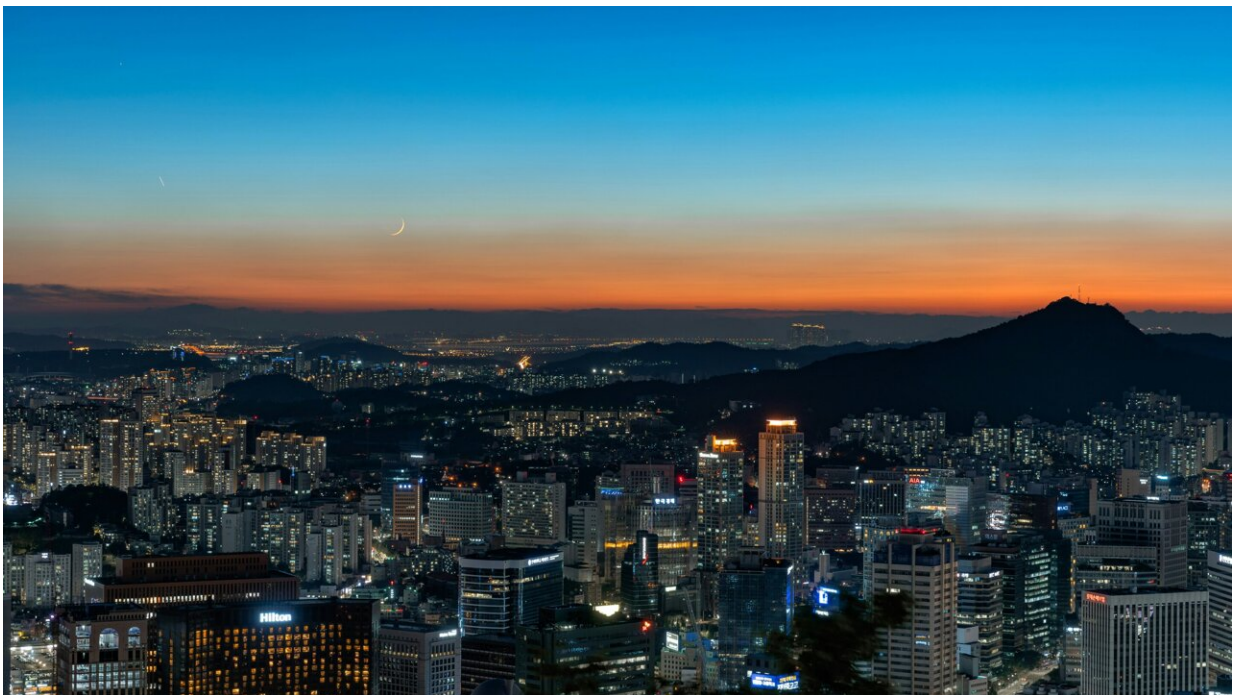


South Korean marginalized communities developed 'disaster subculture' living through extreme climate events, study finds

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Locations around the globe are experiencing climate disasters on a regular basis. But some of the most marginalized populations experience disasters so often it has come to be normalized.

A new study from the University of Kansas found residents of one Seoul, South Korea, neighborhood have grown so accustomed to living through extreme climate events they have developed a "disaster subculture" that challenges both views of reality and how social agencies can help.

Joonmo Kang, assistant professor of social welfare, spent a year living in Jjokbang-chon, an extremely impoverished neighborhood in Seoul, as part of an ethnographic research project. Residents there routinely live through extreme heat and cold in tiny, 70-square-foot units about the size of a closet. Over the course of a year, he interviewed residents about their experiences and worked with local social agencies to understand how they worked with the residents.

Residents regularly expressed a sort of indifference to [extreme heat](#) and [climate change](#), stating they had no options or even that "every day is a disaster." While that seeming difference with reality can potentially be caused by several factors, it shows that [social work](#) has a challenge in how to respond to climate disasters and their everyday effects, Kang said.

The study, published in the [International Journal of Social Welfare](#), is part of Kang's larger body of work in climate justice and eco social work. Through that lens, he said hopes to learn more about how climate change affects certain groups and populations and how social work can respond.

"For this paper I wanted to highlight the lived experiences of so-called slum housing in Seoul, South Korea, where I'm originally from," Kang said. "But heat and climate disasters don't just happen there, it happens throughout the Global North, even in the wealthiest countries. I want to see how this affects lives in the most marginalized communities."

In his [ethnographic study](#), Kang had informal conversations and semi-structured interviews with the residents of Jjokbang-chon. One resident reported how he simply sits still and tries not to move during the hottest times. Others reported they did not go to government-provided cooling centers because they were too far away and the effort to get there would outweigh riding out the heat.

"All year around, all four seasons are filled with distress; every day is a disaster. When every day is like that, when every day is a disaster, when our daily lives are a disaster, the weather doesn't matter. It's not like the summer or the winter becomes particularly hard," one resident said.

Other residents reported living in a jjokbang was preferable to previous experiences of homelessness. Even though they were not allowed by landlords to install cooling systems beyond fans—and the facilities were not equipped to handle them—residents seemed resigned to accept living in extreme conditions.

"This research focused on how people make meaning of extreme weather. The findings revealed they developed a 'disaster subculture,'" Kang said. "When they experience this, it causes them to reflect a sense of normalcy. One of the main things I found was even though it's been widely reported these living conditions can be a living hell, people told me, 'It is what it is.' I was really struck by that."

Building a tolerance to seemingly intolerable climate may be difficult to understand, but a community organizer who works with the Jjokbang-chon population offered insight into why [residents](#) may express such acceptance.

"It might also be their way of telling us, 'I am trying my best to adjust,' and at the same time even though they have a desire to get out of here, they might just be saying that because they don't have the resources or

the means to turn things around," the organizer said.

"Being stuck in that situation for a long period of time, they might have gotten used to it or even built a tolerance because they can't change their reality, and as a result leads to a sense of acceptance, like a shrug of resignation."

The field of social work has a responsibility, however, to serve the world's most vulnerable populations, Kang writes, and understanding their lived experiences is key to doing so effectively.

Kang compared the situation to the boiling frog metaphor, in which a frog in a pot of slowly heated water does not jump out before it is cooked. People living in extreme conditions can be exposed to trauma for long periods, but unlike the frog, can offer insight into how to address the issue.

"Their own views of vulnerability and reality did not seem to align with what was objectively true. This shows we need to address the everyday reality and root causes and why people are living in these conditions."

In ongoing and future work, Kang said he would further explore how to advocate for and empower marginalized communities to address climate issues that affect them every day.

"The folks who live these experiences know best. They have agency, and we need to listen to them," Kang said. "I think it can be a waste of money and effort if we don't listen to what people want and need and work with them to address climate-related issues."

More information: Joonmo Kang, "Every day is a disaster": Climate

vulnerabilities and disaster subculture of jjokbang-chon in Seoul, Korea and its implications for social work, *International Journal of Social Welfare* (2024). [DOI: 10.1111/ijsw.12650](https://doi.org/10.1111/ijsw.12650)

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