

# The Aging of Koreans with Disabilities: Current State and Implications

Ju-hee Hwang  
Associate Research Fellow, KIHASA

## 1. Introduction

Koreans with disabilities as a whole are aging very rapidly—much more rapidly than the overall population—with those aged 50-plus making up 71.1 percent of them in 2011. The Elderly Welfare Act stipulates the age of 65 as the threshold at which one becomes "elderly" and thus eligible for elderly welfare service. However, there is an abundance of research evidence suggesting that disabled people are likely to experience aging early, perhaps as much as 20 years earlier than their able-bodied counterparts. Often, on top of their disabilities, they have to cope with secondary conditions which add to their existing functional and health-related problems.

The age criteria that researchers apply to people with disabilities differ from one research study to another. Some studies use the age 65 when defining older persons with disabilities. Others, especially those looking at policies concerning the employment of disabled individuals, use the age of 55. Still others employ the age of 50 or even 40 as the criteria for defining an older person with disabilities. Although how old a disabled person has to be to become an older disabled person is a matter social consensus, this study uses the age of 50 as the threshold of "older persons" with disabilities.

Apart from the age threshold, it should be noted that the disabled elderly can be divided into those aging with disability and those who have disability with aging. They are two different groups of individuals of different disability characteristics and needs. "People with early-onset disabilities are said to "age with disability," while those with mid- or late-life onsets are said to have "disability with aging."

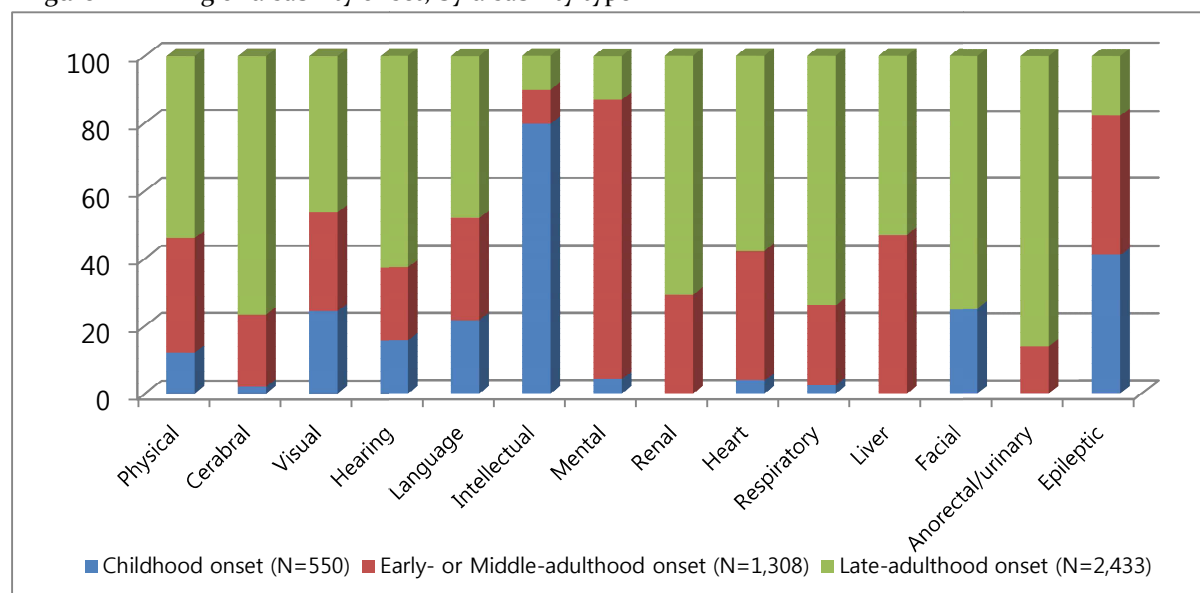
## 2. The Growing Population of Older Disabled Koreans and the Timing of Their Disability Onset

As suggested, disabled persons aged 65 and over as a share of the population with disabilities has been growing two- to three-times faster than the proportion of their comparably aged people without disabilities in the overall population. Those aged 50 and over as a share of the disabled rose from 39.1 percent in 2000 to 62.3 percent in 2005, 68.1 percent in 2008, and 71.1 percent in 2011.

