As of 2020, the total employable population over 15 was about 44.5 million. Of that, the economically active population, those not actively searching for jobs for reasons such as child-rearing, homemaking, being in school, national defense, or any other social reason, was 26.9 million. In 2000, the economically active population was 65.3%, and it has remained steady at around 60 to 63%. The overall economic activity rate has remained higher in the larger metropolitan areas due to the higher demand for employment.

The economically active population can be divided into employed and unemployed people. In 2020, the employed population was 24.8 million, while the unemployed population was 1.1 million. During the economic crisis, the employment rate decreased to its total employable population over 15% to 56.7% in the late 1990s but gradually recovered to the previous level, reaching 60.1% in 2020. On the other hand, during the economic crisis, the unemployment rate (the ratio of unemployed people to the total economically active population) reached 6.3% but had fallen to 4.0% by 2020.
Employment rates are usually higher in large metropolitan areas because of the higher demand for employment that attracts job seekers to these areas. For the same reason, there is a greater fluctuation in unemployment rates in cities depending on the economic situation.

Along with the overall aging of the Korean population, the age of the employed is also increasing. As of 2020, 67.1% of middle-aged (16-64 years old) are employed, 18.9% of elderly (65+), and 14.0% of youths (15-29 years old). Compared to 2000, the share of employed young people decreased by 9%, while the share of the elderly doubled.

By occupational status, regular workers (54.0%), self-employed workers (20.6%), temporary workers (16.7%), daily workers (19.7%), and unpaid family workers (3.9%) are in order. Half of the wage earners, including regular workers, temporary workers, and daily workers, work in the Seoul Metropolitan Area. For the past 20 years, the proportion of regular workers has steadily increased, while the proportion of self-employed people has decreased. The ratio of non-regular workers to wage workers, on the other hand, stood at 36.3% in 2020, remaining in the mid-30% range for the past decade.

As the overall education level of the younger generation increases and the industrial structure is advanced due to the growth of the service sector industry, the higher education level of the employed is evident. As of 2020, the proportion of college graduates employed is 49.0%, and highly educated workers are concentrated in large cities, particularly in the Seoul Metropolitan Area. The number of employed by occupation is as follows: 22.7% employed in manufacturing (23.4%), functional machine operation and assembly workers (19.7%), office workers (17.8%), simple laborers (13.5%), and skilled agricultural, forestry, and fishing workers (13.5%).

Unemployment rates are usually higher in large metropolitan areas because of the higher demand for employment that attracts job seekers to these areas. For the same reason, there is a greater fluctuation in unemployment rates in cities depending on the economic situation.
Among women aged 15 and over, the labor force participation rate was only 37.0% in 1960, but it rose to 50.1% in 2010, exceeding half for the first time in history. Following the global financial crisis in 2009, the rate fell to 49.2%. However, the rate again exceeded 50% in 2012 and reached 52.8% in 2020. In the past 30 years, women’s labor force participation rate has increased by 6.4%, significantly lower than men, at 72.6%. However, the number of economically active women mostly declined from 9.1 million in 2009 to 8.3 million in 2020. Looking at the age distribution of women participating in economic activities, 45-59 years old (35.7%), 30-44 years old (28.2%), 60 years old or older (19.2%), and 15-29 years old (16.8%) are the most common. Women aged 14 or older have a lower economic participation rate than men because they are burdened with birth-giving and child-rearing.

A large proportion of female workers are engaged in service industries such as health and social welfare services, education, and rental services. Accordingly, the proportion of women employed to the total population of married women aged 15-49 years old is higher than the national average in large cities where the service economy has progressed, and rental services, and education services. Accordingly, the proportion of female job seekers who have had their careers cut off due to marriage, pregnancy, childbirth, or illness is higher than that of men, while the proportion of women employed in small and medium businesses with 19 or more employees is somewhat lower. As of 2019, the proportion of regular workers among employed women was 46.6%, which was lower than the proportion of men, and the proportion of temporary and daily workers was slightly higher.

As of 2020, the proportion of women employed in small businesses with nine or fewer employees is higher than that of men, while the proportion of women employed in medium and large businesses with 19 or more employees is somewhat lower. In terms of occupational status, the proportion of regular workers among employed women was 46.6%, which was lower than the proportion of men, and the proportion of temporary and daily workers was slightly higher. The proportion of dual-income households among married households was 45.4% in 2020, remaining in the mid-40% range for the past 10 years. Therefore, the Korean government encourages female workers to balance their work and family and prevent job turnover due to childbirth by implementing maternity support policies such as maternity leave and parental leave. The Korean government also supports female job seekers who have had their careers cut off due to marriage, pregnancy, childbirth, or family caring or who have never had a job.

