



Social assistance for poor children in urban China: A qualitative study from the recipients' perspective☆



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ABSTRACT

In urban China, the recipients' experiences living with social assistance are neglected. This article examines social assistance for poor children in urban China, mainly by interviewing parents and children from urban Dibao households in Tianjin and Chengdu. It finds that the recipients' feelings included gratitude, helplessness, shame and exclusion which reflected limited policy effect on material support and social exclusion prevention. It argues that the recipients are under-served and current social assistance policy for poor children which only includes differentiated aid and education aid is inadequate and should be further improved.

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1. Introduction

The transitional period of socio-economic development with the adoption of a market based economy in China has aggravated poverty and children as the most vulnerable group in the society have been deeply affected. As childhood is the most vital period during mental, physical and social development, short-term deprivation of nutrition, health care, education and affection in childhood could have long-term irreversible consequences (Gürses, 2009). It is undeniable that poor children are more likely to grow up to become poor adults (Corack, 2006; Esping-Anderson & Sarasa, 2002). However, in China child poverty has long been neglected in government social policies. This is mainly because China has a strong tradition of the family responsibility. Policy makers tend to have a persistent belief in the natural and legal role of the family in providing for its members and they are concerned that if government undertakes welfare responsibilities, it may erode the welfare function of the family to support their children and elderly. Another concern advanced by the government is the financial affordability. Up to now, there's no official statistics about the total number of poor children in urban China. Zhang and Tang (2009) estimated that the total number of urban poor children is about 5.56 million through monetary approach. Among these poor children, the majority was children from urban poor households who receive urban minimum living allowance and its number was 4.925 million, accounting for more than 22% of urban people who receive minimum living allowance, and the others were orphans, Street children and AIDS children. Shang and

Wang (2012) used multi-dimensional poverty approach to study child poverty issue in China and found that poor children were faced with poverty in several aspects, including subsistence, health, protection, development and participation.

At present, social assistance for poor children in urban China mainly consists of two aspects. On one hand, Ministry of Civil Affairs has introduced and spread the differentiated aid of urban minimum living allowance system (Dibao) since 2003,¹ which means that the poor urban households with children, disabled people and other vulnerable people can get slightly more benefits than other households. The increased benefits are usually 5%–30% of the minimum living allowance (Li, Han, Xiao, & Zhang, 2007). Differentiated aid provides additional cash transfer for special difficult group such as disabled people, children and old single people in urban Dibao households and aims to help them solve special difficulties. On the other hand, in 2004 and 2005, the *Notice on Further Improving Education Aid for Juveniles with Special Difficulties* and the *Administration Measures for National Student Scholarship* were issued by central government respectively, meaning that the education aid has been basically established. Education aid is a locally regulated program specifically for poor children. It provides the exemption of tuition fees and other miscellaneous expenses as well as stipends to urban

¹ In order to deal with the problem of urban poverty during the transitional period, a new social assistance policy- minimum living allowance system (Dibao) has been established in all the urban areas since 1999. Urban Dibao is an institutionalized social assistance program in which any urban household, as long as its average income is below the standard set by local government, is entitled to receive the minimum living allowance from the government, no matter whether the citizen has physical working capacity or not. Urban Dibao household in this article refers to urban household who receives minimum living allowance.

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Dibao households and other low-income families so as to prevent their children from dropping out of school (Huang, 2003). Existing studies and evaluations on social assistance in China demonstrate how social assistance programs, especially Dibao, have done in relieving the distress of urban poor households (Gao, 2008; Zhang, 2011). Children are considered to be common individuals in these households and are not given special attention. This indicates that intra-household distribution and children's experiences living with social assistance are neglected in these studies. This paper intends to examine the social assistance for poor children from the recipients' perspective and analyze how successful are the social assistance programs, especially differentiated aid of urban Dibao and education aid, in protecting these poor children, which will inspire the improvement of current policy. Poor children in this study refer to children living in urban Dibao households. Other poor children who take up a small proportion, such as orphans and Street children are not the research objects.

