

# The Differences in Mental Health between Youth of Native Korean Backgrounds and Immigrant Backgrounds in South Korea

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## ABSTRACT

My study is designed to investigate the differences in mental health between youth of native Korean backgrounds versus the youth of immigrant backgrounds in Korea, who are called children of multicultural families. For this, I looked into data from the 15<sup>th</sup> Korean Youth Health Behavior Online Survey (2019), conducted by the Korean Center for Disease Control and Prevention. The main questions I address are whether there is a difference of general backgrounds between youth with Korean-born mothers and youth with foreign-born mothers, and whether there is a difference of mental health between youth with Korean-born mothers and youth with foreign-born mothers. In terms of general backgrounds, it has been the case that the educational level and socioeconomic status are lower for parents of multicultural families than those of Korean-born parents. The academic standing for youth from multicultural backgrounds has also averaged lower than that of youth from native Korean families. There was no meaningful difference, however, in terms of mental health of youth from multicultural families compared to youth from native Korean families. Based on such findings, I discussed several implications and limitations of this research.

## **Introduction**

Over the few recent years, there has been an increase of international migrants who marry into Korean households (Ju, Park, & Lee 2017; Ministry of Gender Equality and Family 2020). These families are called “multicultural” families in Korean society. Ever since the early 2000s, the number of multicultural families have been growing now to this day. Especially, foreign-born women who marry into Korean families have outnumbered the foreign-born men by three times. The major nationalities of those women include Vietnam, China, Thailand, Japan, Philippines, the United States, Cambodia, and others (Ministry of Gender Equality and Family 2020).

This trend in international marriage has led the new generation in Korea to become more diverse. The number of children from these international marriages keep on increasing to this day. The youth born from these families have grown up to be adolescents. As these youth graduate from elementary school to continue their education throughout middle school and high school, their relative percentage compared to students whose parents were both born in Korea keep increasing. For example, the percentage of students from multicultural backgrounds in 2012 were only 0.70% (46,954) of the entire student population (6,732,071), while in 2019, this percentage increased to 2.49% (137,225) of the total student population (5,502,880) (Ministry of Gender Equality and Family 2020).

It is commonly known that children with immigrant backgrounds are prone to face many mental, social, and academic challenges than native-born adolescents (Huang et al. 2017; Fritz 2014). As such, children of multicultural families in Korea have been reported to experience many hardships with adjustments in school, social relationships, and career. While in the process of adjustment, there has been evidence that they endure a psychological burden more so than their native counterparts (Lee, Oh, & Chae 2019; Lee & Kim 2017; Kim & Ji 2016).

Previous research has shown that the mental health during adolescent years could become better or worse depending on family relationships and situations (Mood, Jonsson, & Laftman 2017; Park & Lee 2020). Factors relating to family such as socioeconomic backgrounds, parents' educational level, and parenting style all contribute to the mental well-being of the child (Park, Che, & Kim 2013). For multicultural families in Korea, it is the case that they usually have a lower socioeconomic status and the foreign-born mothers have a hard time parenting the children due to difficulties with communication and cultural differences (Ju, Park, & Lee 2017).

Thus, it is commonly believed that children of multicultural families experience such hardships for the most part and are worse in terms of their mental health compared to children from native-born families. Such psychological burden is bound to increase as these children grow up to be teenagers and have to face a more rigorous academic system as well as a constant anxiety about their future career choices. On the other hand, such stress has also been known to be common for teenagers in general, not specifying to teenagers of immigrant background.

To see if it is true that adolescents from multicultural families face more mental struggles than adolescents with Korean-born parents, I looked into data from the 15<sup>th</sup> Korean Youth Health Behavior Online Survey (2019), conducted by the Korean Center for Disease Control and Prevention. This survey has collected responses from more than 57,000 teenagers residing in Korea. The questions I would like to investigate are as follows. First, is there a difference of general backgrounds between youth with Korean-born mothers and youth with foreign-born mothers? Second, is there a difference of mental health between youth with Korean-born mothers and youth with foreign-born mothers?

