



U.S.-BASED NORTH KOREAN **REFUGEES**

A **QUALITATIVE** STUDY - OCTOBER 2014



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In response to clear evidence of grave and widespread human rights abuses, President George W. Bush signed the North Korean Human Rights Act of 2004, which was designed to provide the United States with an expanded set of options and tools to pressure the North Korean regime to end abuses and provide assistance to those who were victims of the regime's harsh policies. Since then, the legislation was reauthorized twice by Congress, and signed by President Bush again in 2008 and by President Obama in 2012.

One of the intended aims of the act was to establish a path for refugees' fleeing North Korea to gain asylum in the United States. As we approach the 10th anniversary of the act's signing, the George W. Bush Institute commissioned InterMedia, an independent, global consultancy specializing in strategic research and evaluation, to conduct a qualitative study of North Korean refugees living in the United States. The objective of the study was to better understand the experiences of those who have fled North Korea and have been able to resettle in the United States as a result of the act, and investigate ways the U.S. government and civil society might better aid those who have fled North Korea in search of a better life in this country. This report presents the results of 16 in-depth interviews with North Koreans who have resettled in the United States, conducted during August and September of 2014.

South Korea remains the *de facto* destination for the vast majority of North Korean refugees.

There are currently 27,000 North Korean refugees in South Korea compared with just over 170 refugees who have resettled in the United States. Yet, despite the disparity in the numbers, America's commitment to accepting refugees holds symbolic importance and the promise of a new life in the United States serves as a great source of hope for those who choose to come here.

Interviews revealed a number of findings about life for North Korean refugees in the United States, including the conflicting feelings of gratitude for the new opportunities the United States presents and frustrations that come with assimilating to a new country.

In aggregate, the findings clearly spotlight the dichotomy between the sincere gratitude most participants felt for the opportunities and assistance they had been given, and the daily difficulties and frustrations they face as they try to adapt to new ways. Many of the interviewees expressed frustration over the fact they were ill-prepared to handle this on their own.

Both in terms of applying for asylum while in a third country, such as Thailand, or receiving needed assistance adjusting to daily life in America, one of the clearest themes to emerge from the interviews was one of great inconsistency in the resettlement process.

During the asylum application process refugees described relatively long waiting periods, often in less than ideal conditions, during which they received very little information on the status of their applications. Several participants knew other asylum-seekers who had given up on their attempts to come to the United States after long wait periods.

¹ Both the term refugee and the term defector are commonly used to refer to those who have fled North Korea and resettled elsewhere. This report uses the term refugee throughout.

Once they arrived in the United States, without the benefit of a large bureaucracy specifically designed to assist refugees with resettlement, as is the case in South Korea, the assistance and support refugees in the United States receive is generally managed through a combination of government, civil society, and individual actors. In many cases the support provided to refugees in the United States was stellar and participants' believed the help they received, despite the challenges they faced, allowed them to very quickly achieve economic independence. For others, however, outside help was scarce and it was not only a struggle to acclimate to their new surroundings, but to achieve a minimal standard of financial independence.

Participants identified a number of particularly difficult barriers to success they had to overcome when they first arrived.

These were also mentioned as potential areas in where the U.S. government and civil society might help to ease the transition from often extremely difficult circumstances in North Korea to eventual success in America.

These included:

- *English language training and acquisition: upon reaching the United States, refugees must quickly find employment and become self-sufficient. This leaves little time to study English, a necessary tool to find better employment, assimilate into American society, and reduce feelings of isolation.*
- *Transportation and self-empowerment: in many cities in the United States car ownership is necessary to achieve even a basic level of independence. Given the modest financial and employment prospects of most refugees upon arrival to the United States, being able to afford a car – even a used car for a few thousand dollars – is a distant goal; this forces them to rely on friends and community members for help.*
- *Healthcare and health insurance: although participants received free health insurance for a limited period of time upon arrival, they had no experience navigating the complex U.S. healthcare system, little understanding of how insurance works, and often were facing serious health issues as a result of malnutrition or lack of preventative healthcare in North Korea. Many participants said that free health insurance expired before they could learn how to take advantage of it and few could afford insurance on their own afterwards.*

In addition, despite some attempts to organize, participants said the lack of a substantial North Korean refugee community in the United States means they must rely on people for help who do not always understand their particular circumstances and have relatively few opportunities to share experiences with those from their own background.

Despite new challenges, however, almost unanimously, participants in the study believed, in the long-run, their decision to come to the United States was a wise one, and held that opportunities for success in America were plentiful.

BACKGROUND

Sample: Sixteen qualitative interviews with refugees living across the United States. The large majority (14) came directly to the United States as asylum seekers rather than going to South Korea prior to resettling in America.

Interview length: Interviews ranged from one to two hours in length.

Fieldwork period: August to September 2014.

All interviews were conducted in Korean by interviewers with experience interviewing North Korean refugees, who were well-versed in North Korean issues and briefed on the goals of this study. Participants' cooperation was voluntary. All information collected during the interviews has been anonymized and verbatim quotations are identified only with basic demographic characteristics. Basic demographic breakdowns of the participants are presented below.

	Sex	Age	Province	Left NK	Arrived in U.S.
1	Male	42	Pyongyang	2005	2010
2	Female	33	Hamkyongbukdo	2004	2006
3	Male	25	Hamkyongbukdo	2000	2009
4	Male	44	Pyonganbukdo	2001	2010
5	Female	55	Hamkyongbukdo	1998	2008
6	Female	48	Hamkyongbukdo	2006	2007
7	Male	35	Kangwondo	2000	2007
8	Female	44	Hamkyongbukdo	2006	2008
9	Male	72	Hamkyongbukdo	1985	2011
10	Female	24	Hamkyongbukdo	2006	2007
11	Male	55	Hamkyongbukdo	1995	2008
12	Male	19	Yanggangdo	2010	2011
13	Male	49	Hwanghaebukdo	2000	2009
14	Male	30	Pyongannamdo	2010	2011
15	Female	37	Hamkyongbukdo	1998	2012
16	Female	27	Hamkyongbukdo	2010	2011

Caveat

This is a small qualitative research project and does not reflect the views of all refugees in the United States, all North Korean refugees, or refugees more generally.

