



## *The impact of COVID-19 on older persons*

# *Republic of Korea analytical brief*

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### Highlights

- As COVID-19 infection increased again, the government raised social distancing to level 2 in the capital area during August 16 – September 11, requesting people to refrain from meeting, visiting restaurants, etc. (COVID-19 Central Headquarters for Disaster Safety Countermeasures. 16-Aug-20.) The government raised social distancing to level 2 nationwide for 2 weeks from August 23. Welfare facilities were to close. (CHDSC. 22-Aug-20.)<sup>1</sup>
- Instead of raising social distance to level 3, the government strengthened level 2 from August 30 to September 6 by prohibiting visits to nursing facilities, hospitals, etc. (CHDSC. 28-Aug-20.)<sup>2</sup> The government raised social distance to level 2.5 in the capital area from August 30 to September 13. (Jungang Sunday. 05-Sep-20.)<sup>3</sup>
- COVID-19 was introduced to nursing facilities and hospitals through their staff/workers, where collective infections increased. (Chosun Ilbo. 30-Aug-20)<sup>4</sup> About a third of the total deaths of COVID-19 came from nursing homes and other elderly facilities. (DongA Ilbo. 18-Sep-20.)<sup>5</sup>

### Changes in general context

- According to "OECD Economic Review of Korea 2020", the relative poverty rate for the elderly was the highest among OECD countries and inequality was predicted to worsen due to COVID-19. In this regard, the government made efforts to increase job opportunities for the elderly and to increase the amount of the basic pension to 254 USD per month for those with an income of 70% or less of the average for all senior citizens, to clear a pension blind spot.<sup>6</sup>
- With social distancing raised to level 2.5, self-employed people and small business owners were directly hit. The government approved a revised supplementary budget of 6.7 billion USD as the second emergency relief grant; 2.6 billion USD was assigned to small business owners and the self-employed, etc.<sup>7</sup>
- Local governments planned to introduce a non-face-to-face care network service system from October that uses ICT in the home to provide quality of care services.<sup>8</sup>
- As the social distancing level increased, customers were requested to use QR codes in cafes, restaurants, etc. Welfare centres provided education on digital devices for the elderly.<sup>9</sup>

### Changes in national COVID-19 situation

- As the number of serious and critical patients increased rapidly, there was an emergency in securing beds to treat severely ill patients.<sup>10</sup>
- Among the new infections from September 10 to 16, the proportion of "blind infections" with infection route unknown was 26%. 40% of those new infections were among the elderly (aged 60 or older). 90% of all severely ill patients were elderly.<sup>11</sup>
- By September 20, the cumulative number of infections was 22,975; the proportion of the elderly was 27.8% (15.8% for 60s, 7.9% for 70s, 4.1% for 80s or older). The number of infections per 100,000 people was 44.3 for all ages and 53.8 for the elderly. The cumulative number of deaths was 383, among whom 94.0% were the elderly. The fatality rate was 1.7% for all ages and 5.6% for the elderly (1.2% for 60s, 6.6% for 70s, 21.2% for 80s or older).<sup>12</sup>

# Key changes in situation of older persons



## Health and care

- There was an increasing number of infections in nursing facilities and nursing hospitals. The most prominent blind spot was the infection in elderly welfare facilities. So far, about a third of the total deaths of COVID-19 have come from nursing homes and other elderly facilities.<sup>13</sup>
- Nursing facilities with the elderly took pre-emptive measures to prevent COVID-19. According to facilities for the elderly and the disabled in Cheongju city, as COVID-19 was re-spreading throughout the country, COVID-19 diagnostic test documents were required for employment in nursing homes.<sup>14</sup>
- The Ministry of Health and Welfare planned to provide the elderly and people with disabilities in the low-income bracket, who live alone, with 100,000 ICT-based, new-generation emergency and safety equipment at home. This easy-to-use equipment can link in real time to the fire station (119) in emergency.<sup>15</sup>
- The Seoul Metropolitan Government carried out a safety management project by installing IoT (Internet of Things) devices in 10,000 households of the elderly; sensors detect unusual behaviours or situations such as falling, etc. and send such information to the emergency centre through personal computer. It aims to check, in real time and non-face-to-face, the safety of the elderly and those vulnerable to breaks in relationships, depression, etc. due to COVID-19.<sup>16</sup>
- According to Jeonbuk Research Institute's research, "Social Disaster Corona19, Let's overcome the daily crisis of the elderly in rural area of Jeonbuk province!", the number of the elderly who expressed frustration increased, as general social welfare centres and senior citizen centres were closed and family visits to nursing facilities were prohibited since March 2020. A decrease in contact with children and neighbours due to COVID-19 also increased the loneliness and stress of the elderly at home. In response to such situations, local governments made efforts to provide a variety of services.<sup>17</sup>