## Methods

### Research Participants

I used raw data from the 15<sup>th</sup> Korean Youth Health Behavior Online Survey (2019), which was conducted by the Korean Center for Disease Control and Prevention. This survey was distributed towards 60,100 students from 800 middle and high schools. As a result, a total of 57,303 students participated in the survey. Among the 57,303 participants, I decided to compare adolescents with native Korean parents to adolescents from multicultural families, specifically those whose mothers were born outside of Korea.

First of all, when I looked at the question "What country was your mother born in?", the nationalities of the students' mothers included China (Korean-Chinese), China (Han-Chinese, other ethnic groups), Japan, Philippines, North Korea, Vietnam, Thailand, Uzbekistan, and Mongolia. I excluded Taiwan (n=2), Cambodia (n=5), and Russia (n=9) because the number of participants were too small out of the entire group of adolescents whose mother was born outside of Korea, as well as the group Others (n=36) because they were uncountable.

In order to demonstrate the comparison between students with both Korean-born parents and students with Korean-born fathers and foreign-born mothers, I looked at the question "Was your father born in South Korea?" to extract only the students whose father was born in Korea, in order to make the two samples as similar and comparable as possible. Out of the students who answered 'Yes' to the question "Was your father born in South Korea?", I used the question "Was your mother born in South Korea?" to distinguish between those who have mothers of foreign nationalities and those who do not. Out of the participants who answered 'No' to the preceding question, the nationalities of their mothers were distinguished by their answers to the question "What country was your mother born in?"

Out of the 35,367 adolescents whose fathers were born in Korea, there were 34,825 (98.47%) students whose mothers were also born in Korea, and 542 (1.53%) students whose mothers were born outside of Korea.

Research Variables

*General Background*

In order to measure the general backgrounds of students, I decided to look at each parents’ educational background, their own perceived economic status, and the students’ school records. The answers to each parents’ educational background were divided into four categories: middle school or below, high school degree, some college degree, and unknown. Students’ perceived economic status and school record were measured on a scale of 1 to 5, 1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest.

*Mental Health*

The research variables used to measure mental health were stress (How much stress do you feel regularly?), depression (Have you ever felt depressed to the extent of being unable to live a regular life for 2 weeks or more over the past 12 months?), thoughts of suicide (Have you ever had serious thoughts about suicide over the past 12 months?), planning of suicide (have you ever made a specific plan in order to commit suicide?), and attempt of suicide (have you ever attempted committing suicide over the past 12 months?).

Stress was measured on a scale of 1 to 5, 1 being the least stressed, and 5 being the most. Students were able to answer with either “Yes” or “No” to the questions measuring depression, thoughts of suicide, planning of suicide, and attempt of suicide, “Yes” being assigned the value 2, and “No” being assigned the value 1.

Statistical Analysis

I used R to perform all statistical analyses for this data. First, the frequency and percentage of each population were recorded per question indicating gender, school type, and parental educational background. For the parental educational background, I used chi- squared analysis because the variables were categorical. For questions measured on a scale of 1 to 5 or 1 to 2 such as economic status, school record, stress, depression, thoughts of suicide, planning of suicide, and attempt of suicide, I used independent t-test because the variables were continuous. In all comparisons, the significance level was set to  $p < 0.05$ .

Results

**Table 1.** Comparison Between Youth with Korean Born Mothers and Those with Foreign Born Mothers: General Background.

		Total (n=35367)	Youth with Korean-born mothers 34825 (98.47)	Youth with foreign-born mothers (n(%), mean ± sd)										t or chi squared (p)
				KC 128	HC 79	NK 2	VT 98	PH 92	JP 109	MO 9	TH 15	UZ 10	Subtotal 542 (1.53)	
Gender	male	16598	16336 (98.42)	59	39	1	42	48	53	4	10	6	262 (1.58)	
	female	18769	18489 (98.51)	69	40	1	56	44	56	5	5	4	280 (1.49)	
School type	Middle 1	6953	6792 (97.68)	27	29	0	55	21	24	1	2	2	161 (2.32)	
	M2	6341	6216 (98.03)	26	20	0	22	19	26	4	4	4	125 (1.97)	
	M3	6250	6157 (98.51)	24	12	0	14	17	20	3	3	0	93 (1.49)	
	High 1	5506	5448 (98.95)	21	5	1	4	11	12	0	2	2	58 (1.05)	
	H2	5100	5064 (98.91)	16	7	1	1	10	16	1	4	0	56 (1.09)	
	H3	5197	5148	14	6	0	2	14	11	0	0	2	49	

