



THE PENINSULA

The Ongoing Search for Justice for Korean-American Adoptees

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In March 2025, South Korea admitted for the first time that the government doctored paperwork and faked the identities of at least 367 children between 1964 and 1999 in a bid for political and economic gains.

South Korea's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), an independent body established by the government to investigate historical injustices, [described these activities](#) as adoption fraud and a violation of human rights. The commission's acknowledgment of human trafficking is a milestone for victims of Korea's adoption system—many of whom have been fighting for decades to bring light to the injustices they and their families have endured.

History of Korean Adoption and Fraud

The devastation of the Korean War left many children in South Korea without families. The presence of armed forces from countries around the world to help defend South Korea left Korean women with [mixed-race children](#) at a time when multiculturalism was heavily stigmatized. Many of these half-Korean children were abandoned as a result, with economic and political instability in the immediate post-war years serving as additional factors. Unable to accommodate the large number of orphans due to the poor state of the economy, inadequate housing, and general disinterest in domestic adoption, the South Korean government turned overseas.

In 1955, Bertha and Harry Holt, a couple from rural Oregon, adopted eight Korean children, generating media attention and likely kickstarting interest in the United States in adopting children from South Korea. The couple eventually created the Holt Adoption Agency to help would-be adoptive parents find a match. With the increase in demand for Korean adoptees from countries around the world, including Australia, Belgium, Sweden, the United States, and many others, the South Korean government and adoption agencies saw an opportunity to monetize and match international demand with a steady supply of children. An investigation by The New York Times published earlier this year revealed that in 1988, South Korean adoption agencies charged an adoption fee of USD 1,500 and strongly suggested that the adopting parents donate an additional USD 400 per child. These prices are particularly notable because the per-capita national income of South Korea at the time was just USD 4,571.

A 2024 investigation by the AP found that adoptions peaked in the 1980s, as “South Korea’s government, Western countries, and adoption agencies worked in tandem to supply some 200,000 Korean children to parents overseas” over the past half-century. Many were kidnapped off the streets, and some parents had their newborns taken away at the hospital, the investigation found, with doctors lying that the baby died or was severely ill. Adoption papers were then falsified to send the children abroad, making it even more difficult for adoptees to reunite with their birth families decades later.

Before the TRC’s report in March, the South Korean government denied allegations that it played any role in these activities and turned down calls from victims for a formal investigation. The TRC was the first government agency to investigate claims of adoption fraud in the country and describe it as a human rights violation. The commission stated that the government was culpable in fabricating records, falsifying identities, neglecting guardianship duties, and engaging in other improprieties.

While it seems unlikely any surviving official will face criminal prosecution, the South Korean government is required by law to follow TRC recommendations which include an official government apology, prompt ratification of the Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Cooperation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption, and commitment from adoption agencies to restore adoptee’s rights. This raises the possibility that the adoptees will receive an official apology from South Korea, given Article 36 of the Basic Act on the Settlement of Past History, which states, “The government should take measures to restore the damage and honor of victims, victims and their bereaved families according to the identified truth.”

Stories of Korean American Adoptees

A little more than half of the estimated 200,000 Korean children adopted by families overseas between the 1960s and 1990s grew up in the United States. Minnesota has the highest number of Korean-American adoptees, comprising around 20 percent of the total Korean-American adoptee population today. Even though more than half a century has passed since the first adoptees arrived in the United States, many still struggle with issues related to their legal status and identity, according to the Korean American Grassroots Conference (KAGC). KAGC estimates that as many as 49,000 intercountry adoptees are denied the same rights as biological children of U.S. citizens, such as employment opportunities, federal loans, and the right to vote. Among the 49,000 adoptees who do not have proper documentation of U.S. citizenship, Korean-American adoptees make up more than half of those who are affected.

Although many U.S. adoptees' citizenship rights are protected by the Child Citizenship Act of 2000, those with insufficient legal paperwork are not guaranteed protection—in the case of South Korea, due to the "careless and fraudulent practices" of the South Korean government at the time and adopted parents who failed to file paperwork for the adoptees. For instance, Korean-American adoptee Adam Crapser, who was deported from the United States back to South Korea because his adoptive parents never secured his U.S. citizenship, sued the South Korean government in 2019 for violation of human rights, stating the government's "manipulating his paperwork to describe him as an orphan despite the existence of a known birth mother, exposing him to abusive adoptive parents by botching background checks and not following up on whether he obtained U.S. citizenship." Although the lower court ruled in favor of Crapser in 2023, the Seoul Central District Court's ruling in January 2025 did not find the South Korean government at fault for violating human rights, thus making the TRC's acknowledgment of adoption fraud significant for future cases.

American families' interest in adoption and the South Korean government's eagerness to cater to U.S. needs led to many rushed adoptions that relied on bending the rules. This included relaxing the obligation of agencies to ensure citizenship for adoptees, which marginalized many Korean-American children. Similar to Crapser, at least eleven adoptees have been deported back to South Korea from the United States since 2002 due to the absence of U.S. citizenship.

Moving Forward

Support for Korean-American adoptees has greatly increased within the United States. KAGC has named the Adoptee Citizenship Act—an act to modify the loopholes of the Child Citizenship Act of 2000 and has been co-sponsored by thirty-one representatives and thirteen senators in 2024—as one of the organization's top policy priorities. Furthermore, community groups and organizations, such as the Korean American Adoptee Adoptive Family Network (KAAN) and Me & Korea, continue to support the Korean-American adoptee cause by fostering community gatherings, teaching the Korean language and culture, bringing awareness to the public about the adoptees' stories, and supporting visits by adoptees to South Korea to meet their birth families.

The TRC's apology is just the first step in bringing justice to Korean-American adoptees victimized by the corrupt nature of South Korea's old adoption process. Adoptees continue to await a formal apology from the government, along with an in-depth investigation into fraudulent activities that may have occurred during this period.

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Photo courtesy of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

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