



The psychological and behavioral outcomes of migrant and left-behind children in China



Hongwei Hu^{a,1}, Shuang Lu^{b,2}, Chien-Chung Huang^{b,3}

^a School of Humanities and Social Science, North China Electric Power University, 689 Huadian Road, Baoding, Hebei Province 071003, PR China

^b School of Social Work, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, 536 George Street, New Brunswick, NJ 08901, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 29 May 2014

Received in revised form 24 July 2014

Accepted 25 July 2014

Available online 2 August 2014

Keywords:

Child development

Psychological outcome

Behavioral outcome

China

Migrant children

Left-behind children

ABSTRACT

With China's urbanization and its development in market economy, mass rural-to-urban migration greatly expanded over the past decades. Consequently, migrant and left-behind children have greatly increased in number. Using data from the 2011 Survey on Social Integration of Migrant Children in Wuhan, China, this study examined psychological and behavioral problems of migrant and left-behind children. Results showed that left-behind and migrant children had poorer psychological and behavioral outcomes than local children. However, the difference disappeared after controlling for family and school characteristics. The findings provided implications on improving psychological and behavioral outcomes of migrant and left-behind children through family intervention and education policy reform.

© 2014 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Since the late 1970s, China's fast urbanization, industrialization, development of market economy and privatization have led to a large number of surplus agricultural laborers and urban–rural income disparity (Chen, Wang, & Wang, 2009; Wong, Li, & Song, 2007). As a result, millions of rural laborers have migrated to cities to look for better job opportunities (Jia & Tian, 2010). These migrant workers, who usually work in manufacture and service industries in private sectors, generally work longer hours yet receive lower incomes and less welfare benefits than urban residents (Li & Li, 2007; Wong et al., 2007). Because of its great magnitude and social impact, the migrant worker population in China has triggered increasing discussion of the impacts of migration on individuals, families, and communities (Cai, 2003; Fan, Fang, Liu, & Liu, 2009; Wong et al., 2007).

With the increasing number of migrant workers, migrant children, who are relocated in urban areas with their migrant parents, as well as left-behind children, who are living without one or both of their parents that migrated to work, have substantially increased in number. According to the estimation of All-China Women's Federation (2013),

China now has approximately 61.03 million left-behind children, which represents an increase of 2.42 million since 2005, and this accounts for 21.88% of the Chinese child population today. At the same time, China also has 35.81 million migrant children, which represent a 41.4% increase since 2005, and this comprises 12.84% of the current Chinese child population.

Due to the transition in their internal family environment and external social context, these children face great challenges in psychological and social development. Migrant children face challenges of living in a new social and cultural environment in cities, although their internal family structure may not have changed (Fan et al., 2009). Facing the marginalization by the urban economic and welfare system and cultural differences, migrant children can hardly integrate into urban society (Chen et al., 2009; Li & Li, 2007).

On the other hand, as their parent(s) moved to other places for work, left-behind children have to adapt to challenges resulting from internal family structural change, such as emotional difficulties in separation from parents and inadequate parental care (Fan et al., 2009). Almost 20% of migrant parents left their children in their hometown when they were less than one year old. Among these parents, 30% left when their children were between one to three months in age (All-China Women's Federation, 2013). In addition, left-behind children's long-term separation with parent(s), as well as inadequate family supervision and emotional care, greatly impacts their life quality, as well as their physical and psychological well-being as they grow-up (All-China Women's Federation, 2013; Su, Li, Lin, Xu, & Zhu, 2012; UNICEF, 2010).

E-mail addresses: whuhhw@126.com (H. Hu), slu@ssw.rutgers.edu (S. Lu),

huangc@rci.rutgers.edu (C.-C. Huang).

¹ Tel.: +86 312 7525164 (O), +86 138 032 76903 (M).

² Tel.: +1 848 932 7520x28256.

³ Tel.: +1 848 932 7520x28246.

The above issues are linked to certain institutional factors. In the 1950s, the Chinese central government established the *Household Registration System* that registered all Chinese citizens as residents in a specific region, which usually was their birthplace. The system also required changes in the residency to be approved by both the local government at the person's place of origin as well as the government at the destination (Liang & Chen, 2007; Wong et al., 2007). Particularly, the registration system divided citizens into two types – agricultural (generally rural residents) and non-agricultural (urban residents) (Chan, 2009). Depending on the type of registration, individuals' access to public services differed from each other. Urban residents were entitled to a wide range of benefits, such as healthcare and housing subsidies, and opportunities, such as higher-paid jobs and advanced child education, that were rarely available to rural residents (Cai, 2003; Wong et al., 2007; Xu, Guan, & Yao, 2011). At the same time, individuals' "local" residency was also associated with eligibility for benefits provided by local governments; people that were registered in one place could rarely enjoy benefits at another place (Chan, 2009).

On the one hand, the urban–rural disparity motivated rural residents to move to cities in search for a better life for themselves or their families; on the other hand, these migrants could hardly enjoy the same benefits as other urban residents in the city because of their "agricultural" registration status and "non-local" residency. This was also true for their children and other family members (Wong et al., 2007; Xu et al., 2011; Zhao, 2000).