INTRODUCTION

The North Korean Human Rights Act (NKHRA), landmark legislation passed by Congress and signed into law by President George W. Bush in 2004, sought to positively affect the human rights situation in North Korea through a number of channels and means. The legislation outlined five specific goals intended to promote:

1. *Respect for and protection of fundamental human rights in North Korea;*
2. *A more durable humanitarian solution to the plight of North Korean refugees;*
3. *Increased monitoring, access, and transparency in the provision of humanitarian assistance inside North Korea;*
4. *The free flow of information into and out of North Korea; and*
5. *Progress toward the peaceful reunification of the Korean peninsula under a democratic system of government.*

To achieve these goals, a number of actions and programs have been authorized or mandated by Congress. These include providing funding for programs and organizations that promote democracy, human rights, and freedom of information; increasing Voice of America (VOA) and Radio Free Asia (RFA) broadcasting to North Korea; creating the position of Special Envoy for Human Rights in North Korea in the Department of State; and working to monitor the status of and facilitate asylum for North Korean refugees who wish to claim asylum and settle in the United States. This report focuses primarily on the experience of North Koreans seeking asylum and resettlement in the United States since the act was implemented.

Since the passage of the act, more than 170 North Korean refugees have entered the United States.² This report summarizes findings from 16 in-depth interviews with North Korean refugees who have resettled in the United States. The interviews were conducted in an attempt to gain a better understanding of their experiences in the United States, 10 years after passage of the legislation that made their entry into the United States possible.

² <http://www.voanews.com/content/four-more-north-korean-defectors-arrived-in-us-in-july/1973101.html>

LIFE IN NORTH KOREA

While it is important to remember this is only a small, non-representative selection of North Koreans in America, in general, participants' circumstances in North Korea were not largely or systemically different than most refugees interviewed for similar studies in China or South Korea.

While the interviews revealed no strongly defining demographic characteristics that predicted which North Korean refugees would choose to seek asylum in the United States, rather than South Korea or another destination, a relatively high tolerance for risk was clear among a number of the participants who, despite understanding that resettling in the United States would hold a number of additional challenges, still chose to forego an easier path in South Korea. The participants in this study did not include any "high-level elites;" participants reflected a range of living standards in North Korea varying from relatively comfortable to the verge of starvation.

My mom and dad had a bit of power and while large families starved to death, my family only consisted of me and my older brother who was two years older and he went to the army, so it was only me. That was why we were able to eat and live. And my parents had some power so I had a good job.³

After leaving home in 1997, I went to go live with relatives, but then was beaten up and kicked out. So then I walked, covering basically all of North Korea, begging for food and foraging for anything to eat. I've eaten tree roots and lived a tough life like this for six years.⁴

Mirroring the differing levels of economic prosperity, participants also reported a range of Songbun statuses.⁵ Yet, most who believed their Songbun status had an appreciable effect on their lives saw their status as a hindrance rather than an aid to success.

Initially my family was of good Songbun in North Korea. Both my parents are from Pyongyang but they were banished to Yangongdo. We suffered a lot because of our fallen status. You know how North Korea is Labor Party oriented, we were not considered 'communist,' but rather 'anti-communist.' In North Korea too, if you work hard you can achieve things, but that type of opportunity was not available to us because of our status. That type of discrimination was too much.⁶

Similar to the majority of refugees and refugees who settle in South Korea, economic motivations or family living abroad were the primary motivations for escape among this study's participants.

The reason for leaving...I didn't think to run away. It was just for money. As the head of my family, I just wanted to earn money and live happily with my family. I thought if I left, I could earn at least \$3,000 and return to North Korea. With that money, I wanted to start a business in the market. I would get a regular job and have my wife work in the market and live off the profits from that. This was my plan when I went to Russia, but I realized that it couldn't happen.⁷

3 Female, 33, Hamkyongbukdo, Left NK in 2004, Arrived in US 2006

4 Male, 35, Kangwondo, Left NK in 2000, Arrived in US 2007

5 Songbun is a system used by the North Korean regime to classify citizens' perceived allegiance toward the regime as core, wavering, or hostile. An individual's Songbun status is heavily influenced by his family's background and helps determine career prospects, housing and even access to food.

6 Female, 37, Hamkyongbukdo, Left NK in 1998, Arrived in US 2012

7 Female, 55, Hamkyongbukdo, Left NK in 1998, Arrived in US 2008

PERCEPTIONS OF THE OUTSIDE WORLD

Depth and nuance of understanding about the world outside of North Korea varied from participant to participant. But many had at least some exposure to outside media and knew before leaving North Korea that China, South Korea, and the United States were economically more prosperous than North Korea.

Most participants reported it had become common knowledge in North Korea that the economic situation in China had improved markedly over the past few decades, evidenced by the ever-growing influx of Chinese products into North Korean markets. For border residents (as a number of the participants were) the economic prosperity of China was an important fact of daily life.

China lives well and has a lot of food. I knew that already because Chinese people come and go and I would accompany my mom to Rajin⁸ to sell things and I would see them. When I think about it now, they were actually really poor. But I saw the clothes they wore and the things they ate. Even a banana, I had for the first time when I came to China. I had food to eat but couldn't eat special things. So when I saw them eat bananas at the market, I always wondered what that would taste like.⁹

South Korea, which had long been painted in North Korean propaganda as a desperately suffering puppet state, came to be idealized by many of the participants who, while in North Korea, became avid viewers of South Korean dramas and films.

