



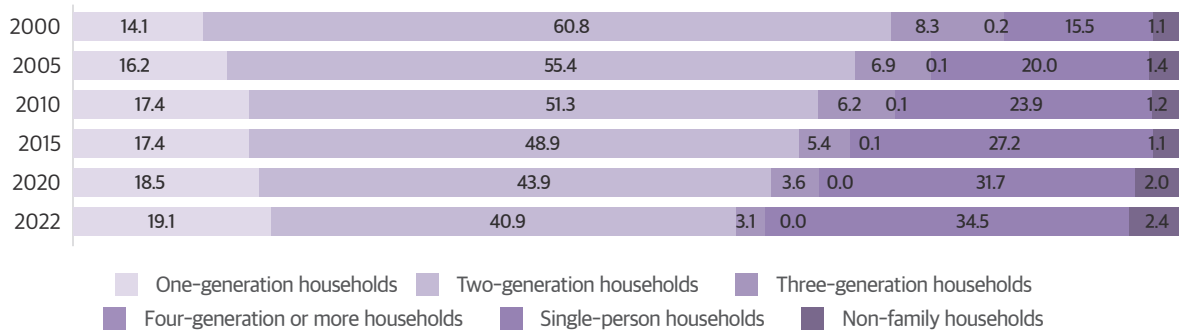
Understanding Non-family Households

Abstract

- ▶ Household and family structures in Korean society are undergoing rapid transformation, with non-family households emerging as a newly expanding form of living arrangement. A non-family household composed of up to five unrelated individuals consists of people who are neither related by blood nor legally married, yet live together as members of the same household.
- ▶ The study found considerable diversity in both the reasons for forming non-family households and in the relationships among household members.
 - Non-family households are predominantly two-person households, and among these, mixed-gender (male + female) households represent the largest share. The study also confirms that some non-family households engage in mutual support and care, functioning in practice as interdependent units. Notably, many mixed-gender two-person households maintain daily lives in ways closely resembling spousal relationships, despite lacking legal marital status.
- ▶ Currently, legal rights are guaranteed only to family relationships based on marriage or kinship, and non-family households are not granted any legal recognition or protection. Therefore, institutional reforms are necessary to ensure the protection of legal rights for non-family households and to prevent discrimination against them.

Summary of Characteristics of Non-family Households

(Unit: %)



Notes: Census data based on administrative records beginning in 2015.
 Source: Statistics Korea (2000, 2005, 2010), Population and Housing Census.
 Statistics Korea (2015, 2020, 2022), Population Census.

* This paper was produced by extracting and summarizing parts of a research report from the Korean Women's Development Institute.
 Source: Kim, Y., Joo, J., Kim, S., Yang, J., & Kim, J. (2024). Current Status and Policy Implications of Non-Family Households. Seoul: Korean Women's Development Institute.

1 Background and Purpose

- ▶ Non-family households are defined as households composed of up to five unrelated individuals who co-reside without family ties. Although relatively small in scale, the number of non-family households has been growing in recent years.
 - In 2022, non-family households accounted for 2.4% of all general households, encompassing a population of 1,098,224 persons (Statistics Korea, 2022). Compared with 2021, the number of family households decreased by 0.4%, single-person households increased by 4.7%, and non-family households increased by 8.7% (Statistics Korea, Population and Housing Census, registered census methodology, press release, July 29, 2022).
 - Among non-family households, 78.9% consisted of two-person households, while households with three or more members comprised 21.1%. As shown in <Table 1>, within two-person non-family households, mixed-gender households (male + female) represented the largest share at 45.1%, followed by male + male households at 34.8%, and female + female households at 20.0% (Statistics Korea, 2020 Population and Housing Census, 20% microdata sample analysis).
 - Changes by age group indicate that the share of household members in their 30s and younger declined from 72.9% in 2010 to 63.0% in 2020, while those aged 40 and older increased from 27.2% to 37.0% during the same period (Statistics Korea, 2010 and 2020 Population and Housing Census, 2% microdata sample analysis). Although non-family households remain concentrated in younger age groups (30s and below), they have recently been increasing among individuals in their 40s and older (see <Table 2>).

