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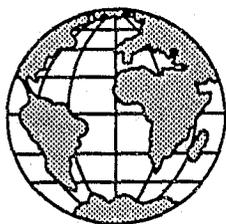
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# International Summaries

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From South Korea

## Industrialization and the Rise of Middle Class Delinquency in Korea

*Rapid urbanization and industrialization have given rise to middle class delinquency problems similar to those faced by Western countries.*

by Dr. Young-Hee Shim

NCJRS

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ACQUISITIONS

### Introduction

This study explores delinquency in Korea's middle class, an economic group virtually unknown prior to the Korean War of the early 1950's. In the past 30 years, Korea has experienced rapid industrialization and urbanization. At the same time, the country has also experienced an increase in juvenile delinquency. It is these young people, especially those from the new middle class, whose delinquency poses problems all too familiar to Western law enforcement professionals and others in authority.

Though middle class delinquency is increasing and becoming more violent, few studies have been done on the subject. One reason for this lack of research is that most delinquency studies focus on the official incidence of lower class delinquency, which differs from middle class delinquency in both seriousness and disposition.

*This is a summary of a paper by Dr. Young-Hee Shim, Professor of Sociology, Hanyang University, Seoul, South Korea. 15 pp. The original contains a bibliography. NCJ 121819. Summary published spring 1990.*

### Methodology

This study is based on quantitative data drawn from official and unofficial statistics and qualitative data from 18 case studies and 64 life histories of middle class delinquents. The quantitative data provided background factors to delineate the scope of sociocultural change that gave rise to middle class delinquency. The qualitative data were used to explore the immediate environmental factors and social conditions that caused these middle class youths to become delinquent.

### Background factors leading to the rise of middle class delinquency

#### *Industrialization changes face of industrial economy*

Beginning in the early 1960's, Korea experienced rapid industrialization that caused dramatic shifts in its primary, secondary, and tertiary industries. For instance, the number of people employed in the primary industry dropped drastically between 1965 and 1987, while the number employed in other areas of the

economy has soared. With the apparent success of rapid industrialization, the structure of the primary, the secondary, and the tertiary industries changed from 58.5 percent, 10.4 percent, and 31.2 percent, respectively, in 1965 to 21.9 percent, 28.1 percent, and 50 percent in 1987.

#### *Population moves from rural to urban settings*

The urbanization rate has also grown dramatically as a natural result of rapid industrialization. Korea was once a primarily rural country, but now the majority of its population lives in urban areas. This change, illustrated in table 1, has completely reversed the urban-rural composition.

Table 1  
Trends in urbanization rates

	1960	1966	1970	1975	1980	1985
Urbanization Rates	28.0	33.5	41.2	48.3	57.3	65.4

Source: Economic Planning Board, 1988 Social Indicators in Korea, pp. 62-63.

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## Changes in the family structure

The structure of the country's families also changed in the generation following the Korean War. In 1955, most families lived in extended households that averaged 5.1 persons each. By 1975, the trend shifted towards a more nuclear family, and households had dropped to an average of 4.6 persons each.

## New middle class grows

The entire Korean class system has undergone a complete restructuring. The new middle and working classes show the greatest growth, increasing from 19.6 percent of the population in 1960 to 38.5 percent in 1980. At the same time, the rural lower class has declined dramatically, dropping from 64 percent of the population in 1960 to only 31.3 percent in 1980. The class structure of the Korean society still seems to be in a state of flux, and the middle class will most likely continue to grow.

## Educational level improves

It is not surprising that Korea's average educational level has improved, given the Korean people's high enthusiasm for education. Both the high school enrollment and graduation rates have increased, creating stiff competition for a limited number of placements in colleges and universities (table 2).

Each change has further repercussions throughout Korean society: industrializa-

Table 2  
Advancement rate of students to higher school level

Year	Primary School	Middle School	High School	College & University
1965	48.7	79.1	37.6	4.6
1970	63.2	70.23	5.9	13.7
1975	76.8	75.5	31.0	20.1
1980	93.7	84.6	43.3	34.3
1985	98.6	88.8	49.6	24.8
1988	99.2	89.0	44.5	20.1

Source: Economic Planning Board, 1988, Social Indicators in Korea, pp. 160-161.

tion led to materialistic value orientation and urbanization; the growth of the middle class placed greater stress on individualism; and rising educational levels led to the "narrow gate syndrome." Taken together, these changes provided a climate for the emergence of middle class delinquency.