As little as 12.8 percent of all disabled persons aged 50 and over were found to have had their disabilities since childhood, 30.5 percent were with disabilities of early- or middle-adulthood onset, and late-adulthood onset disabilities accounted for a whopping 54 percent.

Childhood onset (ages 0~18) accounted for 80.0 percent of intellectual disability cases, 41.2 percent of epileptic cases, and 25 percent of facial disability cases, while 82.6 percent of mental disorder cases, 47.1 percent of liver disorder cases, 41.2 percent of epilepsy cases, and 38.5 percent of heart disease cases were of early- or middle-adulthood onset (ages 19~49). Late-adulthood onset (ages 50 and over) accounted for 86 percent of those with anorectal or urinary disorders, 76.7 percent of cerebral palsy cases, and 75 percent of those with facial disorders, 73.8 percent of respiratory disease cases, and 70.8 percent of renal disorder cases.

<Figure 1> Timing of disability onset, by disability type



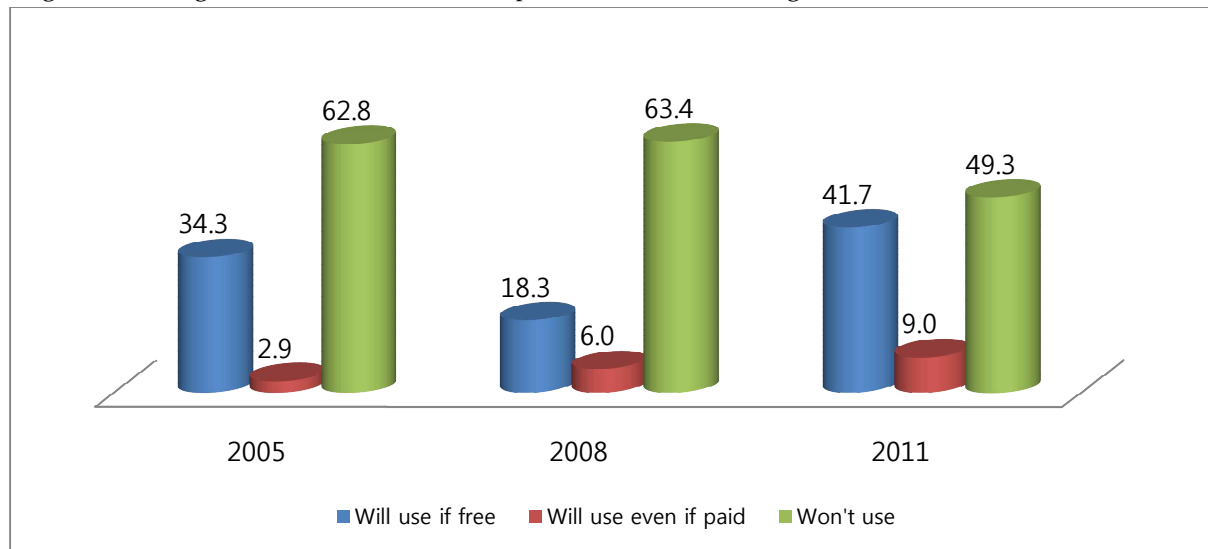
Source: Author's calculation using *National Survey on Persons with Disabilities* (2011), Ministry of Health and Welfare & Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs

### 3. Disabled Older Koreans' Health Status and Care Needs

Self-rated health for older disabled persons tended to decline with age: 2.29 for ages 50~64, 2.08 for the 65~79 group, and 1.99 for those aged 80 and over. Also, the earlier the disability onset, the higher the self-reported health level (2.38 for childhood-onset disabilities, 2.25 for disabilities of early- or middle-adulthood onset, and 2.06 for late-adulthood onset disabilities). This suggests that people with late-onset disabilities rate their subjective health status as poorer than people with early-onset disabilities do theirs; and self-perceived health status was found to be lower among those with late-adulthood onset disabilities than among those with childhood onset disabilities.

