

Left-behind Children in Chinese Urban Areas

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“Left-behind children” are a pronounced social issue in China. Colossal attention has been paid to left-behind children in Chinese rural areas. However, as its economy advanced, the issue also surfaced in urban areas. Compared with their rural counterparts, urban left-behind children face more complicated psychological challenges and social pressures, which have the potential to negatively affect their physical and mental growth as well as their future social integration. This article focuses on delineating the special characteristics of urban left-behind children and looking into the issues confronting them and the factors contributing to their predicament.

Keywords: Left-Behind Children; Urban Areas; China

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Introduction

INITIALLY, “left-behind children” in China referred to those being left in rural areas after their parents moved to work outside their native places as migrant workers. They garnered extensive attention because of the horrific difficulties they experienced, both material and mental (1). As of 2020, there were about 4,177 million left-behind children in Chinese rural areas (2). While focusing on them, people are less likely to note urban left-behind children, their counterparts in cities and towns. Due to China’s vast territory, there are tremendous regional variations in economic development in this country. As towns and smaller cities have fewer job opportunities and lower levels of education compared with major cities, many younger parents may choose to seek employment and further education in the

latter and leave their children to the care of their parents or relatives. As a result, the number of urban left-behind children has kept growing in the past few decades. According to the report “*What the 2020 Census Can Tell Us About Children in China: Facts and Figures*,” there were 298 million children aged 0–17 in China in 2020, among whom 25.16 million were left-behind children in urban areas, representing 8.4% of the total population of this group (2). It is evident that left-behind children in urban areas have better living conditions than their peers in rural areas. Yet, this is also the main reason for the covertness of their issues (3). This article seeks to delineate the characteristics of urban left-behind children and expound on the issues they face and the factors contributing to their predicament in order to spark more interest in this group in academia.

Characteristics of Urban Left-Behind Children

In the State Council of China's 2016 "Opinions on Strengthening the Care and Protection of Left-Behind Children in Rural Areas," Left-behind children are defined as juveniles under the age of sixteen with both parents working as migrant workers or with one parent doing so and the other having lost the competence to be a guardian (4). The definition of urban left-behind children varies in existing literature. A relatively widely accepted one is that an urban left-behind child is a juvenile with registered residence in the city or town who has lived with the absence of parents or one parent for more than six months and is entrusted to other family members or non-family members. There is a clear distinction in the family background between rural and urban left-behind children. The parents of rural left-behind children have no choice but to leave their home places to work somewhere else for the family's very existence, whereas those of urban ones do so mainly for personal development needs, such as working or studying abroad and seeking employment in major cities, or simply being appointed to an important position in a separate place. Hence, urban left-behind children can enjoy better resources, including better living conditions, higher standards of education, and more responsible care from grandparents or other relatives (5). Their characteristics as a special group differ from those of their rural counterparts.

Acceptable Home Economic Conditions

Urban left-behind children typically have better home economic conditions than their rural counterparts. They enjoy better living and development environments, including decent housing, abundant choices of food, novel digital devices, and higher-quality education (6). In 2018, the government of the Yinzhou District of Ningbo City conducted a thematic survey on the lives of urban left-behind children through questionnaires, interviews, and other methods. The survey sampled urban left-behind children from five junior secondary and 10 primary schools in this district. The survey results showed that most participants received proper life care. In response to the question "What do you think of your home living conditions?" 56% of them reported that their family living conditions were good with satisfactory provision of food, clothing, shelter, and transportation; 35% stated that their home living conditions were acceptable; only 9% said that their home circumstances were subpar (7). Nevertheless, material support does not necessarily mean a guarantee of a quality life. For the majority of urban left-behind children, more parental companionship and emotional support are what they really crave (8).

Enjoying Relatively Ample Care and Concern

Generally, urban left-behind children receive more sufficient care than their rural counterparts. The majority of them are taken care of by their grandparents in the absence of their parents. As opposed to rural grandparents who are busy making a living while looking after their grandchildren, urban grandparents often do not have this economic pressure and can act as full-time caregivers for their grandchildren. Moreover, these senior family members tend to give meticulous care to the young children out of a compensation mentality because the latter are experiencing

a lack of parental companionship (8). Grandparenting may sometimes appear indulgent, but it indeed represents genuine concern for the young generation. In addition, the absent parents have their own ways of expressing love. They tend to compensate for their absence and manifest parental concern by providing more attractive items, such as toys, electronic gadgets, famous-brand clothing, etc. (9).

