Response Strategies Through Case Analysis and Reasons for Re-Entry of North Korean Defectors

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Abstract

Purpose: As of December 2021, there are 33,819 North Korean defectors who have entered the Republic of Korea. To support their stable settlement, the public and private sectors are implementing a settlement support policy. However, due to discrimination in South Korean society and longing for family, there is a problem of re-entry to North Korea after leaving South Korea. After analyzing the causes of re-entry into North Korea, the purpose of this study is to provide policy suggestions to block re-entry into North Korea, such as improving the resettlement support system for North Korean refugees and Strengthening the protection officer system.

Method: The concept of North Korean defectors and re-entry is defined, the current status of North Korean defectors entering the country and re-entry is identified, and the causes and problems of re-entry are analyzed through case studies of re-entry.

Results: In the case of North Korean defectors who have entered South Korea, despite government policy support, they are experiencing difficulties in adapting due to discrimination and neglect by South Koreans, difficulties in finding a job, and longing for their families in North Korea. Some of them were found to be re-entering North Korea to meet their families in North Korea.

Conclusion: Problems were derived by analyzing the causes and cases of re-entry of some North Korean defectors. Based on these problems, I would like to suggest policy implications such as improving the education system for North Korean defectors and a resettlement support system that fits the reality in order to block re-entry.

Keywords: North Korean Defectors, Re-Entry, North Korean Families, Residential Protection, Settlement Support

1. Introduction

Looking at the domestic legal definition of a North Korean defector, it is defined as “a person who has an address, immediate family, spouse, workplace, etc. in North Korea and has not acquired foreign nationality after leaving North Korea.” However, in this paper, it is limited to those who have left North Korea and are residing in South Korea. Re-entry to North Korea refers to a person who escapes from North Korea, enters the Republic of Korea and lives there, then escapes from South Korea and re-enters North Korea. The number of North Korean defectors who entered South Korea has continued to increase since exceeding 10,000 in 2007, and as of December 2021, there are 33,818 (male 9,475, female 24,340). The government, in cooperation with private organizations, developed various support activities for the early settlement of North Korean defectors. However, despite such settlement support, it is true that North Korean defectors are having difficulties settling into South Korean society due to psychological and economic difficulties. Some of these misfits have escaped from South Korea and returned to North Korea, causing re-entry into North Korea. According to the data of the Ministry of Unification,
a total of 31 North Korean defectors were confirmed to have re-entered North Korea between 2012 and 2022. Considering the secret nature of re-entry, the number of North Korean defectors who actually re-entered the North is estimated to be much higher. The reason why North Korean defectors risk their lives to return to North Korea is, first, because of longing and guilt for their families in North Korea. The second can be seen as anger due to discrimination and neglect in South Korean society. The third is economic problems caused by difficulties in finding a job. Lastly, it is the conciliation and intimidation of the North Korean authorities. North Korea is attempting to re-enter North Korea through conciliation and threats, targeting defectors who are willing to re-enter North Korea by using their family members who remain in North Korea as hostages. In addition, the North Korean authorities make re-entry defectors appear in the propaganda media to emphasize the negative aspects they experienced in South Korea, and create an appearance of welcoming the re-entry defectors without punishing them. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the causes of re-entry of North Korean defectors, the problems that arise from them, and the cases of each type that actually occurred. Based on this analysis, I would like to present basic data for a response strategy to prevent North Korean defectors from re-entering North Korea.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Definition of ‘North Korean defectors’

Prior to 1990, North Korean defectors were called variously, but here we will refer to them as North Korean defectors[1]. Since then, with the enactment of the ‘Act on Support for Protection and Settlement of North Korean Refugees’ in 1997, the government has officially used the term ‘North Korean refugees’. Also, since 2014, the term North Korean defector has been used at the suggestion of the National Police Agency. Article 2 of the ‘Act on Protection and Settlement Support of North Korean Refugees’ defines 'North Korean refugees' as those who have an address, immediate family, spouse, workplace, etc. in the area north of the Military Demarcation Line (hereinafter referred to as "North Korea"). It is defined as a person who has not acquired a foreign nationality after leaving the country[2]. In this definition, it is a concept that includes both North Korean defectors who have entered South Korea and North Korean defectors who are residing abroad, such as China, after escaping from North Korea. Therefore, in this paper, the term North Korean defector refers only to those who have escaped from North Korea and entered South Korea and are currently residing there.