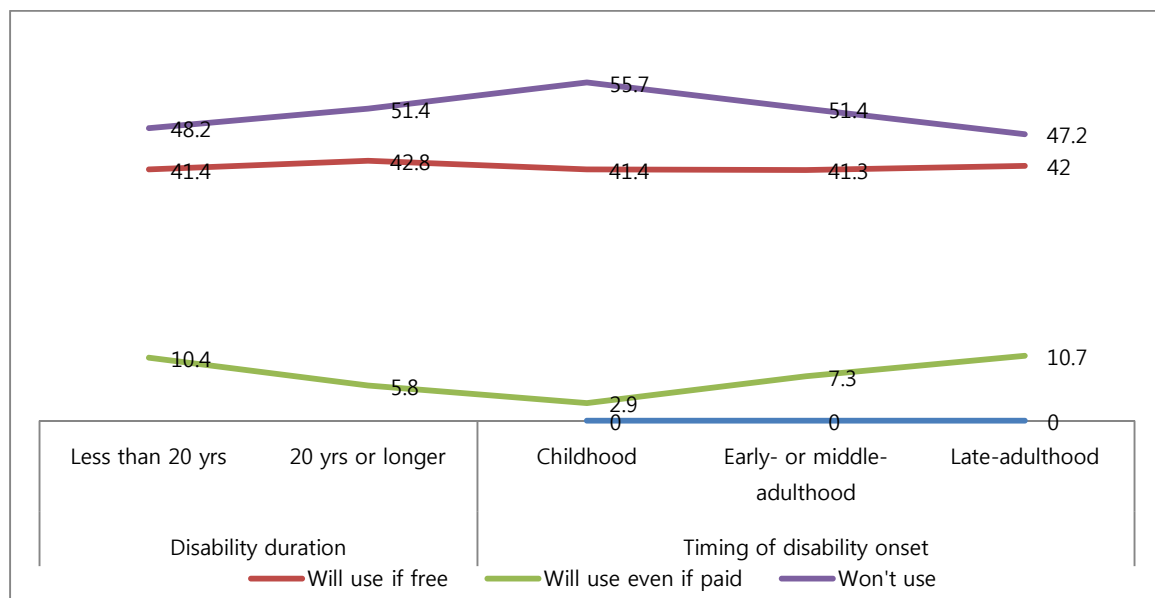
Another feature of note is that the needs of older Koreans with disabilities for non-family caregivers have been rising over the years. Those who said they didn't need an outside caregiver accounted for 62.3 percent in 2005, 63.4 percent in 2008, and 49.3 percent in 2011, while the proportion of those who said they would use non-family caregiver services even on a paid basis increased from 2.9 percent in 2000 to 9.0 percent in 2011. As for the question whether the respondent would use an outside caregiver on a without-charge basis, little difference was observed in affirmative responses between people with early-onset disabilities and those with late-onset disabilities. However, when it came to the question whether the respondent would use the same service even on a paid basis, the rate of "yes" was significantly higher among those with late-onset disabilities than among those with early-onset disabilities.

<Figure 2> Changes in the needs of disabled persons for outside caregivers



Source: Author's calculation using *National Survey on Persons with Disabilities* (2011), Ministry of Health and Welfare & Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs

<Figure 3> Needs of disabled persons for outside caregivers, by disability duration, timing of disability onset



Source: Author's calculation using *National Survey on Persons with Disabilities* (2011), Ministry of Health and Welfare & Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs

#### 4. Life satisfaction levels and outing patterns of older disabled persons

Life satisfaction levels for older disabled persons were found to decline with age (2.57 points for the 50~64 group; 2.49 for the 65~79 group; and 2.35 for the 80-plus group). Life satisfaction levels also varied significantly depending on the timing of disability onset. The later the onset of an older person's disability, the lower his or her life satisfaction tends to be. Also, the older a disabled person is, the less prone he is to going outdoors. Those who "never go outside" accounted for 15.8 percent of the 80-plus group, compared to 5.2 percent for the 65~79 group, and 3.3 percent for the 50~64 group. On the other hand, 70.3 percent of the 50~64 group said they "go outside almost daily," compared to 59.6 percent of the 65~79 group, and 42.5 percent of

the 80-plus group.

