

Sri Lankan Immigrants in South Korea

SEPTEMBER 2026

Summary

At the end of 2024, 33,965 Sri Lankan nationals were registered foreigners in South Korea, 2.3 percent of all registered foreigners and the 13th-largest nationality on that basis; counting short-term visitors, South Korea had 35,792 Sri Lankan resident foreigners on 31 December 2024, 1.4 percent of the total and the 17th-largest nationality. Among registered foreigners Sri Lanka ranked 12th in 2006, 11th in 2014, and 14th in 2019; among all resident foreigners it ranked 14th, 13th, and 19th in those years. The resident count stood at 12,594 in 2006 and 26,057 in 2014. Almost all Sri Lankan residents (94.9 percent in 2024) were registered foreigners, the category for foreign nationals in Korea for more than 90 days.

Highlights

- ▶ At the end of 2024, 33,965 Sri Lankan nationals were registered foreigners in South Korea, the 13th-largest nationality among registered foreigners and the 17th-largest among all resident foreigners (35,792 people, the highest count on record).
- ▶ The Sri Lankan population grew 42.8 percent between 2019 and 2024 (from 25,064 to 35,792), the fifth-fastest growth among the 20 largest nationalities.
- ▶ In 2024, 80.9 percent of Sri Lankan residents held employment visas and 9.7 percent were women, compared with 19.2 percent and 45.1 percent of all resident foreigners.

Most Sri Lankan nationals came as workers under the Employment Permit System (EPS), a program operated between the Korean government and the governments of sending countries that began in August 2004. By June 2012, 24,696 Sri Lankan workers were in Korea under the EPS, the fifth-largest group among 15 sending countries (ILO, 2012). The population fell from 25,064 in 2019 to 20,291 in 2021 and

then rose to 35,792 in 2024. Over the same years, holders of specially designated activities (E-7) and dependent family (F-3) visas grew from a few hundred to several thousand.

Compared with all resident foreigners, Sri Lankan residents in 2024 were far more likely to hold employment visas, much more likely to be men, and more concentrated in ages 20 to 39. They lived mostly outside the Seoul capital area, with the largest share in the Yeongnam region of the southeast, and were more than twice as likely to live in rural counties. This Spotlight describes the size of the population, where Sri Lankan residents live, their age, sex, and visa status, the channels and policies behind their migration, naturalization, health and well-being, migration from Sri Lanka to South Korea, and community organizations.

BOX 1

Definitions

Resident foreigners (체류외국인). All foreign nationals in South Korea on a valid status on 31 December of a given year, including short-term visitors and overseas Koreans who report their residence. This is the broadest count published by the Ministry of Justice.

Registered foreigners (등록외국인). Foreign nationals in South Korea for longer than 90 days who register with immigration authorities. They are a subset of resident foreigners. Overseas Koreans holding F-4 visas report their place of residence instead of registering and are not counted here. District-level figures in this Spotlight use registered foreigners.

Sri Lankan residents. In this Spotlight, the term refers to foreign nationals holding Sri Lankan citizenship. Naturalized Korean citizens of Sri Lankan origin are not included in the resident foreigner counts.

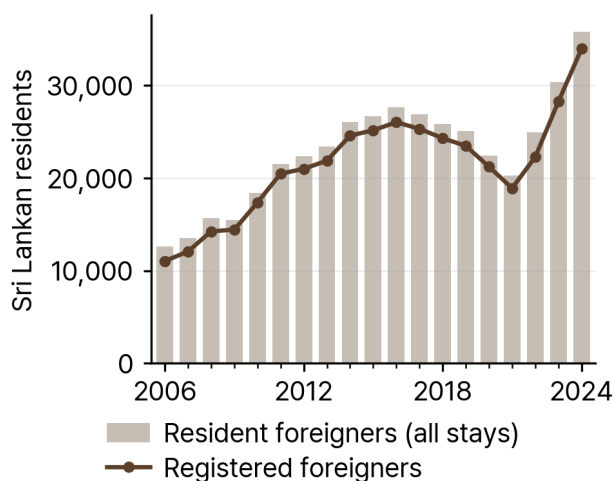
1 Size of the Population over Time

The number of Sri Lankan resident foreigners rose from 12,594 in 2006 to 18,377 in 2010 and 26,057 in 2014, then stood at 25,064 in 2019 (see Figure 1). It declined to 22,466 in 2020 and 20,291 in 2021, a drop of 19.0 percent from 2019 (4,773 fewer people). It then climbed to 24,912 in 2022, 30,370 in

2023, and 35,792 in 2024, the highest count on record. The 2024 total was about 2.8 times the 2006 total (35,792 against 12,594).