Female Employment by Industry (2019)

Female Labor by Employment Type (2019)

Dual Income Households and Maternity/Parental Leave (2020)

Dual-income/single-income households with housewives

Dual Income/Single Income Households with Spouses

Female Labor by Employment Type (2019)

Female Employment by Industry (2019)

Female Workers by Employment Type (2019)

Female Employment by Enterprise Size (2019)

Dual-income/single-income households with housewives

Dual Income Households and Maternity/Parental Leave (2020)

Dual Income/Single Income Households with Spouses

Female Labor by Employment Type (2019)

Female Employment by Industry (2019)

Female Workers by Employment Type (2019)

Female Employment by Enterprise Size (2019)
The rapid aging of Korean society is being driven by the large-scale shrinkage of the dependent baby booms (those born between 1955 and 1964). As the economy grows slowly, the general state of health has improved, and life expectancy has increased. Many elderly workers want to continue working to better prepare for old age as their life expectancy increases. The government provides incentives to improve job skills for the dwindling young elderly (18–40 years old), helps matching jobs, and supports companies that hire them. Also, it supports retired professionals so that they can get re-employed or contribute to the local community by utilizing their experiences and skills.

In 2019, the number of employed young people (15–29 years old) was about 8.3 million, which is maintained despite the population rate of that age group declining. This youth unemployment rate, on the other hand, was 8.6%, which was higher than the overall unemployment rate. It is necessary to take action because persistent high youth unemployment undermines growth potential both personally and nationally. Youth unemployment is the result of various structural factors. First, economic growth dulled due to a prolonged decline in domestic consumption caused by low birth rate and an aging population. Second, retirement occurred due to the reduction of the retirement age. Third, job creation power fell due to the spread of domestic consumption which depends on young people. In addition, when the baby booms generations increase there is a higher college entrance rate than in the past, and competition for high-quality jobs is fierce. To increase the youth employment rate, the Korean government not only encourages companies to hire young people that also helps job-seeking young people more easily obtain job information in Korea and abroad, develop job skills, gain job experience, and further encourages them to work longer after retirement by implementing various youth employment-related policies.
The number of foreigners residing in Korea was only about 0.3 million in 1998. However, it increased dramatically to 2 million (3.9% of the total population) in 2020 due to a large influx of foreign workers, marriage migrants, international students, and overseas Koreans. This increase is the result of various factors. First, in the Korean economy, the wage gap with neighboring states countries becomes clear. Second, the industrial structure shifts in the service industry, exacerbating the labor force shortage in the agricultural, livestock, fishing, construction, and small and medium-sized manufacturing industries. Third, the demand for core services has also increased due to the aging of the population and the increase in dual-income households.

As of 2020, about 4.5 million foreigners aged 15 and over reside in Korea, of which 1.3 million are foreigners, and the rest are non-Korean-born Korean citizens. The non-Korean-born population among immigrants is about 2,500,000, and a labor force participation rate of 66.7%. There are 800,000 foreigners working, with a 63.5% employment rate and a 7.4% unemployment rate.

Approximately two-thirds of the 5,000,000 foreign workers are men, with 38.5% of them in their 20s and 30s. The majority are from Asia, with 320,000 Koreans, 460,000 Vietnamese, and 55,000 Filipinos. Most of them entered Korea on a non-professional employment visa (E-9), an overseas Korean visa (F-4), and a visiting employment (H-2) visa. The proportion of residents living in the Seoul Metropolitan Area reaches 60%, and they mainly work in manufacturing, wholesale and retail, lodging, and personal service businesses.

The Employment Permit System, first introduced in 2003, is divided into the general system, which covers non-professional workers from neighboring or other countries and the special system, which grants professional workers visas (E-7) to foreign nationals. As of 2019, the 14 countries that have signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) for labor force export are the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, Mongolia, Uzbekistan, Cambodia, Pakistan, China, Bangladesh, Kyrgyzstan, Nepal, and Myanmar. East Tigers are engaged in five industries: manufacturing, construction, agriculture and livestock industry, service industry, and fishing industry.


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