

Providing Representation

A Context Study for the M-NCPPC Department of Planning

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Abstract

This paper examines changes in Korean population trends in Beltsville, Maryland, and Prince George's County, Maryland. The report contributes to the existing body of research on Koreans in the United States with suggestions for how to fill the literature gap on Beltsville's Korean population. In the 20th century, the U.S. Census and other government surveys didn't correctly count Korean immigrants. Moreover, there is a shortage of information on the Korean immigrant community in the Beltsville/Route 1 corridor, who settled in the late 1900s, started businesses, and vacated by the 1990s. We provide a methodology to inform a context study on all aspects of life for the Korean population, including push-pull factors, everyday life, geographic data, cultural influence, and significant places such as churches and restaurants.

Table of Contents

Introduction	4
Literature Review	6
Findings/Discussion	7
Recommendations	11
1. Interview People of Korean Descent	11
2. Focus on DMV Trends (Don't Trend on Me)	12
3. Consult Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and Historical Data	13
Conclusion	15
References	17

Introduction

In 2021, the US was home to an estimated two million people of Korean descent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). Korean nationals started immigrating to the US at the turn of the twentieth century. However, they didn't arrive in large numbers, especially in Maryland, until after the 1950s (Sullivan et al., 2023). At the time, Korean migrants cited the following reasons for leaving their home country: unemployment, few educational opportunities, and political conflict (the Korean War and dictatorship) (Min 2011). In contemporary society, Koreans have much higher educational attainment than the US average, with more than half of Korean Americans having at least a bachelor's degree (Noland, 2003; 7Research Center 2017).

Further, people who identify as Korean in the US, whether they are immigrants themselves or the children of immigrants, have significantly higher gross domestic product (GDP) per capita than the standard mean for Americans (Noland, 2003). At the same time, though, Korean Americans have been found to have higher rates of depression compared to other ethnic groups and depression is linked with family violence, substance abuse, and suicide (Kim, 1995). These mental health issues particularly impact elderly Koreans facing the stresses of immigration and resource limitations, and a subsequent underuse of mental health supports (Mui 2000).

The Washington D.C. Metropolitan (D.C. Metro) area is the third largest population center for the Korean diaspora, following Los Angeles and New York (Pew Research Center, 2017). Within the D.C. Metro area, Prince George's County, Maryland has been a destination for Korean settlement, though this specific region is under-studied. Our report discusses the need for a study on the Korean immigrant community specifically in Beltsville, Maryland and the Route 1 corridor. Given the lack of an existing methodology for drawing a connection and providing

information on the Korean American population in the Beltsville area, we offer recommendations to develop strategies for conducting such a study. We partnered with the Prince George's County Planning Department (PPD-M-NCPPC) to analyze existing research conducted on Korean Americans to support the department's efforts to preserve and enhance cultural and historical resources. Our goal in this study is to answer the following research questions:

- What current research on Korean immigration to the US exists?
 - Which methodologies were successful in producing ethnographic data about Korean immigrants?
 - Which methodologies could be applied to a local context like Beltsville?

Literature Review

The 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act restructured the immigration system. It relaxed certain restrictions and quotas for who could come to the US. Specifically, the National Origins Formula provided guidance for who could immigrate. The Origins Formula set quotas that favored immigrants from Western Europe, such as Germany, Ireland, and the United Kingdom, and restricted immigrants from Asia, Latin America, and Africa (Immigration History).

In 1965, the quota for Korea was 100 people. However, in 1970, the quota was raised and 5,056 Koreans entered the U.S. (“Korea: Korean Population in the Washington, DC and Baltimore, MD Metropolitan Areas”). The influx of those looking for opportunity generated establishments to provide companionship and practical aid in adjusting to a new country; churches served that purpose.

The Korean United Methodist Church of Washington is the oldest in the area. The church was established in 1948 in Washington D.C., then moved to Silver Spring in 1980, catalyzing the community's growth with one-hundred-fifty Korean churches in the region by 1992 and two hundred fifty by 1995 (Kim). In 1973, The Korean Central Presbyterian Church of Virginia was a huge catalyst for integrating culture into day-to-day life for Korean Americans. With the massive increase in population, businesses, and institutions, the DMV began to feel the influence and growth of its Korean population. The area is a pillar of the greater Korean American diaspora in the United States, being the third largest community, trailing only the Los Angeles and New York metropolitan areas (“Korean American Population Density Analysis by City”).

As the Korean population increased, so did general civic engagement as donating, volunteering, and providing services in their local community became a part of daily life. Churches provided comfort and for some immigrants, church was like family in times of need and loneliness. The church was also a place where younger generations found and confirmed their cultural identity. Much of the information above refers to Washington D.C. and Virginia, excluding Prince George's County neighborhoods like Langley Park, Beltsville, Adelphi Park, and White Oak where more than 40% of their populations are foreign-born (Maryland Department of Planning).