2.2. Definition of 're-entry to North Korea’

Re-entry means entering the Republic of Korea after escaping from North Korea, living there, escaping from South Korea, and re-entering North Korea. Reasons for re-entry to North Korea can be divided into two major categories. First, they failed to adapt to South Korean society and voluntarily entered North Korea. Second, they could be appeased, threatened, or kidnapped by the North Korean authorities[3]. From 2012 to 2022, the number of North Korean defectors who re-entered North Korea reached 31. Such re-entry of North Korean defectors is sometimes used for propaganda by the North Korean authorities, but it also gives considerable fear and psychological shock to North Korean defectors living in South Korea. In addition, it may be punished for the crime of escape, Article 6, Paragraph 1 of the National Security Law.

2.3. Reasons for 're-entry to North Korea'

When a North Korean defector enters the country, the NIS will undergo an investigation to determine whether or not to protect them. After the survey, they enter Hanawon, a North Korean refugee resettlement support facility operated by the Ministry of Unification, and receive social adaptation education and initial resettlement support for 12 weeks. After completing the
‘Hanawon’ education, they move to the desired residence and receive basic protection necessary for social settlement for 5 years from local governments, the Ministry of Employment and Labor, and the police station. Also, at the private level, local private organizations, medical institutions, religious groups, and volunteers cooperate with the government to provide settlement support. As such, the government, local governments, and the private sector are promoting North Korean refugee resettlement support policies through mutual cooperation. It is true that some North Korean refugees are unable to adapt to South Korean society despite such support for resettlement of North Korean refugees[4]. Some of them are even returning to North Korea. Let’s examine the reasons for this re-entry into North Korea. The first is the longing for the North Korean family. North Korean defectors are suffering from guilt and longing for leaving their family behind in North Korea[5]. In some cases, remittances are sent to North Korea to provide economic support to families residing in North Korea. According to the ‘2017 Economic and Social Integration Status of North Korean Defectors’, the reason why North Korean defectors consider re-entering North Korea is missing their family is the highest at 34.3%[6].

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Division</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I miss my hometown</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>28.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I miss my family</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>34.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty adapting to South Korean society</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>24.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Etc</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>12.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sum</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Second, it is maladjustment to South Korean society[7]. When North Korean defectors enter the country, they want to be recognized for their worth because they risked their lives to live in a free South Korea, but they feel a great sense of loss and anger due to discrimination and neglect by South Koreans[8]. As such, North Korean defectors’ maladjustment to South Korean society is causing various psychological problems[9].

The third is economic difficulties[10][11]. After North Korean refugees receive education at Hanawon and settle down in their residence, they receive employment support from the Employment Protection Officer of the Ministry of Employment and Labor. Even when they find such a job, they are experiencing economic difficulties because their income level is lower than that of the general public and they are unable to find a stable job[12].

The fourth is the conciliation and intimidation of the North Korean authorities. North Korea uses the National Security Agency[13], a South Korean intelligence agency. In order to catch defectors and re-enter North Korea, 'Operation Team' and 'Arrest Team' are being operated in China. In addition, North Korean defectors who re-enter the country obtain state secrets, such as information on North Korean defectors residing in South Korea.

2.4. Status of North Korean defectors

As of December 2021, there are 33,818 North Korean defectors entering the country(male 9,475, female 24,340). The number of North Korean defectors entering the country was maintained at 1,000 from 2001, increased to 2,000 from 2006, and maintained at 1,000 again from 2012 to 2019. However, it fell sharply to 229 in 2020 and 63 in 2021. It is analyzed that the
border closure after 2020 due to the influence of Corona 19 is the biggest cause\textsuperscript{[14]}. However, with the end of COVID-19 from 2023, it is expected that the number of North Korean defectors entering the country will continue to increase in order to solve the problems of the North Korean dictatorship, economic difficulties, and children’s education.

Table 2. Domestic entry status.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Division</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>'10</th>
<th>'11</th>
<th>'12</th>
<th>'13</th>
<th>'14</th>
<th>'15</th>
<th>'16</th>
<th>'17</th>
<th>'18</th>
<th>'19</th>
<th>'20</th>
<th>'21</th>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>33,815</td>
<td>20,400</td>
<td>2,706</td>
<td>1,502</td>
<td>1,514</td>
<td>1,397</td>
<td>1,275</td>
<td>1,418</td>
<td>1,127</td>
<td>1,137</td>
<td>1,047</td>
<td>229</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>9,475</td>
<td>6,379</td>
<td>795</td>
<td>404</td>
<td>369</td>
<td>305</td>
<td>251</td>
<td>302</td>
<td>188</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>24,340</td>
<td>14,021</td>
<td>1,911</td>
<td>1,098</td>
<td>1,145</td>
<td>1,092</td>
<td>1,024</td>
<td>1,116</td>
<td>939</td>
<td>969</td>
<td>845</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Ministry of Unification(2022).