## Characteristics of middle class delinquency

The quantitative and qualitative data indicate that middle class delinquency in Korea is hidden, collective, and complex.

### Hidden delinquency is extensive

Many experts have described middle class delinquency as hidden due to its low visibility. While some delinquent behaviors are obvious, middle class delinquency generally goes unnoticed and undetected. Official statistics indicate that middle and upper class delinquency amounted to only about 11 percent of the total delinquent acts in 1987 (table 3).

Self-reports from adolescents, however, revealed that delinquency was actually much more common. In 1980, 28.6 percent of middle class youth interviewed admitted committing delinquent acts; by 1986, that percentage had climbed to 38.8 percent, almost the same level found among lower class youth (table 4).

### Collective delinquency is a growing trend

Most middle class delinquency was committed by groups, rather than by individuals. According to the qualitative data, only 1 out of 18 cases was committed by an individual. The other 17 cases were group acts committed with or encouraged by peers. Middle class young people often engage in delinquent behavior because the peer group reinforces delinquency. This pattern, similar to that found among the lower socioeconomic classes, accounts for a growing number of reported delinquency cases (table 5).

## Types of delinquent behavior are complex

Cloward and Ohlin (1960) separate types of delinquency into three broad categories: property delinquency (property crimes, vandalism), retreatist delinquency (dropping out or becoming an addict), and violent delinquency (crimes against people). Retreatist and violent delinquency stem from a materialistic and hedonistic culture in which young people take the attitude, "I want what I want when I want it." This attitude seems to dominate contemporary Korean society.

Table 3  
Official estimate of delinquents by standard of living

Year	Lower Class	Middle Class	Upper Class	Total
1975	92.5	7.1	0.4	100.0 (62,007)
1980	90.1	9.6	0.4	100.0 (87,962)
1985	89.6	10.1	0.5	100.0 (102,225)
1987	88.7	10.8	0.5	100.0 (97,849)

Source: White Paper on Crime, 1985: p. 221, 1988: p. 86.

*Types of delinquency overlap.* Two factors caused types of delinquency to overlap in middle class adolescents. First, though delinquents want to retreat from society, they need money for recreational spending. To meet the primary goal of "dropping out" (retreatist delinquency), the delinquent procures money through theft, extortion and/or robbery (property or violent delinquency). In the second pattern, adolescents rebel and become involved with violent circles. The second example of overlapping delinquency pairs bad crowds or gangs (violent delinquency) and withdrawal from society (retreatist delinquency). In this pattern, retreatist delinquency is the primary type of delinquency, and property and/or violent delinquency is secondary.

## Factors leading to middle class delinquency

Relationships with friends and peer pressure are the primary causes of middle class delinquency in Korea, but young

people also become delinquent due to family and school problems.

### Family problems

Young people said they became involved with bad friends or violent gangs because of broken homes or poor family relationships in stressful home environments. Middle class delinquents blamed their behavior on a bad home environment far more often than family break-ups (Nye, 1958; Shim, 1988).

Case studies and interviews revealed that typical family problems included parental conflict, rigid discipline, and sexual promiscuity by the father (Shim, 1988). The author feels these problems can be traced to the patriarchal family model still dominant in Korean families.

### School problems

In contemporary Korean society, school is not only an agency of socialization, but also an avenue to success that determines one's future socioeconomic status. Most school adjustment problems manifest themselves in low achievement and grades, inferiority complexes, and frustration. In turn, these factors contribute to delinquency (Schafer and Polk, 1967; 1972). Education-related frustration is especially common in Korea where a large number of qualified young people compete for limited admission slots in colleges and universities. Dubbed the "narrow gate syndrome," this phenomenon increases the stress on prominent and average-achieving youths already under heavy pressure from their families and schools. It is possible that the "narrow gate syndrome" will cause even those with few school adjustment problems to become frustrated and turn to delinquency (Shim, 1988).

### Youth culture problems

Though most middle class delinquents become involved with bad friends or violent circles because of specific family and/or school adjustment problems, many adolescents without these difficulties become delinquent. This phenomenon supports the view of the youth culture theory (England, 1967; Vaz, 1967)

that middle class youth "want it all" while being reluctant to delay gratification.

Table 4  
Hidden (self-admitted) delinquency by socioeconomic status (SES)

SES	Percentage of adolescents admitting delinquency	
	1980	1986
Low	30.1 (246)*	33.7 (202)
Middle	28.6 (294)	38.8 (160)
Upper Middle	29.4 (17)	(combined with middle class)
Total	29.3 (557)	35.6 (362)

\*Number of respondents admitting to delinquent behavior.

