

Chapter 6

Korea: Poverty in a Tiger Country

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Introduction

Studies on poverty in Korea are relatively scarce, as is the case in many developing countries. The reasons for the lack of poverty studies are even more pronounced in Korea for a number of historical reasons. A three-year internal war from 1950 to 1953 drove the majority of the Korean population into extreme hardship and poverty. After the Armistice in 1953, the remaining years of the 1950s were mainly devoted to reconstruction and rehabilitation, while poverty was too widespread and rampant to attract any serious attention for independent study. The Korean people were forced to persevere through economic difficulties and were urged by the drive to better their living standards. During the early years of rapid economic growth from the early 1960s, Korean researchers perceived only the initial phase of the Hirschmanite tunnel effect (Hirschman 1973), where even growing disparity is welcomed in the anticipation of the trickle down effect. It was not until the late 1970s that a growing concern emerged among Korean researchers with regard to distributive equity and the issues of poverty (see Choo and Kim 1978; Choo et al. 1979; Choo 1982).

Despite the growing concern about absolute and relative poverty issues among the Korean scholars, the theoretical and empirical problems inherent in poverty studies inhibited such research endeavours. Although poverty may be defined in several ways – such as “a situation in which needs are not sufficiently satisfied” (Hagenaars 1986: 1), “a matter of deprivation” (Sen 1981: 2), or the “inability to attain a minimal standard of living” (World Bank 1990: 26), – these definitions are too general to be workably applied to a society. Even after intensive world-wide research efforts devoted to basic needs and social indicators

in the 1970s, there is not even a consensus on a workable concept of primary health care among the researchers, let alone one of absolute or relative poverty.

If poverty studies are to be relevant and meaningful, they must contain empirical analyses. However, useful statistics and data on poverty are much more scarce than any other types of statistical data. For instance, household income and expenditure surveys are carried out in most developing countries. These surveys are designed primarily to derive the weights for the consumer price index, rather than to be used in the estimation of the distribution of income or in the analysis of the poor. Among the price statistics available from developing countries, one can seldom find an index designed specifically for the poor, even though all researchers recognize that there is a wide difference between the consumption basket of the poor and that of an average household.

To conduct a meaningful study on poverty, each poor household needs to be surveyed carefully in terms of all of its unique demographic and socioeconomic characteristics. Such an extensive and detailed sample survey on poverty is in excess of the priorities of policy-makers and the statistical authorities. As a consequence, analysts are forced to use a number of proxies and average figures in a sensitive empirical analysis of poverty. Social scientists in general tend to take least care with data problems in empirical studies placing greater emphasis on the interpretation of their empirical results. One can hardly expect social scientists to make the effort to crosscheck their empirical findings against relevant and peripheral statistical evidence.

This chapter begins with a summary of the major findings from poverty studies of the past two decades, especially those marking the cut-off poverty line and the incidence of absolute and relative poverty by various measures. A wide variation in the estimated measures considered here is attributed to both the theoretical definitions of estimating poverty and problems in using statistical data. We will attempt to deal with these problems separately, although they are often interrelated, and then end with some concluding remarks.

Major findings of existing studies

Although prevailing poverty issues attracted scholastic attention from the early 1960s, it was in the late 1970s when any significant contributions to poverty studies were made in Korea. Most of the earlier studies confined themselves to a part of the poor section in a city or at most to poor sections of a whole city, and were carried

out by social scientists (in economics, public administration, sociology and social services, including public health) (Kwon et al. 1967; Noh, C. S. 1967; Noh, J. H. 1971; Sociology Department, Kyungbuk University 1963). As a consequence, the earlier studies on poverty focused on surveying the income and expenditure patterns of the loosely defined "poor" and analysed their demographic and socioeconomic characteristics as the causes and consequences of poverty. The findings of these studies did, of course, shed some light on the poor, but these studies were far from being comprehensive and representative, for obvious reasons such as the sample sizes, coverage, and survey methods used.

One of the most comprehensive studies on Korean poverty for the years 1965, 1970, and 1976 was carried out by Sang Mok Suh and others at the Korea Development Institute in 1979 (Suh 1979). This study was then extended to 1980 and 1984 by Sang Mok Suh and Ha Chung Yeon (Suh and Yeon 1986). This pioneering study resulted in the estimate of various poverty measures for Korea, as shown in Table 6.1. All the estimated measures of both absolute and relative poverty for the selected years demonstrate trends of rapid reduction consistent with the analysis of the World Bank, except the head-count ratios of relative poverty for 1976 and 1980, which were due to the relative worsening of the distribution of income for these years. For the two benchmark years of 1980 and 1984, the only available measures of poverty are the head-count ratios of absolute and relative poverty, both of which also reveal rapid reductions.