3. North Korea Re-Entry Status and Problems

3.1. North Korea re-entry situation

“Re-entry to North Korea” means that North Korean defectors who have acquired South Korean nationality return to North Korea due to reasons such as maladjustment to South Korean society. According to data from the Ministry of Unification, a total of 31 defectors re-entered North Korea between 2012 and 2022. The number of North Korean defectors who re-entered North Korea by year was 7 in 2012, 7 in 2013, 3 in 2014, 3 in 2015, 4 in 2016, 4 in 2017, 1 in 2019, 1 in 2020, and 1 in 2022. Etc.\textsuperscript{1}

Table 3. Status of North Korean defectors re-entering North Korea.

<table>
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<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Reorganization of the Ministry of Unification(2022).

3.2. Problems with re-entry to North Korea

When North Korean defectors re-enter North Korea, North Korean defectors residing in South Korea become worried and anxious about the safety of their families in North Korea. In fact, North Korean defectors who re-enter North Korea are investigated by the North Korean authorities. In this process, the identity information of North Korean defectors residing in South Korea and the Hanawon curriculum are stated\textsuperscript{[15]}. In particular, in the case of North Korean defectors' personal information and contact information, the North Korean authorities use them as important information that can be used for reentry to North Korea and intimidation. And in the North Korean propaganda media, the North Korean authorities welcome the re-entered North Korean defectors without punishing them, and emphasize the negative aspects that the defectors experienced in their life in South Korea\textsuperscript{[16]}. The reasons why North Korean defectors who re-entered North Korea are appearing in the propaganda media are, first, because North Koreans are feeling the political burden due to the continuous increase in North Korean defections.

\textsuperscript{1} BBC NEWS Korea(2022. 9. 28.).
Second, it is to distort the reality of North Korean defectors and suppress North Korean defectors. Third, it is to criticize the South Korean system and reinforce the idolization of the Kim Jong-un regime in North Korea[17]. And it is because it serves as a means to induce North Korean defectors who cannot adapt to life in South Korea to re-enter North Korea. These factors also affect North Korean defectors' decision to re-enter North Korea. In fact, there are cases of re-entering North Korea after seeing such propaganda. This is an interview with a North Korean defector who re-entered North Korea by appearing in a North Korean propaganda media. “The majority of North Korean refugee women are forced into prostitution. As such, the situation of North Korean refugee women in South Korea is miserable.” “The future of our Republic, where the leader and the people are of one mind and advances for the prosperity of the country, is bright and prosperous. It is my determination to serve the respected Marshal higher and start anew from now on and devote all my passion to building a prosperous nation.” In this way, the videos of North Korean defectors who re-entered North Korea appearing in the propaganda media have a negative impact, such as agitating the society of North Korean defectors living in South Korea.

Figure 1. Press conference for North Korean defectors to return to North Korea

Note: Yonhap News Agency(2013. 1. 24.)

4. Cases by Type of North Korean Re-Entry(Judicial Precedent-Based)

4.1. Cases due to maladjustment to Korean society

North Korean defector A entered a domestic university through special admission after settling into South Korean society, but was unable to adapt to life in South Korea as she struggled with apologetic feelings for her family she left behind in North Korea. Afterwards, he took a leave of absence from university and applied for refugee status to the governments of Canada and the United States. However, he failed in his continued refugee application and returned to Korea to live as a day laborer. Later, after staying for a while at a shelter for North Korean refugees, he got a job at a food factory, but got fired after fighting with a fellow employee. After that, North Korean defector A, unable to settle down in one place, became disillusioned with the life of wandering around the world and decided to re-enter North Korea. After that, North Korean defector A contacted the North Korean consul to re-enter North Korea through the North Korean consulate in Shenyang, China, but gave up the plan to enter North Korea and returned home due to a change of heart. Afterwards, defector A left for China, crossed the Yalu River on foot, re-entered North Korea, and was interrogated by the North Korean State Security
Agency. At this time, North Korean defector A stated state secrets such as the identity information of North Korean defectors residing in Korea, the identity of the police officer in charge of personal protection, the location of Hanawon, and education matters.2

