

# Research in Brief



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## Youth Migration, Population Concentration in the Capital Region, and Population Crisis in Non-Capital Regions

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### Introduction

A recent census by Statistics Korea revealed that in 2019 the population of the capital region accounted for the first time for more than half of Korea's total population. The concentration of population in the capital region is attributed to the complex interplay of many factors including the age selectivity of migration, population aging in non-capital areas, youth issues, and the changing generational composition of population in small cities and rural towns. For a considerable period of time, however, public and policy attention to population concerns remained centered mostly on low fertility and population aging at the national level, while population changes in non-capital regions were treated as not so much an issue of population as one of regional development or underdevelopment. It is only of late that the population issues of non-capital regions have come to the fore of the public agenda; yet,

they are still often treated as issues of “population concentration in the capital region” or “demographic extinction” in non-capital regions, reduced to isolated issues specific to certain individual regions. This brief attempts to look at the concentration of population in the capital region in terms of youth migration and its impact on populations in non-capital regions.

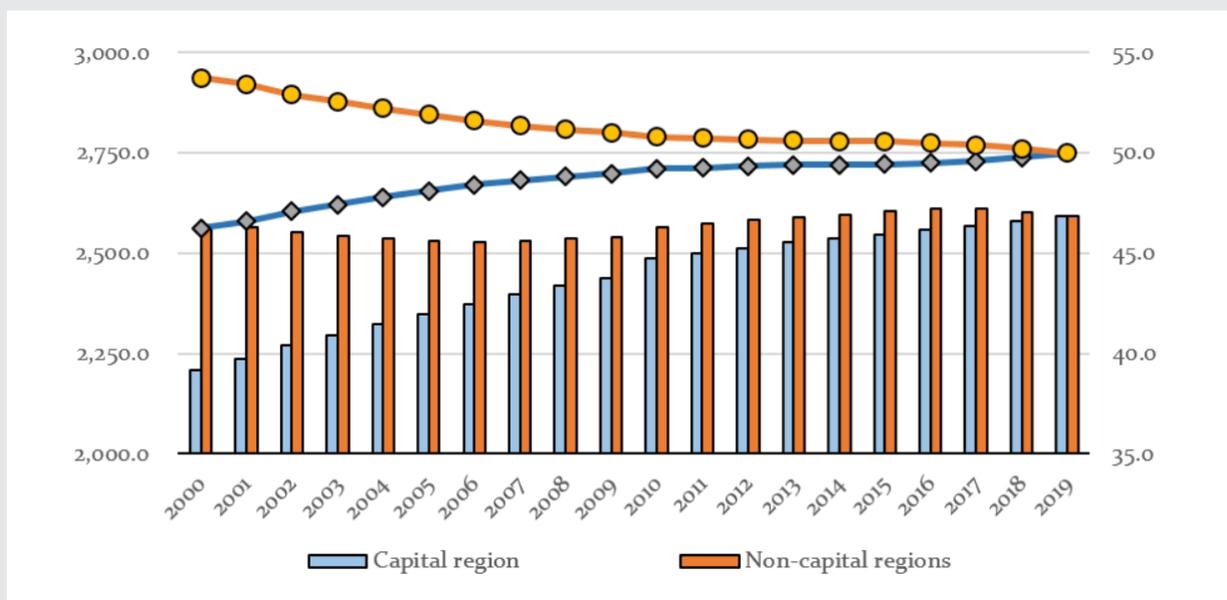


## Trends in the population concentration in the capital region and population decline in non-capital areas

In the past when Korea’s population was still growing, population concentration in the capital region meant that Seoul and its neighbor cities were being populated at a faster rate than other areas. However, with the population declining in recent years in non-capital areas, the concentration of population in the capital region is progressing in ways different from the way it did in the past.

