



Children of migrant parents: Migrating together or left behind

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Children
Migrant parents
Children migration
Left behind
Hukou
Social insurance

ABSTRACT

Migrant parents in China are increasingly choosing to bring their children with them to their migration destination from their place of origin. This paper uses a 2016 migrant survey data to examine whether the likelihood of children living in their parents' migration destinations compared to those left in their places of origin has a correlation with parents' household characteristics, employment status and their participation in the social insurance scheme. Over all, older and better educated parents, longer migration history and intra-provincial move all predict higher likelihood of children moving with parents, the same as being the only child and born in destination cities, but not the child's gender. For the purpose of our analysis, children of migrant parents are disaggregated based on their urban or rural *hukou* status (household registration). Controlling for household characteristics, we find that migrant parents who have lower monthly savings, or who have access to local health insurance, or who do not have employment contracts are more likely to bring their children along if they are rural registered children. Access to pension could predict higher likelihood of children migration. Improving social insurance schemes for rural *hukou* migrants to make them at par with those for urban *hukou* migrants can remove discrepancies in the likelihood of their children's migration.

1. Introduction

Overall the proportion of children moving from rural areas to cities along with their migrant parents has been rising in China (Fan, Sun, & Zheng, 2011). Estimates over the size of migrant children relative to those children who have been left-behind in their rural places of origin also show this trend. Duan and Yang (2008) analyzed the survey data from 2005 that sampled 1% of the national population and concluded that among all children of rural-to-urban migrants, 74% of children in the 0–14 year's age group were “left behind”. Studies of the 2010 census (Women's Union, 2013) found that the number of children migration had increased substantially across all age groups. Among migrants' children in the 0–17 age group, 63% were “left behind”.

The increasing proportion of rural to urban migrant children in cities, especially among younger age groups, suggests an increasing trend of migrants bringing their children along during migration. Internal migration in China is moving from “couple migration” to “family migration influencing migrant households' decision on whether to bring children with them or leave them behind with relatives at their place of origin. As family is the basic unit of social life, increasing family migration with children suggests certain changes in migrants' livelihood that allows them to be able to migrate as a family, rather than leaving some family members behind. A better understanding of migrants

parents' decisions on their children's migration could suggest directions for policy interventions.

Two reasons might explain this changing pattern. First, at the household level, migrant parents have improved their socio-economic conditions, among other things, and therefore able to afford to bring their children with them to their destination city. For example, if one parent has a pay rise, they may realize that rather than sending remittance, it is better for the other parent to quit the low paying job and stay home to take care of their child in the city. Secondly, it has to do with the change in public policies that support migrant families to bring their children to the city. These policies may include easing of restrictions on access to schools for migrant children, providing better employment security for parents, or better social insurance coverage of migrant families.

In this paper we want to understand the factors affecting the decision of the migrant parents on their children's whereabouts. Specifically, by controlling for the differences at the household level, including parents' socio-economic characteristics and children's demographic characteristics, we are mostly interested in examining differences in family arrangement due to the influence of public policies. Both the 2008 Labor Contract Law of China (Gallagher, Giles, Park, & Wang, 2015) and China's social insurance reforms (Yao & Kim, 2015), have improved the legal contract conditions for migrant employees, and

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.habitatint.2018.05.001>

Received 13 July 2017; Received in revised form 14 January 2018; Accepted 3 May 2018
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significantly expanded the pension and health care coverage among rural registered population. We wonder, are parents with better employment security and better social insurance coverage more likely to bring their children to their destination city?

We use data from the 2016 “National Migrant Population Health and Family Planning Survey”. We separate the children of migrant parents between those who have an urban *hukou* and those with a rural *hukou*. The children with urban *hukou* will primarily be those whose parents are urban-to-urban migrants whereas the children with rural *hukou* will be mainly those whose parents are rural-to-urban migrants. Although social security coverage has been expanded significantly among rural registered migrant population, it still has its limitations comparing to coverage for urban registered migrant families. Our findings call for public policies that target more specifically to rural migrant families in order to make the urbanization processes in China more just and equitable.

2. Literature review

In international labor migration, the stringent migration policies in destination countries often make it difficult for families to migrate together. Within China, the *hukou* policy restricting population mobility between urban and rural areas similarly involve family separation due to migration. China's internal migration since the economic reform has witnessed three phases, including individual migration, couple migration and family migration with children (Fan et al., 2011). In individual migration, one parent, usually the Mom, stay home to take care of Children. In couple migration, children are often left behind with relatives which allow couples to work elsewhere (Chen, Liu, & Mair, 2011). Only in the more recent increasing family migration, children are brought along. We wonder what factors have led to the increasing family migration with children.

