

# Increased Youth Single-person Households and Solitary Deaths realized by College Students

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## 대학생이 인식한 청년 1인 가구 및 청년 고독사 증가 현상

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**Abstract** The study conducted a Focus Group Interview (FGI) on college students to identify single-person households and Solitary Deaths of single-person households recognized by college students. This can be provided as basic data to address problems in single-person households and social problems such as future youth solitary death and will contribute to building a social safety net. This study conducted FGI to analyze data for five fourth graders majoring in social welfare. In the case of involuntary independent living, the high poverty and unemployment rate of single-person households was cited as the cause of economic instability, housing problems and emotional relationship formation. He said that he thinks about young loneliness because he has vague fears about what happens in the media and what can happen to them. As the number of young single-person households will inevitably increase in the coming months and economic difficulties are the biggest problem and the biggest cause of young solitude, institutional support is needed first, especially for housing costs.

**Key Words** : College student, Youth Single-person Household, Youth Solitary Death, Focused group interview, Youth support policy

요 약 본 연구는 대학생을 대상으로 포커스 그룹 인터뷰(FGI)를 실시하여 대학생들이 인식하는 청년 1인 가구와 고독사에 대해 파악하였다. 이는 청년 1인 가구의 문제점과 향후 청년 고독사와 같은 사회적 문제를 해결하기 위한 기본 데이터로 제공될 수 있고 사회 안전망 구축에 기여할 것이다. 본 연구는 사회복지 전공 4학년 5명을 대상으로 FGI를 시행하여 자료를 분석하였다. 연구 참여자들은 청년 취업 문제를 청년 1인 가구 증가의 가장 큰 원인으로 제시했다. 비자발적 독립생활의 경우, 청년 1인 가구의 높은 빈곤과 실업률은 경제적 불안정, 주거 문제 및 감정적인 관계 형성의 원인으로 제시되었다. 대부분의 연구 참가자들은 청년기는 더 이상 원하는 것을 얻을 수 있는 시기가 아니라 처음부터 경제적 압력에 시달리는 시기라고 하였다. 청년 1인 가구의 높은 음주율과 흡연율도 문제로 인식되었고 이는 만성 질환, 우울증 및 자살과 같은 심각한 육체적, 정신적 건강 문제를 발생한다고 인식하였다. 청년 고독사에 대해서는 언론에서 일어나는 사건마다 막연한 두려움을 갖게 되며 본인들에게 일어날 수 있는 일이라고 생각하고 있다고 하였다. 청년 1인가구는 앞으로 증가할 수 밖에 없으며 비자발적인 1인 가구의 경우 경제적 어려움이 가장 큰 문제이며 청년 고독사의 가장 큰 원인이기 때문에 이에 대한 제도 지원이 우선적으로 필요하며 특히 주거비에 대한 실질적인 지원이 필요할 것이다.

주제어 : 대학생, 청년 1인가구, 청년고독사, 포커스 그룹 인터뷰, 청년 정책지원

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## 1. Introduction

Human beings grow through stages after birth such as infancy, adolescence, youth, mature age, and old age.

It categorized these stages of human growth into eight categories in terms of socio- psychological development[1]. Of these, youth was regarded as early adulthood, ranging from 20 to 39 years old. The main developmental task of this period is to form a positive self-identity of early adulthood through intimacy and isolation, which is a premise for forming intimacy with others. And he thought if it is not properly formed, it can lead to isolation.

Early adulthood is often regarded as a period of graduation from school, finding a job, marrying, and having children[2]. As the age at which these activities mainly occur is getting late, it became difficult to define it only by the distinction of biological age.

In Korea, there are not many cases of the youth research analyzed from the perspective of transition to adulthood.

As a representative study, there is a series of "Study on Transition from Youth to Adulthood" conducted by National Youth Policy Institute in 2011. This series consists of three volumes, 'A Study on Gender Differences in Adulthood Transition' [3], 'A Study on Adulthood Transition of the Vulnerable Youth' [4] and 'A Study on Actual Condition of Adulthood Transition in Korea' [5].

Of these, [5] typified the adulthood transition path and analyzed the transition from school to labor market, marriage, birth, and separate family.

As a result of the analysis, it was found that the period of transition to labor market after graduation of the Korean youth was not much different from that of OECD countries. However, it turned out that employment rate was low, and the portion of low-wage employment was the highest. And the improvement in education level and the modern values delayed the first marriage of Korean men and women. In addition, socioeconomic uncertainty and labor market instability

also had certain effects on the first marriage.

In a serious situation of youth unemployment, identifying the actual situation of young people and preparing policy alternatives are becoming important tasks. Although young people are emerging as an important target for government policy, this is not limited to recent years as the issue has been raised continuously since the 1997 financial crisis.

The problem of youth at present must be regarded as very serious since it is not only the problem of youth unemployment as it expands to the entire spectrum of young people' life. Also, social and economic environments surrounding the youth are changing rapidly. It is very important to analyze how this environmental change affects young people in order to prepare measures for improving the quality of young people's life in the mid- to long-term perspective [6].