FIGURE 1

Sri Lankan Residents in South Korea, All Resident Foreigners and Registered Foreigners, 2006-24

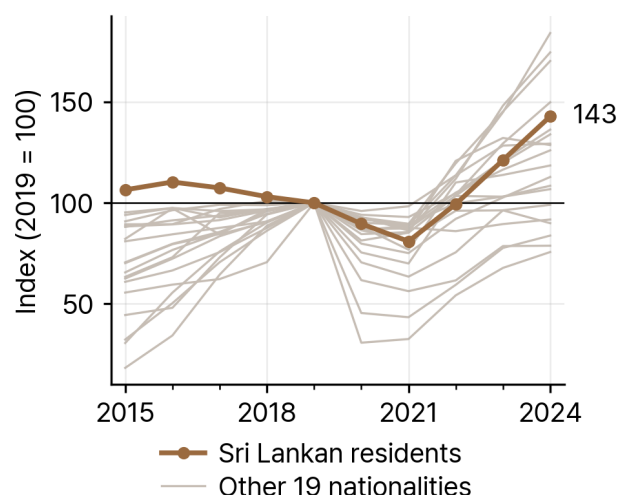


Source: KIRD dataset, from Ministry of Justice immigration yearbooks, 2006-2024.

Registered foreigners made up most of the group in every year shown: 11,051 of 12,594 in 2006 and 33,965 of 35,792 in 2024 (94.9 percent). Sri Lankan nationals were 2.3 percent of all registered foreigners in 2024 and 1.4 percent of all resident foreigners, so the group ranks higher among registered foreigners (13th) than among all resident foreigners (17th) (see Table 1).

FIGURE 2

Growth of Sri Lankan Residents Compared with the Other 19 Largest Nationalities in South Korea, 2019-24 (index, 2019 = 100)



Source: KIRD dataset, from Ministry of Justice immigration yearbooks, 2006-2024.

Indexed to 2019 = 100, the Sri Lankan population stood at 142.8 in 2024, a growth of 42.8 percent over five years. That was the fifth-fastest growth among the 20 largest nationalities in South Korea (see Figure 2). Because the population had fallen during 2020 and 2021, most of this growth came after 2021: the count rose by 15,501 between 2021 and 2024 (from 20,291 to 35,792).

TABLE 1

Sri Lankan Residents in South Korea, Selected Years, 2006-24

Year	Resident foreigners	Registered foreigners	Registered as % of resident	Rank among registered foreigners	Rank among all resident foreigners	Share of all registered foreigners (%)	Share of all resident foreigners (%)
2006	12,594	11,051	87.7	12	14	1.8	1.4
2014	26,057	24,582	94.3	11	13	2.3	1.4
2019	25,064	23,476	93.7	14	19	1.8	1.0
2024	35,792	33,965	94.9	13	17	2.3	1.4

Note: Registered as % of resident is computed as registered foreigners divided by resident foreigners. Resident foreigners include short-term visitors and F-4 residence reporters; registered foreigners are long-term residents who registered with immigration authorities.

Source: KIRD dataset, from Ministry of Justice immigration yearbooks, 2006-2024.