Oh, I thought [South Koreans] were evil. I thought South Koreans were bad people. They are capitalist cannibals. But when I saw movies, my perception started to change and thought they were lovely and friendly. Even the way they spoke. And especially the men were so handsome and attractive. It made me fall into a fantasy!¹⁰

While some had a sense that the United States was the world's economic powerhouse, very few participants had a detailed knowledge of what life in the United States was like before leaving North Korea. One participant recounted her experience learning more about the United States once leaving North Korea for China.

I thought I never wanted to go to the United States. I wanted to hit them if I were to meet them... I thought everything [I learned in school in North Korea] was true. When I realized everything was a lie when I came to China, I was in such a state of confusion. Everything I knew for the past 24 years in my mind and heart were all lies. I couldn't believe it. It was so difficult. When my mind was changing I was so miserable I wanted to die.¹¹

8 Rajin, also known as Rason, is a port city in northeastern North Korea.

9 Female, 33, Hamkyongbukdo, Left NK in 2004, Arrived in US 2006

10 Female, 33, Hamkyongbukdo, Left NK in 2004, Arrived in US 2006

11 Female, 33, Hamkyongbukdo, Left NK in 2004, Arrived in US 2006

COMING TO AMERICA

The participants' decisions to come to the United States were motivated by highly idiosyncratic factors. Very rarely were refugees' options for asylum and resettlement fully and objectively explained to them before they were asked to make a decision on where they would like to resettle, if indeed they were asked at all. South Korea was the default destination for most for the obvious reasons – language and cultural familiarity as well as resettlement benefits and assistance for those who were aware of the support given to North Korean refugees in South Korea. While not applicable to all who have resettled in the United States, the primary motivating factors for choosing the United States were: the influence of someone, often religiously affiliated, who advocated for choosing the United States, or the presence of a family member or friend who had already resettled there.

When I came to Thailand, my uncle was already living in the U.S. My uncle said that he would take me to the U.S. I first told my grandmother that I wanted to go live with her in South Korea. Then she said that her years to live are numbered so it would be better to settle with my uncle. She persuaded me to stay with my uncle.¹²

... I decided to go to South Korea. But when we got to the UN, they gave us the opportunity to choose between South Korea or the U.S. I did not select the U.S. because of the language barrier, and because South Korea would be closer to home once unification happens. But the pastor that was helping us told us that the South Korean economy was doing poorly, so I should go to the U.S. And that's why I changed my selection and reapplied for the U.S.¹³

I never thought of going to South Korea or the U.S. But since they were really cracking down on refugees in China I was going to go to South Korea. The person who came to get me in China was able to get me citizenship in South Korea, but at the time President Bush was inviting refugees to the U.S. and the person helping me was introduced to [a human rights activist]. That person told me not to go to South Korea because you never know when war will break out between the north and south, so I ended up coming to the U.S.¹⁴

Among those who made the choice to come to the United States free of an external motivating factor, it is difficult to characterize a type of refugee who is more likely to choose to come to America based solely on the person's background. The two characteristics that may be exceptions appear to be risk tolerance and the perception of America when in North Korea or in transit in China. Those who chose to come to the United States without the coaxing of an advisor or family member generally understood they were foregoing some of the obvious benefits of resettling in South Korea. But they still chose the United States either because they had been turned off of South Korea by stories of discrimination of North Korean refugees or because they felt, after overcoming difficulties such as the language barrier, the opportunities for success would be greater in the United States.

12 Male, 44, Pyeonganbukdo, Left NK in 2001, Arrived in US 2010

13 Female, 44, Hamkyongbukdo, Left NK in 2006, Arrived in US 2008

14 Male, 72, Hamkyongbukdo, Left NK in 1985, Arrived in US 2011

My attitude towards America changed while I was living in China for two years. When it comes to America, Chinese people are like 'mei guo mei guo.'¹⁵ It's a dream for them. A place of a lot of opportunities, big, and a lot of money. I thought, 'Wow, America must be rich and powerful.' So I felt a little torn by the pastor. I wanted to go to a bigger country. But then I was also scared because I suffered so much learning Chinese and now I had to learn English. I wanted to finally comfortably speak Korean now. But on one hand, I learned through the internet that [North Korean] people in South Korea were living difficult lives because of discrimination. They were fighting and being discriminated against by their own people. So I thought I would rather go to America. The pastor said that in America there were many different ethnicities so we wouldn't face discrimination. And you are still young in your 20s, so if you just learn English you will have more opportunities than in South Korea. While I thought what he said made sense, I was still scared so I waited till the last 10 minutes to change my mind.¹⁶

Factors motivating North Korean refugees to come to the United States are primarily external such as:

- an influential advisor when in transit, often pastors/priests
- a family member or friend who had already resettled in the United States
- interactions with others refugees in detention/hiding/holding
- interactions with diplomatic or humanitarian personnel
- other factors such as wait time also influenced participants' destinations

Many refugees were connected with the church or NGO groups that helped them in the process of escaping China and applying for asylum through Korean-Chinese communities, brokers, or other North Koreans who moved regularly between North Korea and China. However, some became connected to such groups by seeking them out online after arriving in China.

[I found the pastor who helped me in China] Through the computer. I just mentioned it. I searched "defector" and went into a website and requested help and said that I was in danger. Someone left a comment there and gave me the email address to the website and said to erase my post. So I deleted it along with that person's email address. So I wrote the pastor a detailed email and he finally responded after three times. I found out that the man who commented on my post, his girlfriend was staying with the pastor in [another city]. So I ended up living with his girlfriend. If the guy didn't see my post then I don't know what would have happened to me.¹⁷

More than one participant reported that they had first heard the United States sometimes accepts North Korean refugees through a media source such as international radio, rather than, as is more commonly the case, through a person or organization, such as an NGO, church worker, or another refugee.