Father's Education	middle school or below	541	472 (87.25)	18	6	0	9	18	10	1	4	3	69 (12.75)	669.5 (p<0.001)
	High school	8341	8158 (97.81)	52	36	0	27	24	32	5	4	3	183 (2.19)	
	Some college	19590	19493 (99.50)	20	13	1	16	11	31	1	2	2	97 (0.50)	
	unknown	6895	6702 (97.20)	38	24	1	46	39	36	2	5	2	193 (2.80)	
Mother's Education	middle school or below	436	398 (91.28)	12	8	0	14	2	0	0	1	1	38 (8.72)	402.3 (p<0.001)
	High school	9698	9576 (98.74)	48	17	0	14	14	21	2	4	2	122 (1.26)	
	Some college	18856	18701 (99.17)	20	22	1	7	45	49	5	2	5	156 (0.83)	
	unknown	6376	6150 (96.46)	48	32	1	63	31	39	2	8	2	226 (3.54)	
Economic status			3.400 ±0.867	3.094 ±0.837	3.203 ±0.807	2.000 ±1.414	3.193 ±0.869	2.835 ±0.868	2.500 ±0.866	3.111 ±0.333	2.800 ±0.862	3.400 ±0.966	3.021 ±0.858	10.566 (P < 0.001)
School record			3.160 ±1.159	2.781 ±1.163	3.101 ±1.150	3.500 ±2.121	2.837 ±0.981	2.609 ±1.016	2.927 ±1.144	2.778 ±1.093	2.733 ±1.033	3.100 ±1.287	2.828 ±1.122	7.0771 (P < 0.001)

KC=Korean Chinese, HC=Han Chinese, NK=North Korea, VT=Vietnam, PH=Philippines, JP=Japan, MO=Mongolia, TH=Thailand, UZ=Uzbekistan

Table 1 shows the general backgrounds of youth with Korean-born mothers (34,825, 98.47%) versus youth with foreign-born mothers (542, 1.53%). First, in terms of gender, out of the total of 35,367 students, there were 16,598 male students and 18,769 female students. There were 16,336 male students (98.42%) and 18,489 female students (98.51%) whose mothers were born in Korea, and 262 male students (1.58%) and 280 female students (1.49%) whose mothers were born outside of Korea.

There were a total of 6953 middle school students in grade 1 (youth with Korean-born mothers: 97.68%, youth with foreign-born mothers: 2.32%), 6341 middle school students in grade 2 (youth with Korean-born mothers: 98.03%, youth with foreign-born mothers: 1.97%), 6250 middle school students in grade 3 (youth with Korean-born mothers: 98.51%, youth with foreign-born mothers: 1.49%). There were a total of 5506 high school students in grade 1 (youth with Korean-born mothers: 98.95%, youth with foreign-born mothers: 1.05%), 5100 high school students in grade 2 (youth with Korean-born mothers: 98.91%, youth with foreign-born mothers: 1.09%), 5197 high school students in grade 3 (youth with Korean-born mothers: 99.06%, youth with foreign-born mothers: 0.94%). I was able to observe that as the grade level increased, the percentage of youth with foreign-born mothers decreased.

In terms of the father's education, in the level "middle school degree or below", the fathers of youth with Korean-born mothers consisted of 87.25% and youth with foreign-born mothers 12.75%. In the level "high school degree", the fathers of youth with Korean-born mothers consisted of 97.81% and youth with foreign-born mothers 2.19%. In the level "some college", the fathers of youth with Korean-born mothers consisted of 99.50% and youth with foreign-born mothers 0.50%. On the other hand, in terms of the mother's education, in the level "middle school degree or below", the mothers of youth with Korean-born mothers consisted of 91.28% and youth with foreign-born mothers 8.72%. In the level "high school degree", the mothers of youth with Korean-born mothers consisted of 98.74% and youth with foreign-born mothers 1.26%. In the level "some college", the mothers of youth with Korean-born mothers consisted of 99.17% and youth with foreign-born mothers 0.83%. I was able to observe that the relative percentage of both fathers and mothers of youth with foreign-born mothers decreased as the educational level increased ( $p < 0.001$ ).