<Table 1> Distribution of Two-person Non-family Households by Gender Composition

(Unit: households, %)

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Male + Male households	72,514	34.8
Female + Female households	41,735	20.0
Male + Female households	94,032	45.1
Total	208,281	100.0

Note: Household weights applied.

Source: Statistics Korea (2020). Population and Housing Census, 20% microdata sample analysis.

<Table 2> Changes in Age Distribution among All Members of Non-family Households

(Unit: %)

Category	Teens	20s	30s	40s	50s	60s	70+
2010	7.1	43.9	21.9	11.5	8.4	4.2	3.1
2015	5.0	39.2	21.8	13.9	12.4	5.0	2.8
2020	3.0	36.5	23.5	13.1	12.5	7.9	3.5

Source: Statistics Korea (2010, 2015, 2020). Population and Housing Census, 2% microdata sample analysis.

- ▶ Currently, the Population Census by Statistics Korea provides the only available dataset on non-family households. However, it is limited to basic demographic and household information and does not capture details regarding the relationships among household members, reasons for household formation, or the nature of cohabitation.

- Consequently, no research has examined whether members of non-family households merely share living space, whether they maintain emotional intimacy, whether they engage in mutual care or financial support, or whether they form relationships similar to those within families.
 - Furthermore, it remains unclear whether individuals form non-family households temporarily at certain stages of the life course, or whether these represent a more stable household form — an essential question for understanding contemporary transformations in family formation in Korea.
- ▶ This study examines the emerging and increasingly prominent non-family household structure by analyzing general characteristics of household members, reasons for household formation, care and support practices, and patterns of cohabitation. The study also explores the broader implications and policy considerations associated with this phenomenon within the context of growing family diversity in Korean society.

2 Current Status of Non-family Households Based on the Population and Housing Census

Comparison of Non-family Households with Family Households and Single-person Households

- ▶ A comparison of non-family households with family households and single-person households shows that the average age of members in non-family households was the lowest: 36.6 years for non-family households, 41.5 years for family households, and 48.9 years for single-person households.
- ▶ Regarding marital status, unmarried individuals accounted for an overwhelming majority at 70.3%, followed by those with a spouse at 19.6%, divorced at 7.7%, and widowed at 2.5%. The difference in the proportion of unmarried individuals between household types was substantial: among family households, 25.6% were unmarried, while 50.7% were unmarried in single-person households.

Characteristics by Household Size within Non-family Households

- ▶ Regarding household size, two-person households comprised 78.9% of non-family households, whereas households with three or more members accounted for 21.1%.
- ▶ The average age of household members was 37.8 years in two-person households and 34.6 years in households with three or more members. In terms of age distribution, those aged 30 and below were more common in households with three or more members, while those aged 40 and older were more prevalent in two-person households, indicating that larger non-family households tended to include younger individuals.
- ▶ The marital status profile also varied: in two-person households, 72.3% were unmarried, 14.5% had a spouse, 10.1% were divorced, and 3.1% were widowed, whereas in households of three or more, 66.8% were unmarried, 28.7% had a spouse, 3.2% were divorced, and 1.3% were widowed. Compared with larger households, two-person households had slightly higher proportions of unmarried and divorced individuals, while the proportion of those with a spouse was higher in households of three or more.

Characteristics of Household Members by Gender Composition in Two-person Non-family Households

- ▶ Examining two-person non-family households by gender composition, mixed-gender households (male + female) constituted the largest share at 45.1%, followed by male + male households at 34.8% and female + female households at 20.0%.
- ▶ The average age of household members was highest in mixed-gender households at 40.2 years, compared to 36.2 years in male + male households and 35.1 years in female + female households.
- ▶ In all gender compositions, unmarried individuals represented the largest group. The proportion of unmarried members was highest in female + female households (82.0%), followed by mixed-gender households (71.0%) and male + male households (69.1%). The share of individuals with a spouse was highest in male + male households at 24.2%, compared with 9.0% in mixed-gender households and 7.2% in female + female households.