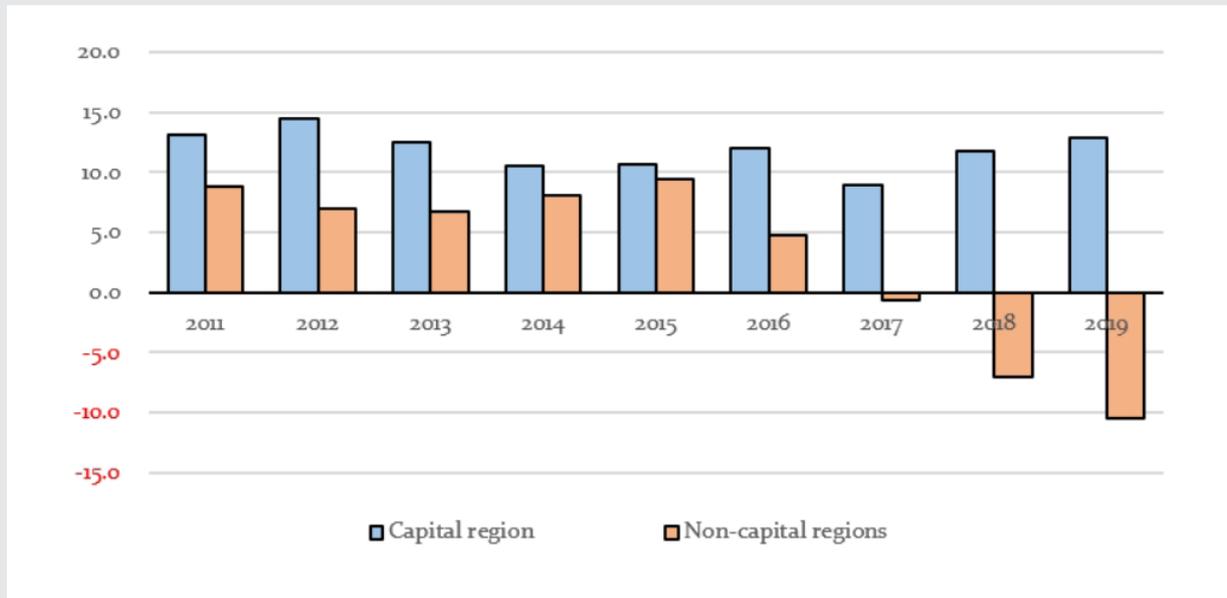
Despite the policy of balanced national development, the population of the capital region has grown steadily over the years, adding an average of 100,000 people every year since 2011, barring 2017. In 2019, the population of the capital region outstripped the population of the rest of the country. Meanwhile, the population of non-capital regions has declined on a growing scale since 2017, when the policy of balanced national development began to lose its effect. The combination of population growth in the capital region and population decline in non-capital areas is rapidly pulling up the capital region’s population as a share of the entire population.

[Figure 1] Trends in population growth in the capital region and non-capital areas



Source: Resident-registered population at the middle of the year (for each year), KOSIS

[Figure 2] Population growth and decline in the capital region and non-capital areas



Source: Mid-year Registered Population (for each year), KOSIS

Population change is determined by natural growth, which is the difference between birth and mortality rates and net migration, which is the difference between migration inflows and outflows. The Korean population has in recent years shown a declining number of births and low fertility levels, with women of childbearing age declining in number. The number of deaths has been on the rise with the growing old-age population.

