

Editorial Note: “Refugees, Immigrants and Public Policy in South Korea: A Two-Nation Research Collaboration”

Jesus N. Valero ¹

Immigration policy has resurged as a top area of scholarly and practitioner inquiry in a variety of fields, including public policy, public administration, political science, sociology, public health, and others. This explosive growth in interest and relevance has been largely the effect of globalization including cases around the world where countries are facing an influx of new migrants, including refugees displaced as a result of civil conflict and war and labor migrants who seek improved economic prosperity. At the time of this editorial note, for example, a caravan of migrants from Central and South America are at the U.S.-Mexico border in search of asylum in the U.S.—some fleeing persecution from gangs and others looking for job opportunities and economic well-being.

Once admitted into their new host country, migrants begin a journey towards assimilation and resettlement, and as the International Federation of Red Cross notes, the needs and challenges facing migrants are immense and multidimensional—ranging from healthcare, education, and housing to understanding the laws and institutions in their new host country. Western scholarship, particularly that based in the United States, is vast, but there remains a need for comparative work in other contexts to understand the differences and similarities in how host countries and communities respond to the arrival of immigrants.

South Korea, for example, has been categorized as a largely homogenous country that has experienced increases in asylum seekers along with a significant and growing population of marriage and labor migrants in recent years. Until the summer of 2018, migration had been a largely latent issue in Korea, but political attention to immigration policy skyrocketed with the unexpected arrival of 486 Yemeni refugees on Jeju—a resort island off South Korea’s southern coast with no visa requirement. Despite these changing demographics and recent developments in Korea, there’s essentially no research on how local governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and policy makers at all levels of government are responding to migration

¹ Associate Editor, *Journal of Contemporary Eastern Asia*; Assistant Professor, The University of Utah.

as a public policy issue. Trusted information is needed about many migration-related issues, for example: What challenges do local governments face in integrating new migrants? What role do NGOs play in helping migrants integrate into their new homes? What are the healthcare and mental healthcare needs of migrants, and to what extent are these being met? To address these and related questions, the University of Utah² (Salt Lake City, Utah, USA) and SungKyunKwan University³ (Seoul, South Korea) have established a cross-national, interdisciplinary team of scholars and graduate students to engage in community-based research to create evidence-based knowledge about immigration issues, policies and practices in the South Korea context.

This research collaboration began in 2017 with the submission of a joint grant proposal to the Korea Foundation to engage in interdisciplinary, team-based research and capacity building with three specific goals: 1) train the next generation of interdisciplinary social science researchers with interests in immigration policy, 2) engage in community-based research on migration in Korea using mixed-method research approaches, and 3) disseminate research findings to practitioner and scholarly audiences. This collaborative team was divided into three groups comprised of faculty and graduate students from both universities based on the expertise and research interests of members. Team 1 is focused on exploring research questions about the role of non-governmental organizations in integrating migrants into Korean society. Team 2 is exploring the healthcare and mental healthcare needs and challenges facing migrants who have settled in South Korea. Team 3 has adopted a political and public policy perspective and is exploring a variety of questions about the extent to which new migration flows to Korea are perceived as positive or negative for society by the general population and policy influencers, and the degree to which migration amounts to a creeping crisis.

With funding from the Korea Foundation, and the University of Utah's College of Social and Behavioral Science, Asia Center, and Office of the Vice President for Research, the three teams met in South Korea in summer of 2018 to initiate data collection including case studies in Seoul and Ansan—areas with significant migrant communities. The three teams conducted in-depth interviews with NGOs, local government officials and others involved with immigration policy in Korea, and launched surveys to learn about the healthcare needs of migrants and perceptions of Koreans towards migrants. All three teams are currently in the data analysis stage and have

2 University of Utah team members include: Professors J. Steven Ott, Jesus N. Valero, Lina Svedin, Kim Korinek, TP Singh, Caren Frost, Lisa Gren, and Eunbin Chung. Graduate students include Georgina Griffith (MPA student), Kwynn Gonzalez-Pons (PhD student in Social Work), and Devon Cantwell (PhD student in Political Science).

3 SungKyunKwan University team members include: Professors Sook Jong Lee, Hyung Jun Park, Rosa Minhyo Cho, and Kyujin Jung. Graduate students include Minjeong Kim, Minhyuk Cho, Mingil Kim, and Hwayeon Kim, all PhD students in Public Administration.

begun implementing plans to disseminate research findings through a variety of mechanisms, including a panel at the 2019 conference of the American Society of Public Administration.

This collaborative research group is enthusiastic about contributing to an important area of scholarly inquiry as well as of practical importance, and about engaging with scholars and students with interests in immigration policy and practices in South Korea. For additional information and queries about the ongoing research of this collaborative group, please contact Professor J. Steven Ott (jsott@cpha.utah.edu) or Professor Jesus N. Valero (jesus.valero@utah.edu).