

Research to Practice Paper

The Impact of Rural-Urban Migration on China's Children

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Lessons of Community and Compassion: Overcoming Social Isolation and Building Social
Connectedness Through Policy and Program Development

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Introduction

In this essay, I will be discussing the effects of rapid urbanization and rural-urban migration in China on the children that are left behind, as parents turn to urban-based work. I will begin by explaining the nature of rural-urban migration and the state registration system in China. Second, I will conceptualize the social isolation of China's left-behind children. Third, I will explain China's current governmental policies, programs, and future plans. And finally, I will argue for greater policies implemented at the national level to help combat social isolation and feelings of loneliness among China's left-behind children.

Rural-Urban Migration and the State Registration System in China

When Deng Xiaoping became the leader of the Communist Party of China, he implemented the Reform and the Opening-up Policy, which ultimately accelerated urban population growth tremendously.¹ Consequently, in the last generation alone, about 270 million Chinese labourers have left their villages for work in the cities, which has led to a mass voluntary rural-urban migration movement.² While the last generation's migration was largely influenced by state policies, the start of the initial rural-urban migration was largely due to the Opening-up Policy, foreign investment that created a multitude of employment opportunities at higher wages, and the central economic policy pushing the development of township enterprises resulting in the growth of small- and medium-sized towns.³ In addition, the Restoration of University Entrance Examination created an opportunity for the next generation to study, which incentivized rural

¹ Guanglun Michael Mu and Yang Hu, *Floating Children and Left-Behind Children in China*, (The Netherlands, Sense Publishers, 2016), 7-8.

² "Little Match Children." (October 17th, 2015). *The Economist*. Accessed December 1, 2017.

³ Guanglun Michael Mu and Yang Hu, *Floating Children and Left-Behind Children in China*, 7-8.

workers to migrate to the city.⁴ Finally, the transformation from state socialism to market socialism abolished the state-owned enterprises and laid off workers, leading rural migrants to flee to factories and workshops in city suburbs.⁵ By the end of 2015, the urbanization rate exceeded 58% and continues to increase as more rural-urban migration occurs.⁶

While economic and state reforms have increased China's GDP and urbanization rate, rural-urban migration has come at a cost for the wellbeing of children, because many parents must leave their children behind. This is primarily due to the registration state reform, also known as the hukou, and the facilities and accommodations of factory work. The hukou system acts as an internal passport, giving people access to various services; however, a rural child's registration system will not grant them the same services in the city, so it will become very costly for the parents to support the child.⁷ Even if parents defy the hukou system, such as by sending their children to unlicensed schools, many urban parents work 12 or more hours per day or live in dormitories where children are not allowed, so it is difficult for them to look after their children.⁸ Therefore, because of the registration system and difficult work conditions, parents must leave their children behind with kin caregivers, or extended families and friends, in order to provide a better future for their children.

Conceptualizing Social Isolation of China's Left-Behind Children (LBC)

The critical problem with this arrangement is that the caregivers are often not well suited to take care of the children; even when they are, the absence of the child's parents can also lead to

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ "Little Match Children." (October 17th, 2015). *The Economist*. Accessed December 1, 2017.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

social isolation. As much as 22% of all Chinese children are categorized as LBC, with 29 million living with grandparents and over 2 million living alone.⁹ However, the grandparents' old age, lack of financial support, and poor health often prevent them from providing quality care, leading some children to act as the caregivers.¹⁰ While the grandparents and other extended caregivers allocate more time to farm work, children's nutrition and safety suffers since they are not being supervised. There is also a lack of discipline, because caregivers are reluctant to displease the child given the circumstances, as well as a lack of emotional communication, because children are rarely asked about their feelings.¹¹

Lacking an equally meaningful relationship with their new caregivers, children are often left feeling like a burden, resulting in feelings of loneliness and isolation. In a 2011 study by Jingzhong et al., children interviewed offered comments such as, "I felt lonely when I saw other children have their parents' company while I have an aged grandpa with me."¹² This suggests that the grandfather does not provide a fulfilling and adequate relationship for the child. Another child said, "I'm not happy because I can't live with my parents; my life is loneliness."¹³ As John Cacioppo explains in the first chapter of "Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection," an individual residing in a tight knit community but without a sense of belonging and connection to others is lonely.¹⁴ Thus, LBC not only require greater emotional support to foster

⁹ Zhao C., Hesketh T., Zhou X., Wang F., Jiang M., and Hesketh T. 2017. "Care for left-behind children in rural China: A realist evaluation of a community-based intervention". *Children and Youth Services Review*. 82: 239-240.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Jingzhong Y, and P Lu. 2011. "Differentiated childhoods: impacts of rural labor migration on left-behind children in China". *The Journal of Peasant Studies*. 38 (2): 362-69.

¹² Ibid., 372.

¹³ Ibid., 373.

¹⁴ Cacioppo, John T., and William Patrick. 2008. *Loneliness: human nature and the need for social connection*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co.

a sense of belonging in their small villages, but they also need to connect with other children who are going through the same or similar situations.

Moreover, another study found that “whether children were left behind or not, significantly affected their likelihood of loneliness,” and that LBC are consequently at risk of adverse psychological consequences.¹⁵ Sub-populations who are particularly at risk of severe loneliness include those brought up by grandparents, those who have bad relationships with their parents, those who have poor economic status, and those with low frequency of communication with their parents.¹⁶

Furthermore, even if LBC are provided with sufficient care by their new caregivers, the presence of their parents is crucial for their early development, which may prevent loneliness in the long-term. This is because “adolescents maintaining strong attachment relationships with their parents are more able to develop attachment relationships with close friends,” which suggests the relationship they foster with their parents will dictate those with others.¹⁷ Thus, children who are deprived emotionally, whether by their parents or another source in their life, “are likely to develop insecure attachment to their caregivers and insecure is in turn associated with depression risk in adolescents.”¹⁸ Thus, it is crucial that their emotional needs are taken care of in order to establish healthy relationships and prevent loneliness.

