of the elderly in recent years dating back only to the late 1960s. But more significant is the overriding perception of the public that there has been the continuous betterment of health conditions throughout their life span, which is believed to have generated general satisfaction with their current health among elderly persons. Low expectations on public medical service, which is in turn related to the short history of social welfare in the country, can be added to the factors in the lack of social concerns in health care of the elderly. It may be important to note here is that the perception of health is not entirely a physical matter but largely determined by culture. Koreans are usually less occupied with the problems of health in

ordinary life and rarely consider discomfort or slight pain as a symptom of an illness. Senility diseases are taken in most cases as natural, and seldom related to the problems of health.

So far, no special government health programmes were developed for the aged. However, mounting interests in old age coupled with the rapidly growing size of the elderly population would make it inevitable for the government to take some measures for the health care of the elderly in the near future. One important question here is whether new policies would inflict the changes in the currently prevailing concept of health and increase the demand on health and medical services among the aged. The answer is partly yes, but also dependent largely upon the nature and direction of the newly evolving government social welfare policy and various societal conditions.

FAMILY STRUCTURE

From the demographic and health points of view, no urgency in the problems of the aged is felt keenly. Why, then, the elderly is already placed in the center of social concern in Korea? What is the origin of the current problems of old age? In dealing with these questions, now let us turn to the implications of recent socio-economic changes upon the problems of the elderly.

It is well documented that the ideal family living in traditional Korea is that of a large, multi-generational extended family. The family has been the very source of security and authority for aged parents. The dissolution of the family system is often referred as one of the outcomes of the recent transformation of Korean society, which is typified by the prevalent idea that transition in the Korean family from the extended family orientation to the western type of nuclear family started and is well on the way. Majority of the debates on the problems of the old was put on in this context. However, the idea of changing family structure needs elaboration. Firstly, unlike what is believed by the public, the proportion of nuclear family has not increased substantially during 1960-75, while that of three or more generational households reveals a considerable decline. During 1970-75, the proportion of nuclear family was reported to have dropped. Also a substantial decline in the average family or household size is observed only for the intercensal years 1960-66, the period marked with the most profound migration from rural to urban areas in the history of Korea (Table 3). In a word, no persistent rise in the proportion of nuclear family and any considerable decline in the family size have taken place during the last two decades. Previously, the trend was reversed. Although the conjugal family ideals are weighted high among the youth, there is yet no indication so far of the appearance of one

generation family of old persons to a socially significant degree.

In urban areas, old parents often constitute a separate household from their married children. This is inevitable in many cases because of limited space and extremely high housing price in the city. Some parents prefer to live alone for their own freedom. But all these are temporary in the sense that the parents can choose and change the place of residence at any time and such separate living continues while they are able to earn their own livelihood and do have enough physical strength for outdoor activities.

These observations lead us to conclude that the living arrangement and its changing patterns hardly pose problems to the elderly. Rather, complaints filed by old persons indicate that the major problems of the aged in family living are conducive of the conflicts of norms, values and role perceptions between the old and the young, as well as in the loss of actual power and authority in the family economy and management. The aged are increasingly thought as "burden" rather than "asset" by their children, particularly in economic terms. Modernization and the influx of the Western life style in every respect have impeded the traditional way of life. This not only constitutes a challenge to the traditionally stipulated authority of the old, but necessitates their continuous

readjustment to the ever changing social as well as physical environment.

WORK AND RETIREMENT

The adjustment problems in old age are again noticed in the occupational life. In the modern sector occupations, particularly in the fields of professional, managerial and technical works, there is a strong emphasis upon new ideas and techniques for their effectiveness or productivity. The long experience in the work is hardly appreciated, and accordingly there developed an attitude treating age as an indicator of "incompetence" in connection with the less adjustability of the elders. Both in the private business firms and in the government bureaucracy, elders are often forced to retire for this very reason at a relatively young age.

