



The extent and risk factors of child poverty in urban China – What can be done for realising the Chinese government goal of eradicating poverty before 2020



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ABSTRACT

This paper examined the extent of child poverty in urban China, and how the structural and individual risk factors impact on child poverty in urban China using China Health and Nutrition Survey data. Child poverty is measured using a multidimensional deprivation approach. Eight dimensions that are indicative of children's basic rights as ratified in UNCRC (1989) are used to identify poor children, including nutrition, water, sanitation, health, education, information, participation and protection. The empirical results show that the hukou type of the family and parents' work units as the structural risk factors exerted the greatest influences on child poverty in urban China. These structural barriers for realising children's basic rights should be removed in order to achieve the Chinese government political goal of eradicating poverty in China in the next five years before 2020.

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1. Introduction

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was recently adopted by the world leaders at the United Nations in New York on Sep., 2015. The 2030 Agenda comprises 17 new sustainable development goals (SDGs). Among these global goals, eradicating poverty is listed as the first goal that aims to halve people living on less than \$1.25 a day. Following the 2030 Agenda, the Chinese president Xi Jinping made an ambitious commitment in the poverty reduction and development forum, held in Beijing on Oct., 2015 that the Chinese government will endeavour to eradicate poverty in China in the next five years.

The consequences of poverty on children have been widely acknowledged to be detrimental and permanent. As Ortiz et al. (2012, p.1) argued, 'While an adult may fall into poverty temporarily, falling into poverty in childhood can last a lifetime – rarely does a child get a second chance at an education or a healthy start in life. Even short periods of food deprivation can impact children's long-term development. If children do not receive adequate nutrition, they grow smaller in size and intellectual capacity, are more vulnerable to life-threatening diseases, perform worse in school, and ultimately, are less likely to be productive adults. Child poverty threatens not only the individual child, but is likely to be passed on to future generation, entrenching and even exacerbating inequality in society.'

Therefore, this is why the UNICEF advocated that poverty reduction should begin with children (UNICEF, 2005, 2012).

In the global and domestic context, to realise the ambitious goal of eradicating poverty in China in the following next five years, the Chinese government puts forward the accurate anti-poverty strategies. Measuring poverty and targeting the poor population accurately are considered as the most important strategies to eradicate poverty. It can also be known from the existing literature that the accurate measurement of poverty is the basis for poverty research and for making effective anti-poverty policies or programmes. As Gordon and Nandy (2012, p.92) argued, 'valid and reliable measurement is a prerequisite for effective and efficient evidence-based policy interventions to end child poverty. Without good measurement of child poverty, resources may not be targeted at the groups of children in greatest need, and it will prove impossible to evaluate the cost-effectiveness of anti-poverty policies'.

However, reviewing the existing literature, there is surprisingly little research focusing on child poverty measurement in China, especially on children living in urban areas of China, which results in a big knowledge gap. As Qi and Tang (2015) discussed, the existing studies are more concerned with children in China's poor rural areas with few studies focused on poor children living in urban China. The lack of research on the measurement of child poverty in urban China makes it difficult for the policy-makers to know what is the extent of child poverty in urban China, what groups of children in China are now in greatest need, and how future anti-poverty policies or schemes can be made

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and implemented in order to realise the Chinese government poverty eradication goal in the next five years.

Therefore, this paper aims to fill in the existing knowledge gap by investigating the extent and risk factors of child poverty in urban China. This paper has the following three contributions. Firstly, it will adopt a multidimensional deprivation approach to accurately measure child poverty in urban China and to examine its extent, which not only fills the existing knowledge gap but is also an improvement of the limited existing studies on child poverty measurement in urban China that just utilise a unidimensional income approach. Secondly, this paper will also examine how the household or individual demographic or socioeconomic characteristics associated with child poverty, i.e. how the structural and individual risk factors impact child poverty in urban China. Finally, the findings of this paper will have significant implications for policy makers to better realise the government goal of eradicating poverty before 2020.

The following paper is organised as follows: [Section 2](#) will review and discuss the existing studies on child poverty measurement in China, in particular to discuss the limitations of the income approach and why a multidimensional deprivation approach should be used for measuring child poverty. [Section 2](#) will also review the risk factors of child poverty, and explain what risk factors will be included in the following analysis; [Section 3](#) will introduce the dataset used for the analysis, i.e. the China Health and Nutrition Survey data (CHNS); [Section 4](#) will present the results about the extent and risk factors of child poverty in urban China; and finally [Section 5](#) will summarise the whole paper and discuss what policy makers can be done for better eradicating child poverty in urban China.

2. Literature review

2.1. Child poverty measurement

The few existing studies that measured child poverty in urban China adopted the income approach. Children are considered as living in poverty if their equivalised household income below an estimated income poverty line. [Lu and Wei \(2002\)](#), for example, measured child poverty in urban China using the urban household survey data, collected by the Chinese Academy of Social Science (CASS) in three different years, i.e. 1988, 1995 and 1999. The income poverty line designed by the National Bureau of Statistics of China (NBS) was used for identifying the poor children. Some other studies identified the poor children using China's urban minimum living security standard line (also known as Dibao line) ([Chen, Benyon, & Maher, 2005](#); [Solomon, Ren, Xu, & Maher, 2004](#)). Recently, [Qi and Wu \(2015a\)](#) measured child poverty in urban China using the relative income poverty line, defined as 50% of median household income.