Our challenge is the lack of literature about Korean immigrants in the United States because this group is generally under-studied. However, we have found some general information about Korean immigration to Washington D.C. While the literature provides useful information about immigration, it doesn't explain Korean immigrants' impact in America. The literature we reviewed hypothesizes that the lack of studies is because Korean Americans are a small percentage of the American population.

Specifically for Beltsville, we encounter even more challenges accessing data and studies about Korean immigration and Korean Americans. Annandale, Virginia has the largest community of Korean immigrants (Chang, 2014). Like Beltsville, Annandale is a suburb of Washington D.C. A study on Korean immigrants in Montgomery County, Maryland showed how difficult it is to study on Korean immigrants. The researchers found insufficient information, needed help knowing where to start researching, and found little success when trying to interview Koreans.

Findings/Discussion

This project's main goal is to develop a methodology for a larger context study in Prince George's County and we experimented with strategies for analyzing Korean immigration and the Korean community in Beltsville. Our search ran into several problems, discussed throughout this paper.

The first and most significant problem stemmed from the lack of demographic information collected on Koreans before 1980. This is due to poor record-keeping and demographic data collection. The Census Bureau failed to accurately account for Koreans as an ethnic group. Further, at the Frederick S. DeMarr Library of County History, maintained by the Prince George's County Historical Society, we sought to learn more about Beltsville through old newspaper articles, census books, and other community survey resources. We only found one lead—an article from *The Beltsville News* about the daughter of Korean Beltsville business owners. After several email correspondences with her, she declined to participate in an interview, citing her lack of “any useful information for [our] research” (Choi 2024).

The DeMarr library provided minimal data, highlighting the dearth of information on Korean ethnic groups in local data sources. Likewise, large organizations responsible for collecting demographic information, such as the U.S. Census or American Community Survey, also collected little data on Koreans, let alone Koreans in Beltsville. Before 1980, the government classified Koreans as “Other Races,” along with other Asian, Hispanic, and Middle Eastern groups. As a result, there is no way to accurately count or survey the number of Korean immigrants in Beltsville during this time.

After 1980, data collection on Korean immigrants improved, and we found that between 1980 and 2000, the number of Koreans living in Beltsville slowly rose. By 2010, however, only 28 people of Korean ancestry lived in Beltsville, and in 2020, the Census Bureau counted only 25 people of Korean descent.

Given the dearth of quantitative data on Korean immigrants in Beltsville, we pivoted to a qualitative approach. We sought to interview people of Korean descent in Beltsville about their family history. Unfortunately, given the low numbers of Beltsville residents of Korean descent, we could not secure an interview. We tried to identify people of Korean descent through other Beltsville residents we interviewed, but that also proved unsuccessful.

We did obtain qualitative data on Korean immigrants in the US. While reviewing existing literature, we found information on various issues pertinent to the Korean community. The literature had abundant information on push factors that spurred immigration to the US from Korea, including political instability, the Korean War, military dictatorship following the Korean War, regional tensions, and lack of economic opportunity.

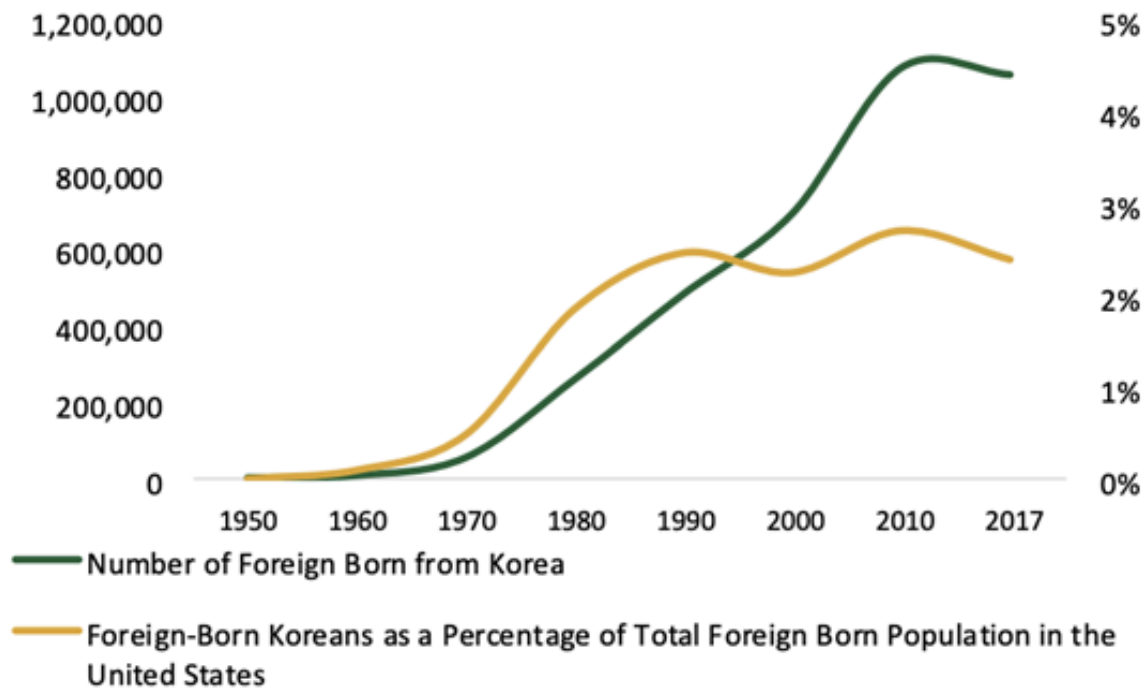
During the 1950s, the Korean War contributed the most to emigration from South Korea. In this period, the US maintained a quota system, limiting the number of Korean immigrants allowed to enter the country. Despite the quota, Koreans could still come to the US under special circumstances.