In the study carried out by [6], social and economic indicators of the youth were developed in seven major areas, including population, family, education, economy, housing, health, culture and values.

Of these, the most serious turned out to be economy and housing areas. The employment rate of young people is steadily decreasing and the unemployment rate is continuously increasing, and the proportion of non-regular workers also turned out to be increasing steadily. The relative wage of non-regular workers compared to regular workers in young people fell from 57% in 2006 to 47% in 2015. In housing area, in comparison to the size and ratio of the out-of-home residents of the entire population that increased from 0.6% in 2000 to 3.7% in 2015, up 3.1% over the 15 years, the size and ratio of the out-of-home residents of the youth increased from 1.3% in 2000 to 9.7% in 2015, up 8.4% over the past 15 years, indicating that the housing poverty level of young people is much higher than that of other age groups. In the case of young householders, the rate of self-occupancy was conspicuously low, and the ratio of residence paying monthly rent with security turned out to be relatively

high.

For the Korean youth single-person households, the average poverty rate is 13.9% by the OECD member nation standard. The youth single-person households record the higher poverty rate among other household types [7]. The solitary death is defined as the lonely death of a youth of the age of 20~39 after he/she had lived alone. According to the analysis made by Seoul Welfare Foundation, the sure and suspected solitary death cases are 2,343 in total in 2013, and the youth death takes up 14% [8].

Though the youth solitary death problems arise, even the condition of the youth single-person households has not been understood. The youth supporting policy is very limited to the areas related to the employment such as 'youth employment promotion special law'. This is because the period of youth is seen as the part of the adulthood and the teenager policy is prioritized more than the youth policy[7].

The Korean single-person household has become prevalent since 2000s. The rate of the Korean single-person households is expected to grow to 31.3% in 2025, from 23.9% in 2010 [9]. This kind of the increase in the single-person households results in the change of the society in every economic, social, and cultural aspects [10].

Especially, the various supportive system including the social network will become more complicatedly constituted. The weakness of the single-person household can also be found in the isolated danger. The social isolation rate is measured to be 17.6% when one doesn't have someone to talk about his/her hardship, 23.2% when one is sick and doesn't have someone to look after him/her, and 49.9% when one does not have somewhere/someone to borrow money from. The Korean isolation rate is about 2 times higher than in other OECD nations.

The recent youth single-person households can be classified into the voluntary and involuntary cases. For the voluntary case, it's the household composed with the merit of freedom and independence in the economic

aspect. For the involuntary case, it's the household who suffers the poor residential environment and employment instability.

In the voluntary single-person households, one communicates within the society even though he/she doesn't live with his/her family. Also, it's not quite concerning as one has the free lifestyle. However, for the involuntary single-person households, the social isolation by the lack of social communication due to the unemployment and other residential problems [7] is accelerated, which causes some serious problems in society, such as the youth solitary death.

A college student is a representative youth holding student status. From the moment he or she graduates from college, the student will be faced with a number of problems that need to be resolved by himself or herself, from employment issue to housing issue. Especially, among the problems being recognized by college students, it seems that investigations on the increase in the number of single youth householders and on youths' monophobia can provide very important data for welfare policies and practical approaches in social and economic fields to improve the quality of life for the youth[11-14].

Therefore, this research tries to make the phenomenological approach by executing the focus group interview to figure out the college students' understandings of the youth single-person households and solitary deaths.

The result will be able to provide the basic data to solve the social problems such as the adverse effects of the youth single-person households and solitary deaths in the future. It will also contribute to the construction of the social safety net.

## 2. Materials and Procedure of Study

### 2.1 Research Method and Procedure

This research executed the Focus Group Interview to the total of 5 students of 4th year with social welfare

major in S university to apprehend their thoughts for the increases in the youth single-person households and solitary deaths. The participants' names were quoted anonymously in alphabetical order. The socio-demographic background is shown in Table 1.

The interview had been performed once a week from Nov. 23rd, 2017 until Dec. 2nd, 2017. For the moral consideration, the research explained the purpose and object of this research to all research participants and got their approvals beforehand, and the time required was about one to one and half hours.

During the advance preparation process, the research participants were told about the research introduction and received the questions in advance to give them more time to think about.

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of Participants

Participant	Grade	Sex	Residence type	Income level
A	4	male	live alone	middle
B	4	male	With family	middle
C	4	male	live alone	low
D	4	male	live alone	low
E	4	male	With family	middle

For the interview, the open questions about the understanding of the increase in the youth single-person households and the problems and alternatives of the youth solitary deaths were used and under the participants' approvals, their replies were recorded.

## 2.2 Data Analysis Method

For the FGI content analysis method, the spiral qualitative data analysis was used [15]. First, the research repeatedly read the entire word-for-word record and tried to get the full sense of interview and selected and marked the meaningful content. In the next step, the original document was converted in the appropriate unit by the research theme, and the data systemization and conversion were done. In the third

step, the theme and dimension were decided by the standard of the classification system. To enhance the reliability and validity of data analysis, 2 experts in the related filed and the research team consistently participated and discussed.