Housing Characteristics: Type of Dwelling, Tenure, and Length of Residence

- ▶ In terms of housing characteristics, detached houses accounted for the largest proportion of residence types at 39.0%, followed by apartments (27.7%) and non-residential structures (17.2%). Compared with family households, non-family households had a lower proportion of apartment dwellings and a higher proportion of non-residential units.
- ▶ Regarding housing tenure, the most common form was monthly rent with deposit (38.9%), followed by rent-free housing such as employer-provided dormitories or staff housing (22.4%), and owner-occupied housing (17.9%). Compared with family households and single-person households, non-family households had a lower share of owner-occupied housing and a higher share of rent-free arrangements.
- ▶ Non-family households also tended to have shorter residence durations: 32.8% had lived in their current home for less than one year. When considering those who had lived in the residence for less than three years, the proportion was 67.9% for non-family households, compared to 52.7% for single-person households and 30.8% for family households — indicating significantly greater residential mobility among non-family households.

3 Cohabitation Among Non-family Households

- ▶ This study examined the cohabitation arrangements of non-family households through a structured survey of household members.
 - (Survey participants) Members of non-family households composed of two or more unrelated individuals.
 - (Sampling method) Purposive sampling using an online panel managed by a professional survey firm, supplemented with selected offline interviews.
 - (Survey content) General characteristics of household members, household formation, cohabitation arrangements, and policy support needs.
 - (Survey period) May 8-31, 2024.
 - (Sample size) 335 respondents.

► Duration of Cohabitation and Reasons for Household Formation

- The duration of cohabitation varied by age group and household structure. Younger respondents in their 20s exhibited the shortest duration of cohabitation, with length of cohabitation increasing gradually with age.
- Two-person households tended to have shorter durations compared to households of three or more. Among two-person households, female + female households reported the shortest cohabitation period, whereas mixed-gender households (male + female) reported the longest duration.

► The most common reason for forming a non-family household was to reduce housing costs.

- Among respondents in their 20s or younger, 61.4% cited housing cost reduction, the highest proportion among all age groups. Among those aged 50 and older, 'reducing living expenses' (43.1%) was cited more frequently compared to younger groups.
- Households of three or more members exhibited a strong economic motivation for cohabitation, selecting housing cost reduction (57.1%), living expense reduction (42.9%), and larger living space for the same cost (25.3%) as primary reasons. For two-person households, motivations varied by gender composition. Among two-person households, mixed-gender households (male + female) reported being in an intimate relationship as the primary reason for cohabitation (72.8%), followed by reducing housing costs (38.2%). For male + male households, the most common reason was reducing housing costs (72.0%), followed by reducing living expenses (44.0%). For female + female households, reducing housing costs was most prevalent (65.5%), followed by being close friends (32.8%).

► Relationship Dynamics Before and After Cohabitation

- Prior to forming a household, 78.2% of respondents indicated they already knew their current housemates. The proportion who were previously unacquainted was higher in households of three or more (23.1%) than in two-person households (9.0%).
- In their current relationship perception, members of mixed-gender two-person households primarily viewed their relationship as similar to a romantic, spousal partnership (77.9%), while 17.6% characterized it as mutually supportive and dependent. Other non-family households primarily described themselves as a joint living arrangement involving "housemates who are not strangers," indicating a shared living community but without familial or romantic identification.

► Anticipated Reasons for Ending Cohabitation

- Among households of three or more members, transitioning to an independent single-person household (19.8%) and graduation or job relocation (18.7%) were the most anticipated reasons for ending cohabitation. In mixed-gender two-person households, dissolution of the romantic relationship was expected to be the primary trigger, whereas other groups more commonly cited moving out independently, graduation or job changes, or marriage.