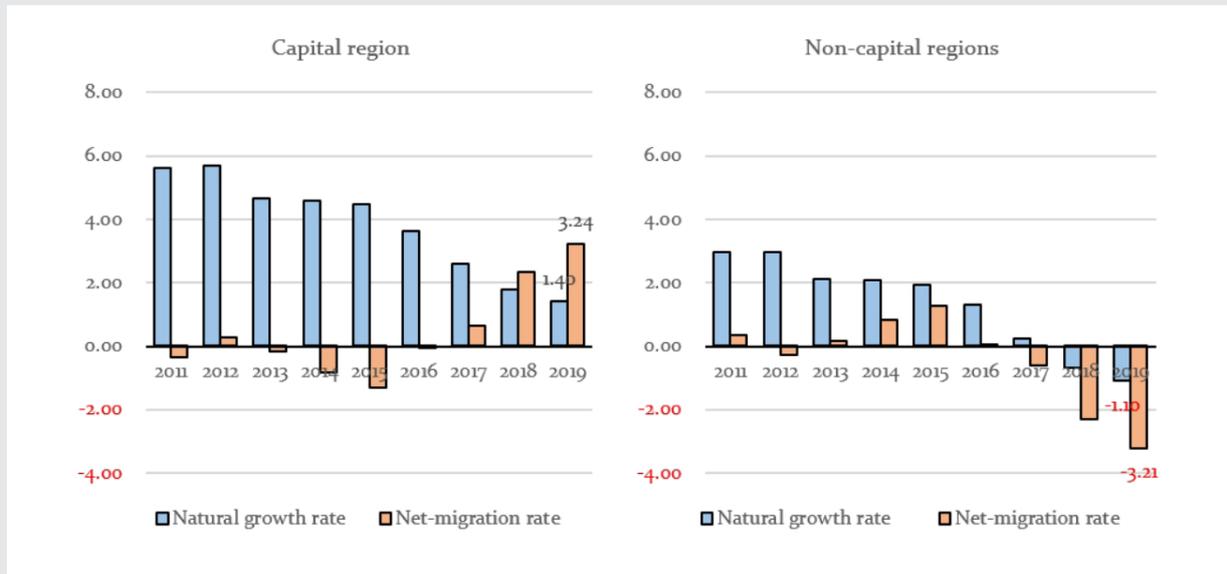


## Factors affecting population changes in the capital region and in non-capital areas

Several demographic factors have varying effects across regions. In recent years, the capital region saw a natural growth in its population and a positive net migration. The rest of the country was affected by a combination of natural population reduction and negative net migration (see Figure 3).

With its natural population growth rate waning, the capital region had recorded a negative net migration in the six years to 2016 (except 2012), a period over which the policy of balanced national development took hold in earnest. The capital region's net migration turned positive in 2017 and remained so since then.

[Figure 3] Population growth factors



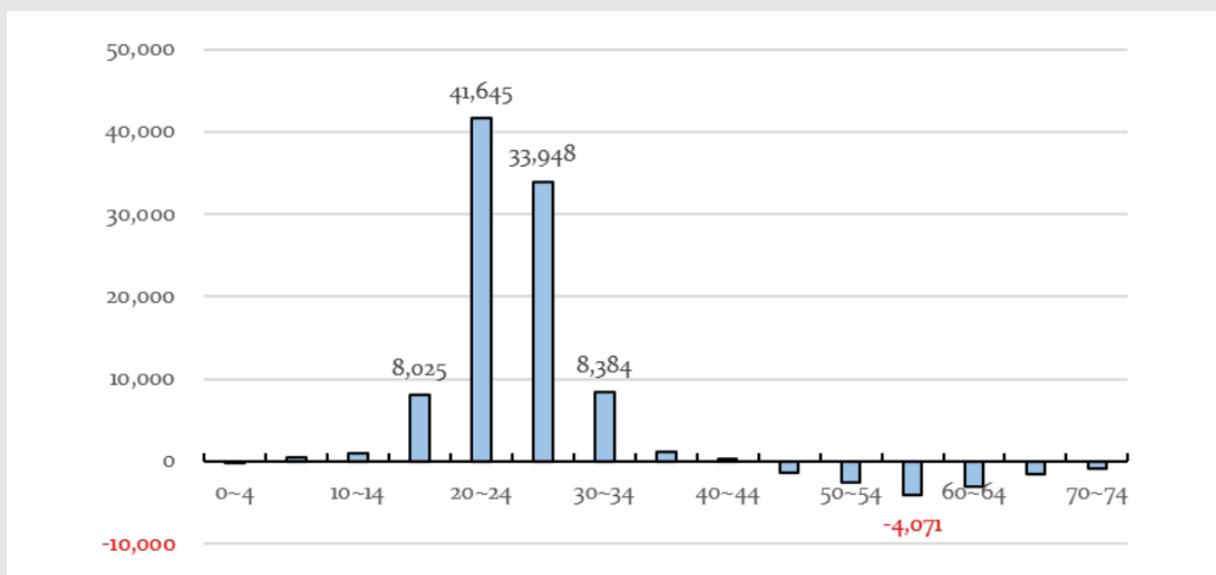
Source: Vital Statistics–Live Birth and Death Statistics (for each year), KOSIS; Population Migration Statistics (for each year), KOSIS

Non-capital regions as a whole saw their population shrink in the past few years, as their net migration turned negative relative to the capital region in 2017 and a natural decline began in 2018.