[It would be good if refugee eligibility for North Koreans was publicized through] Voice of America radio. After I ran away, I listened to Voice of America a lot in Russia. I turned on the U.S. radio station all night and listened to people who settled in the U.S. When I heard that, I never knew that I would end up in the U.S. I could never imagine crossing the Pacific to the U.S. without proper documentation.

15 Mandarin Chinese for "America"

16 Female, 33, Hamkyongbukdo, Left NK in 2004, Arrived in US 2006

17 Female, 33, Hamkyongbukdo, Left NK in 2004, Arrived in US 2006

This was in 2005, when President Bush was in office. Then after that, I kept hearing on the news and TV that the U.S. government will recognize North Korean escapees as refugees and will accept us in the U.S....So this gave me immense hope. I did not know anyone in the U.S. and there was nobody that is willing to help me. The only driving factor for me was that the U.S. is North Korea's greatest enemy and also the most powerful country in the world.¹⁸

Participants waited to come to the United States anywhere from a few months to well over a year. Many of those interviewed said that they encountered other North Korean would-be émigrés to the United States in China, or in waiting in Southeast Asia, who eventually found the waiting period too long and withdrew their applications for asylum in the United States and went, instead, to South Korea.

The North Korean refugees that say that they want to come to the U.S. Well, they get to an embassy but the background check process takes a long time. So after four to six months into the background check process, some North Korean refugees can't wait around any longer and they drop out. Going to South Korea, it only takes six months maximum, unlike the one year for the U.S. I've heard of several instances where the North Korean refugee couldn't wait any longer waiting to get their background check completed by the U.S. and quit and left [for South Korea].¹⁹

It was very difficult process. It would have been easy if we got connected to [an NGO] but we were not able to, thus making it difficult.... After that we also had an opportunity to go to South Korea a more comfortable way. But we didn't give up on going to America. We thought we might not be able to go to America. The [NGO] members told us that it will be a difficult road but there is a way to go into America if we endure. So we chose to stick with enduring and going to America. There were four of us at the time, the other two gave up on coming to America it was only my sibling and I that decided to go through the whole process. We did not give up.²⁰

In one extreme case, a participant was warned in advance on his way to Thailand that the wait for admission to the United States could be very long, so he took an unusual and much more arduous journey from Thailand on his own through South America and Mexico.

No, I went to Thailand with the intention of going to the U.S. I was going to go to a refugee camp but a person told me it would take three or four years to come to the U.S. They said there was a faster route to get to the U.S. So from Thailand I ended up going through Argentina and into Mexico.²¹

The experiences participants endured while waiting to be granted asylum varied widely based on their living circumstances during that time -- whether in hiding externally, in the care of the U.S. government, or in a detention facility. The first group of refugees admitted to the United States under the NKHRA said they enjoyed very good treatment and accommodations prior to their departure for the United States.

18 Male, 35, Kangwondo, Left NK in 2000, Arrived in US 2007

19 Male, 35, Kangwondo, Left NK in 2000, Arrived in US 2007

20 Female, 37, Hamkyongbukdo, Left NK in 1998, Arrived in US 2012

21 Male, 72, Hamkyongbukdo, Left NK in 1985, Arrived in US 2011

I followed the guide and crossed a mountain to Laos and then crossed the Mekong River into Thailand. I then went to the U.S. Embassy in Thailand. The pastor had already notified them that we were coming. The pastor also sent an American volunteer, who was my age from Los Angeles, to help with English. She told the embassy that we were North Korean refugees and had escaped. The U.S. Embassy completely welcomed us and put us up in a really nice hotel with two people per room. It had everything. They did our laundry, sent us to the best hospital in Thailand to get physical check-ups, and we ate delicious food at the hotel.²²

Several participants were helped with accommodations and logistics while waiting for asylum by NGOs or international humanitarian organizations. They generally reported positive, if somewhat mundane experiences. While none of the participants in this study were offered English learning opportunities while waiting, some NGOs have already begun providing basic English language training for those applying to enter the United States during the time spent waiting for asylum to be granted.

The international organization paid for the hotel fee the whole 11.5 months. This experience we had was absolutely different [in a positive way] from that of any other North Korean refugee that I have heard of – for example ones who came via Thailand -- while I was there in Cambodia.²³

Still the most common case among participants was waiting for asylum at a detention facility in Thailand. A number of the participants reported enduring difficult, crowded conditions during their wait in Thailand.

I asked before going there during my interview why I have to go there. Early August, they told me that I would leave on August 31st and the U.S. Embassy told me that I have to stay in the jail before leaving. Around July, I went to the jail and during the interview right before going was when they told me. When I went into the jail facility, I was told to tell them I'm from North Korea and that they would treat me well. So when I went there I kept saying, 'North Korea, North Korea.' They took me to the cell, when I was first taken there I was so shocked. I was surprised because I didn't know why I had to stay in a place like that when I did nothing wrong. I was really scared and worried that they would do something to me or send me away. Then the police came and when I looked in, there were around 70+ men in the facility.²⁴

When I was there, we were treated like dogs. When you go there you can't breathe so people can't sleep. In a space like that there should honestly only be about 100 people but there were approximately 350. So it was hard to breathe... Even when we told the U.S. and South Korean Embassy, they would tell us the same thing. They would say that since we were using a Thai prison, we were on Thailand's land so we should control ourselves. There wasn't much they could do because there was just so many of us.²⁵

However, according to multiple reports significant improvements have been made in conditions in detention centers in recent years.²⁶

One common complaint among nearly all the participants, regardless of the circumstances when waiting for asylum, was the lack of communication and updates about the process. They were unsure of how long they should expect the process to take and whether or not their cases were proceeding as they should.

