Speaking as a Gerontologist



Population Aging: A Tale of Two Countries

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In 2018, for the first time in human history, there were more people in the world aged 65+ than under five. What's more, the United Nations Population Division projects that the global population will likely peak sometime in this century before gradually declining. What's driving the change? More people are surviving into older age and fewer children are being born. But perhaps more interesting than the fact that the global population *is* aging is the rapid pace of change.

"Demographic transition" refers to the time it takes a population to change from relatively young (7% aged 65+) to "older" (14% aged 65+). For many Western countries, this took decades: 115 years for France, 92 years for Norway, 85 years for Sweden, and 72 for the U.S. This provided time (at least in theory) to develop infrastructures such as retirement and health care systems. More recently, several countries including South Korea, Singapore, Thailand, Brazil have transitioned in under 25 years, creating both challenges and opportunities.

Consider South Korea and Singapore. South Korea transitioned in only 18 years and has encountered a series of economic and social challenges. High poverty rate for older people, especially in women, caused by gaps in mandatory retirement age (often age 60) and pension eligibility (age 62+) combined with fewer workers paying into retirement systems has led to a growing mismatch between retirement policy, pension adequacy, and the economic realities of later life. At the same time, traditional family care structures have changed as families have become smaller, adult children have relocated, and expectations about familial responsibility have shifted. South Korea also has exceptionally high suicide rates -- around 80 per 100,000 among men aged 70+ --, associated with factors including financial insecurity, social isolation, and family disconnection.

In contrast, Singapore made the same demographic transition in 20 years but unlike South Korea, Singapore has taken a "benefit" rather than "problem" approach to population change. Its statutory minimum retirement age is 64; eligible workers ***must*** be offered re-employment opportunities up to age 69. More than 9 in 10 eligible employees who want to continue working are successfully offered re-employment. Singapore has also invested in "Career Conversion Programs" which provide subsidized structured training for people – especially workers age 40+-- who are changing occupations and entering healthcare, social work, and caregiving careers. With regards to social inclusion, Singapore positions older people as community resources, providing volunteer and other opportunities to connect their communities. Suicide rates overall for all Singaporeans was 8.23 per 100,000 in 2024, although people age 65+, especially men, accounted for around 1/3 of those deaths.

Although South Korea and Singapore differ in culture, population size, political structure, and many other ways, they offer contrasting pictures of rapid population aging. Their experiences

remind us that demographic change alone does not determine the experience of growing older. Policies and social structures matter—particularly those supporting economic security, meaningful contribution, and social connection. Perhaps the better question is not how societies will manage growing numbers of older people, but how they will adapt to populations in which growing older is increasingly the norm.