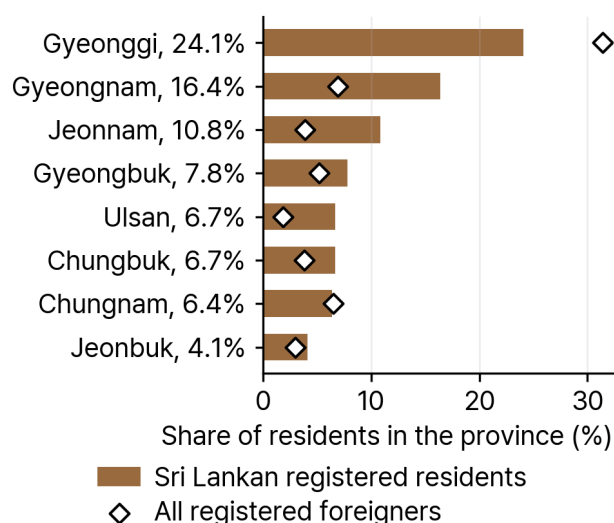
2 Distribution by Province and District

In 2024, 37.9 percent of Sri Lankan registered residents lived in the Yeongnam region (Busan, Daegu, Ulsan, and the Gyeongsang provinces), 27.1 percent in Incheon and Gyeonggi province, 16.5 percent in the Honam region, 14.0 percent in the Chungcheong region, 3.5 percent in Gangwon and Jeju, and 1.0 percent (351 people) in Seoul (see Figure 3). The Seoul

capital area (Seoul, Incheon, and Gyeonggi) was home to 28.1 percent of the group, compared with 55.2 percent of all resident foreigners.

FIGURE 3

Sri Lankan Registered Residents by Province, 2024



Source: KIRD dataset, from Ministry of Justice registered-foreigner statistics by district, 2024.

Sri Lankan residents were more likely than other foreigners to live in rural counties (gun): 26.0 percent did in 2024, against 10.6 percent of all resident foreigners. In the Honam region,

61.2 percent of Sri Lankan residents lived in rural counties, and in Chungcheong, 41.9 percent.

The largest Sri Lankan populations were in Hwaseong-si (1,670), Gimhae-si (1,617), Ulsan Dong-gu (1,366), and Geoje-si (1,079) (see Figure 4 and Table 2). The ten largest districts together accounted for 30.3 percent of Sri Lankan registered residents, and 80 districts had at least 100. In Seoul, the largest counts were in Yongsan-gu (60) and Gwanak-gu (47).

In some smaller districts, Sri Lankan nationals made up a large part of the foreign population. They accounted for 24.9 percent of registered foreigners in Daegu Gunwi-gun (145 people), 24.4 percent in Jindo-gun (638), 18.6 percent in Incheon Ongjin-gun (111), 16.3 percent in Wando-gun (832), and 14.2 percent in Ulsan Dong-gu (1,366).

The index of dissimilarity (D), which measures how differently Sri Lankan residents and all other registered foreigners are spread across districts, fell from 0.571 in 2014 to 0.539 in 2024. A value of 0.539 means that about 54 percent of Sri Lankan residents would have to move to another district to match the distribution of other foreigners. No district met the KIRD definition of an ethnic enclave in 2024 (a location quotient of at least 2 and Sri Lankan nationals making up at least 30 percent of the district's foreign residents); the highest share, in Daegu Gunwi-gun, was 24.9 percent.

TABLE 2

Ten Districts with the Most Sri Lankan Registered Residents, 2024

District	Province	Sri Lankan residents	Share of district's foreign residents
Hwaseong-si	Gyeonggi-do	1,670	3.3%
Gimhae-si	Gyeongsangnam-do	1,617	6.5%
Ulsan Dong-gu	Ulsan	1,366	14.2%
Geoje-si	Gyeongsangnam-do	1,079	7.2%
Gimpo-si	Gyeonggi-do	970	3.8%
Wando-gun	Jeollanam-do	832	16.3%
Eumseong-gun	Chungcheongbuk-do	772	5.6%
Gyeongju-si	Gyeongsangbuk-do	703	5.5%
Jindo-gun	Jeollanam-do	638	24.4%
Daegu Dalseong-gun	Daegu	630	8.5%

Note: Share of district's foreign residents is Sri Lankan registered residents divided by all registered foreigners in the district.