22 Female, 33, Hamkyongbukdo, Left NK in 2004, Arrived in US 2006

23 Male, 35, Kangwondo, Left NK in 2000, Arrived in US 2007

24 Male, 44, Pyeonganbukdo, Left NK in 2001, Arrived in US 2010

25 Female, 48, Hamkyongbukdo, Left NK in 2006, Arrived in US 2007

26 <http://www.northkoreanrefugees.com/2010-06-idevisit.htm>; <http://www.dailynk.com/english/read.php?cataId=nk00400&num=9958>

I couldn't access any of this information. It was so frustrating but I was always waiting.²⁷

They didn't give us exact information nor did they tell us when we are leaving. So we were frustrated. We didn't know when we were leaving. They just told us we would leave when things were ready.²⁸

There were no updates. We heard nothing, we were just told it would take either a year or two. So when we did the interview with the U.S. Embassy and got the physical exam, gave us hope that we would be leaving soon to the U.S., but after the interview nothing was told to us of the time frame.²⁹

Frustrations about opacity of timelines notwithstanding, those interviewed for this project spoke very favorably about their experiences with U.S. government and non-government personnel alike. The group of participants included refugees who came to the United States through very atypical paths – one woman came via Kyrgyzstan and a male participant crossed the border into the United States from Mexico, after traveling up from Argentina. Yet, even in cases where those handling the refugees were not accustomed to dealing with North Koreans, the refugees interviewed praised the conduct of U.S. officials in the interactions.

Yes, they were very kind. Americans are very kind people. There was a Korean person that translated for me since I can't speak English. I only met with people at the U.S. embassy twice. It went well and they just told me to wait.³⁰

ARRIVAL IN THE UNITED STATES

Immediate arrival assistance was generally provided by an NGO³¹. According to participants, the individual case officer involved had a large impact on the degree of understanding they received about life in the United States, as well as the bureaucratic processes the participants had to follow upon arrival.

For the first two months, we just went to Manhattan every day to attend free classes that the [NGO] offered us to learn English. They scheduled doctor's appointments so we could receive our shots in Flushing [N.Y]. They arranged classes and even shopping trips. The manager was a Chinese woman and at that time I could speak Chinese. They gave us one phone to use for six of us.³²

[An NGO] was the organization that was in charge of us but they said they were too busy to meet us at the airport so they made my friend come and meet us. So my friend came with a couple of people to meet us. About three or four days later [the NGO] finally came and met us...but compared to other states [the NGO in] California was not very welcoming, we were very sad. At least I had a house and friend here but there were many that didn't have that.³³

27 Female, 48, Hamkyongbukdo, Left NK in 2006, Arrived in US 2007

28 Female, 33, Hamkyongbukdo, Left NK in 2004, Arrived in US 2006

29 Female, 37, Hamkyongbukdo, Left NK in 1998, Arrived in US 2012

30 Male, 55, Hamkyongbukdo, Left NK in 1995, Arrived in US 2008

31 A variety of NGOs based in Asia and the United States provide services to refugees. In China and Southeast Asia, NGOs, provide shelter, help refugees with basic needs, and assist with passage to South Korea or the United States. In the United States, "voluntary agencies" or "VOLAGs" are organizations contracted by the U.S. State Department to provide initial placement and other services to refugees. VOLAGs receive both government and private funding for their work. Other U.S.-based NGOs and many church-affiliated organizations supplement and expand on the initial assistance provided by VOLAGs. Those interviewed for this study did not necessarily distinguish among the various types of NGOs active in the field.

32 Female, 33, Hamkyongbukdo, Left NK in 2004, Arrived in US 2006

33 Female, 37, Hamkyongbukdo, Left NK in 1998, Arrived in US 2012

While the participants were unfailingly appreciative of the assistance they received, some did note, after comparing experiences with other refugees in the United States and elsewhere, the level of help given upon arrival to the United States varied substantially compared with experiences of those who had gone to South Korea, which were much more uniform and predictable.

Many of the participants enjoyed a short period of settling in, during which they found housing, took care of pressing medical needs, made connections with local Korean community members, and, in some cases, took English classes. But, again, experiences differed markedly based on where and, in which community, the participants were placed, as well as their physical and mental state upon arrival.

When you get to a new country like the U.S, you'd expect to have a tough time adjusting, but we met a great church so we did not. For example, when we would have to go to the market, someone would pick us up. If we'd have to go to the hospital, someone would pick us up to take us there, too. And when we'd have to pay rent, someone would help us because we couldn't communicate in English. We had that type of great first experience in Greensboro, [North Carolina].³⁴

After I arrived, I learned English through [an NGO]. They teach us how to interview for jobs and survival English for about six months. It was so difficult to follow, I could not understand anything. I came to the U.S. not knowing the English alphabet so the class level was too high. It was difficult.³⁵

While a majority of participants were able to take English classes provided by NGOs that assisted with their immediate resettlement needs, most participants stopped classes after several months. The most common reasons for lapsed studies were difficulties keeping up with class, as in some cases participants did not even know the alphabet prior to arrival, and the need to devote the bulk of their time to earning money.

Participants transitioned extremely quickly to working. While the timeframe depends somewhat on the level and responsiveness of external support, nearly all participants were working (and generally economically self-sufficient) within a year of arrival, and many in as little as a couple of months. Generally, participants were able to find jobs through Korean community members, in restaurants or stores that served the Korean community where knowledge of English was not crucial.