► Management of Cohabitation: Shared Costs, Housework, and Household Rules

- Prior agreements before cohabitation primarily focused on cost-sharing arrangements, including housing-related expenses, utility fees, and daily living costs. Conversely, advance discussions about housework responsibilities, shared meals, or rules for daily conduct were relatively less common.

▶ Meaning of Household Relationships: Mutual Reliance and Role Expectations

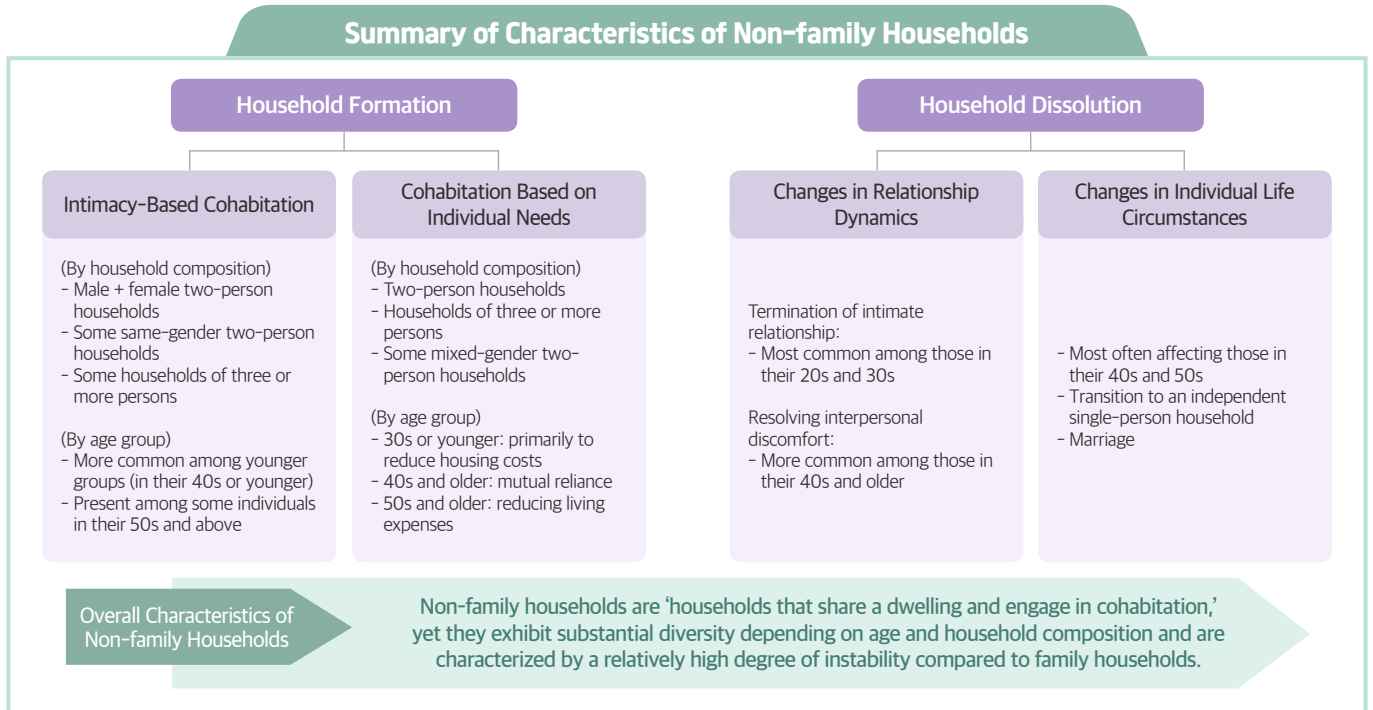
- The types of issues for which household members relied on one another varied by household type: Male + female, female + female, and three-or-more-person households most frequently relied on co-residents regarding crime and safety-related concerns. Male + male two-person households showed the highest reliance in cases of illness or health-related problems (86.0%). For concerns related to romantic relationships or marriage (82.0%) and economic difficulties (75.5%), reliance was strongest among male + female households.
- Regarding expectations of a legal guardian role, 60.3% of respondents expressed that they would expect such a role from their housemates. Expectations were highest in mixed-gender two-person households (79.4%) and female + female two-person households (65.5%). In contrast, expectations were lower among male + male two-person households (64.0%) and households of three or more members (58.2%), where a greater proportion responded that they did not expect such a role.

