**South Korea Says About 20% Of Its Population Is At Risk For Internet Addiction**

South Korea is one of the most wired countries in the world. Ninety-five percent of adults own a smartphone. That level of connectivity is a double-edged sword. The latest government survey shows almost 20% of the population - nearly 10 million people - are at risk for Internet addiction.

NPR's Michael Sullivan reports from Seoul.

MICHAEL SULLIVAN, BYLINE: It's hard to walk more than a block or two in Seoul without finding a PC bang - what the Koreans call an Internet gaming room. This one's in a basement in Gangnam.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #1: (Speaking Korean).

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #2: (Speaking Korean).

SULLIVAN: Big, comfy chairs and fast computers for about a dollar an hour. And most are open 24 hours a day. Lee Kae-seong is the owner here.

LEE KAE-SEONG: (Through interpreter) There are customers who will stay a day or two. I've seen a lot of customers coming here late in the afternoon and leave the next morning. That's pretty common.

SULLIVAN: Then there are the totally oblivious.

KAE-SEONG: (Through interpreter) Some customers who play for too long, I'm sorry to say - they get smelly, and other customers start to complain. So we have to ask them to leave.

SULLIVAN: Dr. Roh Sungwon is a psychiatrist at Seoul's Hanyang University. Stories like these don't surprise him at all.

ROH SUNGWON: (Through interpreter) Here I see dramatic cases of both adolescents and adults who started to have serious problems with their health, relationships with their family or at school from game addiction. Some students refuse to go to school or even inflict physical force on their parents.

SULLIVAN: To some parents in the U.S., this might sound distressingly familiar. What's different here, though, Roh says, is that the government knows it has a public health crisis, and it's doing something about it.

SUNGWON: (Through interpreter) There are regional education offices that provide services, such as in-school counseling, screening surveys, preventive disciplines and, for severe cases, addiction camps.

SULLIVAN: And almost all of it is paid for by the government at the national or local level. One of the camps the government started is in Muju, three hours south of Seoul.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #3: (Speaking Korean).

SULLIVAN: Here, teenagers undergo weekslong programs to wean them from their tech addiction, be it social media or gaming. There's lots of group activities to keep them active and engaged as a group and no tech, all of it confiscated the day they arrive. How did that make this 16-year-old feel?

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #4: Nervous.

SULLIVAN: Nervous, with good reason. We agreed not to use any of the girls' names.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #5: (Through interpreter) I've had my phone since my first year in elementary school. I've never been without it since. So I was worried.

SULLIVAN: Five days into the program, meeting new friends, she says she now realizes that she can live without her phone, which she used to be on about eight hours a day.

Another girl, 14, isn't so sure. She used to spend at least 10 hours a day playing games and didn't eat much, either. Every minute spent eating, she says, was a minute lost gaming. And she's still having a hard time here at the camp, five days in.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #6: (Through interpreter) My hands get shaky. I can't concentrate.

SULLIVAN: So you're basically counting the days until you get your phone back.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #6: (Through interpreter) Yeah.

SULLIVAN: I ask her if she thinks being here will help her kick or at least contain her gaming problem.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #6: (Through interpreter) No, I don't think so.

SULLIVAN: Shim Yong-chool, the center's director, is more hopeful. She's just started, he says. He thinks she'll be better when the program finishes. And she'll also have access to counseling when she gets home, he says. That's not what he's worried about.

SHIM YONG-CHOOL: (Through interpreter) The percentage of teenagers dependent on Internet and smartphones is actually increasing, so our organization is expanding and trying to get ready to accept more students.

SULLIVAN: In May, the World Health Organization formally added gaming disorder to its list of recognized addictions, which may help the issue get the attention it's been lacking in the U.S.

Hanyang University's Dr. Roh.

SUNGWON: (Through interpreter) If the U.S. doesn't want to follow Korea's footsteps in terms of game addiction, it's important for the U.S. government and relevant experts to pay attention, to educate people and screen out addicted students.

SULLIVAN: And, he says, provide adequate therapy for those diagnosed with game addiction.

Michael Sullivan, NPR News, Seoul.