Next, the average perceived economic status of students with Korean-born mothers was 3.400, and for students with foreign-born mothers, 3.021. I observed that the economic status of adolescents with parents who were both born in Korea were higher than those of the economic status of adolescents with foreign-born mothers ( $p < 0.001$ ).

The perceived school record of students with Korean-born mothers had an average of 3.160, while that of the students with foreign-born mothers averaging on 2.828, which is lower than the perceived academic achievement level of students with native Korean mothers ( $p < 0.001$ ).

**Table 2.** Comparison Between Youth with Korean Born Mothers and Those with Foreign Born Mothers: Mental Health.

	Youth with Korean-born mothers	Youth with foreign-born mothers (mean±std)										t(p)
		KC	HC	NK	VT	PH	JP	MO	TH	UZ	subtotal	
Stress	3.283 ±0.973	3.266 ±0.935	3.342 ±1.164	4.500 ±0.707	3.357 ±1.058	3.272 ±0.915	3.275 ±1.096	3.444 ±1.130	3.400 ±1.242	3.300 ±1.059	3.296 ±1.031	-0.2815 (0.7784)
Depression	1.279 ±0.449	1.234 ±0.425	1.291 ±0.457	1.500 ±0.707	1.286 ±0.454	1.228 ±0.422	1.266 ±0.443	1.222 ±0.441	1.200 ±0.414	1.200 ±0.421	1.258 ±0.438	1.1899 (0.2346)
Suicidal Thoughts	1.134 ±0.341	1.148 ±0.357	1.177 ±0.384	1.500 ±0.707	1.143 ±0.352	1.098 ±0.299	1.119 ±0.326	1.111 ±0.333	1.200 ±0.414	1.000 ±0.000	1.141 ±0.348	-0.4433 (0.6577)
Suicidal Planning	1.038 ±0.192	1.047 ±0.212	1.063 ±0.245	1.500 ±0.707	1.041 ±0.199	1.033 ±0.179	1.055 ±0.229	1.000 ±0.000	1.067 ±0.258	1.100 ±0.316	1.053 ±0.225	-1.5837 (0.1138)
Suicidal Attempts	1.028 ±0.166	1.039 ±0.195	1.051 ±0.221	1.000 ±0.000	1.031 ±0.173	1.054 ±0.228	1.009 ±0.096	1.000 ±0.000	1.000 ±0.000	1.200 ±0.422	1.040 ±0.195	-1.3922 (0.1644)

KC=Korean Chinese, HC=Han Chinese, NK=North Korea, VT=Vietnam, PH=Philippines, JP=Japan, MO=Mongolia, TH=Thailand, UZ=Uzbekistan

Table 2 shows the perceived mental health of youth with Korean-born mothers and youth with foreign-born mothers. First, in terms of stress, the youth with Korean-born mothers responded with an average of 3.283, while the youth with foreign-born mothers had an average of 3.296. While the number of the latter is slightly higher, this is not a statistically meaningful result.

In terms of depression, the youth with Korean-born mothers had an average of 1.279, while the youth with foreign-born mothers had an average of 1.258. While the average of the youth with Korean-born mothers is slightly higher, this is not statistically significant.

In terms of suicidal thoughts, planning, and attempt, the youth with Korean-born mothers responded with an average of 1.134, 1.038, and 1.028 each, while the youth with foreign-born mothers had an average of 1.141, 1.053, and 1.040 each. While all the averages of youth with mothers born outside of Korea were slightly higher, none of these results were statistically meaningful.

## Discussion

The main purpose of this research was to investigate the difference in mental health between children of both native Korean-born parents and children who have Korean-born fathers but foreign-born mothers. In order to observe the backgrounds of each group before comparing the difference in mental health, I compared the general and socioeconomic status of both groups. First of all, I looked at the gender, school type, and grade level of all participants. Next, to find out each groups' social backgrounds, I compared the educational level of both the father and the mother, as well as the economic status. The results demonstrated that as the educational level of parents increase, the relative percentage of parents from multicultural families decrease. Also, the perceived economic status of multicultural families tended to be lower than that of families with both Korean-born parents. Such findings show similarities to other research that demonstrate the disadvantage in immigrant families in economic status (Bae 2014; Ju, Park, & Lee 2017).