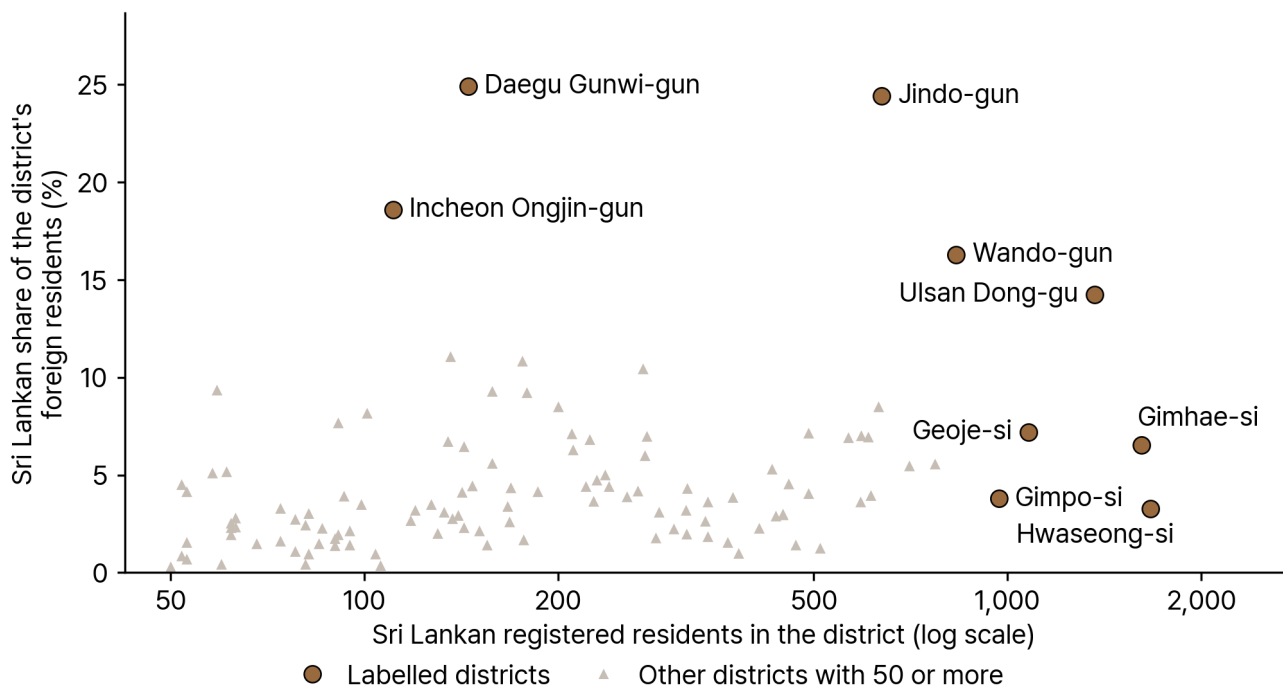
Source: KIRD dataset, from Ministry of Justice registered-foreigner statistics by district, 2024.

3 Age and Sex

Sri Lankan residents were concentrated in young working ages. In 2024, 78.9 percent (28,228 people) were ages 20 to 39, compared with 49.7 percent of all resident foreigners. Both

the largest five-year age group and the median fell in the group ages 30 to 34 (see Figure 5).

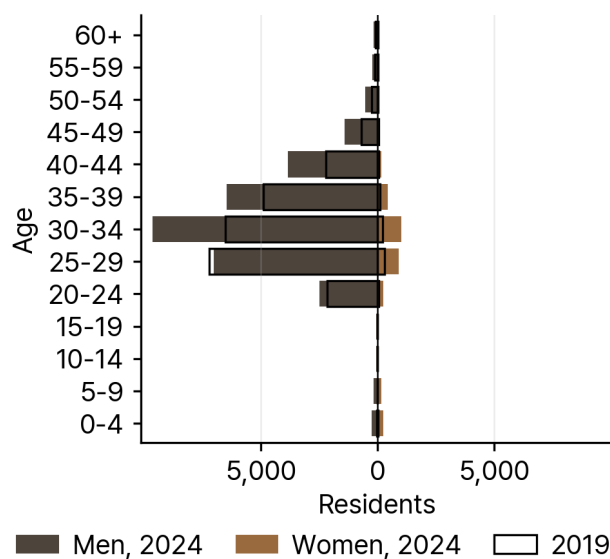
FIGURE 4

Districts with the Most Sri Lankan Registered Residents, 2024

Source: KIRD dataset, from Ministry of Justice registered-foreigner statistics by district, 2024.

Children and older adults were few, though their numbers grew. Children under age 15 made up 2.6 percent of the group in 2024 (947 children, up from 118 in 2019), compared with 5.7 percent of all resident foreigners. Children under age 5 numbered 508 in 2024, up from 72 in 2019. People age 60 and older made up 0.6 percent, compared with 12.9 percent of all resident foreigners.