4 Characteristics of Non-family Households and Implications for Changes in Korean Family Structures

● Characteristics of Non-family Households

- ▶ The defining characteristic of non-family households is that they are households in which individuals share a dwelling, and household members can generally be described as co-residing individuals.
- ▶ In terms of household formation, non-family households can be broadly categorized into those formed based on intimate/affectionate relationships and those formed based on necessity.
 - Households that share a residence based on intimate or affectionate relationships include many mixed-gender two-person households (male + female), as well as some same-gender households (female + female or male + male) and some households with three or more members. Households sharing a residence to meet mutual needs include most same-gender households, some mixed-gender households, and households of three or more people.
- ▶ Regarding dissolution, non-family households may end easily when relationships change — such as the end of an intimate relationship or interpersonal conflict — or due to changes in individual life circumstances such as employment, marriage, or independent living.
 - Whether formed through intimacy or necessity, non-family households inherently carry a degree of instability, as cohabitation can be terminated readily when relationships shift or individual life circumstances change.
- ▶ Unlike families, non-family households do not operate under standardized norms or conventional expectations regarding cohabitation. Norms around economic support, cost-sharing, meals, and everyday life do not mirror the culturally embedded assumptions found in family households.
 - For example, although members live together, there is no expectation that meals must be shared, and expenses are not always divided equally. Members distribute roles according to situational needs and maintain shared household rules.

- However, mixed-gender two-person households exhibit relatively greater adherence to traditional gender roles compared to other types of households. They show lower levels of prior negotiation about shared living arrangements and lower rates of equal division of household labor.



● Implications for Changes in Korean Family Structures

- ▶ Through cohabitation, members often develop intimate and supportive relationships that extend beyond ordinary housemate arrangements. They care for and rely on one another, provide assistance with everyday matters, and, in some cases, even expect a degree of guardian-like support. These households thus function as relationships that are closer than mere acquaintances, with members providing mutual help and support in daily life.
- ▶ Mixed-gender two-person households (male + female) generally exhibit characteristics distinct from other types of households.
 - Their reasons for household formation and anticipated reasons for dissolution are highly driven by intimate/ affectionate relationships, and their duration of cohabitation tends to be longer than that of other two-person households. Moreover, a large share perceive one another as being in a spouse-like relationship, suggesting that although classified as a non-family household, male + female two-person households function similarly to conjugal couples in practice.
- ▶ Beyond male-female households, many male-male, female-female, and three-or-more-person households also perceive their co-residents as individuals they care for and depend on, conceptualizing their relationships as somewhere between 'unrelated individuals' and 'family.' Given the rising rates of lifelong singlehood and divorce in South Korea, these findings suggest that new forms of intimacy-based cohabitation — outside conventional conjugal or blood-based family structures — may become increasingly prevalent.
- ▶ The policy needs of non-family households vary significantly according to household size, gender composition, and the individual characteristics of household members. Therefore, institutional support measures must be designed and tailored to the specific characteristics of different subgroups within non-family households.

