

# Youths as a Policy Target Group: What to Identify and How?

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## Youth, that ambiguous category

Legally defined as adults, yet usually taken to mean those in their life-stage with a whole life ahead of them, youths as a group have been receiving less policy attention than their due. The seriousness not only of their situation in the labor market, but also of their housing, health and financial standing recently led youths to be regarded as a policy target group. Paradoxically, however, the multifaceted characteristics of young people's situation are what makes it difficult to draw the definition of youths.

A certain group can readily be justified as a policy target when that group comes with a clear identity, as are the cases with the elderly, people with disabilities, and children. For youths, it is much more difficult to draw the commonalities—apart from age—they share as a group. Even how the age of youth is defined differs widely from one law, program, or locality to another. The Framework Act on Youth, proposed by Mr. Lee Myung-Soo on May 21, 2018 and passed by the National Assembly on January 9, defines youths as people aged between 19 and 34. In some localities, a youth can be as old as 45 or even 49 years of age. Such arbitrary age definitions of youth makes it difficult to ascertain in an accurate manner the actual state of issues faced by young people. Under these circumstances, aligning policy implementation with issues identified can be difficult, and so is assessing policy effectiveness and establishing a policy feedback mechanism.

Beside the issue of varied age definitions, there are other factors that make identifying youths a difficult task. Youths are a group of individuals who tend to differ in many ways in their transition to social independence. Changes in their lifestyles constitute yet another factor that makes it difficult to identify youths as a policy target group.

## Youth policies in Korea

Youth policies need to be designed taking into account priorities of youths in their different transition states and various lifestyles. The current youth policy, however, does not, to a sufficient extent, take into account the various aspects of youth identity. The current youth employment policy is composed by and large of “Corporate-Youth Incentive Package” programs, Youth Fair Chance Support, and Youth Employment Support, all implemented on a budget of about KRW2.36 trillion.

Corporate Youth Incentive package provides tax benefits and subsidy grants for firms and youths. Youth Fair Chance Support is about providing increased training opportunities through offline courses and online modules. Youth employment support provides Employment Success Package (ESP) programs, job-matching programs, and personalized employment services.

Findings from Statistics Korea's Economically Active Population Survey (Supplementary Survey on Youths aged 15~29, May 2019) suggest that Korean youths stay as few as 13.6 months in their first job, which they come to land as many as 10.8 months after graduating or leaving

school. When asked why they quit their first job when they did, 49.7 percent cited “working conditions” (including “low pay” or “long work hours”). As many as 79.4 percent of youths were found to have been paid as little as, or less than, KRW2 million a month.

[Table 1] Youth employment policies of the Moon Jae-in Government

Corporate-Youth Incentive Package	Youth Fair Chance Support	Youth Employment Support infrastructure
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Additional Youth Employment Subsidy</li> <li>• Tax reform for promoting employment</li> <li>• Three-year Tomorrow Mutual Aid Program</li> <li>• Tomorrow Mutual Aid Program for working youths</li> <li>• Ensure that youths have enough time for job search</li> <li>• Increase Hope Ladder Scholarship</li> <li>• Increase earned income tax reduction and exemption</li> <li>• Expand EITC coverage</li> <li>• Low-interest medium-term housing loans for youths</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide Youth Job Search Allowance</li> <li>• Establish Online Youth Centers</li> <li>• Establish Offline Youth Centers</li> <li>• Make selection criteria public through job opening announcement</li> <li>• Create a culture of feedback on selection results</li> <li>• Increase youth training and employment support</li> <li>• Implement “Training Ladder”</li> <li>• Promote trainings linked to industrial demand</li> <li>• Increase training programs for youths with disabilities</li> <li>• Establish “Smart Platform”</li> <li>• Improve career path support programs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In-depth, professional ESP counselling</li> <li>• Improved ESP performance indicators and commission methods</li> <li>• Worknet-based individualized services</li> <li>• Worknet machine-learning-based auto recommendation</li> <li>• Employment support for Pyeongchang Winter Olympics volunteer workers</li> <li>• Early execution and increased proportion of youth-related programs</li> <li>• Performance assessment linked to youth employment effect</li> <li>• Favorable selection for those from employment-disadvantaged areas</li> <li>• Reduced work hours</li> <li>• Comprehensive plan for rooting out workplace bullying and discrimination</li> <li>• Eradicating workplace sexual harassment</li> </ul>

Income security programs that take into account the sociodemographic characteristics of the population include child allowance, basic pension, and disability pension. The part of the income security system that can help reduce poverty among the youth population is the National Basic Living Security (NBLS). However, NBLS mostly benefits people middle-aged and older. According to the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, middle-aged and older individuals accounted for 67.7 percent of able-bodied NBLS beneficiaries, while those aged 15 to 39 made up only 10 percent, which is 1.2 percent of the youth population.