The proportion of those who said they "never go outside" was highest (7.1 percent) in the group of older disabled persons with late-onset disabilities.

<Table 1> Frequency of going outdoors in disabled persons, by age, disability duration, and the timing of disability onset

	Age			Disability duration		Timing of disability onset		
	50~64	65~79	80+	Less than 20 years	20 years or longer	Childhood	Early- or middle adulthood	Late-adulthood
	(N=1,843)	(N=2,011)	(N=437)	(N=2,910)	(N=1,381)	(N=550)	(N=1,308)	(N=2,433)
Almost daily	70.3	59.6	42.5	60.3	67.1	70.4	70.5	56.4
1~3 times weekly	20.1	24.7	22.1	24.1	19	19.5	19.3	24.9
1~3 times monthly	6.3	10.4	19.6	9.7	9.5	7.6	6.7	11.6
Never go out	3.3	5.2	15.8	5.9	4.3	2.5	3.6	7.1
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
$\chi^2$	227.581***			22.225***		101.069***		

Source: Author's calculation using *National Survey on Persons with Disabilities* (2011), Ministry of Health and Welfare & Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs

## 5. Income characteristics of older persons with disabilities

The average monthly household income was higher for the youngest age group (the 50~64 group) than for the rest. Also, the income level was lower for those with childhood onset disabilities than for persons with later-onset disabilities. The percentage of those in receipt of benefits from the non-contributory Basic Social Security (BSS) was highest for the 50~64 group (13.8 percent); and the proportion of BSS benefit recipients was higher in those with early-onset disabilities than in those with late-onset disabilities.

<Table 2> Average monthly household income of older persons with disabilities

Classification		Average	Standard deviation	F(p)
Age	50~64	234.07	433.205	30.989(.000)***
	65~79	158.17	146.151	
	80+	169.09	171.803	
Disability duration	Less than 20 yrs	197.99	356.724	2.374(.018)*
	20 yrs and longer	179.26	164.115	
Timing of disability onset	Childhood	181.36	188.488	5.295(.005)**
	Early- or middle-adulthood	215.07	317.824	
	Late-adulthood	181.94	323.899	
	Total	191.96	308.268	

Source: Author's calculation using *National Survey on Persons with Disabilities* (2011), Ministry of Health and Welfare & Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs

<Table 3> National Basic Social Security recipients as shares of older people with disabilities, by age, disability duration, and the timing of disability onset

	Age			Disability duration		Timing of disability onset		
	50~64 (N=1,843)	65-79 (N=2,011)	80+ (N=437)	Less than 20 yrs (N=2,910)	20 yrs or longer (N=1,381)	Childhood (N=550)	Early- or middle-adulthood (N=1,308)	Late-adulthood (N=2,433)
Non-recipient	85.7	90.3	88.8	90.4	83.6	80.4	86.3	91.1
Regular recipient	13.8	9.5	11.2	9.3	15.9	18.9	13.5	8.7
Conditional recipient	0.4	0.2	0	0.2	0.4	0.7	0.2	0.2
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
$\chi^2$	20.970***			42.199***		58.380***		

Source: Author's calculation using *National Survey on Persons with Disabilities* (2011), Ministry of Health and Welfare & Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs

## 6. Older people with disabilities and their welfare needs

The welfare needs of older people with disabilities varied depending on age, disability duration, and the timing of disability onset. Their self-perceived needs for health care tended to increase with age, while income needs were greater among those who had had their disabilities for many years.