5 Policy Implications and Recommendations

Policy Implications

- ▶ Taken together, non-family households can be broadly described as ‘loosely bonded, intimacy-based collective living arrangements’ — relationships that are neither fully familial nor entirely between unrelated individuals, but exist somewhere in between.
 - Many members perceive their relationships as ones characterized by care, emotional reliance, and mutual support, forming connections that lie midway between ‘strangers’ and ‘family.’ Such living arrangements are often chosen voluntarily for practical reasons, such as reducing housing costs. However, they can be easily dissolved due to desires for independent living, job relocation, or marriage. Consequently, these households remain relatively loose and unstable, with no legal obligations or rights between members.
 - Traditionally, discussions on the fluidity of family formation and the breakdown of standardized life-course pathways have focused on trends such as the rise of single-person households, non-marriage, and divorce. The present findings—covering shared living with mutual care, emotionally supportive cohabitation, and intimacy-based non-marital cohabitation — also reflect these broader demographic shifts.
 - Individuals move in and out of different household forms across their lives — living with parents, transitioning to single-person households, marrying and divorcing, living with friends, non-marital cohabitation, and returning to living alone. This suggests the need to redefine the concept of family — traditionally centered on marriage and kinship — toward relational attributes or functional roles such as mutual care and emotional intimacy.
- ▶ Currently, non-family households are most common among younger adults, particularly those who are unmarried. However, the recent increase in non-family households among individuals in their 40s and older indicates that cohabitation may expand across all age groups.
 - Among younger individuals, non-family households are often formed temporarily before marriage. Among older adults, however, cohabitation may be longer-term, sometimes preferred over independent single-person living. This suggests that some older adults may increasingly choose new forms of intimacy-based cohabitation, outside the structure of traditional families. These groups may seek to maintain cohabitation over an extended period, potentially reducing instability and viewing their relationships as equivalent to family.
 - This trend may also signal the emergence of new relational forms that serve as alternatives to the traditional family — arrangements that combine shared housing, economic cooperation, and care functions. Thus, for non-family households that sustain long-term cohabitation and maintain family-like relationships, there is a need for legal recognition equivalent to that of families.
- ▶ Among two-person non-family households, male + female households make up a large share, with many functioning similarly to de facto marital unions, though some regard themselves as simply co-living couples.
 - Most male + female two-person households operate similarly to legally married couples: romantic relationships are the dominant motive for formation and dissolution, cohabitation duration tends to be longer, and many perceive each other as spouses. Therefore, these households could be categorized as de facto partnerships within the broader category of non-family households.

- Some male + female two-person households, however, do not identify as de facto spouses. In the Census, they are classified as non-family households because they identify the relationship as “cohabitant” rather than “spouse.” Survey responses also included cases where members saw themselves simply as supportive companions rather than equivalent to legal spouses. These households may not wish for their cohabitation to be legally framed as family.

○ Policy Tasks for Supporting Non-family Households

- ▶ This study confirms the existence of non-family households in which members provide substantial mutual support and caregiving.
 - Many male + female two-person households live in ways that closely resemble marital relationships. Yet legal rights in Korea are granted only to relationships formed through marriage or kinship, meaning non-family households receive no legal protection. It is therefore essential to establish and reform systems that protect the rights of non-family households and prevent discrimination.
- ▶ While non-family households involve cohabitation, their relationships are based on egalitarian intimacy, and support needs vary depending on household size, gender composition, and the degree of intimacy among members.
 - Policies pertaining to non-family households must be tailored to the diversity of relationship types within these households. Approaches should include both the development of new legal frameworks and reform of existing systems to ensure rights protection.
- ▶ For institutional mechanisms such as the proposed Civil Partnership Act, which aims to guarantee rights for non-family cohabitants, it is crucial to recognize that non-family households differ from families legally recognized through marriage or kinship. Thus, rights related to cohabitation should be protected only when the individuals concerned mutually consent and formally register their relationship.
 - Moreover, any system designed to protect the rights of non-family households must reflect the internal diversity of these groups. Such systems should include a spectrum of options — from those guaranteeing rights equivalent to legal families to those providing minimal necessary protections. Upon registration, individuals should be able to choose from a menu of support options, selecting the rights and protections that best correspond to their needs.

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Supervising ministries

Family Policy Division, Ministry of Gender Equality and Family

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