In interpreting the findings of Suh's 1979 study and Suh and Yeon's 1986 study, it must be noted that the cut-off line estimated in the two studies was applied to two different sets of estimated size distribution of income. For the earlier years of 1965, 1970, and 1976, Suh relied on Choo's estimates, whereas Sug and Yeon used the results of the social statistics surveys for 1980 and 1984 conducted by the National Bureau of Statistics (1986). For this reason, there may be some discrepancies, although the overall trends may be consistent. The 1979 study by Suh had further been matched and supplemented by the 1980 study by Yoon (Yoon 1994; Yoon and Park 1985), which basically adopted the Leyden method in estimating a poverty line in Korea.

In addition to the studies cited above, there have been two noteworthy studies on urban and rural poverty, respectively, in recent years (Bark 1994; Chung and Oh 1990). Table 6.2 shows the recent estimation of absolute poverty in urban Korea by Soon-Il Bark compared with the estimates of Suh and the

Table 6.1 Estimates of various poverty measures in Korea, 1965–1984

	1965	1970	1976	1980	1984
<i>Head-count ratio (%)</i>					
Absolute poverty ^a	40.9	23.4	14.8	9.8	4.5
Urban	54.9	16.2	18.1	10.4	4.6
Rural	35.8	27.9	11.7	9.0	4.4
Relative poverty ^b	12.1	4.8	12.4	13.4	7.7
Urban	17.9	7.0	16.0	15.1	7.8
Rural	10.0	3.4	9.2	11.2	7.5
<i>Poverty gap (billion won in current prices)</i>					
Total	79.1	60.8	221.0		
Urban	39.7	21.3	139.6		
Rural	39.4	39.5	81.4		
<i>Poverty gap as % of gross national product (%)</i>					
Total	9.8	2.3	1.8		
Urban	4.9	0.8	1.1		
Rural	4.9	1.5	0.7		
<i>Sen's Poverty Index</i>					
Total	0.1489	0.0623	0.0595		
Urban	0.2490	0.0443	0.0728		
Rural	0.1085	0.0733	0.0472		

Sources: Suh (1979); Suh and Yeon (1986).

Notes:

^aThe absolute poverty line is defined as 121,000 won per month in 1981 for a five-member family.

^bThe relative poverty line is defined as one-third of the average household income in a given year.

Table 6.2 Comparison of available estimates of the absolute poverty rate for urban Korea, 1965–90 (%)

Source	1965	1970	1980	1984	1990
Suh	40.9	23.4	9.8	4.5	N/A
Bark	N/A	68.5	48.3	44.4	11.6
MOHSA ^a	10.2	N/A	6.2	N/A	7.7

Sources: Suh (1979); Bark (1994: 74–5).

Note:

^aThe ratio of recipients of public assistance to the total population provided by the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs.

Ministry of Health and Social Affairs. The estimates of the urban poverty rates by Bark are considerably higher than two others, although both of the series show a rapid reduction in the prevalence of poverty. Such wide differences in the poverty rate

Table 6.3 Comparison of two estimates of the absolute and relative poverty rate for the rural Korea, 1967–1988

	Source	1967	1970	1988
Absolute poverty rate	Suh and Suh and Yeon	35.8	27.9	4.4 ^a
	Chung and Oh	33.7	23.5	6.5
Relative poverty rate	Suh and Suh and Yeon	10.0	3.4	7.5
	Chung and Oh	31.6	36.1	17.4

Sources: Chung and Oh (1992); Suh (1979); Suh and Yeon (1986).

Note:

^a1984.

for the same target population frustrate all serious analysts when they review existing studies.

The comparison of two poverty estimates for rural Korea (Table 6.3) looks much better than that for urban Korea. The Suh and Yeon estimate of absolute poverty for 1970 is somewhat higher than that of Chung and Oh, while the estimate for 1988 is the reverse. However, the two estimated rates of relative poverty reveal pronounced differences, particularly for 1970. Although the difference narrows for 1988, it is still significant at about 10 percentage points. These differences are primarily due to definitional differences: Suh and Yeon took one-third of the average income as the cut-off line, whereas Chung and Oh defined it to be one-half (Chung and Oh 1992; 26). Furthermore, for the same reason, the absolute poverty incidence for 1967 (both Suh and Chung) and 1970 (Suh only) was higher than the incidence of the relative poverty in the same years.