First, marrying an American allowed Koreans to enter the US. The deployment of soldiers to Korea as part of the US's direct involvement in the war resulted in American men marrying Korean women, who came to be known as military brides. At the end of the soldiers' tours, they brought their Korean wives back to the US. The other special circumstance was transnational baby adoption, in which American families adopted Korean children.

Following the Korean War, the Korean Peninsula was mired in political instability. Due to South Korea's military dictatorship, which lasted much of the 20th century, and regional conflict with the hostile North Korean regime, many Koreans sought a better life in the US, which became possible after the federal government lifted immigration quotas in 1965. During this time, Koreans had many reasons to leave Korea, particularly a poor economy with low wages that were insufficient to cover the cost of living.

In 1965, changes to US immigration policy complemented the push factors driving Koreans out of their home country. The Immigration and Nationality Act lifted quotas on Asian countries, removing barriers to entry for people from Korea and promoting growth in Korean immigration. Before this policy, the US Korean population was 11,000; by 1980, it had skyrocketed to 290,000. After the Immigration and Nationality Act, Korean influence and representation increased across the D.C. Metro area. Churches, restaurants, and cultural centers were the main cultural pillars of Korean communities. The Korean Presbyterian Church of Beltsville and First Korean Baptist Church in Silver Spring grew alongside the population, providing fellowship, maintaining tradition, and offering social services. Churches were integral to the communities they served. Further, cultural centers acted as hubs for growth as new Korean immigrants laid roots.

Concurrently, Koreans in the D.C. Metro area became a smaller percentage of the immigrant population as Latin American and Caribbean immigrant populations grew extensively due to the same 1965 immigration reform that spurred Korean migration.



Source: U.S. Census Bureau. United States, 1850-2017. ipums.org extracts (the nativity variable was used for 1950, 1960, 1970 and the citizen variable was used for 1980, 1990, 2000, 2017)

Figure 1. Korean Immigrant Population in the United States, 1950-2017 (Source: Institute for Immigration Research - George Mason University)

Today, the share of immigrants of Korean descent varies across the region, with over 8% of immigrants in Fairfax and Clarke Counties (Virginia) hailing from Korea. On the other hand, only 1-2% of Prince George’s County immigrants are from Korea.

Recommendations

1. Interview People of Korean Descent

Renowned local researchers have carried out or attempted to carry out, similar context studies on Asian American populations. Dr. Michelle Magalong, a lead on the D.C. Asian

American Context Study, emphasized the importance of establishing trust and rapport with Asian Americans to effectively carry out study objectives. A key strategy to build rapport with the community is community outreach by tabling at festivals or events. Establishing a presence in the community helped her team meet and gather data on Chinese and Korean populations in D.C. For example, some interviewees referred the team to other community members, who the team subsequently interviewed (a snowball sample).

In addition to interviews, as in the D.C. context study, researchers could undertake oral histories. Compared to interviews, oral histories are more open-ended, allowing a person to tell a life story on their terms and letting the participant guide the conversation. Oral histories may reveal what one's childhood looked like, where they grew up, and what it was like to grow up Korean American. In our experience, having an informant dictate the conversation can draw very little helpful information if the moderator is untrained in facilitating. However, with trained oral historians, the information gathered from these broader narratives can provide qualitative data about Koreans in Beltsville. Further, standardized training will allow the oral history and interview collection methods to be replicated.

