



Research article

Parental absence, child victimization, and psychological well-being in rural China



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ABSTRACT

Using cross-sectional data regarding 793 rural children aged 10–16 in Sichuan Province of China, the present study examined the preceding-year rates of seven forms of child victimization (physical assault, property crime, peer/sibling victimization, child maltreatment, sexual victimization, witnessing family violence, and exposure to community violence) and poly-victimization, and found children's victimization experiences increased as the degree of parental absence increased (from the presence of two biological parents, to parental migration and parental separation and divorce). Elevated levels of depression were also found among left-behind children and children of separated or divorced parents, compared to children living with both biological parents; and child poly-victimization added to the risk of child depression. Certain demographic characteristics (being a boy and younger) and parental factors were associated with child victimization in rural China. This study highlights the need for child protection in rural China, and in particular for parent-absent children.

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1. Introduction

Considerable attention has been given to the phenomenon of left-behind children in China – the massive numbers of children being left behind in rural hometowns by one or both parents who migrate to urban areas for economic reasons. Nationwide, over 61 million children are left behind; meaning that one child in five has experienced separation from parents (All-China Women's Federation, 2013; Zhao, Liu, & Wang, 2015). The physical absence of parents due to migration is temporary, because most plan to rejoin their children sooner or later. Although migrant parents are physically absent and do not participate in child care, most of them try to maintain communication, support, and psychological connection with their children and other family members left behind. Like long-term parental absence caused by divorce or separation, short-term parental absence may have various effects, positive or negative, on the well-being of left-behind children.

Long-term parental absence is often associated with poorer child well-being because of insufficient care and nurture (Amato & Anthony, 2014; Amato & Keith, 1991). Studies suggest that left-behind children are adversely affected by the migration of their parents, and are at greater risk of accidental injury (Shen et al., 2013), psychological abuse and neglect (Cheng et al., 2010; Li, Zhong, Chen, Zhong, & Pan, 2015), mental health problems (Guo et al., 2015; Shen et al., 2015; Zhao et al., 2014), and behavioral problems (Fan, Su, Gill, & Birmaher, 2010; Gao, Li, Chan, Lau, & Griffiths, 2013), than counterparts

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whose parents are available. The effect size of the impacts measured by Cohen's d has ranged from 0.13 to 0.31 in previous meta-analyses, which is very small to small in magnitude (Wang & Mesman, 2015; Wang et al., 2015). However, with little attention paid to child victimization and safety issues in the meta-analyses, findings on the impact of parents' migration on left-behind children are inconclusive.

Some studies have even found that parental migration within China may have a positive effect on left-behind children's education. For example, unlike some other developing countries (e.g., the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Mexico, and the Caribbean), Chinese migration has been found to affect children's educational opportunities positively because it provides more resources (Morooka & Liang, 2009). The preference for sons in Chinese culture, particularly in rural traditional culture, has weakened (Zhou, Wang, Zhou, & Hesketh, 2012). Many migrant parents realize the importance of school and encourage their children, girls included, to achieve a higher level of education by providing greater financial support (Chen & Sun, 2015). Left-behind children have been found to perform better academically than non-left-behind children (Sun et al., 2015).

The quantity and quality of parental involvement are related to the well-being of children left-behind (Wang & Mesman, 2015). Researchers have often used non-left-behind children as a comparison group; however, no study has recognized that some non-left-behind children are also affected by parental absence caused by divorce, separation, death, or parental incapacity. To assume homogeneity in non-left-behind children is to fail to address the differences between short-term parental absence caused by internal migration and long-term parent absence. Thus, more intergroup comparison is needed to understand how children are affected.

1.1. Parental absence and child victimization

Previous studies on the victimization of left-behind children have generally focused on child abuse and neglect by parents or caregivers. The findings from different countries are mixed. A study conducted in the Philippines reported fewer abuses among left-behind children because the higher socioeconomic status of families with overseas workers is a protective factor against child abuse (Asis, 2006). In China, on the contrary, left-behind children in rural areas seem to be more likely to experience psychological abuse and neglect because of the high stress levels of their caregivers (Cheng et al., 2010; Han, Qin, Ma, Pan, & Jiao, 2015). Other types of violence against children, such as peer or sexual victimization, as well as poly-victimization (four or more types of victimization; Finkelhor, Hamby, Ormrod, & Turner, 2005), are rarely studied in the context of rural China.

An increasing number of studies are focusing on the full range of victimization resulting from parental absence. The National Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence (NatSCEV) comprehensively investigated the entire spectrum of children's exposure to violence, crime, and abuse in the US, and found higher rates of poly-victimization among children in single-parent and stepparent families (Finkelhor, Turner, Hamby, & Ormrod, 2011). Research suggests that in China, children living with a single parent are more likely to be a victim and to suffer lifetime exposure to poly-victimization (Chan, 2014).

Single parents, low socioeconomic status, poor parent-child relationship, and harsh discipline are risk factors of child maltreatment (Stith et al., 2009). Parental migration changes the family structure and childcare arrangements, which may have an effect on the well-being of left-behind children. Multigenerational coresidence is common in rural areas and many grandparents are the primary caregivers of children (Zeng & Xie, 2014). Thus, when parents are absent, grandparents often serve as primary caregivers. However, no study has yet examined whether grandparenting serves as a protective or risk factor of child victimization in rural China.

1.2. Parental absence and children's psychological well-being

Children are more vulnerable and may encounter more difficulties in their lives if their parents are absent. Children of divorced families have been found to have lower psychological adjustment than children living with married parents (Amato, 2001). Also, a large body of literature on left-behind children's psychological adjustment suggests that the left-behind experience increases the likelihood of mental health problems, such as depression, anxiety, loneliness, lower self-concept, etc. (Guo et al., 2015; He et al., 2012; Shen et al., 2015; Su, Li, Lin, Xu, & Zhu, 2013). Child victimization is found to affect children's mental health. Cole et al. (2015) identified peer victimization as a risk factor for children's depressive symptoms in a longitudinal study using an ethnically diverse sample. Chan (2013) identified an association between child victimization and mental health among urban children in China using a large, representative sample. This mechanism may be helpful to explain the higher risk of psychological problems among children with absent parents in rural China.

1.3. Purpose of the study

The current study compared left-behind children with non-left-behind children living with two biological parents; and also compared the former with children of divorced and separated parents in rural Sichuan Province in China. The objective of this study was to examine the past year victimization and poly-victimization rates across these three groups of rural children. The possible protective or risk factors related to child victimization were investigated. We hypothesized that child victimization increases the risk of depression.

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