FIGURE 5

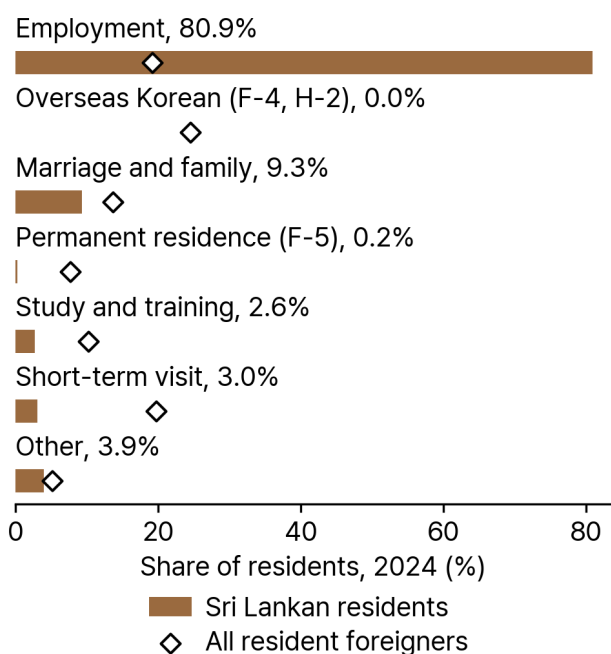
Sri Lankan Residents in South Korea by Age and Sex, 2019 and 2024

Source: KIRD dataset, from Ministry of Justice immigration yearbooks, 2006-2024.

Women made up 9.7 percent of Sri Lankan residents in 2024 (3,487 women), up from 3.6 percent in 2019 (913 women). Among all resident foreigners, women made up 45.1 percent.

4 Visa Status

FIGURE 6

Visa Groups of Sri Lankan Residents and All Resident Foreigners in South Korea, 2024

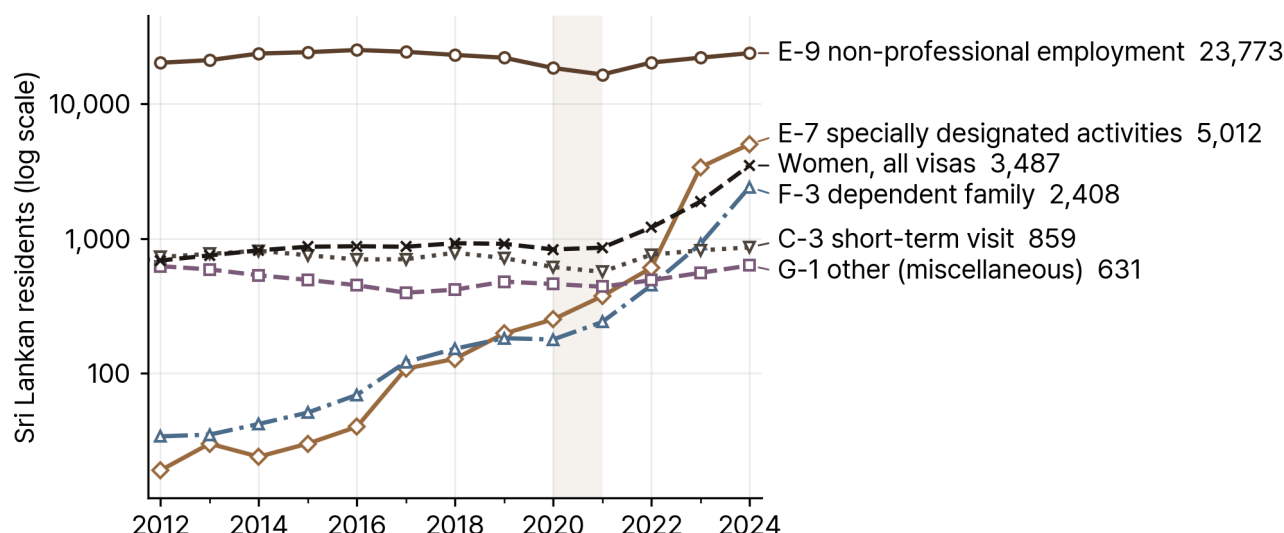
Source: KIRD dataset, from Ministry of Justice immigration yearbooks, 2006-2024.