A key component of gathering accurate information is having at least one or two team members fluent in Korean. Our team found that a former Beltsville businessperson was most comfortable speaking Korean and had limited English proficiency. Although her daughter offered to translate, we caution the Prince George's County Planning Department against putting the onus on community members to translate. Instead, we suggest meeting interviewees where *they* are by providing interviewers who speak and understand Korean. With a fluent Korean speaker, we may have been able to interview the wife of the late Sam Choi, former owner of

Neil's Cleaners. However, given our limited time and the logistical challenges of coordinating a meeting with Mrs. Choi and her daughter, we were unable to carry out the interview.

2. Focus on DMV Trends (Don't Trend on Me)

Throughout our research, we've started with a big picture look at Korean immigration trends, to understand significant East Coast Korean population centers (New York, New Jersey, and Virginia), where Koreans make up a larger proportion of the current immigrant population. We narrowed the scope to Maryland and Prince George's County through leads and connections. We pinpointed push-pull factors, significant places, regional influences, social status changes, and gender role influence, which led to more information on the Beltsville community.

Replicating this methodology is critical to our deliverable, and this proposed study method will apply to other demographics that the Prince George's County Planning Department seeks to understand. Research, planning, and inclusion have severely underrepresented the Korean population. Yet, many academic papers have provided context on a population comprising less than 1% of Prince George's County immigrants.

3. Consult Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and Historical Data

Another possible route for conducting a context study on Beltsville's Korean Americans is analyzing Geographic Information Systems (GIS) data. Geographic data paired with historical property deed data would provide information on where Korean families lived or held businesses. This strategy would use U.S. Census data and the American Community Survey to

complement GIS data. These combined data sets would fill holes in the GIS data and the historical property data.

In contrast to interviews or oral histories, this information would be primarily quantitative, which could limit the richness of the data. Using solely quantitative data eliminates the personal aspect of a project, which could potentially create a generalization of the Korean population. It would further limit representation because it could reduce the presence of Korean Americans to mere numbers instead of recognizing their cultural legacies, which often need to be quantifiable. However, given the obstacles in reaching out to informants, this strategy may be more easily replicable depending on data availability on populations of interest across Prince George's County.

Conclusion

The dearth of information on the Korean community in Beltsville poses a challenge to the Prince George's County Planning Department. In failing to understand the history of this population, the Department may overlook the needs of Korean Americans in the community and not preserve its rich cultural and economic impact.

In Washington, D.C. and Montgomery County, experts have attempted to carry out context studies, though on Asian Americans as a larger ethnic group. These endeavors to study Asian American groups reflect local trends in expanding regional knowledge on under-studied communities.

In general, we found that people emigrated due to political instability related to the Korean War and subsequent military dictatorship in South Korea. Further, the desire for better economic opportunities and education spurred immigration to the United States. Before the

federal government passed the Immigration and Nationality Act in 1965, which opened immigration pathways for skilled workers and reunifying family members, the main ways for Korean residents to immigrate to the United States (and eventually gain citizenship) were through marrying an American, usually an American soldier, or through being transnationally adopted by American adults.

Reviewing the literature and local newspaper archives, we found that poor record-keeping practices that failed to accurately capture data on people of Korean descent and overall little quantitative data on Korean Americans, especially in Beltsville. This left us with few sources. Further, we were only able to conduct three interviews: one with a longtime Beltsville resident and two with members of the Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) in the D.C. context study. From our research, we propose the following actions the Prince George's County Planning Department can take to remedy this issue:

1. **Interview People of Korean Descent.** As informed by the successful AAPI in D.C. context study, interviews with first, second, and third generation Korean Americans could capture the diversity of experiences across generations. Interviews should begin by building trust and rapport with community members by establishing a researcher presence at local events and festivals. Researchers should be adequately trained and paid to ensure quality data collection. More structured interviews should be complemented with less structured oral histories that allow participants to provide personal recollections. One or two team members should be fluent in Korean to facilitate conversations with those who are more comfortable speaking their heritage language.
2. **Widen the Focus Beyond DMV Trends.** Extrapolate social challenges, growth patterns, and information on culturally significant structures (churches and restaurants) from similar areas

to make inferences about Beltsville's community, for example, the New York metropolitan area and Annandale, Virginia, which both have large Korean populations and existing research on acculturation, social mobility, and integration as well as thoroughly documented quantitative data.

3. **Consult Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and Historical Data.** This strategy alone would help gather quantitative information, which might decrease the richness of gathered data but offers a more replicable technique. This suggestion should not be carried out in isolation as we've already established that Census data on Koreans is limited prior to the 1980s and guessing Korean establishments or residents based on last names is not reliable. However, paired with interviews or ideas taken from other metro areas, GIS could prove useful in mapping Korean influence in the Beltsville area.

Using these recommendations would allow the Prince George's County Planning Department to begin filling in the historical gaps about the Beltsville Korean community.

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