

An Overview of China's Left-behind Children

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As featured in Lianhe Zaobao, 3 Sep 2017

Due to China's rapid industrialisation and urbanization over the past few decades, millions of able-bodied men and women from rural villages and small towns left their families behind, in search of better work opportunities elsewhere. Many of them are parents and their separation from children gives rise to the "left-behind children" phenomenon that has attracted much attention.

Some readers may ask, why don't these migrant parents bring their children along? The answer to this question lies with the household registration system of China. As early as in the 1950s, the Chinese government established the household registration system, which divided the entire population into agricultural and non-agricultural; local and non-local. A child's household registration (or hukou) status depends on his or her parents' and has nothing to do with where the child was born. The hukou system is closely interlinked with provisions of public services and social welfare. Without a local hukou, it is very difficult for migrants and their family members to access public education, health care, housing subsidies and other social services and welfare available to local hukou holders.

In recent years, local governments have begun reforming the hukou system. Yet, their policies regarding migrant children's access to public schools often require a number of documents such as property ownership certificate (or tenancy agreement), proof of legal and stable employment, proof of non-violation of birth planning policies, and other certificates. Many cities also require a minimum number of years of contributions to the social security system. It is not clear what percentages of migrant parents can actually meet all the requirements. Across cities and even within the same city but across time, policies specific to the privately-run schools serving migrant children often vary, which has impacted the survival and stability of these schools.

In addition to the barriers set up by the hukou system, the working conditions and environment of migrant parents made it challenging to migrate together with their children. They work long hours for meagre wages often as factory workers, construction workers, waiters and waitresses, cleaners, or couriers. Neither do many migrant parents have time to take care of their children, nor can they afford the expenses of raising a child in a city.

How many left-behind children are there in China? According to an estimation based on the 2010 census, which defines left-behind children as those below age 18 and with one or both parents away, there were 61.02 million left-behind rural children. However, a new figure published by the Ministry of Civil Affairs on November 9 in 2016 puts the number of left-behind children at 9.02 million. The new estimation defines left-behind children as those under age 16 and those whose both parents are doing migrant work or one parent is doing migrant work and the other does not have the capability to care for children.

Though it is difficult to know the exact number of left-behind children, it is certain that a large number of children are growing up in separation from one or both parents for extended periods of time. How will this influence their lives?

Newspapers and social media often depict stories of accidents involving left-behind children, violence against left-behind children, left-behind children committing suicide, or tragedies of crimes committed by left-behind children. The picture presented by these stories is however incomplete. Social science studies based on empirical evidence tell a more comprehensive and complicated story.

On one hand, doing migrant work increases household income, which enables parents to provide their children with better food, health care, and education. The 2010 census data show that the enrolment rates are higher among rural left-behind children than among rural non-left-behind children.

On the other hand, the absence of one or both parents may cause harm to children's psychological wellbeing. Studies based on small-scale survey found that, compared with non-left-behind children, left-behind children more often feel lonely, afraid, disappointed, anxious, and even abandoned. However, other studies using nationally representative samples and more rigorous statistical methods found that, left-behind children do not differ from non-left-behind children in terms of depressive symptoms or self-perception.

Modern technology has facilitated the contact and communication between migrant parents and left-behind children. Based on my interviews and surveys in rural Hubei, many migrant parents maintain frequent contact with their children via phone calls, messages, and internet-based instant messengers to monitor their health and school performance. Most left-behind children understand clearly why their parents left for migrant work. Many of them particularly girls think that their parents are leading a hard life as migrant workers, and they feel they must study hard to not let their parents down. Frequent parent-child communication, better financial status, and the coping strategies of migrant parents and left-behind children may all help to mitigate the negative impacts of parent-child separation.

Overall, left-behind children do not necessarily fare worse than non-left-behind children. However, researchers found that children living together with migrant parents in urban areas report levels of cognitive ability and educational expectation that are closer to those of urban children, leaving left-behind children far behind. It is the urban population that has benefited most from China's economic growth, leaving the rural population behind. Children growing up in rural China, whether they are left behind or not, are not able to enjoy the quality education and other public resources offered by cities. To a certain extent, migrant children can benefit from the richer and better resources and environment of the cities.

Policy makers should try to reduce and eliminate various discrimination and differential treatment based on hukou status, help and encourage more migrant parents bring along their children to the city, and ensure that migrant children enjoy equal opportunities of education and development as urban children. Shanghai did better than other cities in providing migrant children access to compulsory education. In recent years, the Shanghai government had simplified the procedure of enrolling migrant children in school, and provided special funds to require public schools and encourage private schools to accept migrant children.

In addition to institutional discrimination, migrant workers and migrant children also suffer social discrimination from the public. Some urban residents look down upon migrant workers and migrant children and attribute more crowded public transportation and higher crime rates to migrants. Reducing social discrimination is one of the requisites to ensure that migrant workers and migrant children integrate into cities. Schools, communities, media, and the government should promote interactions and understanding between local residents and migrants and between urban children and migrant children. This includes advocating the tolerance and appreciation of different dialects, accents, food habits, and other cultural practices.