



# Comparison of Clinical Outcomes between North Korean Defectors and South Koreans

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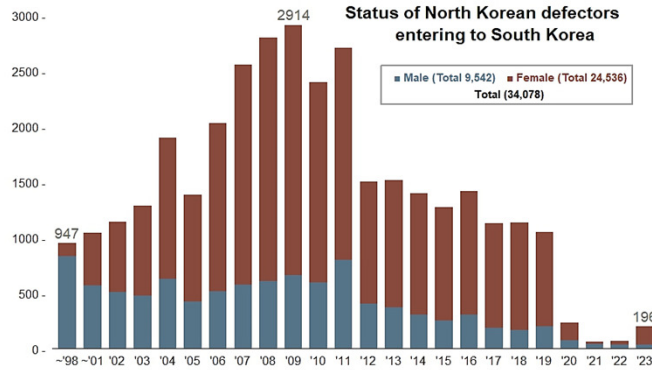
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## Introduction



Since 1998, over 33,000 North Korean defectors (NKDs) have entered South Korea (SK). These individuals often face severe trauma from their experiences in NK and during their defection.

Upon arrival, they encounter sociocultural barriers that hinder their adaptation to a new society. Their mental health and adjustment are adversely affected by past trauma, prolonged defection periods, forced repatriation, psychological challenges, and acculturative stressors, including perceived discrimination and low income.

## Methods

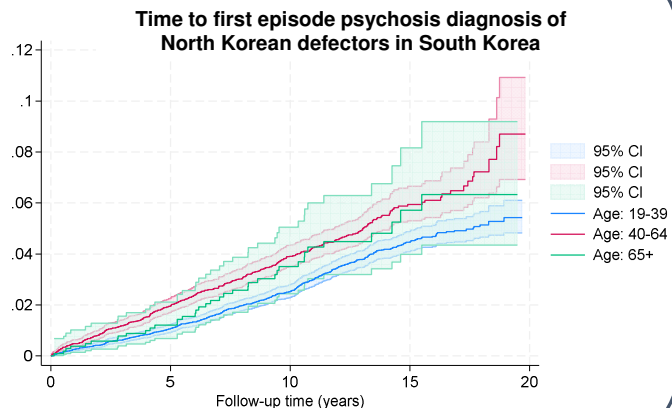
We conducted a retrospective cohort study using Korean health insurance data from January 2002 to December 2022, comparing NKDs with a matched SK control group. The analysis focused on first episode psychosis (FEP) incidence, comorbidities, and mortality, using Cox regression to assess the influence of demographic factors on outcomes.

## Results

The incidence rate (IR) of FEP is about 4-folds higher in the NKDs [3.22 (95% CI,3.05-3.43) per 1,000 person years] compared to South Koreans (SKs) [8.09 (95% CI,8.01-8.17) per 1,000 person years] from 2004 to 2022.

However, after adjusting for gender, age, sex, Charlson Comorbidity Index, and income quintile, the IR was lower in NKDs (IR ratio, 0.81; 95% CI, 0.93-1.06).

Kaplan-Meier curves showed the highest hazard rate for NKDs aged 40 to 64.



## Conclusions

These findings highlight higher levels of mental health problems among older adults NKDs, perhaps due to their higher exposure to traumatic events in North Korea or during their defection. Further research is crucial to develop targeted interventions and policies specifically aimed at this age group.