Heavier Academic Burdens from Urban Education

Urban left-behind children have access to higher-quality education in urban schools, which can provide advanced educational resources including excellent teaching staff, abundant teaching materials, and modern educational facilities (10). On the other hand, this advantage also constitutes a challenge for this group in that higher standard of education leads to more intense academic competition. They need to work extremely hard to excel. For most of them, the academic pressure is overly heavy given the lack of parental help and support in this regard (11). In 2013, a research group at Beihua University's School of Education Sciences conducted a survey on the issue of urban left-behind children, drawing the sample from six junior secondary and six primary schools in Jilin city. The survey results showed that urban left-behind children had a variety of academic problems, such as academic anxiety, poor study habits, improper learning methods, and lower academic performance, among others. Only 13% of students polled were satisfied with their learning situations (against 27% among non-left-behind children); 60% of them were not very satisfied with, 2.1% dissatisfied with, and 4.9% indifferent to their performance. More than half of them expressed concern over their exam grades in fear of making parents worried about their school progress. 39% of them were ranked as low performers, which was much higher than the percentage of 24% in non-left-behind children (12).

Psychologically Vulnerable

Urban left-behind children live in a more complicated social environment than their rural counterparts. While being exposed to multifarious information and interpersonal relationships, they cannot talk through perceived perplexities with their parents instantly, which substantially increase psychological vulnerabilities among them (13). The incidence of negative emotions, such as loneliness, anxiety, depression, and insecurity, is high. According to the findings of Song's and his co-workers' 2019 investigation of the issue of urban left-behind children in Changsha City, Hunan Province, negative personality tendencies like pessimism and low self-esteem are common in students of this group. Among all participants, only 35.80% perceived a moderate or above level of security, 39.05% had a moderate or high level of responsibility, and 41.42% had a moderate or above level of self-confidence, whereas the percentages among non-left-behind children were 47.35%, 52.98%, and 47.35%, respectively. Urban left-behind children scored lower on all personality and mental health scales (14).

Major Issues with Urban Left-Behind Children and Their Harms

Excessive Material Compensation

As per information provided by the National Bureau of Statistics in 2023, the per capita disposable income of Chinese urban residents was 47,122 CNY, while that of rural residents was 18,748 CNY; the per capita consumption expenditure of urban residents was 32,994 CNY, whereas that of rural residents was 18,175 CNY (15). These figures reveal considerable gaps in the living standards between urban and rural populations. Due to their relatively higher home incomes, parents of urban left-behind children choose to compensate for their absence from home with more material provision for their kids, bringing potential hazards to the latter's psychology, values, and self-motivation.

Parental companionship and support are crucial for the psychological health of the child. They concern not only material comforts but, more importantly, emotional and spiritual nourishment (16). When parents buy their kids toys, electronic devices, and other objects to make themselves less sorry about leaving them behind, the latter may feel satisfied for a short time, but their feelings of loneliness and being neglected will not vanish. Instead, they may gradually accumulate and develop into psychological problems (17). Moreover, material compensation is likely to foster skewed values in children. Over time, they may develop the misconception that material satisfaction is the single solution to all issues (12). Continuous reinforcement of such a conception can lead to a disregard for life purpose in pursuit of inordinate material comforts in the kids' future lives. Also, long-term irrational material rewards may weaken the child's initiative and self-motivation (18). If they can always effortlessly get whatever they like from parents, they may gradually lose the motivation to strive for a better future on their own and be deprived of the chances to develop capacities for coping with prospective difficulties and challenges.

Internet Addiction

Due to parental absence from their home lives, urban left-behind children tend to use internet-based media as an alternative companion. The use of the internet has become a central component of their lives. As a result, internet addiction has become a pronounced issue among urban left-behind children, who are typically equipped with more advanced digital devices (19). The harms of digital-device dependence and internet addiction to this group are many, including hazards to their physical and mental health, academic performance, and more.

The damage of internet addiction to the physical health of urban left-behind children is most direct and explicit. Long-term screen use in mobile gaming, social media browsing, and video viewing can easily cause vision decline or even more severe eye conditions. The sedentary lifestyle brought on by digital gadgets can lead to other physical problems, such as cervical pain (20). In addition, the indulgence in virtual reality may deprive the kids of their time for outdoor activities and physical exercise, which can impair their overall physical fitness (21).