About a week after I arrived I was able to find a job.³⁶

³⁴ Male, 35, Kangwondo, Left NK in 2000, Arrived in US 2007

³⁵ Female, 37, Hamkyongbukdo, Left NK in 1998, Arrived in US 2012

³⁶ Female, 37, Hamkyongbukdo, Left NK in 1998, Arrived in US 2012

LIFE IN THE UNITED STATES

Life for most participants is lived almost entirely within Korean communities in the United States. This is natural given a lack of English language abilities and cultural familiarity with those in the Korean diaspora. Participants nearly unanimously mentioned acts of kindness and help they had received from members of the Korean community, and, upon arrival, most of the participants' work opportunities were a direct extension of their interactions with the Korean community where they lived.

If you want to work, you can work at a Korean store, if you're having a hard time a Korean church is there to help. The Koreans here don't have any obligation to help and don't owe us, even though North Koreans view them as the enemy. So we should all be grateful, but there are probably some people who think Koreans are bad and have been offended in some way, or were discriminated against somehow, but I've never had that happen to me. Whenever I'm having a hard time, Koreans always help out.³⁷

Most of the friends I have are Korean and they help me a lot. If I need to buy something, they help me. Even this morning, my accountant, who is Korean, called me. Whenever I have questions about my business, he becomes my hands and feet. But when I was renovating my store or using a commercial realtor, an American was more convenient...I think Koreans are great friends to me, but I also find Americans to be very comfortable too.³⁸

However, nearly all also said they did not feel completely accepted or included, and often felt looked down upon or pitied. According to participants, strong feelings related to North Korea exist among many members of Korean communities in the United States and these sometimes negatively affected the way refugees were treated in Korean-American communities.

I feel like I'm left out. That's why I left the Korean church, some people just flat out look down on us because we're from North Korea. Saying that we don't know anything... Don't know how to work.³⁹

That was the most difficult, even more than trying to learn English. The ostracizing and isolation by South Koreans [in the United States] was the most difficult and that made me feel cut all ties with people and not hang out with them.⁴⁰

The small minority of participants who had become socially active outside of the Korean community were more socially fulfilled. Nearly across the board, participants reported that the reactions of those who were not of Korean heritage to learning they had come from North Korea were more favorable than the reactions they received from those in the Korean community.

It's interesting because in comparison to Americans, when you tell other Koreans you are from North Korea they react very uniquely. They look at you like you're a zoo animal, they ask a lot of questions. Americans, on the other hand, when you tell them you're from North Korea, they just ask about Kim Jong Un and don't really treat you differently. But Koreans are very curious. It hurts my pride a bit but I let them know what it's really like in North Korea.⁴¹

37 Male, 72, Hamkyongbukdo, Left NK in 1985, Arrived in US 2011

38 Female, 48, Hamkyongbukdo, Left NK in 2006, Arrived in US 2007

39 Male, 25, Hamkyongbukdo, Left NK in 2000, Arrived in US 2009

40 Female, 27, Hamkyongbukdo, Left NK in 2010, Arrived in US 2011

41 Female, 37, Hamkyongbukdo, Left NK in 1998, Arrived in US 2012

Church communities (specifically Korean churches) were extremely central to most of the participants' lives in the United States. By their own admission, some participants were devoted religious believers, while others simply found the Korean church communities to be the most readily available sources of community and available assistance.

They help a lot now. If I'm sick and need to go to the hospital someone will come and pick me up. They treat me very well. It's just a small church.⁴²

I think church has helped with the depression, but I still think about my daughter a lot and the time I spent in prison...I have a hard time sleeping. I don't really like talking with people and it often causes me to get in fights. I have a hard time controlling my anger. I don't really like going out either. I've thought about death at times, but my doctor, you know he can't really eat with his patients. But he'll call a lot and come help when he needs to. I really want to praise my pastor—he's helped me a lot.⁴³

Outside of church communities, some participants did have NGO contacts, who assisted them with certain needs and challenges. While these NGOs were, in some cases, extremely important resources, they were generally not "communities" in the way that churches could be.

When it comes to things to do with the government like official documents and such, we contact [an NGO]. For personal matters we reach out to our church friends.⁴⁴

The work ethic displayed by the participants was impressive. While several participants said they found life in the United States to be harder than they had imagined, most seemed to realize that, in comparison to the South Korea, going to the United States was not the "easy" option. Most had found ways to become financially independent very quickly. In fact, several said they felt they had progressed more quickly than they would have in South Korea because they so quickly had to fend for themselves.

It's better here. At first I was envious of the refugees in South Korea because they give you housing and money. But there are problems because that discourages working and learning. But I couldn't think about anything else. I just had to concentrate on learning English. But those people had housing and money, so they think about frivolous things. I felt things were urgent because I had to make money, learn, and move, so I couldn't think about anything else and just concentrated on what I needed to do. That's why I became independent quickly. But those people in South Korea aren't able to do that. So I thought that was good. There are some people who don't understand that and complain that it's better to give time and money so the refugees have time to learn. But that wasn't the case in my situation. It was because of my situation that I was able to stand on my own so quickly.⁴⁵

Although they acknowledged the additional difficulties and hurdles resettling in America entailed, almost none said they had significant regrets or would choose another path in hindsight.

42 Male, 55, Hamkyongbukdo, Left NK in 1995, Arrived in US 2008

43 Male, 72, Hamkyongbukdo, Left NK in 1985, Arrived in US 2011

44 Female, 37, Hamkyongbukdo, Left NK in 1998, Arrived in US 2012

45 Female, 33, Hamkyongbukdo, Left NK in 2004, Arrived in US 2006

No not at all. I don't regret it. I think I just had too high of expectations of America. I was a bit disappointed because of those high expectations. But I have no regrets. It's such a comfortable country for me. It's so free here. I'm not under anyone's control. I do get lonely because I'm not with my parents. But I am proud that I chose to come to America.⁴⁶

It's not easy here but when you try hard there are many more opportunities here. There are limits no matter how hard you try in South Korea. Opportunities are limited.⁴⁷

That said, while most participants were very quickly able to work and earn enough to cover their basic expenses, few were able to save for the future. Many also worried that insufficient time to learn English or acquire an education could be hurting their long-term prospects.