These wide variations in the findings of existing studies on poverty deserve further scrutiny, otherwise these findings may confuse the issue, be abused by diverse interest groups and distort reality. Although some difference may be allowed, the extent should be within the level of tolerance, certainly not as great as in the comparison of Suh and Bark's estimates of urban absolute poverty in 1976 and 1980 (as shown in Table 6.2).

The problem of different findings by different researchers is compounded by the theoretical methods and statistical data used. As is widely known, there exist a number of methods for establishing the minimum cost of living as a cut-off line of poverty, and this results in a wide range of figures (see, for example, Table 6.4 below). In addition, there is a tendency among social science researchers to conserve their efforts in

order to make better use, with care, of existing data with their well-known inherent limitations.

What is even more dangerous is the common practice of social scientists of extending a point-of-time estimate into a time series estimate. In relation to poverty studies, the consumer price index is used as the deflator or inflator, not the consumer price index of the poor. In addition, the size of family is often not adjusted, by measuring adult-equivalent scales for different family compositions. The next two sections will attempt to examine these problems further in the Korean context.

Estimation methods

The available poverty studies in Korea applied a number of different methods in establishing the poverty threshold or cut-off lines, ranging from Engel's coefficient method to the poll or perception method. Table 6.4 summarizes representative studies in Korea during the past two decades and the resulting estimates of the minimum cost of living (MCL) per person per month in 1993 constant Korean prices. All of these methods have their respective merits and demerits, which do not need further elaboration here. However, because each of these methods is

Table 6.4 Estimated minimum costs of living per person per month in Korea, 1973-90

Source	Reference year	Method	Estimated MCL (1993 constant Won 1000)
MOHSA	1973	Engel	32
Suh	1973	Engel	35
Yoon	1980	Leyden	63
Chang	1984	Rowntree	66
Lee	1985	Leyden	66
MOHSA(1)	1978	Engel	83
MOHSA(2)	1978	Leyden	110
Bae et al.	1987	Rowntree	181
Lim et al.	1989	Leyden	109
Ahn et al.(1)	1989	Expenditure	99
Ahn et al.(2)	1990	Expenditure	105
Bark et al.(1)	1990	Perception	114
Bark et al.(2)	1990	Perception	127

Source: Bark (1994).

Table 6.5 Comparison of the Engel's coefficient of the poor households and the average urban household, 1962-90 (%)

Source	Reference year	Poor households	Urban households
Kyungbuk University team	1962	77.9	44.4
Kwon et al.	1966	80.0	47.0
MOHSA	1973	52.3	41.1
Ahn et al.	1979	50.2	35.2
Kim	1982	32.0	38.3
Hong et al.	1985	55.3	34.4
Bark et al.	1990	31.8	27.4

Source: Bark (1994: 102).

applied to Korea, the result is a wide range of MCL estimates. The lowest estimate is from the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, while the highest one (almost six times higher) is reported in the study by Bae et al. The substantial changes in MCL over time may be attributed to changes in the commodity baskets and the ever-increasing aspirations of the poor, along with increasing average per capita income.

Generally speaking, at least in the case of Korean studies, the Engel method tends to yield a low estimate, followed by the Leyden and the Rowntree methods (with the exception of the study by Bae et al.). The expenditure method and the poll (perception) method produce results on the high side, with some variations depending on the assumptions employed in each study. However, the differences between the MCL estimates are so significantly large that the adopted method may not be the whole explanation.

The estimates of MCL in Table 6.4 reveal a tendency to be higher, the more recent the reference year is. Because of the rapid economic growth in Korea during these years, the composition and especially the prices of basic goods and services necessary to maintain a minimum standard of living have changed significantly over the years. It is like finding a difference in the MCL in an international comparison between high- and low-income countries. As partial evidence to support this point, Table 6.5 provides the estimates of the Engel's coefficient for poor households compared with the average urban household over the years. The declining trend in the coefficient for the poor is as apparent as it is for urban households. This explains why the estimates of MCL for recent years are larger: each estimate is

multiplied by the inverse of the Engel's coefficient when the Engel method is applied.

As shown in Table 6.6, the differences in the sample of a survey also cause the resultant estimates to differ, for at least three reasons. First, most of the sample surveys were conducted in the poor areas of the metropolitan city of Seoul, Daegu, or, at most, six major cities of Korea. The results from these surveys were inevitably significantly higher than those from a sample survey covering the entire country and including small and medium-sized cities and rural villages.

Second, depending on the survey, the sample households were selected from the absolute poor, poor families assisted under the Livelihood Protection Law, low-income households, residents within poor areas, or households earning below the average income (as shown in Table 6.6). Therefore, the selection criteria of the sample caused the estimated MCL from each survey to vary significantly.