Internet dependence is also detrimental to the mental health of urban, left-behind children. Inordinate use of digital devices and the internet reduces their face-to-face communication with other individuals, leading to their tendencies towards introversion, aloofness, and withdrawal, resulting in social deficits (22). Given their immature judgment, they are susceptible to

the influence of negative online sentiments. In the meantime, they may become victims of online bullying, risking developing psychological problems such as senses of inferiority, anxiety, and depression (23). Worse still, internet addiction may induce misconduct among them. To secure illegitimate use of the internet, they may resort to lying, cheating, or even theft (24). Problematic behaviors like these not only damage their personal image and interpersonal relationships but also have long-term negative impacts on their future development.

In addition, internet addiction has an adverse effect on the academic performance of urban left-behind children. Young internet addicts may stay up late playing video games or aimlessly browsing the internet, resulting in their inability to concentrate in class during the day and, consequently, a decline in academic achievement. Poor academic performance can further reduce their interest in learning and exacerbate their dependence on the internet (25). Over time, this vicious cycle will tremendously impair their learning attitudes and capacities.

Potentially Hazardous Grandparenting

In the context of the expansion of life expectancy, grandparenting is becoming increasingly common in China, a supportive practice that facilitates the younger generation's participation in employment competition. According to "China Child Welfare and Protection Policy Stocktaking 2020," 96% of left-behind children in China were raised by grandparents (26). This parenting style makes a difference to intergenerational relationships as well as the family structure, posing special impacts on the lifestyle and mental state of left-behind children (27).

Grandparents of urban left-behind children are mostly full-time careers of their grandparents and typically overly indulgent with them, likely to foster selfish and willful personalities in the young kids. They may adopt unprincipled accommodation even when encountering unreasonable demands from their grandchildren, which is not favorable to the character building of the latter (28). Furthermore, older people are more traditionally minded and less receptive to new ideas, thus more disposed to hold to outmoded educational notions. That is an impediment to the development of inquiring, risk-taking, and innovative mentalities in children (29). In addition, the physical condition of older people is also a potential risk in grandparenting. As they age, the grandparents are most likely to have health issues like degenerated vision and memory. These issues may compromise their competence in taking care of their grandchildren, resulting in safety hazards.

Peer Discrimination

Peer discrimination against urban left-behind children derives from social prejudice against this group. In traditional Chinese family-focused culture, the completeness of the family is highly valued (30). The "parentless" left-behind children are often labeled as "problem children" or "unruly children" (31). As a result, they have lower "status" than non-left-behind children in the school and are susceptible to the latter's exclusion. Peer discrimination can not only bring them direct psychological harm but also have repercussions for their future growth.

Being at the critical stage of emotional and psychological

development, left-behind children are particularly sensitive to the attitudes of their peers. They are likely to internalize the negative comments from peers when facing their constant mocks and other exclusive behaviors and develop the misperception that they are truly inferior and unworthy of love and respect. This self-negating mindset can seriously undermine their self-worth and confidence and may even lead to the ideation of self-destruction (33). At the same time, peer discrimination can overly instigate the defense mechanisms in left-behind children, resulting in their extreme reactions, either aggressive or evasive. Some of them may choose to respond with violence or resort to criminal acts; others may opt to escape into the virtual world to seek a sense of identification and belonging, further exacerbating their social alienation (34). According to Du et al.'s 2012 research on the relationship between aggressive behavior and loneliness in urban left-behind children, there was a significant correlation between social anxiety and aggression behavior as well as its sub-factors such as hostility, physical aggression, anger, and verbal aggression (35).

Additionally, peer discrimination has negative impacts on the development of social skills and interpersonal capabilities in left-behind children. Peer exclusion deprives them of experience in establishing sound relationships with other people, which may lead to their difficulty in social integration in adulthood (36). Social skill deficiency can potentially cause problems for their career development and even marital relationships in the future. In Song and his co-workers' 2019 survey in Changsha City, 13.02% of urban left-behind children polled claimed that they had few or no good friends, and 43.49% said they had a limited number of good friends. The figures were 5.96% and 38.41%, respectively, among their non-left-behind peers (14).