In 2024, 80.9 percent of Sri Lankan residents held an employment visa, compared with 19.2 percent of all resident foreigners (see Figure 6). Marriage and family visas accounted for 9.3 percent (13.6 percent for all resident foreigners), short-term visits for 3.0 percent (19.7 percent), study and training

visas for 2.6 percent (10.2 percent), and permanent residence (F-5) for 0.2 percent (7.7 percent). Almost no Sri Lankan residents held overseas Korean visas (F-4 or H-2), which accounted for 24.5 percent of all resident foreigners.

FIGURE 7

Sri Lankan Residents in South Korea by Main Visa Type, 2012-24



Source: KIRD dataset, from Ministry of Justice immigration yearbooks, 2006-2024.

TABLE 3

Sri Lankan Residents by Visa Type, 2019 and 2024

Visa	Meaning	2019	2024	Share of Sri Lankan residents, 2024	Sri Lankan share of all holders of this visa, 2024
E-9	Non-professional employment	21,992	23,773	66.4%	7.0%
E-7	Specially designated activities	197	5,012	14.0%	7.9%
F-3	Dependent family	182	2,408	6.7%	4.6%
C-3	Short-term visit	716	859	2.4%	0.5%
G-1	Other (miscellaneous)	479	631	1.8%	1.1%
D-2	Student	288	612	1.7%	0.3%
F-6	Marriage migration	308	373	1.0%	0.3%

Note: Shares of Sri Lankan residents are out of 35,792 resident foreigners of Sri Lankan nationality in 2024.

Source: KIRD dataset, from Ministry of Justice immigration yearbooks, 2006-2024.

The E-9 non-professional employment visa, issued under the Employment Permit System, was held by 23,773 Sri Lankan residents in 2024, compared with 23,618 in 2014 and 21,992 in 2019. Sri Lankan nationals made up 7.0 percent of all E-9 holders in South Korea, the eighth-largest share of any nationality. The E-9 share of the group fell from about 88 percent in 2019 (21,992 of 25,064) to 66.4 percent in 2024.

Other visa types grew much faster after 2019 (see Figure 7). Specially designated activities (E-7) visa holders rose from 197 to 5,012 between 2019 and 2024, about 25 times, and Sri Lankan nationals made up 7.9 percent of all E-7 holders in South Korea in 2024. Dependent family (F-3) visa holders rose from 182 to 2,408, about 13 times. Student (D-2) visa holders rose from 288 to 612. Marriage migrant (F-6) visa holders changed less, from 308 to 373.

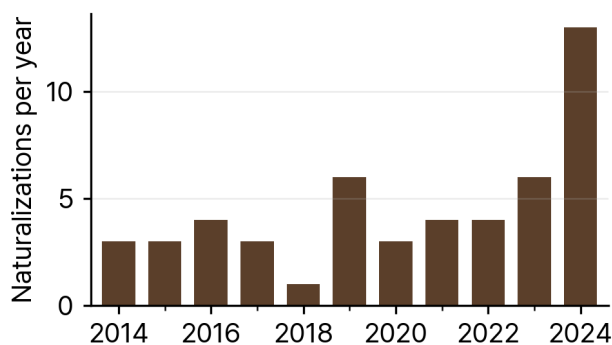
5 Migration Channels and Policy

Sri Lanka sends workers to Korea under the Employment Permit System, which South Korea implemented in August 2004 and operates through agreements with the governments of sending countries. As of June 2012, 24,696 Sri Lankan workers were in Korea under the EPS, the fifth-largest group among the 15 countries with an EPS memorandum of understanding at the time (ILO, 2012).

A 2018 study of Sri Lankan workers who returned from South Korea listed the reasons Korea became one of the top destinations for Sri Lankan labor migrants: low pre-departure costs, no fees to recruitment agencies, no specific educational qualifications or professional tests beyond basic Korean language, relatively high salaries, and a legal work visa granted for five years. Under this route, 7,406 Sri Lankan workers entered Korea in 2011, 5,630 in 2012, and 5,389 in 2013 (Karunaratne and Abeygunawardana 2018).

6 Naturalization

FIGURE 8
Naturalizations of Sri Lankan Nationals in South Korea, 2014–24



Source: KIRD dataset, from Ministry of Justice immigration yearbooks, 2006–2024.