## Population concentration and youth migration

Negative net migration has been pointed out as the factor most responsible for the population decline in the non-capital regions. For the non-capital regions, net out-migration far outstrips natural population decline (see Figure 3). Especially in a situation as Korea’s where a net outflow of people from non-capital regions means a net inflow of the same scale for the capital region, migration is regarded as a key factor contributing to the population concentration in the capital region and to regional disparities. The extent to which population outflow occurs varies widely across the non-capital regions, with the largest proportion of population outflow from every city or province outside the capital region moving into the capital region.

[Figure 4] Net migration for the capital region (2019), by age group



Source: Population Migration Statistics (for each year), KOSIS

[Table 1] Net youth migration rates for non-capital cities and provinces

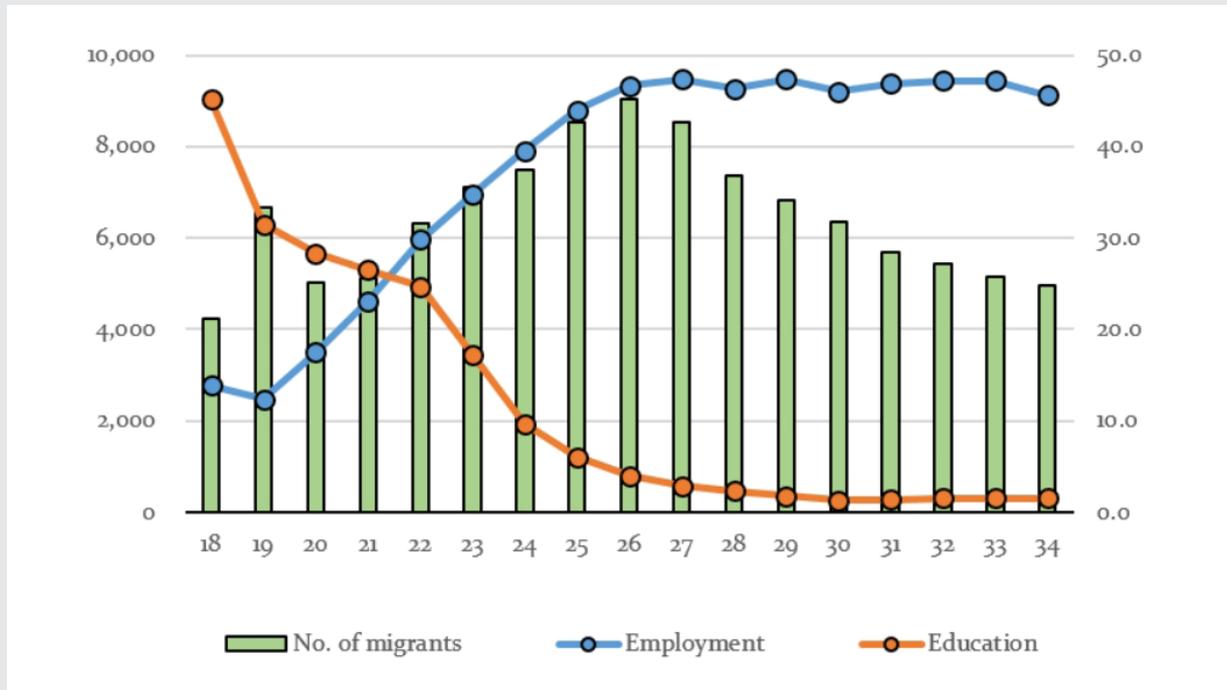
	Overall	Capital region	Other areas		Overall	Capital region	Other areas
Jeonbuk	-35.5	-25.6	-9.9	Gyeongnam	-23	-17.4	-5.6
Gangwon	-19.8	-21.7	1.9	Chungnam	-10.3	-16.4	6.1
Gyeongbuk	-25.2	-20.7	-4.5	Daejeon	-12.9	-16.1	3.2
Jeonnam	-30.7	-19.4	-11.3	Busan	-14.1	-15.5	1.4
Ulsan	-23.8	-19	-4.8	Chungbuk	-9	-13.1	4.1
Daegu	-23.5	-18.3	-5.2	Jeju	-4.4	-10.5	6.1
Gwangju	-9.8	-18.2	8.4	Sejong	108.4	6.1	102.3