Existing empirical literature suggests that children of migrating parents are hurt no matter if they join their parents or if they are left behind. Migrant children fare worse than non-migrant ones in both origins and destinations (Chen, Fromentin, Salagean, & Zou, 2017; Wu & Zhang, 2015). In migration origins, the “left-behind” children could benefit from remittances sent home by parents which can increase their economic wellbeing, thus paying for schooling and better housing; however, they grow up without one or both parents, and were found to be more likely to have emotional and psychological difficulties that lead to poorer health, poorer academic performance, and greater problems of socialization (Biao, 2007; Wen & Lin, 2012; Ye & Pan, 2011). In migration destinations, although they live with their parents in cities, and benefit from better services and advanced living environment, children of migrant parents confront different opportunities and challenges, including barriers to accessing social services, sharing their parents' economic insecurities, and social and cultural dislocation. Their physical health, mental health, and school performance (Huang, Song, Tao, & Liang, 2016; Sun et al., 2010; Liang & Chen, 2007) all lag behind their urban counterparts. In general, it is agreed that the “parent's migration” does not lead to these disadvantages of their children, rather it is the institutional divide created by the household registration system (Chan, 1994) in China (Biao, 2007; Xu & Xie, 2015). These disadvantages faced by children of migrant parents are likely to have detrimental long-term consequences both for children themselves, and for urban society as a whole, in that they are potential seeds of social conflict (Ren, 2017).

Rather than studying the “impact of migration” as most studies on migrant children have focused on, this paper asks what has led to migrant parents' decision differences between bringing children along and leaving children behind. The large scale internal migration in China's recent urbanization processes has facilitated the systematically collected large dataset about migrant families, and further provided opportunities to quantitatively investigate factors affecting the family arrangement decisions during migration. We review two sets of factors

that may influence the migration family arrangement decision in the literature, one related to household characteristics and the other related to public policy changes.

2.1. Household characteristics and decision on children's migration

The household strategy theory (Massey et al., 1993) contends that migration is primarily household decisions to manage risk. The same theory was also applied to internal migration in China (Taylor, Rozelle, & De Brauw, 2003). More recent studies found that since China's economic situation, while more recent migrants are attracted to cities more for an urban lifestyle (Hu, 2012). The prevalence of family migration with children suggests a shift in motivation away from purely economic reasons. Other benefits of family migration with children, include the possibility for mothers to provide child care, to improve their children's educational performance by helping them with their schoolwork, and to support their husband's employment (Maurer-Fazio, Connelly, Chen, & Tang, 2011). Moreover, giving birth to babies in destination cities was increasing since 2012 as previous lengthy procedures required by the “one child policy” to obtain birth permits at *hukou* origin loosened up. Couple migration can turn into family migration without any additional move involved.

Household demographic characteristics, could influence the decisions on migrant households' family arrangement. Women migrants usually have a much stronger desire to settle in their destination cities (Pessar, 2003, p. 29), and mothers are generally the ones who tend to put more effort into sustaining relationships with the children when they are away working, compared with fathers (Jolly, Bell, & Narayanaswamy, 2003), we suspect that migrant women should be more likely to bring children along to cities. Older parents might be more matured and thus prioritize living with children more than those younger ones. Higher number of household members in destinations could be easier to share childcare responsibilities within households. Our empirical studies should be able to examine these hypothesis.

Parents' socio-economic characteristics could also make an impact. The living cost of migrant families with children are more likely to be higher than those without children. Migrant parents with children living together have to negotiate between time spent on working for more money and time spent for child care. Fully employed parents might find it hard to take care of their children in destination cities. Studies have found that an unemployed migrant parent taking care of housework could actually lower the living cost (Roberts, Connelly, Xie, & Zheng, 2004) as their income are generally low. The higher need for child care for small children usually requires mothers to quit their jobs, especially for infants who require breastfeeding. The low participation rate of women in the workforce is generally linked to child care responsibilities. Maurer-Fazio et al. (2011) found that migrant women with preschool-aged children were 16.3 percent less likely to work than migrant women with young school-age children and 30.4 percent less likely to work than married migrant women with no co-resident children.

Child age, and the best interest of a child as perceived by her parents (Bushin, 2009), are important factors in the family's decision as to bring the child with them or leave them behind. For migrant families with school age children, children's access to education opportunities in city are critical in family arrangement decisions (Chen & Feng, 2013). Internal migrants in China usually face a series of constraints to live with their children in urban destinations originated from their non-local *hukou* status, including their children's limited access to public schools (Xiong, 2015) and higher cost of childcare service, among others. Migrant parents have followed varied strategies on bringing children to destinations at different age. Some parents bring their preschool-age child along while sending her back to the place of origin when their child reach school age, to avoid the higher cost of school fees in the city (Connelly, Roberts, & Zheng, 2011). Others may elect to leave their

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