Between 2014 and 2024, 50 Sri Lankan nationals naturalized as South Korean citizens. Annual counts ranged from 1 to 6 between 2014 and 2023, with the low of 1 in 2018, and rose to 13 in 2024 (see Figure 8). The 13 naturalizations in 2024 equal about 0.04 percent of the 35,792 Sri Lankan residents that year.

7 Unauthorized Residents

Sri Lanka is not among the ten nationalities that the Ministry of Justice immigration yearbook (table 6–4) reports separately for unauthorized residents, so no count of unauthorized Sri Lankan residents is published. The yearbook reported 397,522 unauthorized residents of all nationalities in 2024.

8 Health and Well-being

A study of 67,576 migrant workers with recorded occupational injuries in South Korea between January 2007 and September 2018 included 2,584 Sri Lankan nationals, of whom 22 died

from their injuries (about 0.9 percent) (Lee et al. 2023).

A 2021 survey of Sri Lankan EPS workers in Korean manufacturing found that unfamiliar work practices and a lack of safety and work training were an impediment, and that language was one of the main barriers to living and working in Korea (Don and Hong 2021).

In February 2025, a Korean forklift operator at a brick factory in Naju tied a 31-year-old Sri Lankan worker in plastic wrap and lifted him with a forklift. South Korea's Labor Ministry rejected the factory head's description of the incident as a prank and investigated whether workers had experienced beating, bullying, and overdue wages (Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, 2025). In May 2026, a court sentenced the operator to a suspended prison term and community service and fined the company 5 million won (Yonhap News Agency, 2026).

9 Migration from Sri Lanka to South Korea

South Korea receives a small share of Sri Lankan labor migrants. In 2023, 9,746 of the 297,656 Sri Lankans who registered with the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE) registered for jobs in South Korea, about 3.3 percent, making Korea the seventh-largest destination after Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, the Maldives, and Romania (SLBFE 2023). In 2024 the number fell to 7,114 of 314,786, about 2.3 percent, and Korea dropped to tenth place, behind Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the Maldives, Romania, Israel, Japan, and Oman (SLBFE 2025a). UN DESA estimated that 16,851 Sri Lanka-born people lived in South Korea in mid-2024, about 1.1 percent of the 1,492,103 Sri Lankan emigrants worldwide, which placed Korea 15th among destination countries (UN DESA 2024). That estimate is lower than the 35,792 Sri Lankan resident foreigners counted by the Ministry of Justice at the end of 2024.

Sri Lanka's Labour Ministry said it sent 6,500 to 7,000 workers to South Korea in 2023 and planned to send 10,000 in 2024, mainly in production, fishing, and construction (EconomyNext 2024). In the first half of 2025, 3,134 of the 144,379 Sri Lankans who left for foreign employment went to South Korea, about 2.2 percent (SLBFE 2025b). For the EPS-TOPIK round with applications taken from 15 to 17 September 2025, Korea's Ministry of Employment and Labor and HRD Korea set a recruitment quota of 2,500 Sri Lankan workers, 2,000 in manufacturing and 500 in fisheries (MOEL and HRD Korea 2025). Over all of 2024, 58,369 Sri Lankans took the EPS-TOPIK and 9,530 passed (HRD Korea 2025); Korea admitted 5,562 Sri Lankan workers on E-9 visas that year and 3,730 in 2025 (Ministry of Employment and Labor 2026).

World Bank data put personal remittances received by Sri Lanka at 7.16 percent of GDP in 2023 and 6.75 percent in 2024 (World Bank 2024). In the third quarter of 2025, Sri Lanka

received US\$111.8 million in workers' remittances from South Korea, the eighth-largest amount from a single country, after the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, the United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Italy, and the United States (Central Bank of Sri Lanka 2025).

We know of no published breakdown of Korea-bound migrants by district, province, or language group. For the population as a whole, Sinhala and Tamil are the official languages.

In February 2025, Sri Lanka's Cabinet approved a memorandum of understanding with South Korean provincial and municipal councils for seasonal work under Korea's E-8 visa. Workers may serve up to three terms within a maximum

of three years, and no private Sri Lankan agency is authorized to send workers under this route. The Cabinet spokesman warned that overstaying visas would lead to reduced quotas for Sri Lankan workers and could cost access to both E-8 and E-9 visas (Daily FT 2025). Under the 2025 point-based selection system for Sri Lankan EPS applicants, candidates must be aged 18 to 39, have no criminal record or history of forced deportation from Korea, pass a color-vision screening, and not have already spent five years or more in Korea on an E-9 or E-10 visa. Applicants who meet these conditions are narrowed to 1.1 times the recruitment quota before a second-round skills test and job-capacity assessment (MOEL and HRD Korea 2025).