2. Methods

The study applied a qualitative research approach, focusing on understanding how the recipients (including parents and children from urban Dibao households) felt about benefiting from differentiated aid of urban Dibao and education aid. The study was conducted in two cities of China, namely Tianjin and Chengdu. Tianjin is one of the four Municipalities (municipality directly under the central government) in China and belongs to eastern area with developed economic level. While Chengdu is the capital city of Sichuan Province, and Sichuan is an underdeveloped area in Western China. The assistance policies and the composition of the recipients in Chengdu and Tianjin are similar to other cities with larger population. Thus, the two cities can be considered as representative to some degree. In addition, the analysis on living conditions of urban Dibao households through surveys on these two cities in 2008, which provides useful information and a foundation for this study, shows that poor children from urban Dibao households in Tianjin and Chengdu both took up more than 20% of urban Dibao population. This implies that a large number of children live on subsistence benefits in both cities, and these poor children are vulnerable to risks and faced with deprivation in nutrition, education and social development. The main social assistance programs for poor children have been developed since 2004 and are relatively sound in two cities (There are some differences in the programs and relative definite regulations in the two cities can be seen from Table 1). The recipients therefore have had nearly several years' experiences with social assistance for poor children.

A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants for this study. Staff in civil affairs departments who are responsible for reviewing social assistance searched the files of urban Dibao households to identify subjects who met the research criteria. The criteria included: (a) households currently receiving differentiated aid of urban Dibao and education aid; (b) households with children who are in and above junior high school in order to reach a better communication. 34 samples are selected from eight communities in Tianjin and 38 samples are selected from eleven communities in Chengdu. At last, 30 urban Dibao households were interviewed in both cities because some households declined to participate. One parent and one child were chosen from each household. The characteristics of parent and children participants can be seen in Tables 2 and 3. The standard of the purposive sampling on determination of sample size is the data it provides instead of the size in the statistical sense. Strauss and Corbin (1990) proposed that, the important standard measure for ending the field interview was whether "theoretical saturation" was reached. In this study, exploration still needs to be made for many experience categories because the experience is never saturate, but only for the category for analysis, when more than twenty households were interviewed, it found that the existing core topics were constantly repeated by following narrators, which indicates that the sample capacity is almost theoretically saturate. A semi-structured interview was designed to obtain information.

Table 1

Relative measures of social assistance for poor children in Tianjin and Chengdu.

	Differentiated aid of urban minimum living allowance system	Education aid
Tianjin	Raise the benefit by 10% for households receiving minimum living allowance with students at the stage of compulsory education	Exemption of tuition fees and other miscellaneous expenses for poor students at the stage of compulsory education and high school Poor students have to apply to their school and then schools have to verify the application. If their applications are approved they can get relative assistance.
Chengdu	Raise the benefit by 20% and 40% for households receiving minimum living allowance with students at the stage of compulsory education and high school respectively	Exemption of tuition fees and other miscellaneous expenses for poor students at the stage of compulsory education and high school. Stipend for poor students who choose to live in dormitories Families receiving minimum living allowance should go to relative residential districts to input their information before new semester. When new semester begins, schools have to verify the information in system and provide the education aid actively

Notes: The above measures can be found from relative regulations on social assistance in the above two cities. See the websites of Bureau of Civil Affairs in Tianjin and Chengdu.

Parents answered open-ended questions including the expenses on their children's living and education, the assistance they had received and what kind of assistance they wanted from the government; children were asked about their health, emotion, expenses on studying, relative activities, the assistance they had received and what assistance they thought would be helpful, they were also asked about whether they were discriminated or excluded in the school.

All the interviews were conducted in the respondents' homes. Respondents were informed, prior to commencement, that participation in the study was entirely voluntary and they could refuse to take part, or not answer any questions with which they were uncomfortable, at any point during the interview. Names of respondents were replaced

Table 2

Characteristics of parents participants (n = 60).

Characteristics	Frequency/range (mean)
Gender	
Male	27
Female	33
Age	
Range (mean)	35–56(43.2) years
Employment status	
Unemployed	27
Temporary jobs	23
Regular jobs	10
Education background	
Primary school	19
Junior high school	28
Senior high school	13
Relationship status	
Married	38
Divorced	13
Widowed	9
Family income	280–1030(520) Yuan
Family expense	300–1810(895) Yuan
Residential housing area	15–90(38) square meters
House with bathroom	
Yes	50
No	10
Duration of receiving Dibao	1–9(3.8) years

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