A study on the mental health of North Korean refugee youth in South Korea

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**Background**: An influx of North Korean refugees entering into the South has been growing steadily with annual numbers reaching 3,000 or so for the past several years. There has been some shifts in the demographic composition of the incoming North Koreans over time from the vast majority of the early arrivals in the 90’s being single male political asylees to an increasing number of females and families with children. The change in demographic composition has been influenced by the nature of migration from political defection to economic migration.

Many previous studies on the North Korean refugees have focused on the adult population and fewer studies have been conducted on children and youth and those few were concerned about their poor academic attainment and school adjustment. Therefore, this study is to investigate the prevalence of mental health problems among the North Korean refugee youth and the contributing factors to their mental health issues.

**Method:** 200 North Korean refugee youth were surveyed, 39 youth in the Resettlement Orientation Center(ROC) and 161 youth residing in the community.

**Findings:** First, 71% of the respondents reported one or more of traumatic incidents prior to their arrival. Those exposed to trauma reported an average of 6.5 trauma incidents.

Secondly, 13% of the respondents had severe PTSD and 23% moderate level.

Thirdly, the prevalence of clinical depression was estimated at 5.1% for the ROC youth and 3.1% for the youth in the community.

Fourthly, the influencing factors to their mental health measured by HSCL-37 were trauma exposure level, health, presence of intimate family in the South, and resilience level in the youth.

**Conclusions/implications**: Comparisons with the South Korean youth indicate that these youth were faring much better than expected. However, the interpretation of the study findings has to be made with caution due to under-reporting tendency.