TABLE 4
Migration indicators, Sri Lanka and South Korea

Indicator	Value	Source
Sri Lanka-born population in South Korea, mid-2024	16,851	UN DESA 2024
South Korea's share of Sri Lankan emigrants and rank among destinations, 2024	About 1.1 percent (16,851 of 1,492,103); 15th	UN DESA 2024
SLBFE registrations for jobs in South Korea, 2023	9,746 of 297,656 (3.3 percent); seventh	SLBFE 2023
SLBFE registrations for jobs in South Korea, 2024	7,114 of 314,786 (2.3 percent); tenth	SLBFE 2025a
Workers sent to South Korea, 2023 (Labour Ministry)	6,500 to 7,000; 10,000 planned for 2024	EconomyNext 2024
Departures for employment in South Korea, January-June 2025	3,134 of 144,379 (2.2 percent)	SLBFE 2025b
EPS recruitment quota for Sri Lanka, September 2025 round	2,500 (2,000 manufacturing, 500 fisheries)	MOEL and HRD Korea 2025
EPS-TOPIK test takers in Sri Lanka, 2024	58,369 (9,530 passed)	HRD Korea 2025
E-9 workers admitted from Sri Lanka, 2024 and 2025	5,562 and 3,730	Ministry of Employment and Labor 2026
Workers' remittances from South Korea, third quarter of 2025	US\$111.8 million; eighth among source countries	Central Bank of Sri Lanka 2025
Personal remittances as share of GDP	7.16 percent (2023); 6.75 percent (2024)	World Bank 2024

Note: As far as we know, no breakdown of Korea-bound migrants by district or language group has been published.

Research on Sri Lankan migration to Korea is limited. Shaw (2010), using household survey data, finds that Sri Lankan labor migration diversified away from the Middle East from the late 1990s, with Korea among the new destinations in Asia and Europe, and that nearly half of the migrant workforce became male. Karunaratne and Abeygunawardana (2018), studying workers who returned from Korea, report that 60 percent of returnees were engaged in business ventures and 32 percent had put their savings mainly into land or housing. Don and Hong (2021) find that Sri Lankan EPS workers in Korean manufacturing lacked safety and job training and faced language barriers at work. We are not aware of any study of brokers, migration debt, or marriage migration specific to Sri Lankans in Korea.

10 Community Organizations

Buddhist ties connect the two countries. Kandy and Gyeongju established a sister-city partnership in 2018, many Sri Lankan Buddhist monks live in Korea and practice Korean Buddhism, and in August 2021 Gyeongju City provided financial assistance and medical units to the National Hospital of Kandy for COVID-19 patients (Korea Times, 2023). Sri Lankan students have their own association, the Sri Lankan Students Association - Korea (SLSA-Korea), based in Seoul (SLSA-Korea, 2026).

Of the 1,717 migrant-serving organizations in the KIRD census, 4 name Sri Lankan people or Sri Lanka in their name or target group, and all 4 are religious sites. They are Love Sri Lanka Church (Sangnok-gu, Ansan), the Asan Sri Lanka Maha Vihara

temple (Dhamma Friends, Asan-si), the Mahamevnawa meditation center (Danwon-gu, Ansan), and Sri Radha Shyamasundar Mandir, the ISKCON Seoul temple (Yongsan-gu,

Seoul). Most general-purpose organizations in the census, such as multicultural family and foreign worker support centers, also serve Sri Lankan residents.

About these profiles. The KIRD data profiles describe the twenty nationalities with more than 20,000 resident foreigners in South Korea in 2024 and answer the questions asked most often about foreign residents. Figures come from the Korea Immigration Regional Dashboard (KIRD) dataset, built from the Ministry of Justice immigration yearbooks and the Ministry of the Interior and Safety foreign-resident statistics for 2006 to 2024 (<https://doi.org/10.3886/E249944V1>); context comes from the sources listed. Interactive maps and tables: <https://immigrantsinkorea.today>.

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