Official age of retirement in the public sector ranges 45 to 60 depending upon the type of work. The retirement age, for the private sector, though customary, is known to be much lower. This retirement policy and the actual practice of retirement run in opposite direction with the trend of aging: Consequently, an increasing proportion have to go through out of work for a longer period due to old age, and many persons are forced to become "old" while they are still physically capable of work. The problem is particularly acute in urban areas.

The retirement problem is not pressing in rural villages. The age of retirement from farming has extended to a considerable degree during the last two decades due to the shortage of young labour resulted from the heavy rural to urban migration of the young. But this has created another kind of problem in rural areas. Farm labour in old age is considered to be neither prestigious nor proper, and rather reflects, in general, hardship, or sometimes bitterness, of the aged.

In the city, the shares of the economically active population and persons employed among the total male population decreases sharply after ages 50-54. Passing age 60, less than a half was reported in the labour force. Economic activity almost ceases at age 70. The rate of labour participation is observed to have dropped marginally in more recent years (Table 5). The drop in the rate of old age employment may constitute a social concern, but here again the more significant feature is that the old age employment is largely confined to less prestigious or trivial jobs.

The problem is more of general sort; that is, the elders engage in less socially respected works than the youngsters. The less adjustability is one of the reasons for this, but the more important is the lower educational qualifications of the elders. Higher educational opportunity has expanded greatly since the late 1950s, which in turn

resulted in the considerable educational disparity between generations. In view of the fact that education was the most crucial determinant of social prestige in traditional Korea, this evolving educational disadvantage signifies for the elders the surrender of authority to the youngsters in every aspect of social life.

Meaning of Sex

In understanding the problems of old age properly, the consideration of sex would have great importance in Korea. The survivorship is higher for female and therefore the proportion of women among the aged is much larger than that of men (Table 1).

Traditionally double norms were applied in Korea to men and women. For example, in the case of widowhood, men were encouraged to remarry, whereas women were prescribed not to. Women's social position was considerably inferior to that of men. Women were not allowed to engage in external economic activities or employment. Those norms has waned significantly during this period of modernization. However, strong role discrimination between sex is still prevalent. The social status of women is comparatively much low and the employment opportunity for women is highly restricted. In a word, the nature of problems of old women is totally dissimilar with that of

old men. Employment structure and social participation would be of important implications for dealing with the problems of aged men, while family structure and relationship are for the women. Taking their socially inferior position and less opportunity for work into account, the problems in old age can be weighted as more serious for women than for men in Korea.

Concluding Remarks

The social concept of the old has considerably changed during the last two decades in Korea. Yet, the concept is far different from the prevalent idea in the Western societies which portrays the aged as 'poor, weak, isolated, incapable and dependent'. Although societal transformation, which in part means the adoption of Western technology and values, is expected to continue at least by the year 2000, there is no doubt that Korean society will persistently manifest distinctiveness and uniqueness in its structure and culture. The question^{is}/to what extent Western ideology would affect the way of thought and life of Koreans. The nature and intensity of the problem will be largely dependent upon the degree of prevalence of 'individualism' which is incompatible with traditional family stability and the normative emphasis on filial piety.

Now, interest in social welfare is rising high in Korea. The government put priority on social development

in the national development planning and just stepped in setting up social welfare programmes including those for the aged. The programmes articulated so far are only minor ones and the decision on what direction of old age policy should go has to be awaited. The major concerns in this regard will be what traditional elements should be preserved and how to enhance social prestige of the elderly. The above discussions suggest that social welfare policy should emphasize the welfare of the family rather than individual as to promote family stability and thus security of the aged within the family. This in turn means the protection of elderly persons from social isolation. Another important aspect is to ensure institutionally job security until the official age of retirement and the extension of working life. For this, excessive achievement orientation should be avoided. A programme to induce the participation of the aged in community activities in the city will be worthy of consideration. Through the New Village Movement, the government has tried to promote community solidarity and activities for one decade, but due to the overwhelming emphasis on the economic sphere, the most available, and perhaps most effective, manpower for the movement was largely eliminated; that is, elderly citizens. If their participation is ensured and successful, this will provide the old with the sense of dignity and decency.