Note: The list is in order of the rate of net migration to the capital region  
Source: Population Migration Statistics (for each year), KOSIS

Youth net migration is a key determinant of population growth or decline in many non-capital regions (cities and provinces). However, how much of the overall youth out-migration is moving into the capital region varies across cities and provinces (see Table 1). Of all cities and provinces outside the capital region, Jeonbuk had the highest youth out-migration rate. Migration to the capital region as a percentage of total youth out-migration was also higher in Jeonbuk than in anywhere else. Some metropolitan cities, including Gwangju, had a net out-migration to the capital region and a net in-migration from other areas outside the capital region. Jeonbuk's youth out-migration to the capital region has been so rapidly growing as to put the sustainability of the province's population at risk. Youth net migration to the capital region from Jeonbuk accounted for 46.5 percent of the population decline the province had in 2019. This is equivalent to 66.9 percent of net out-migration occurred in Jeonbuk, a province which within its

boundaries has no metropolitan city and which is relatively close to the capital region.

[Figure 6] Youth out-migration to the capital region



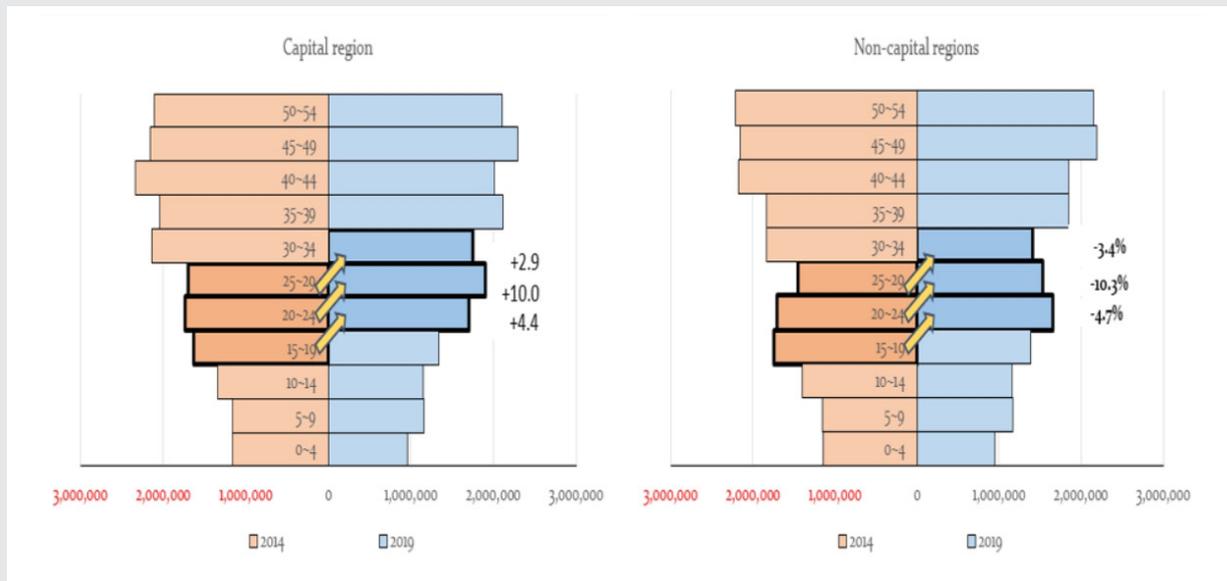
Source: Population Migration Statistics (for each year), KOSIS

The main reasons for youth migrating from non-capital areas to the capital region vary depending on age. Those in their early youth move to the capital region seeking, above all else, education. The migration of young people past college age to the capital region is associated in the main with employment (see Figure 6). Such patterns suggest an increasing concentration of youth migration into the capital region, where good-quality colleges and jobs are concentrated. Youth populations in non-capital regions are shrinking with the rapid out-migration of youth, especially those whose ages range from 18 to early 20's.