The Youth Hope Growing Account, designed though it is to help young NBLS recipients accumulate assets, pays out the account balance as soon as the account holder exits from NBLS within three years of joining the account program.

Housing programs for youths include public rental housing, financial support, information provision and training programs, all of which relatively well-received by the public. Still, there is the persistent problem of demand outstripping supply. Also, individuals in dire need of public housing are under-identified.

As for health policy, youths aged 20 and older were made eligible since 2019 for free health checkups. Also, public health centers and mental health centers in cities, counties and wards

provide a range of health care services to their residents including those in their twenties. However, how exactly young people should be supported in their health care is not well thought out. Youths have significant suicide-related issues. Also, the prevalence of chronic conditions such as musculoskeletal diseases and ulcerative colitis are rising among young people.

Current education policies on youths include national scholarship (tuition support for students from households in the 8th income decile and lower), Hope Ladder Scholarship Type I (whereby beneficiaries are fully covered for tuition fees and expenses for job-seeking activities), Hope Ladder Scholarship Type II (whereby college tuition fees are provided for high-school graduates who have been in employment with small- to medium-sized firms for more than 3 years and who wish to pursue further education) and student loan programs (designed to support in tuition fees and living expenses for college and graduate students). Although all these policies have been found to increase youth employment, their effect remains insignificant on reducing the time taken for a youth job seeker to land a first job, a regular job, or a job that matches her preference.

[Table 2] “Half-tuition” beneficiaries in %

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Application rate	3%	12%	21%	20%	24%	23%

Note: half tuition beneficiaries/enrolled students

Source: Ministry of Education (Feb. 7, 2019)

## What to identify and how?

The question of what of youths to understand and how means that youth policies should concern those they are meant for. The implication is that youth policies need to take into account youths’ transitions from one stage of development or experience to another in work, housing, health and economic realms.

Youth employment policy needs to be so aligned as to create decent jobs for young people in a sustainable way. The labor market needs to take steps to improve working conditions and pay systems for youth employees. Also, reasons should be identified as to why the time taken to find a job differs depending on educational attainment. The difficulties and challenges youths face in their search for jobs should be taken into account in policy responses.

More educated than any of their earlier counterparts, today’s youths are to a considerable extent homogeneous in terms of capabilities. However, youths today cannot but have an issue with distributive justice in a society where disparities are increasing in opportunities and wages. It would require a sufficient workforce to deliver youth services to have the effect of youth policies known and felt. The rationale of fostering workforce is evident insofar as there is a need to expand social services for youths. However, since much debate and criticism has been leveled at the quality of social service jobs, the question of how to foster and increase workers for youth services must be considered accompanied by ways to ensure that these youth service jobs do not end up being precarious. The social services available now for youths are mostly those concerning physical and mental health. Any new service areas will have to be explored and expanded based on needs, with the participation of youths—potential beneficiaries—themselves.

As for youth jobs, policy attention should be paid to not only jobs youths get after graduation or dropout; jobs in general, including those young people take during school years, should also

be taken into account.

Accurate identification of the characteristics of youth jobs is important in that it can serve as a basis for reducing gaps social security, and in particular in employment insurance coverage, helping youths buy time and financial space they so dearly need. Demanding though it is for individual skills, platform-based work does not guarantee that rewards are linked to such skills. Also, considering the increasing cases of workplace safety and of workplace bullying and harassment, a thorough examination is necessary of the qualitative aspect of youth jobs.

To better address the problem of poverty among youths, it is important to identify how well social security programs are functioning on a continued basis to actually promote equity among youths.

Compared to other life stages, youth is characterized by, among other things, unstable living arrangements (*goshiwon*, R&B, dorm, studio flat, etc.) Thus, understanding youths' housing conditions requires an examination of where these young people live. A survey of youths in general may not help much to identify the unstable living conditions (both economic and housing conditions) of young people in need of support. Thus, a separate survey is needed that focuses on youths living in disadvantaged housing conditions. Youths who, although economically not wholly independent, live by themselves should be more closely examined.

Identifying the economic situations of youths is important in that it is closely related with justifying and assessing the effectiveness of a policy (for example, how the policy in question can help reduce inequality, etc.) Heterogeneity, a characteristic of youths, also strongly suggests the need to ascertain the economic situations of young people. Some experts speak even of the need to look at the incidence of financial management training and in credit default among youths.