Among all participants, I also looked at the school record in order to see how well they are doing at academics. I observed that the average perceived school record for children with foreign-born mothers was significantly lower than that of the children with Korean mothers. This shows a similar trend to other research that also demonstrate that children from immigrant families tend to struggle more in school compared to children who have Korean-born parents (Yeon 2017; Oh 2005). However, there has also been research that shows no difference in academic achievement in children from immigrant families than that of children of Korean-born parents (Lee & Cha 2020).

In order to compare the mental health of these two groups, I looked at the questions on the survey pertaining to stress, depression, and suicidal thoughts, planning, and attempt. In terms of depression, the youth with Korean-born

mothers recorded slightly higher than youth with foreign-born mothers, but there was no statistical significance. In terms of stress, suicidal thoughts, planning, and attempt, the youth of foreign-born mothers averaged slightly higher, but this did not show a statistical significance either. There is no agreement among various studies whether being from an immigrant family is worse or better for the child's mental state than having both native parents (Jackson, Kiernan, & McLanahan 2012).

Furthermore, other studies that analyzed the Korean Youth Health Behavior Online Survey did not show a consistent pattern among results in terms of mental health. For example, some research showed that the depression levels and suicidal thoughts were higher among children of multicultural families (Chae 2018; Yim & Park 2014), and some showed that the suicidal planning and attempts were higher among children who have foreign-born parents (Jang 2020). Others showed that there was no difference between the two groups in terms of stress and depression, but suicidal thoughts, planning, and attempts recorded higher for children who have multicultural backgrounds (Lee & Lee 2019). In some cases, only the suicidal attempts of children who have foreign-born parents marked higher than children who do not (Park & Lee 2016).

Such disparity in results could be because there is different data collected each year, so the results of a research could vary depending on the year even though it is on the same topic. Also, when extracting the research participants, the method differs depending on the researcher. For example, I decided to only include students with both Korean-born parents and a Korean-born father with a foreign-born mother, but other research included cases where both parents were foreign-born as well as cases where only the father or the mother was foreign-born. There is also difference between how the scale was manipulated and calculated by each researcher. I decided to make the nominal categories such as Yes-or-No questions or questions that have five options from "least likely" to "most likely" on a Likert scale from 1 to 2 or 1 to 5, while other researchers solely used it as a categorical variable.

## Conclusion

When I looked at the difference of general backgrounds between youth with Korean-born mothers and youth with foreign-born mothers, it has been the case that the relative percentage of parents from multicultural families compared to their Korean-born counterparts decrease as the educational level becomes more advanced. As such, the perceived economic status of multicultural families was lower than that of their native-born counterparts. I also observed that the academic standing of students from immigrant backgrounds was lower than that of students with both Korean-born parents.

While I expected to see some difference of mental health between youth with Korean-born mothers and youth with foreign-born mothers, I could not observe a meaningful disparity. Youth with Korean-born mothers averaged slightly higher than youth with foreign-born mothers in terms of depression, and for questions pertaining to stress, suicidal thoughts, planning, and attempt, youth with foreign-born mothers averaged slightly higher, but there were no statistically significant results overall.

Thus, through my findings, I hope to reduce the social belief that adolescents from multicultural families will not be able to adjust well and that their mental health will be at stake more so than their native counterparts. By doing so, it will be possible to prevent the reproduction of more social stereotypes and unnecessary sympathy for adolescents of multicultural backgrounds.

## Limitations

Through this research, not only did I try to see the difference between youth who have Korean-born mothers and those who have foreign-born mothers, but also the differences between each nationality of foreign-born mothers. However, for the case of the latter, the numbers were too small to make any significant differences. Also, there was no big

disparity between youth with Korean-born mothers and youth with foreign-born mothers in terms of mental health, making it unnecessary to compare the cases between each nationality.

Also, I could not include cases where the father was foreign-born or when both parents were foreign-born. There is a need to find out any differences in cases where the father is the immigrant versus the mother, or when both parents are immigrants.

In the future, I hope to further develop my research to see if the socioeconomic status or parental educational background makes more difference for a child's mental state than being from an immigrant background. I also hope to make a comparison between gender and age groups amongst children from immigrant families to see if those factors also contribute to a difference in mental health.

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