However, measuring child poverty using these different income poverty lines has many drawbacks. Firstly, children have varied needs which rely on not only household financial resources, but most importantly the accessibility of basic infrastructure and public services provided by the surrounding environment ([Qi and Wu, 2014, 2015b](#)). Secondly, the income approach does not provide the information that how children living below the income poverty line experience poverty or whether children's basic rights as ratified in the [UNCRC \(1989\)](#) are fulfilled or not. Three dimensions of children's rights are particularly stated, i.e. survival and development rights, the rights of being protected and the rights of participation. The convention set standards that all children have the rights to a minimum level of wellbeing including the right to water, nutrition, basic education, survival and to access infrastructure and services that are critical for children's development and future wellbeing. The concept of child poverty when defined in relation to the specified rights means not only the 'freedom from insufficient resources but also the freedom from material and social deprivation – premature death, hunger, malnutrition and the lack of access to clean water, sanitation, education, health care and information' ([Gordon, Nandy, Pantazis, Pemberton, & Townsend, 2003a](#), p.3). Thirdly, child poverty is a multidimensional concept that has many manifestations. As clearly

defined by [UNGA \(2006, para460\)](#) that 'children living in poverty are deprived of nutrition, water and sanitation facilities, access to basic health-care services, shelter, education, participation and protection, and that while a severe lack of goods and services hurts every human being, it is most threatening and harmful to children, leaving them unable to enjoy their rights, to reach their full potential and to participate as full members of society.'

Therefore, in child poverty measurement, it is important to look beyond the income indicator, and to use indicators that can directly measure children's living standards and the effects of insufficient household resources or inadequate public service provisions for children ([Goodman & Myck, 2005](#); [Minujin, 2012](#); [Minujin & Nandy, 2012](#); [Roelen & Gassmann, 2008](#)). As UNICEF noted that, 'measuring child poverty can no longer be lumped together with general poverty assessments which often focus solely on income levels, but must take into consideration access to basic social services, especially nutrition, water, sanitation, shelter, education and information.' ([UNICEF, 2007](#), p.1).

This paper thus will adopt a multidimensional deprivation approach to measure child poverty in urban China. Based on children's basic rights as ratified in the [UNCRC \(1989\)](#) and the child poverty definition by the United Nations ([UNGA, 2006](#)), eight dimensions will be developed for accurately measuring child poverty in urban China, including nutrition, water, sanitation facilities, access to basic health-care services, shelter, education, participation and protection. [Section 3](#) will detail the cut-offs for each deprivation indicator and dimension, and will clearly define the poor children.

2.2. The risk factors of child poverty

All potential risk factors and explanations of poverty can generally be divided into two categories, according to [Spicker \(1993\)](#), i.e. the individualistic and the structural factors. The individualistic factors or explanations attribute poverty to the characteristics of the poor ([Spicker, 1993](#)). For example, people might become poor because of their lower human capital- mental illness, physical disability, lower education, lower skills or 'laziness' or as a result of the wrong decisions people make. From this perspective, children might become poor because of parents' individualistic factors, for example, parents have poorer educational levels, poor health or laziness. The structural factors attribute poverty to class, race, minority religions, and geographical inequalities or to the structure of power including economic, political and elite structures ([Alcock, 2006](#); [Spicker, 1993](#)). As [Gordon and Spicker \(1999, p.56\)](#) argued, 'Structural explanations consider poverty as the outcomes of the structures or power, resources or opportunities available to different groups in the society and to the way in which social process create deprivations or block opportunities for escape from poverty for some groups or individuals. Structural poverty may result from casualties of a competitive society, from inequality or from structured disadvantage or from the exercise of power.'

The analysis of the risk factors or causes of child poverty should not only look at the individualistic factors of child poverty such as the health conditions or educational status of parents. Structural risk factors that may potentially affect children's living standards in urban China should also be examined, such as the hukou type of the family or parents' work units or occupations. Parents' deprivations as a result of the structural factors will affect children's living standards, and therefore, how these risk factors impact on child poverty and deprivation should be analysed. For example, as a result of the structural exclusions of the household registration system (hukou), many existing studies show that most rural migrants living in the urban cities of China tend to have lower income, poorer working conditions and poorer living conditions ([Bosker, Brakman, Garretsen, & Schramm, 2012](#); [Li, 2013](#); [Song, 2014](#); [Vendryes, 2011](#); [Wu, 2013](#); [Zhang, 2010](#); [Zhang & Treiman, 2013](#)). And therefore, children living in migrant families without an urban hukou are more likely to suffer from poorer living conditions, meanwhile, these children also face the difficulties in equally accessing to the basic infrastructure and social services, such as in accessing the urban local public schools

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