¹⁵ Jia, Zhaobao, and Wenhua Tian. 2010. "Loneliness of left-behind children: a cross-sectional survey in a sample of rural China". *Child: Care, Health and Development*. 36 (6): 816.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ He, Bingyan, Jingyi Fan, Ni Liu, Huijuan Li, Yanjun Wang, Joshua Williams, and Kaishing Wong. 2012. "Depression risk of 'left-behind children' in rural China". *Psychiatry Research*. 200 (2-3): 310.

¹⁸ Ibid.

China's Current Policies, Programs, and Future Plans

China's policies and programs have proven insufficient to help the situation, because so few specifically address the problem. While some local authorities have implemented policies to meet children's basic needs, "a national policy document and response is still lacking."¹⁹ The role of the government remains minimal as well in the child welfare system.²⁰ Thus, there are no social services to address children's needs directly. While All-China Women's Federation (WF) works closely with the government to pay more attention to LBC, most of their work has only been through schools.²¹ Some of these programs are indeed beneficial for LBC; however, few of them run on a national scale and few "reach the very bottom of society where the most urgent support is needed."²² For example, in Kaihua County, 21 clubs were established by the WF in 2013, which decreased loneliness and anti-social behaviour and improved school achievement; however, there were challenges in mobilizing financial resources and seeking support from local authorities.²³

There are also few measures meant to address the mental health of LBC in China.²⁴ While there are a few community based approaches, such as children staying with teachers during the week for tutoring services, this requires funds and is another emotional stress on the children.²⁵ The Chinese government said in 2016, that the State Council ordered local governments to build

¹⁹ Hu, Yang, Bob Lonnie, and Judith Burton. 2014. "Enhancing the capacity of kin caregivers and their families to meet the needs of children left behind". *China Journal of Social Work*. 7 (2): 140.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 141.

²² Jia, Zhaobao, and Wenhua Tian. 2010. "Loneliness of left-behind children: a cross-sectional survey in a sample of rural China". *Child: Care, Health and Development*. 36 (6): 817.

²³ Zhao C., Hesketh T., Zhou X., Wang F., Jiang M., and Hesketh T. 2017. "Care for left-behind children in rural China: A realist evaluation of a community-based intervention". *Children and Youth Services Review*. 82: 244-245.

²⁴ Jia, Zhaobao, and Wenhua Tian. 2010. "Loneliness of left-behind children: a cross-sectional survey in a sample of rural China". *Child: Care, Health and Development*. 36 (6): 817.

²⁵ Hu, Yang, Bob Lonnie, and Judith Burton. 2014. "Enhancing the capacity of kin caregivers and their families to meet the needs of children left behind". *China Journal of Social Work*. 7 (2): 138.

a database of LCB to protect their rights, and that those authorities are required to have one file for each child and it should be updated regularly.²⁶

Policy and Program Recommendations

First, a policy should be in place so that at least one parent must stay with a child while another goes to work in an urban setting. While there have been successful clubs and organizations that work to decrease loneliness among children, as mentioned earlier, studies have suggested that caregivers are unable to replace the unique role of children's parents, especially their mother. The specific relationship between the child and parent is rooted in the child's nature and without it, feelings of loneliness are unavoidable.²⁷ If one parent is unable to stay with the child in their rural setting, then the new caregivers must have access to clubs and organizations that provide children with emotional support to combat isolation. I suggest implementing clubs at the national level, such as the one described above by the WF and village community members, which aim to promote social connectedness by bringing children together. There should also be social work services implemented at the national level to meet children's emotional needs and help them work through feelings of abandonment. If both parents must leave the child, then they should also be required to at least stay in daily contact with their child via telephone or other means of technology.

Second, I agree with Guanglun Michael Mu and Yang Hu, who suggest that "people who have been living in a given place for a certain number of months (as evidenced by purchase of property or rental contract) and intend to continue to live in this place can apply for residency of

²⁶ "China's Plan to Catch Up with its Left-Behind Children." (March 27, 2016). South China Morning Post. Accessed: December 1, 2017.

²⁷ Hu, Yang, Bob Lonnie, and Judith Burton. 2014. "Enhancing the capacity of kin caregivers and their families to meet the needs of children left behind". China Journal of Social Work. 7 (2): 137.

the place,” which allows their children access to schooling and health facilities.²⁸ However, I believe that parents should be able to apply for residency with their children upon arrival, which would eliminate the need for children to be left behind.²⁹ Finally, I also agree that the provision of social services should promote inclusive policies that value and promote cooperation among different government departments. For example, the Ministry of Education supports the schooling of LBC, but they need to work together with the ministry of transportation to ensure that students have a means to get to school. Health care services are crucial as well since children are unable to focus at school if they are unwell, emotionally or physically.³⁰

Conclusion

To conclude, while the period of urbanization and mass rural-urban migrations have created great economic gains in China, the country’s children have severely suffered as a result. As I have argued, new caregivers are often not well suited to take care of LBC and the role of parents is often difficult if not impossible to replace. Therefore, more diverse and enforceable policies must be applied at the national level to ensure that children do not suffer from social isolation as a result.

²⁸ Guanglun Michael Mu and Yang Hu, *Floating Children and Left-Behind Children in China*, (The Netherlands, Sense Publishers, 2016), 169.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 169-170.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

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