4.2. Cases due to economic hardship

Around April 2010, North Korean defector B went through education at Hanawon, a resettlement support facility for North Korean defectors, and was discharged into society. Afterwards, North Korean escape broker K filed a lawsuit demanding payment of 1 million won out of B’s 5 million won for escaping from North Korea. North Korean defector B failed to attend the trial because he was not requested to appear at the court, and the lawsuit proceeded and lost. Based on this, the rental housing deposit supported by the government to North Korean defector B was provisionally seized. B was very dissatisfied with this situation. In the meantime, around June 2012, Q, a North Korean defector who re-entered North Korea, held a press conference in North Korea and watched a scene where defectors were welcomed in North Korea, such as a family reunion, on TV. Accordingly, North Korean defector B thought that North Korean authorities would forgive and welcome defectors, so she wanted to live in North Korea with her mother and other family members. Also, while consulting at the Korea Legal Aid Corporation on the issue of North Korean defection costs, when an employee of the corporation told him that B had no chance of winning, he became angry and decided to go to North Korea. Afterwards, they prepared for re-entry into North Korea by closing time deposits and savings accounts at banks and disposing of cars. After that, on October 20, 2012, B arrived at Yanji Airport in China via Incheon International Airport. B visited the North Korean consulate in Shenyang, China and said, “I am a North Korean defector. I went to South Korea and came here to return to my motherland.” On November 3, 2012, she boarded a plane from Shenyang Airport in China to Pyongyang and arrived at Sunan Airfield in Pyongyang to re-enter North Korea.3

4.3. Cases case of appeasement by the North Korean authorities

North Korean defector C tried to let his son P, who was in North Korea, escape North Korea, but failed. Later, when his son persuaded him to come to North Korea, saying that the authorities would forgive everything if he returned to North Korea, he decided to re-enter North Korea. Afterwards, C was introduced to broker Y, who is smuggling in connection with the State Security Agency in Hyesan, North Korea. C was concerned that if he re-entered North Korea, he would be punished by the North Korean authorities for his past defecting history. In response, through Y, he promised to donate 200 tons of rice to the North Korean authorities, along with an oath of allegiance saying, “Even if I go to my country in the future, I will give my all with my spotless and pure heart for the party and country led by our general.” Reported to the North Korean State Security Agency. Afterwards, C, along with Y, paid 105 million won to purchase 130 tons of Chinese rice and sent it to North Korea by having it sent to Hyesan Customs in North Korea through Changbai Customs in China. In addition, North Korean defector C sent the remaining 70 tons of rice to North Korea as a loyalty gift, as reported to the State Security Agency in Hyesan, North Korea. And while preparing for re-entry, C tried to re-enter North Korea by way of Yanji, China, by taking out a loan from a bank and preparing funds totaling about 320 million won.

5. Conclusion

The government, local governments, and the private sector are promoting North Korean defector support policies through mutual cooperation. Nevertheless, it is true that some North Korean defectors are unable to adapt to South Korean society[18]. Some of them even go back to North Korea and re-enter North Korea. The reason for such re-entry is, first, longing and guilt for the family repatriated to North Korea. The second is maladjustment to South Korean society due to discrimination and neglect by South Korean residents. Third is economic hardship. The fourth is the conciliation and intimidation of the North Korean authorities. Cases of reentry to North Korea that actually occurred were analyzed with a focus on precedents. 'Case of re-entry to North Korea due to maladjustment to Korean society', 'Case of re-entry to North Korea due to economic difficulties', 'Case of re-entry to North Korea due to conciliation by the North Korean authorities' could be confirmed. As can be seen through the case studies, the reasons for re-entry to North Korea are diverse, including psychological and economic causes and North Korean authorities' operations[19]. For these reasons, when defectors leave South Korea and re-enter North Korea, defectors residing in South Korea worry and become anxious about the safety of their family members in North Korea. A North Korean defector who re-enters North Korea is subject to investigation by the North Korean authorities and must state the identity of the defector residing in South Korea. This North Korean defector status can be used by the North Korean authorities to persuade or intimidate the re-entry family against the North Korean family[20]. As such, the re-entry of North Korean defectors is having a negative impact, such as shaking up the North Korean defector society where they are settling down and living in South Korea. Therefore, I would like to suggest a plan to curb the re-entry of North Korean defectors in the future. First, for the stable settlement of North Korean refugees, the counseling and training hours of professional counselors for psychological stability must be greatly expanded in the Hanawon curriculum[21]. Second, in local governments where more than 300 North Korean refugees live, a dedicated team of 2 to 4 people in charge of protection for the residence is formed to strengthen an effective and customized settlement support system, and to establish sisterhood relationships with local residents who can serve as mentors. You need to provide psychological and emotional support. Lastly, it is time to prepare a response system that can promptly investigate re-entry cases by training personal protection police officers with expertise in North Korean system and security investigations in order to block the North Korean authorities from conciliating re-entry into North Korea.

6. References

6.1. Journal articles


### 6.2. Additional References


### 7. Appendix

#### 7.1. Authors contribution

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