Table 1 : Percentages of Population and Sex Ratios for Selected Age Groups, 1925, 1960 & 1975.

	Percentages			Sex Ratio *
	Both Sexes	Male	Female	
<u>1925</u>				
50+	13.0	12.6	13.7	94.8
60+	6.4	6.0	7.0	87.2
70+	1.9	1.7	2.1	79.6
<u>1960</u>				
50+	11.4	10.4	12.4	84.7
60+	5.5	4.6	6.4	73.9
70+	1.8	1.4	2.2	65.7
<u>1975</u>				
50+	11.4	10.3	13.1	80.4
60+	5.6	4.5	6.7	68.9
70+	1.6	1.3	2.6	52.5

* (Male/Female) x 100

Source : Korean Census Reports.

Table 2 : Percentages of Currently Married and Widowed for Selected Age Groups by Sex, 1925, 1966 & 1975.

	Both sexes		Male		Female	
	C.M	W	C.M	W	C.M	W
<u>1925</u>						
50-54	74.2	23.9	83.1	14.5	64.7	34.1
55-59	65.9	32.7	78.7	19.5	53.1	45.9
60-64	48.9	42.7	72.2	26.5	41.5	57.9
65-69	45.8	53.4	63.7	35.2	30.2	69.2
<u>1966</u>						
50-54	80.0	19.3	95.2	4.1	65.4	34.0
55-59	72.3	27.1	92.2	7.2	54.0	45.5
60-64	62.3	37.3	87.4	12.1	41.8	57.9
65-69	51.2	48.4	80.2	9.4	30.4	69.3
<u>1975</u>						
50-54	82.0	17.2	95.2	3.1	68.8	30.3
55-59	75.2	24.2	94.4	5.0	57.6	48.7
60-64	66.4	33.1	91.1	8.5	46.0	53.6
65-69	55.9	43.7	85.7	13.9	34.0	65.6

Source : Korean Census Reports.

Table 3 : Average Household Size, Percentages of Nuclear Families and Three or More Generation Families by Urban-rural Areas, 1930-75.

	Household size	Nuclear Family	Three or More Generation Family
<u>1930</u>			
All	5.26		
Urban	4.71		
Rural	5.30		
<u>1950</u>			
All	5.66		29.25
Urban	5.45		19.54
Rural	5.74		33.18
<u>1966</u>			
All	5.62	66.80	26.65
Urban	5.27	72.41	17.64
Rural	5.81	63.72	31.60
<u>1970</u>			
All	5.74	71.53	23.21
Urban	4.88	76.90	15.40
Rural	5.60	67.54	29.01
<u>1975</u>			
All	5.22	70.65	21.06
Urban	4.99	73.80	15.02
Rural	5.44	67.55	27.04

Source : Kwon, et, al, The Population of Korea, PDSC, Seoul, 1975, and 9 1975 Korean Census Reports.

Table 4 : Aged Dependency Ratios* by Urban-rural Areas, 1960-75.

	All	Urban	Rural
1960	106	68	122
1965	101	64	123
1970	103	61	139
1975	100	63	140

* $60+ / (15-59) \times 1000$

Source: the same as Table 3.

Table 5 : Percentages of Economically Active Population and the Currently Employed for Selected Age Groups, Urban Area and Male, 1966 & 1975.

	Economically Active	Employed
<u>1966</u>		
50-54	93.2	80.4
55-59	80.6	68.0
60-64	49.1	45.3
65-69	31.7	29.9
70-74	14.2	13.2
<u>1975</u>		
50-54	90.0	83.0
55-59	74.9	68.9
60-64	48.7	46.6
65-69	28.8	27.7
70-74	11.0	10.9