After paying my rent and all my bills, I don't have much left over. I can sustain my life but I can't save money to do anything.⁴⁸

Living in America I feel I would need to learn a skill...and I need to learn English to do that. I don't have parents or people that I can rely on here. I am pretty much on my own. I thought that, in that case, I have to be able to make it on my own, and to do that I would have to learn a technical skill. If not I have to continue to be a waitress and do menial labors. Now that is the only choice I have so I work [to pay my bills], but later on I want to [be] specialized in a skill.⁴⁹

Several of the participants were full-time students. However, this was generally possible only for those who were relatively young when they arrived and came with their parents or those who were placed with a host family that could bear a substantial portion of their living costs. While they still faced issues acclimating to student culture in the United States, those younger refugees who could devote themselves more fully to learning the language and making a broad range of social connections outside the Korean community were able to adapt to life in America more fully and quickly than most participants.

Legal status and citizenship were extremely important to many of the participants, particularly because many had experienced long periods of time in China or other countries without legal status. As a result, they lived in fear of detention or repatriation, or, at the very least, faced limited opportunities because they lacked legal status. With assistance from NGO or church groups most refugees moved through the green card and citizenship process relatively smoothly, even if some were frustrated by the five-year wait compared with immediate citizenship upon arrival for refugees who resettled in South Korea.

When I was in China, I didn't have any status. So it was always on my mind. Even though I was a resident, I didn't have a passport. So I wanted my citizenship very badly. I'm a North Korean but I don't have a passport. So it's difficult to go to other countries or if I want to travel. I don't have any documents. So I wanted to quickly get my citizenship and become a true citizen. I'm not a South Korean so I don't have anything, so it was very important to me... It took five years [to get].⁵⁰

46 Female, 27, Hamkyongbukdo, Left NK in 2010, Arrived in US 2011

47 Female, 33, Hamkyongbukdo, Left NK in 2004, Arrived in US 2006

48 Female, 55, Hamkyongbukdo, Left NK in 1998, Arrived in US 2008

49 Female, 27, Hamkyongbukdo, Left NK in 2010, Arrived in US 2011

50 Female, 33, Hamkyongbukdo, Left NK in 2004, Arrived in US 2006

Echoing positive comments made about U.S. government personnel in Thailand and other third countries, many of the participants were extremely impressed by the conduct of police and other figures of authority in the United States. Coming from North Korea, where participants said bribing police officers and military personnel was a normal aspect of life, refugees were particularly impressed by the exercise of the rule of law in the United States.

Four months after coming to the U.S., I started working at someone's store. An armed police officer came in and I completely froze. He asked me for water and handed me money. Back at my country, you would get in big trouble if a store charged a police officer. You need to bribe them. If it was my business, then I wouldn't have taken the cash. So I asked the owner and said, 'Ma'am, am I supposed to accept the cash that the police officer left there?' She turned to me and exclaimed, 'Of course! This is America. He is paying for his water.' I told her that I was afraid of taking money from a police officer. She asked why and that's when I thought, 'This is America. It's a good country where a worker and the police are all the same.' In North Korea, you just bribe police officers if they arrest you. So when I told the owner that, she said that you can't give police officers [a bribe] here even if you get arrested or you would get into more trouble. That's when I realized that America was a fair country.⁵¹

CONNECTIONS WITH NORTH KOREA

While many participants expressed a desire to get more involved in North Korean issues – mainly humanitarian, some were interested in policy and unification related topics as well – most were so consumed with work and study that they were unable to devote significant time to such pursuits.

However, many, including some of the younger participants, made an effort to stay up-to-date on news from North Korea and are willing to share their experiences with those who are interested to learn more about North Korea.

I always search for North Korea-related news online and stay up-to-date. Geographically, I have a very good knowledge of North Korea due to my earlier life experience wandering around the entire country begging for food... Eighty to ninety percent of the news that you get in the South Korean media is false, I do not believe the news. I piece together information I find, though, which is possible now because there is an increasing number of people (North Koreans) seeking a life in either South Korea or a foreign country.⁵²

While most participants naturally shared their stories with those they interacted with regularly in the Korean community, those who were more closely involved with North Korea-focused NGOs were more likely to speak about their background in wider forum. A number of the younger participants, especially those who had relatively better command of English and who were connected with NGOs, had given speeches describing their experiences in North Korea to college students as part of awareness-raising activities.

51 Female, 48, Hamkyongbukdo, Left NK in 2006, Arrived in US 2007

52 Male, 35, Kangwondo, Left NK in 2000, Arrived in US 2007

When some people find out I'm from North Korea they'll call me up and ask if I want to eat together and they want to know more about North Korea. Talking about the things that have caused me pain is hard, but if people know it could be helpful to unification.⁵³

Sometimes [an NGO], they invite me for a speech [about my background in North Korea], then I give a speech.⁵⁴

Although many participants were unable to reestablish contact with loved ones still in North Korea, a number of participants kept in touch or sent financial support to family and friends still in North Korea. Since refugee communication and remittance networks from the United States to North Korea are less established than those from South Korea, communications and money transfers can be relatively expensive.

I watch the news [related to North Korea] daily. I go on the computer every day after work. It's because that's my home and I still have a lot of relatives there. I am so very thankful for the times I get to talk to my relatives in North Korea.⁵⁵

Yes I send money to my parents. It is a financial burden. There are times when I get the call asking for help. I barely save here and certainly not wealthy. It really breaks my heart when I can't send money when my family back home needs it.⁵⁶

Participants said their families still in North Korea displayed a wide range of reactions to their new lives, from support for bettering their lives in the United States to feelings of anger and betrayal.