## Income security

- According to the Bank of Korea's "BOK Issue Note: Status and Evaluation of Temporary Vacation Workers", temporary leave (temporary unpaid layoff by the employer) in the second quarter of this year increased by 730,000 due to the spread of COVID-19, compared to the same period last year. By age, the biggest increase in the number of temporary leaves were for people aged 60 or older.<sup>18</sup>
- According to "Employment Trends in August" of Statistics Korea, in August 2020 the number of employed persons decreased by 274,000, year-on-year; by 33,000 in age from 15 to 19, by 139,000 in their 20s, by 230,000 in 30s, by 182,000 in 40s, by 74,000 in 50s. However, employees in 60s or older increased by 384,000, because public assistance jobs, for which salaries were paid by tax, continued to be created for the last six months.<sup>19</sup>
- With social distancing raised to level 2.5, self-employed people and small business owners were directly hit. An older woman in her 60s, self-employed in Anyang city, tried to commit suicide due to financial difficulties and debt burden. Although in May an administrative order banning debt collection was issued, it had been nearly four months since she closed her store due to COVID-19.<sup>20</sup>



## Social issues

- Amid the recent surge in COVID-19 cases, the number of seriously and critically ill patients also increased rapidly. One senior citizen in his 80s died after a sudden deterioration while waiting for transfer to a hospital with beds for severe COVID-19 patients. More than 20 hospitals would not accept more than 20 elderly patients suffering from stroke, due to lack of beds.<sup>21</sup>
- The government recommended people to refrain from visiting their hometown and making trips during Korean Thanksgiving Day. The government planned to provide a variety of free "untact" contents to enjoy online special cultural events at home, such as indoor family plays, Korean traditional clothes shops, art exhibitions, cultural exhibitions, and broadcasting of plays, opera,

musical, nonverbal drama, etc. as well as some non-contact visiting to nursing facilities and medical organizations through a "transparent barrier".<sup>22</sup>

- According to analysis on antipsychotic prescriptions for the elderly in 1,446 nursing hospitals nationwide, the use of antipsychotic increased by 7% after prohibition of visits to nursing hospitals due to COVID-19; specifically, prescriptions for schizophrenia therapy increased by more than 80%. For the last six months, 3.7% of antipsychotic prescriptions for the elderly were for psychotic patients, 89.0% were for patients with dementia but without psychosis, and 7.3% were for other elderly people. The number of antipsychotic prescriptions in March and April 2020 after the spread of COVID-19 increased by 7.5%, compared to November and December 2019 before the spread of COVID-19. Nursing hospitals tended to scale back activities for the elderly in nursing hospitals or force them to sleep by means of drugs, due to the shortage of manpower.<sup>23</sup>
- As "strengthened social distancing" was implemented, senior citizen general welfare centres and free lunch centres were closed again from August 18. Hence many of the elderly roamed the streets or went to fast food restaurants as a meeting place because of the low prices and lack of restrictions by age. However, such places became another quarantine blind spot, since customers typically sit face to face and talk for a long time.<sup>24</sup>
- The biggest hit was to vulnerable social groups such as the elderly; the free food service centres were suspended due to social distancing. Even handing out rice balls on the street was to stop, because of the strengthened social distancing orders that prohibited the gathering of people. In addition, the free food service centres faced difficulties in recruiting volunteers to cook properly and also experienced a decrease in donations. To prevent the blind spot of care for the elderly, the Seoul Metropolitan Government provided meals for the elderly from low-income families through senior citizens' restaurants or delivery systems.<sup>25</sup>