Third, the sample size also differs widely from one survey to another, ranging from a few hundred households to a few thousand. Certainly, a sample of several thousand in a survey of one city (Kwon et al.'s 1966 study of Seoul) may be redundant, whereas Bark's 1993 sample for a national study may be considered to be rather small. These variations in the sample sizes of different studies would inevitably result in varying degrees of possible sampling errors.

The resulting estimates of MCL in 1993 constant prices, as shown in Table 6.4, tend to be somewhat biased, either way, owing to the index number problem implicit in the use of the consumer price index (CPI) as the inflator. Because the CPI is compiled by adjusting the weights of commodities and services every five years in Korea, it would be hazardous to use it to generate an appropriate time-series in order to derive an MCL series in constant terms.

It is safe to say that the application of any method for determining the poverty threshold yields an estimate with some variation, in the case of Korean studies as in any other country. The differences in the estimated poverty line may be to a certain extent attributable to the method of determining MCL, the coverage, the sample size of the survey, and the reference year. In particular, the difference between reference years during the period of rapid economic growth and transformation in a country such as Korea makes the comparison of MCL estimates extremely difficult.

What is evident from the preceding examination is that the existing poverty studies in Korea can provide only a range for the

Table 6.6 Differences in the samples surveyed

Coverage	Name of investigators	Year sampled	Type of households surveyed	Sample size	Area covered
National	Ministry of Social Affairs	1973	Low income households with an income below 24,000 Won per month	1,162	
	Kim	1981	All households assisted under the Livelihood Protection Law	1,292	
	Bark et al.	1990	All low-income households	2,500	
	Bark et al.	1993	All low-income households	830	
Local	Sociology Dept., Kyungbuk University	1962	All low-income households within the area		Shinamdong, Daegu
	Noh	1964	"	120	
	Kwon et al.	1966	"	723	
	Choi	1968	"	4,222	Dongbu, Ichon-dong, Seoul
	Noh	1970	Low-income households with less than the per capita income of 7,000 Won	347	16 poor areas of Seoul
	Yoo	1971	The poor assisted under the Livelihood Protection Law	2,652	2 poor areas of Seoul
	The city of Seoul	1979	Low-income households	1,162	
	Suh et al.	1981	Poor households assisted under the Livelihood Protection Law	1,292	Poor areas in Seoul
	Yoo et al.	1982	All low-income households	2,500	
	Kim	1982	"	830	40 poor areas of Seoul
	Hong et al.	1985	The absolute poor	120	Bong-cheon dong
	Lim et al.	1989	Low-income households with income below than 765,000 Won per household	723	2 poor areas of Seoul
	Chun et al.	1989	All low-income households	4,222	6 cities
				347	Seoul

Source: Bark (1994: 99-100).

poverty line, not its specific value within a tolerable level of accuracy. Therefore, it is not surprising to find wide variations in the incidence of poverty in Korea.

The adequacy of the data used

Any serious empirical analyst, whether from a developed or a developing country, frequently runs into difficulty with the availability and reliability of necessary data. However, the degree of difficulty varies from one country to another. Analysts tend to be rather eloquent about the theoretical hypothesis to be tested, its mathematical specification, and the interpretation of quantitative results, but they seldom explain the problems of the necessary data to be used in estimating the critical parameters of analytical equations. In order to be economical in academic works, analysts rely almost entirely on the published data of statistical agencies and estimates by a handful of data specialists. The only justification given by the users of these statistics is the citation of the sources, but they seldom assess the data.

Although Korea is considered to be one of the developing countries that is relatively better endowed with adequate statistics, the data required in poverty studies are comparatively scarce and those that are available are far from adequate. For example, the central statistical agency in Korea did not use a large enough sample in its urban household income and expenditure survey for it to be possible to abstract statistical data to represent the urban poor.¹ However, poverty researchers, instead of attempting to survey a large enough sample of the poor directly, often derive a sub-sample of the poor from this survey. Moreover, it is practically impossible to derive any meaningful price series for a particular target population such as the poor from existing price indices.

Even when there is a high-quality sample survey on the poor and the poverty line is scientifically established, the head-count method simply cannot be applied to the size distribution of income for Korea. One of the few serious studies that attempted to measure poverty in Korea was conducted by Suh (1979), who took Choo's income distribution estimates in order to derive a head-count ratio. Suh's study applied a five-step procedure, which estimated the poverty line and borrowed adjustment factors from Statistics Canada (1973) for an adult-equivalent scale. It is still unclear how household-specific information was applied by Suh to the distribution pattern estimated by Choo. In short, it is practically impossible to pool survey results with income distribution data, as they exist in Korea, unless strong

assumptions are introduced about the distribution pattern and household characteristics within the lower deciles.