[When I speak with my mother in North Korea] she is supportive. My mother's dream was to live abroad. From since we were children she always planted the vision for us to live with strength even though things may get tough.⁵⁷

Even now, those people dislike me for betraying the fatherland. Even my father. I talk to my mom once every few years on the phone but I still haven't talked with my dad. He's still angry at me. He doesn't want to talk to me. My father was fired from his job and went to the countryside. My brother can't get a good job even though he went to the army and graduated college. I'm on the Missing Persons list. So he can't get a good job because his sister is listed as missing on his background.⁵⁸

53 Male, 72, Hamkyongbukdo, Left NK in 1985, Arrived in US 2011

54 Male, 25, Hamkyongbukdo, Left NK in 2000, Arrived in US 2009

55 Female, 48, Hamkyongbukdo, Left NK in 2006, Arrived in US 2007

56 Female, 37, Hamkyongbukdo, Left NK in 1998, Arrived in US 2012

57 Female, 37, Hamkyongbukdo, Left NK in 1998, Arrived in US 2012

58 Female, 33, Hamkyongbukdo, Left NK in 2004, Arrived in US 2006

KEY ISSUES OF CONCERN

When participants were asked what they considered to be the biggest challenges to life in the United States as a recently resettled North Korean refugee, several consistent themes emerged. Similarly, when asked where government or non-government groups might be able to provide further assistance to help refugees acclimate more quickly and smoothly, the same topics were mentioned.

Language acquisition: Because refugees must transition so quickly to economic self-sufficiency, many have to table, if not completely abandon, learning English, which limits their future prospects for employment and assimilation.

[The most difficult part of life in America:] To be honest, the language and then my family that I left behind. I can't express that in words. But for daily life, it's the language that's difficult...without English there's no way to do anything but work in a restaurant.⁵⁹

It has to be five years. I'm worried about that too. You have to pass the test to get your citizenship but I don't know English. Education is something you receive during your formative years but it's so hard to have to learn English now. I wish the U.S. government would just give North Korean refugees citizenship. I worry about it as the date nears. Can't they just give citizenship to North Koreans who came here to survive? I'm always anxious because I don't have a nationality. I don't know when I will be taken away.⁶⁰

Mobility: While some major cities have public transportation that makes owning a car unnecessary, nearly all the participants in this study live in areas where having a car is necessary to achieve any real level of independence. While those without cars rely on friends or church members to drive them to where they needed to go, they generally feel as though they are burdens to those chauffeuring them. Participants said any help that could be provided to refugees to acquire inexpensive cars shortly after arrival would be very empowering.

I felt that my day-to-day life was very limited and inconvenient because I did not have a car. So, in addition to the car, the fact that being able to pay the rent was entirely contingent upon my earning money was also limiting. Even if I wanted to study, I was not able to do so.⁶¹

59 Female, 55, Hamkyongbukdo, Left NK in 1998, Arrived in US 2008

60 Female, 55, Hamkyongbukdo, Left NK in 1998, Arrived in US 2008

61 Female, 44, Hamkyongbukdo, Left NK in 2006, Arrived in US 2008

Insurance and health problems: Like many refugees – and Americans in general – health insurance is a struggle for the participants. While upon arrival they had free health insurance for a short period of time, most were not proficient enough navigating the healthcare system to make the most of it. Given chronic malnutrition and lack of health care in North Korea, refugees, including some in this study, routinely suffer from a range of health problems that can be extremely costly to address within the U.S. health care system.

I wasn't able to work. I was in the hospital a lot because of my depression and couldn't work. I weighed about 46 kilos, and I'm 180 centimeters tall. Even now I'm considered malnourished.⁶²

The most difficult for North Koreans is insurance. Because North Koreans lived in North Korea with barely no food, they are physically unwell and live with a lot of diseases. Because they don't have health insurance they do not go to the hospital. When North Koreans first come to the U.S. even though they have insurance they don't know how to even use it. By the time they realize how to take advantage of the insurance the allotted eight months is over and they don't have access. After the fact, people realize that they have a disease and with no insurance they can't [be] treated and suffer a lot. Everything in the U.S. is based on insurance. I think it is necessary that the government takes care of refugees' health conditions with health insurance by extending the coverage from eight months to a longer period. Just until the refugee is fully settled and able to take advantage of the coverage. I do not. I tried to enroll in Obamacare but compared to how much I make in a month I could not afford to pay 300 USD a month for the coverage. Insurance is such a difficult thing. Even if I am sick because of no insurance I can't get help.⁶³

And in North Korea, we have free healthcare. There aren't too many drugs or services available, but we are treated for free. I got lucky and received surgery for free in North Korea. These health-related costs in the U.S. are always beyond my comprehension.⁶⁴

In addition to the more crucial needs above, many participants said that while they have become involved in Korean or church communities in their own areas, opportunities to connect with other refugees who share their background, experiences, and current challenges are rare. As the North Korean diaspora in the United States is small and widely dispersed, many of the participants hoped that NGOs or other groups could sponsor events that bring them together with greater regularity.

You know the retreat we have every year where we gather and meet together? I think the government should support us on programs like that more. The reason is, that we more need opportunities to meet together and talk to each other to share our experiences. We need each other and people. We need opportunities or platforms to meet people that went through the same experiences. Only people who went through the hardship of defecting, overcoming death, can really understand each other and empathize with each other.⁶⁵

62 Male, 72, Hamkyongbukdo, Left NK in 1985, Arrived in US 2011

63 Female, 37, Hamkyongbukdo, Left NK in 1998, Arrived in US 2012

64 Female, 44, Hamkyongbukdo, Left NK in 2006, Arrived in US 2008

65 Male, 44, Pyeonganbukdo, Left NK in 2001, Arrived in US 2010

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