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In one case study cited in the ministry's report, an unnamed 17-year-old's social withdrawal was attributed to domestic violence and depression. The individual slept most days and struggled to leave the house or make eye contact with others. In another, a young student's **malaise** was said to have been exacerbated by attempts to force them back into the classroom.

"Reclusive youths can have slower physical growth due to irregular living and unbalanced nutrition, and are likely to face mental difficulties such as depression due to loss of social roles and delayed adaptation," said the ministry, which prioritizes individuals from **disadvantaged households** under South Korea's expanded Youth Welfare Support Act.

Asia's fourth-largest economy also faces other unfavorable demographic trends including a steadily declining population—down to 51.63 million people in 2022 after peaking at 51.84 million two years earlier—and **a fertility rate** of 0.78 that saw only 249,000 newborns last year, the lowest in contemporary records since 1970. The United Nations suggests a minimum of 2.1 is required to maintain a stable population.

In March, Yoon called the country's birth rate a "crucial national agenda." But, as in neighboring Japan, the population challenge persists despite policies and public expenditure exceeding \$200 billion in two decades.

Meanwhile, those over the age of 65 accounted for 17.5 percent of the population last year, according to government-run Statistics Korea. It projects the aged population to reach 20.6 percent by the middle of the decade and 46.4 percent by 2070, creating a sizable social security burden on the shrinking working-age population between 15-64.

Defining a Phenomenon

In Japan, **acute social withdrawal**—known as "hikikomori"—is said to affect nearly 1.5 million people, according to the country's Children and Families Agency, which last November identified the phenomenon in 2 percent of people aged 15-64.

Officials in Tokyo define hikikomori, which refers both to the people and the status, as living in isolation for at least six months. Despite studies going back decades, however, its exact parameters are hard to **pin down**. Long-running research assigns it as either a psychiatric or cultural syndrome.

The South Korean government says reclusive youths live in a "**confined space**, disconnected from the outside for more than a certain period of time." These individuals exhibit "noticeable difficulty in living a normal life" due to various factors including **school bullying**, academic stress, domestic violence, or a general absence of care.

A snapshot provided in January by the local government in Seoul said 129,000, or 4.5 percent, of the

capital's young adults aged 19-39 were living in some form of isolation, mainly from unemployment, and social or psychological difficulties.

Nearly a third said they had been living a **solitary life** for more than five years, and 11.5 percent said their reclusiveness exceeded a decade. More than half expressed a desire to end their seclusion, according to the city's survey of 5,513 young adults, which was extrapolated to suggest 610,000 people across the country could be living in similar circumstances.

Academics have studied social isolation in the elderly for years, but the phenomenon affected the broader population during the COVID-19 pandemic amid **shelter-in-place** orders and social distances, said Statistics Korea, which found 20 percent of citizens experienced loneliness last year. Seoul's answers to the problem, if successful, could provide useful insights for other capitals in the region.

"Rapid industrialization within 30-40 years, changing norms around family sizes, and prospects about the labor market could be among the reasons for social isolation," said Andrew Yeo, a senior fellow and Korea chair at the Brookings Institution.

"In the past, politicians have reached out more to the other end of the demographic spectrum, the older generation, but policies are not sustainable for the economy if the population remains very top heavy. The current government recognizes that it needs to think about the future much more," Yeo, who is also a politics professor at the Catholic University of America, told Newsweek.

"As with the issue of low fertility, it all lumps into this idea of South Korea's national interest. You want to make sure that there is a healthy, balanced relationship across generations for a functioning society in the longer term. I think the government realizes that with these demographic changes, there is a younger segment of society that may need additional support," he said.

"This might also be a way for South Korean society as a whole, but the government and the conservative party in particular, to shift the narrative and show they are addressing the needs of the youth as well. But cash transfers are not a permanent solution. The government would be better served by policies that try to integrate youths and provide for their social and emotional well-being," said Yeo.

The findings of a government-backed study, published last September in the open-access journal *Frontiers in Public Health*, suggest instances of reclusiveness are far too broad for any single policy to address.

Social scientists at Jeonbuk National University, a public research institution in the country's southwest, argued contributing factors included socioeconomic indicators like age, career and marital

living allowance

– zasiłek

reclusive youth

– młody samotnik

longevity

– długość życia

vulnerable subset of the population

– wrażliwa/

bezbronna część

populacji

welfare system

– system opieki

społecznej

counseling

– doradztwo

seclusion

– izolacja,

odosobnienie

malaise

– apatia, marazm

disadvantaged

household

– gospodarstwo

domowe w trudnej

sytuacji

fertility rate

– współczynnik

plodności

acute

– dotkliwy,

poważny

social withdrawal

– wycofanie

społeczne

pin something

down – określać

coś, sprecyzować

coś

confined space

– ograniczona

przestrzeń

school bullying

– problem nękania

w szkole

solitary life

– samotne życie

shelter-in-place

– schronienie

dostępne na

miejscu