Furthermore, the household income and expenditure survey results used in estimating the size distribution of income for Korea involve a number of problems that deserve a mention. The city household income and expenditure survey (CHIES) conducted in Korea contains elements of both upward and downward bias (Choo 1982: Appendix II). On the one hand the CHIES results are considered to be upwardly biased because the survey excludes all non-farm households in non-city areas, where incomes are basically lower than those in cities. On the other hand, the results are downwardly biased because the survey applied an upper income ceiling until 1976 and thus excluded the highest-income households. Therefore, if an analyst uses the CHIES data to estimate the poverty line, the resultant cut-off line and poverty incidence rate tend to be upwardly biased. However, the most serious defect of the CHIES is the fact that, ever since the survey was first conducted in 1963, it has never released the surveyed incomes, but consumption expenditures of the self-employed and wage income households.

If the farm household income and expenditure survey (FHIES) is utilized for the purpose of a poverty study, its results are likely to be downwardly biased in terms of a head-count, because the survey excludes those farm households cultivating less than 1 danbo (equivalent to 0.235 acres) and landless rural households, which are assumed to be more likely to be poor than property holders. This exclusion had a significant defect until the late 1980s in Korea, when all farm workers were paid at subsistence level. In recent years, however, the shortage of manual workers in Korea has become so serious that a male farm worker is paid more than US\$ 50 per day, on average, including fringe benefits of all kinds.

Owing to these deficiencies in the CHIES and FHIES, a number of researchers bravely attempted to carry out sample surveys themselves, which, as mentioned in the previous section, is technically very difficult, to say the least. Moreover, such surveys are useful only for limited purposes in a cross-section study because of seasonality, limited coverage of sampled areas, arbitrary sample selections, and the inexperience of the field workers, among others. Even when the results of an independent cross-section survey prove to be relatively accurate, it is difficult to maintain consistency over time among the surveys and the results would not serve the purpose of time-series analysis, unless an analyst assumed them to be comparable with other results. Any attempt to gather primary data on poverty must be

made with extreme care and researchers need to make a concerted effort to solve data problems.

Another spectrum of data and associated problems lies in establishing the poverty line. Despite worldwide efforts throughout the 1970s to make quantum specifications of basic needs, there is no consensus among researchers yet on what constitutes primary health care, let alone basic needs. Without theoretical specifications, one cannot, of course, expect such statistical data to be compiled by the statistical agencies.

Summary and concluding remarks

Numerous empirical studies of poverty have been attempted in Korea, as reviewed in this paper. Owing to differences in analytical methods, reference years, and the coverage of surveys, the findings from one study inevitably differ from those of others. These findings can provide us only with a range of existing benchmarks, which need to be used with careful qualification, both implicit and explicit, in a study. Therefore, further research effort is required in order to gain conclusive evidence on both urban and rural poverty in Korea.

As in other parts of the world, all the available estimation methods have been applied in the Korean poverty studies over the years. A new method has the merit of compensating for the weakness of another method, at least theoretically. However, when there is no conclusive study, the application of different methods complicates the matter by making the clarification of differences in the findings of each study more difficult. It is hard to know whether to attribute the differences to the method itself or to a weakness of the study, such as the data pooled and/or surveyed. Instead of applying all available methods, it might be better to use a few selected or tested ones until conclusive evidence on different aspects of poverty emerges.

As in all countries, the major bottleneck in poverty studies in Korea lies in what we call data problems. These time-consuming problems are too frequently and conveniently overlooked by researchers. Because the relevant statistics compiled by the Korean statistical agencies are not readily applicable to poverty studies, almost all such studies rely on data from sample surveys designed by the researchers. However, conducting a sample survey is not a simple task, especially one on poverty. Therefore, social scientists in all countries should support their statistical agencies in securing adequate staff and budgets to conduct poverty and related surveys regularly.

Although there have been numerous studies on poverty in Korea in the past, these studies are far from conclusive. At their best, they reveal only partial truths, and they are also sometimes misleading. Rapid economic growth during the past thirty years in Korea has alleviated poverty to a great extent. Yet there remain, and will remain, many pockets of absolute and relative poverty in Korea, for which comprehensive policy measures need to be adopted. In the absence of persuasive studies on poverty and policy recommendations to redress it, the sufferings of the poor are bound to remain unnoticed and ignored. Such neglect represents a research and academic failure as much as the administrative and managerial failure of poverty alleviation efforts.

NOTE

1. Until 1977, the sample size did not exceed 2,000 households for the 32 cities surveyed in Korea.

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