People with disabilities of childhood onset were found to be in need, most notably, of income and housing support. Those who had had disabilities since their young or middle adulthood expressed particular need of government support for income, employment and human rights. The areas for which people with late-onset disabilities identified as in most need of government support were health, income, and mobility.

<Table 4> Areas in which disabled persons calls for government support, by age, disability duration, timing of disability onset

Areas in need of support	Age			Disability duration		Timing of disability onset		
	50~64 (N=1,843)	65-79 (N=2,011)	80+ (N=437)	Less than 20 yrs (N=2,910)	20 yrs or longer (N=1,381)	Childhood (N=550)	Early- or middle-adulthood (N=1,308)	Late-adulthood (N=2,433)
Income	39.9	37.8	33.1	36.7	41.4	39.6	40.9	36.5
Health care	29.9	40.3	45.7	39.1	30.8	29.3	28.9	42
Employment	10.2	4.8	2.7	6.9	7	6.9	9.9	5.4
Housing	7.7	6.9	7.1	6.9	8	10.5	7.5	6.4
Mobility right	1.7	2.4	4.3	2.3	2.2	2	2	2.5
Child care & education	0.9	0.5	0.5	0.7	0.7	0.9	0.8	0.5
Leisure & physical activities	1.7	1.2	1.1	1.4	1.4	1.5	1.5	1.4
Human rights of the disabled	3.8	2	1.8	2.5	3.3	3.6	3.8	2
Improvement of public perception toward the disabled	1.4	1	1.4	0.9	1.7	2.2	1.5	0.8
Prevention of disability	1.4	0.8	0.7	1	1.2	1.1	1.6	0.7
Others	0.2	0.3	0.7	0.2	0.6	0.5	0.3	0.3
None	1.1	2	0.9	1.5	1.6	1.8	1.1	1.6
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Author's calculation using *National Survey on Persons with Disabilities* (2011), Ministry of Health and Welfare & Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs

## 7. Policy implications

Before 2000, Korea's policy on persons with disabilities was focused on special education programs for disabled children and vocational rehabilitation and welfare programs for young and middle-aged people (ages 20~45) with disabilities. Since the implementation in 2006 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, however, an array of new laws were instituted to help promote the rights of the disabled and increase assistance in their pension and activities of daily living. But there still remains much room for improvement in the current welfare system for the disabled.

Given that disabled people are much more likely than people without disabilities to suffer from early aging and secondary conditions, the age threshold beyond which people with disabilities can be regarded eligible for "intervention services" should be lowered from the current 65 to 50. Older people with early-onset mental disabilities, in particular, should be given priority in policy considerations, as they as a group are more likely to have faced barriers to labor market participation and thus more likely to experience impoverishment.

As the Korean population ages, so does the population of older persons with disabilities. This suggests that older persons with disabilities will soon make up most of those for whom welfare services for disabled persons are intended, which in turn calls for further development of programs and facilities designed specifically for older individuals with disabilities. Communities across the country have in place welfare centers, day care centers, short-term shelters, and group homes that are designed for the needs of people with disabilities. Most of these facilities, however, are of limited availability to older disabled persons. The current

situation necessitates increased community-based care arrangements to meet the needs especially of older persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

As older persons with disabilities age further, their health needs grow. Health care is of particular concern especially to older persons with late-onset disabilities. Thus, there is a strong need to increase support for healthcare programs, not only for the treatment of old-age-related internal disorders, but also to help prevent lifestyle diseases and complications in older persons with disabilities and improve their dietary habits. Also, such health services as physical therapy will have to increase to help disabled persons prevent early aging.

Korea's welfare system as it stands divides between disability welfare service and elderly welfare service. To be eligible for disability welfare service, one must be a "registered disabled person" of at least 18 years of age, while elderly welfare service is intended for people aged 65 and older. Many of the disabled aged 65 and over, who in principle are supposed to be benefiting from both, are benefiting from neither. Further improvement of the system is necessary and will have to involve creating linkages between disability welfare service and elderly welfare service, making best use of the strengths of each.