## Responses

### Government

- The Seoul Metropolitan Government gradually opened social welfare facilities such as senior citizen centres to minimize the gap in community care starting August 3. The senior citizen centres, operated by the budget of the local government, provided leisure opportunities such as talking with friends, baduk, fitness exercise, folk dancing, listening to radio, watching television, etc. and provided such activities as keeping street order, collecting litter, protecting nature, and volunteering.<sup>26</sup>
- As the spread of COVID-19 continued, amid nationwide extension of level 2 social distancing and discussions on upgrading to level 3, the government announced measures to strengthen care for vulnerable groups during new outbreaks of COVID-19. Staff working at facilities were allowed to work normally so that essential services such as emergency care could continue. For emergency care needs, such as for senior citizens or persons with disabilities who did not use public facilities, the government planned to provide essential services such as delivery of lunch boxes, confirmation of their safety, and support for activities. In areas where confirmed cases were widespread, indirect services for the elderly such as food delivery, calls to say hello, etc. were planned, depending on each city, county, and district's own judgment.<sup>27</sup>
- The Public Agency for Social Service of the metropolitan areas and provinces continued to recruit caregivers, to operate the emergency care support system, and to operate the emergency care support task force under the Central Social Service Support Group. Local governments made every effort to prevent the spread of infection in the community while minimizing the elderly care gap through indirect services. These included establishing an active monitoring system for the elderly who were concerned about fever and respiratory symptoms, reducing visiting time and number of visits, and continuing to provide essential face-to-face services.<sup>28</sup>
- Mass infections spread in Gwangju Metropolitan City. If COVID-19 is upgraded to level 3, all events, meetings, etc. with more than 10 people would be banned and all restaurants would be closed. Virtually all activities of citizens and urban functions would be suspended, which would bring about economic and social blows that are difficult to recover from for a considerable period of time. Therefore, the Gwangju Metropolitan City COVID-19 Public-Private Joint Countermeasure Committee maintained social distancing at level 2, but measures such as the expansion of the ban on collective gatherings, equivalent to level 3, were taken. Firstly, only non-face-to-face online religious activities were allowed. Secondly, an administrative order was issued that banned group-building activities and indoor group movements. Thirdly, additional administrative orders

were issued for major multi-use facilities with a high risk of collective infection. Their designation changed from collective restricted facilities to collective prohibited facilities; collective prohibited facilities included leisure facilities for the elderly, such as senior citizen centres, etc.<sup>29</sup>

- Nam-gu Office of Daegu Metropolitan City held conferences on strategies in response to COVID-19. Nam-gu General Social Welfare Centre introduced the intact education program for the disabled who had difficulties in outside activities; Daeduk Senior Citizen General Welfare Centre introduced a manual for check-in calls to say hello with a health checklist for the elderly living alone to overcome the difficulty of direct contact; and Daemyeong Social Welfare Centre introduced videos of floriculture, dancing, yoga, etc. and activity kits for the disabled.<sup>30</sup>
- Jeju-do Provincial Government planned to introduce a non-face-to-face care network service system from October that combines information and communication technology into the home to provide quality of care services.<sup>31</sup> In order to provide information on prevention of COVID-19 and to respond to corona blue (depression) and blind spots of care due to limited manpower for the elderly living alone, Gyeongsangnam-do Provincial Government expanded to an additional 1,800 households the new non-face-to-face care service through the AI (artificial intelligence) speaker system, ARIA, by the end of 2020. The Provincial Government aimed to provide such integrated care services using ARIA to a total of 7,000 households within the next year.<sup>32</sup>

### Non-government bodies

- For prevention of “lonely deaths” and deterioration in the health of elderly people living alone due to social distancing, the National Volunteer Federation of Korea launched the Love Milk Delivery Project on August 20. It aimed to check whether the milk delivered to the home of the elderly living alone was piled up in front of the house and thereby to prevent solitude and take care of their health.<sup>33</sup>
- Similarly, the Cheon Office Food Service Centre under the National Volunteer Federation, with the aim to prevent deaths of elderly people living alone, launched a “milk delivery business of love.” After delivering milk to the elderly living alone, without face-to-face contact, the delivery staff check whether the elderly received it. When milk accumulated in front of the house, it was assumed that the elderly person had experienced an emergency or unexpected accident, and prompt action was taken.<sup>34</sup>
- Nursing facilities with many elderly people took pre-emptive measures to prevent COVID-19. According to facilities for the elderly and the disabled in Cheongju city, as COVID-19 was re-spreading throughout the country, COVID-19 diagnostic test documents were required for employment in nursing homes.<sup>35</sup>

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### Endnotes

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4. Chosun Ilbo. Newspaper, 30 August 2020.
5. DongA Ilbo. Newspaper, 18 September 2020.
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7. JoongAng Ilbo, Newspaper, 10 September 2020.
8. The Financial News. Newspaper, 17 September 2020.
9. Yonhap News Agency, Broadcast, 19 September 2020.
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18. Status and Evaluation of Temporary Vacation Workers. Bank of Korea, BOK Issue Note, 2020.
19. Employment Trends in August. Statistics Korea, 2020.
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21. JTBC, Broadcast, 15 September 2020.
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30. Central Headquarters for Disaster Safety Countermeasures against COVID-19, Republic of Korea, COVID-19 Situation of Domestic Occurrence (September 8, Regular Briefing), press release.
31. The Financial News. Newspaper, 17 September 2020.
32. Chosun Ilbo. Newspaper, 3 August 2020.
33. DongA Ilbo, Newspaper, 18 August 2020.
34. YTN, Broadcast, 20 August 2020.
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