Source: Shim, 1981; Shim, 1987a: p. 151; 1987c.

In most cases studied, these youths spent their childhood in well-to-do families and had no serious family or school adjustment problems. When they became involved with the wrong crowd and developed delinquent behavior, it was because of the influence of friends or violent circles and gangs (Shim, 1988). Peer pressure appears to be the most important factor pulling young people into delinquency, though family and school adjustment problems can serve as indirect catalysts. Circles of friends are especially powerful because they provide opportunities for adolescents to complain, to feel superior to others, to have fun together, and to liberate themselves from the constraints of the family and the school.

Many middle class youths not only feel a great inclination toward violent and retreatist delinquency, but consider these behaviors to be positive. In fact, they often take pride in their delinquent experiences, which they feel make them the object of envy among their peers.

### Control of middle class delinquency

Delinquency can be classified according to types and seriousness of control. In most cases, official responses to delinquent behavior include suspension or expulsion from school, arrest by the

police, hearings in juvenile court, or referral to a training school. Any of these actions will label a young person as delinquent and is often considered a mark of pride by the young person. This is particularly true for members of violent gangs, who describe the labels as "getting stars."

Official disposition or control of delinquency tends to be more selective, especially for young people from the middle class. (Shim, 1987b). Unlike delinquents from lower classes, who are generally referred to training schools or given other court-ordered punishments, middle class delinquents are often not even labelled as such when they are caught. Instead, most are protected by their parents' socioeconomic status, and their cases are handled informally by schools or police rather than being referred to the courts.

### Recidivism

*Delinquent behavior is generally outgrown.* Most middle class delinquency appears to be transitory and is outgrown as adolescents become more mature (Karacki and Toby, 1962). Young people stop committing delinquent acts for a variety of reasons: the underlying problem has been eliminated; the school or home environment has improved; or the experience of being caught and/or punished "shocked" them into better behavior. Most simply outgrew the desire for delinquent behavior as they matured (Shim, 1988).

Table 5  
Proportion of collective delinquency cases in official statistics

Year	Single	Collective	Total
1975	59.2	40.8	100.0 (2,970)
1980	38.8	61.2	100.0 (1,550)
1984	33.4	66.6	100.0 (3,500)

Source: White Paper on Crime, 1985: p. 215

*Reasons for recidivism vary.* When delinquent behavior did continue, it was generally because the original negative influence had not been eliminated or reduced. In other cases, there had either

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been no control, or the youths had rebelled against the control (Shim, 1988). It is probable that recidivism is caused by rebellion against the system, which allows selective control of delinquents. Perceived hypocrisy by the controlling agency may also be an important contributing factor. Many delinquents also cited police violence as another reason for their rebellious behavior.

## Conclusion: building a new cultural environment

Based on analysis of the structural background and environmental factors leading to middle class delinquency, the author proposes the following alternatives for reducing the incidence of middle class delinquency.

*Democratize the family.* First, Shim suggests that the country's families become more democratic. While the contemporary Korean family is not as patriarchal as traditional families of previous generations, many old patterns still re-

main. Rigid, authoritarian discipline, promiscuity by the father, and parental conflict are especially harmful side effects of the patriarchal family structure and the gender-based double standard. The author feels that the Korean family should be transformed into a more democratic, egalitarian one.

*Educate the whole person.* Second, the author says schools should shift their focus from achievement-oriented goals to educating the whole person. The present educational system exacerbates the "narrow gate syndrome" by emphasizing only high achievement and competition, causing young people to become self-centered and oblivious to the needs of the larger community. As a result, they do not develop a social consciousness, something that is sorely lacking at present.

*Develop concern for human dignity.* Third, the author feels that the materialistic and hedonistic values of the young must be replaced by concern for human dignity and human rights. With the process of industrialization, the standard

of living of the general Korean population has greatly improved, allowing families to acquire more material possessions. At the same time, however, the gap between rich and poor has widened, alienating many in the lower class. It is vital that more concern for the poor be fostered and that they be guaranteed a living standard necessary to maintain human dignity.

The author believes that a more democratic family structure, holistic educational system, and concern for human dignity will create a new socioculture in the democratic community, thus reducing the problem of middle class delinquency.

*The Assistant Attorney General, Office of Justice Programs, coordinates the activities of the following program Offices and Bureaus: National Institute of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, Bureau of Justice Assistance, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and Office for Victims of Crime.*