In response to issues and challenges that the migrant population and their children face, the Chinese government initiated a series of policy reforms with respect to the control of population migration and welfare programs in relation to migrant populations. In the late 1980s, the Chinese central government began to allow individuals to move and stay at a different place from their registered residency temporarily. In the early 1990s, with the decentralization of the Household Registration System governance, local governments in some big cities, such as Beijing and Guangzhou, began to abolish the differences between agricultural and non-agricultural registration status, while the distinctions between local and non-local residents still remained (Chan, 2009). Later on during that decade, Chinese governments began to provide benefits, such as pension, occupational injury insurance, and basic healthcare, to migrant workers in state-owned enterprises and big private corporations (Xu et al., 2011). These initiatives, however, have not fundamentally changed the Household Registration System, and had limited effects on improving migrant worker and their children's well-being. The place of residency and type of registration remain significant determinants of individuals' access to public services and life opportunities (Chan, 2009).

2. Literature review

2.1. Migration and child development

Family migration can generate significant impacts on child development. Parents' migration often results in family dysfunction and adverse child psychological outcomes (Steinhausen et al., 1990; Stevens & Vollebergh, 2008). Children affected by migration are at a great risk of suffering from a broad range of psychological problems, such as depression, anxiety, loneliness, and negative self-perception; they may also exhibit behavioral problems (Jia & Tian, 2010; Pottinger, 2005; UNICEF, 2010). Researchers have shown that migration leads to vulnerability and a loss of wellbeing for migrant children, as well as an increased risk in morbidity (Gwyther & Jenkins, 1998; Kouider, Koglin, & Petermann, 2014; Rosado, Johnson, McGinnity, & Cuevas, 2013; Slesinger, Christenson, & Cautley, 1986; Washbrook, Waldfogel, Bradbury, Corak, & Ghanghro, 2012). Although migration of children is a global issue, migration of children in China is a unique problem. China's Household Registration System and mass domestic migration is a special case in the world; therefore, making China's migration of children and its

following consequences different from other countries. This paper will examine the extent of previous findings on children from migrant families in China.

Studies found that, for instance, although living in cities, migrant children's life experience was limited within school, home, and neighborhood, which led to their insufficient communication with urban residents, inadequate social skills, and self-perceived marginalization (Guo, Yao, & Yang, 2005; Li & Li, 2007). Migrant children also had an averaged 0.16 points higher level of loneliness (1.95 vs. 1.79, on a 1–4 scale) than children who were neither migrant nor left-behind (Fan et al., 2009).

Left-behind children are also faced with similar problems. Rural children whose parents had both migrated were found to have lower level of life satisfaction and higher level of loneliness than non-left-behind children. Children with one parent who had migrated also had higher level of loneliness than non-left-behind children (Su et al., 2012). Similarly, Jia and Tian (2010) suggested that left-behind children were more likely to suffer from loneliness and more likely to experience severe loneliness than non-left-behind children. Fan et al. (2009) also argued that children whose parents had both migrated had lower level of self-esteem, higher level of depression, and higher level of loneliness than children who were neither migrant nor left-behind.

There are, however, mixed findings with respect to the effect of migration on child psychological outcomes. Guo et al. (2005) found that many migrant children were very positive toward life and believed that their condition would improve in future. Some studies also depicted that left-behind and non-left-behind children did not differ significantly in self-perceived happiness, in which positive coping strategies and social support might be the protective factors (Hu, Liu, Shen, & Fan, 2008; Zhang, Tang, Hu, & Xu, 2006).

2.2. Family environment and child development

Family environment plays a significant role in child psychological and social development. Due to migrant parents' long work hours and relatively low level of education, migrant parents often lack time and skills to tutor their children's homework; the insufficient parent–child communication makes migrant children more likely to feel lonely than urban children. Parents are also concerned more about children's academic performance than their psychological and emotional needs (Guo et al., 2005).

A similar result was found for left-behind children. Jia and Tian (2010) pointed out that left-behind children's relationship with their parents was substantially weaker than non-left-behind children, which in turn might lead to psychological problems. Children who were raised by grandparents, had poorer relationships with parents, or infrequently communicated with parents, would encounter more frequent and severe loneliness. Su et al. (2012) also found that more frequent parent–child communication was linked to children's higher level of life satisfaction, academic satisfaction and happiness.

2.3. School environment and child development

Under China's Household Registration System, children's access to and quality of education can vary significantly among regions (Liang & Chen, 2007). Students who want to enroll in public schools need to be registered and residing in the same school district since local governments are responsible for paying for educational expenses. Migrant children, who usually are not registered in urban areas, are often denied access to or enrolled with additional charges in urban schools (Dong, 2010; Liang & Chen, 2007; Wong et al., 2007).

As the migrant child population continues to grow, China's Ministry of Education articulated that migrant children should primarily be enrolled in local schools in cities (Liang & Chen, 2007). Many local governments, such as the government of Hubei Province, also began to require local urban schools to admit migrant children to guarantee

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/6834122>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/6834122>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)