## The impact of youth out-migration on population in non-capital areas

Youth out-migration is found to deepen disparities both in population size and in population structure between the capital region and non-capital regions (see Figure 7). The capital region has seen a rapid growth in its youth population as people in their 20's, especially those in their early 20's, in non-capital areas have migrated out on an increasing scale to it.

[Figure 6] Youth out-migration to the capital region



Source: Resident-registered Population Statistics—Mid-year Registered Population (2004, 2019), KOSIS

Population migration has more than a direct impact on population size and structure: it has its secondary impact on birth rates in non-capital areas. As their youth population shrinks, non-capital areas in Korea suffer declines in their female population of childbearing age. This in turn occasions, even if the total fertility rate remains the same, declines in the number of births and the crude birth rate, which over time may even quicken the pace of natural population decline in non-capital areas. On the other hand, as its youth population grows via migration as it has in recent years, the capital region is likely to see increases, if not actually in the total fertility rate (as the total fertility rate may not be higher among young newcomers than among long-standing residents of comparable age), at any rate in the number of births. The long-term effect of this is to slow the progression of natural population decline (see Figure 8). The rapid youth out-migration to the capital region, which in times past of high fertility rates did not have an effect to speak of on natural population changes in Korea, has a significant effect on natural population growth as many of the non-capital regions have begun to undergo natural declines in their populations. The combined effect of youth net migration of the kind Korea has had in recent years and the ongoing natural population decline is likely to be an aggravated population concentration in the capital region and an escalated threat to the sustainability of populations in non-capital regions.



## Concluding remarks

The discussion thus far suggests that the population crisis facing Korea's non-capital areas is not so

much a challenge concerning individual areas as it is one arising from migration to and from different areas and that population changes at municipality-level play out in ways different from the way they do at the national level. The aging, and subsequent decline, of the population of Korea at large is an outcome brought on by and large by persistent low fertility. At the municipality-level, however, it is out-migration especially of youth that brings about the most change in the population.

The concentrated net migration of young people into the capital region adversely affects both the size and structure of population in non-capital regions. Such a trend is likely to exert a detrimental effect on the reproductive structure and growth potential of population in non-capital regions. The fact that despite its low fertility, the capital region has been able to keep its population relatively young, while some non-capital regions, including Jeonnam Province, even with their high fertility, are seeing their populations age and decline at a rapid pace, is attributed in large part to the current structure of inter-regional youth migration. Also, as migration is more selective of people with high levels of skills and education, resulting in a brain drain and widening disparities in population quality between the capital region and non-capital areas, there is a risk for small cities and rural towns to lose their vitality.

There is a tendency that, due to youth migration, the high fertility rates of some non-capital regions do not reflect in any accurate way the level of population reproduction in those areas, which suggests the need, when measuring regional-level fertility, to take an approach of combining total fertility rates and crude birth rates.

As the difficulties non-capital regions face with respect to their population—notably, population aging and population decline—stem to a considerable extent from the structural out-migration to other areas, in particular to the capital region, they should be viewed not as a consequence of an individual region's underdevelopment or financial weakness but as an outcome of relations regions have with one another. Budget considerations concerning balanced regional development, allocation of policy expenditures and regional cooperation funds, should therefore take into account the structure of youth in- and out-migration between regions.

Population policies for non-capital regions will need to be implemented in conjunction with youth policies, with a view to achieving the development of both youth and regions. With the implementation next year of the Youth Policy Act, non-capital regions with a negative net youth migration, unlike the capital region and some metropolitan cities, will need to seek innovative ways to help young people settle into them. Tying population policy with youth policy in an effective way requires expanding the policy reach beyond childbirth and childcare into soft policy instruments like youth employment, youth rights protection, children's education, compact city programs, and social overhead capital for residents.

Youth migration significantly affects regional development and the lives of youth themselves. This calls for an in-depth understanding of not only youth migration dynamics but also youth life-course transitions. There is a need in this respect to recommence the Korean National Migration Survey, which has been discontinued since 1997.