## 3. Results

### 3.1 Understanding of College Students on the increase in the youth single-person households

The research participants proposed the youth unemployment problem as the overriding cause for the increasing youth single-person households.

For the involuntary independent lives, the high working poverty and unemployment rates of the youth single-person households was thought to be the cause of the economic instability, residential problems and difficult formation of emotional relationship.

*"I also live alone now, and I cannot concentrate in the class due to part-time work for monthly rent and pocket money ... But since I need money right now and I have to go to school ... Also, since I have to earn living expenses as my parents pay my tuition ... I cannot but continue my part-time work. (Participant A)"*

*"When working part-time, school grades go down ... I know that to have a good job, good grades are key, but I cannot help it right now... I cannot even finish our team assignment... I am sorry to my friends because I cannot participate much in... I even feel awkward with my friends ... I feel so sleepy and I still submit my assignment unfinished ... The school life is so hard. (Participant C)"*

The most of the research participants said that the adolescence is not the time for the youth to achieve whichever they want anymore but is the time for them to suffer the economic pressure from the beginning, quoting the 'spoon class theory'.

*"When I see kids going to school without a worry of money, not doing any part-time work ... I think the class theory is right. It's different from the starting point ... I'm out of steam ... It's like there is a 'league of their own' ... I cannot catch up with them however hard I try. (Participant D)"*

*"There are really silver spoons, although they say they are not ... In fact, I envy them. I also want to have fun during my college years ... But I am more worried about after college. What if I cannot find a job, when all my friends get a job ... (Participant B)"*

In fact, the student loan from the time of university, unemployment after graduation, and unstable work cause the economic pressure, and it becomes the time for the youth who are in the initial adult period to experience the reality of poverty.

Especially, the residential problem is the most burdening of all as the monthly proportion is high. The high drinking and smoking rates of the youth single-person households are recognized to be the problems as well. They cause the serious physical and mental health problems such as the chronic disease, depression and suicide.

*"When I meet my friends after late night part-time work, I try to play games, drink alcohol and relieve stress. In fact, I do not have anything else to do ... As I live alone, I often go to one of my friends' house to play ... Living that way, I feel it harms my body. I say to myself 'Don't do that anymore, you have to go home to sleep.' But it doesn't work as well ... Then, when a semester passes by, I wonder what I did ... (Participant A)"*

The research participants said that the youth are likely to form the single-person households due to their employment problems. Then, they will live in the places like a studio or goshiwon without good health management and communication with other people. This results in the isolated lifestyles.

*"I feel lonely if I do not meet my friends and I do not*

*drink in the evening for a few days. I guess it will be different if I have a lover ... When I spend a weekend playing games alone, I wonder if 'I am not going out of my mind or I am not becoming a weird person. (Participant D)"*

*"I usually play games. When meeting friends a number of times, I have to spend money and time ... Sometimes, I don't get along very well ... So, I just relax at home and play games. Then, I find the time passes real fast ... In fact, oftentimes I deliberately allocate time to play games before I do anything else. (Participant A)"*

### 3.2 Youth Solitary Death Problem

The research participants do not recognize the youth solitary death very well, however they still believe it can definitely happen to them or their friends. The reason for that is that they have vague concern toward the solitary death in the youth single-person households as it is often displayed by the news and other media. Then they started to think that it can happen to us.

*"I live with my family at present. But I worry at times what will happen if I have to live alone due to my job and something happens in the workplace. I would not be able to tell it to my parents ... I would go to a Goshiwon ... I might get drunk and fall over ... I am afraid of all kinds of things. There are so many newspaper articles reporting that kind of incidents ... (Participant E)"*

*"Since there are a lot of 1-person households, people who live alone do not have anyone from whom to ask for help in case they have problems. Especially when they suddenly get sick or have an economic problem, they would be at a loss to go anywhere ... I think it will be really bad if one is not good at managing ... (Participant D)"*

As the research participants are suffering from the economic hardship doing the part time job to pay back their student loan and prepare the living expense, they

already resigned themselves to the economic stress even after they get employed. Based on the thoughts of the most of the research participants that the youth are socially isolated if they continue to suffer from the economic difficulty and unemployment, the policy to connect jobs should be executed along with the economic supporting policy such as the policy to control tuitions.

#### 4. Conclusion

The research participants understand the increase of the youth single-person households in connection with the employment and thinks that the economic stress is the biggest problem during the youth. As they also think the youth solitary death is caused by the economic reasons, we recognize the acute need for the economic supporting policy for the youth.

Furthermore, the youth single-person households, in fact, suffer more from the income and residential poverty than other youth households. Because it's hard for them to surmount by themselves, it seems that the preparation of the combinational supportive system for employment, income, education and residence should be made.

When the number of jobs decreases due to changes in the social environment, young people who have their first jobs are forced to start in difficult conditions. We believe that a tailored, detailed service support is especially needed for young people who are starting their first job.

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