Factors Contributing to the Predicament of Urban Left-Behind Children in China

Social Factors

The growing number of urban left-behind children is a direct consequence of the unbalanced economic development in China. As per the "Report on Regional Economic Development in China (2019-2020)," there were huge economic divides between eastern and western China and between southern and northern China. In 2000, the GDP of the eastern, central, western, and northeastern regions represented 53.44%, 19.15%, 17.51%, and 9.90% of the national GDP, respectively. In 2019, the corresponding figures were 51.88%, 22.20%, 20.82%, and 5.10% (37). There are limited employment opportunities in economically backward areas, whereas the demands for labor forces are robust in economically developed regions. To pursue more promising jobs and higher levels of income, many young parents opt to move to developed cities for employment but leave their kids in places of their registered residence (also known as Hukou), where the latter are entitled to free public education.

The government and society tend to focus their attention on the left-behind children in rural areas because the issue there is a starker reality due to the lower levels of living conditions and education in rural China. Compared with their rural counterparts, urban left-behind children enjoy a better material life. That by no means indicates that their lives are void of challenges.

Instead, their issues are more hidden because of their different living circumstances. Since the basic living and education provision for them is guaranteed, what urban left-behind children suffer is more of an affective deficiency, which is not as intuitive and explicit as the difficulties faced by their rural counterparts. This is the main reason why the government and society are less concerned about this group.

In response to the issue of left-behind children in rural areas, the central government has released a series of papers, such as "Opinions on Strengthening the Care and Protection of Left-Behind Children in Rural Areas" (4) and "Opinions of the State Council on Further Improving the Care and Service System for Left-Behind Children and Children in Need in Rural Areas" (38). Nevertheless, no policies targeted at urban left-behind children have been put forward. Meanwhile, for the local governments, the governance of urban left-behind children is not included in the existing public affairs management systems, and there is a lack of effective coping measures for this issue (10). The local authorities in certain regions mandated that the communities and schools be accountable for the wellbeing of this group but failed to provide them with the necessary funding and resource backing (39).

School-Related Factors

School psychological support is of special significance for urban left-behind children. Nevertheless, schools in China are inclined to prioritize student academic success and concentrate all resources on preparations for high-stakes examinations (40). Most of them do not include psychological health education in their curricula, let alone establishing specialized psychological support mechanisms for left-behind children. The lack of psychological health education leads to their inability to navigate psychological challenges like loneliness and depression (41). Furthermore, schools do not pay sufficient attention to creating an inclusive campus atmosphere that encourages peer support for left-behind children (42). The dearth of peer support is a major contributor to their difficulty adapting to school and mental health issues. Research has shown that peer support is beneficial for the social adaptation of left-behind children and that insufficient peer support as well as severe peer exclusion, a more devastating factor, can induce a high level of loneliness in them, leading to their maladaptation in school (43). In addition, many schools do not have dedicated files for left-behind children, which could build up a profile of them, including their home situations, academic levels, and mental states (44). Without such files, it is difficult for the school to administer individualized care and education to each of them.

Teachers play a pivotal role in the day-to-day school life of urban left-behind children, having the potential to give them efficacious assistance in building confidence, developing senses of self-worth, and enhancing social skills, in addition to providing routine instruction and tutoring (45). Nonetheless, a portion of them lack adequate understanding of the peculiarities of urban left-behind children. They tend to focus attention on the latter's academic performance as they do on other students, disregarding their special psychological needs due to their separation from their parents (46). This is particularly unfavorable to those low-achieving, left-behind children. Moreover, heavy

workloads of the teacher, a consequence of large-size class-based instruction, contribute to their failure to pay special attention to each individual left-behind child (47). Additionally, guidance and support from specialists like psychological counselors are typically unavailable to teachers in their interactions with left-behind children (9). The lack of professional intervention not only lowers the effectiveness of education for left-behind children but also makes the chance of timely addressing their crises slim.

Family-Related Factors

In the course of the child's growth, their communication with adult family members is of vital significance for their academic progress as well as character building and value identification. Proper guidance from the family is the steppingstone to their developing into healthy, positive, and responsible individuals capable of navigating life challenges. Evidently, face-to-face communication with parents is not always accessible to left-behind children. Although ever-advancing communication technology could make up for the inadequacy, most parents have failed to make full use of modern tools to establish regular, positive communication with their kids after separation. Parent-child communication occurs only when the left-behind child is in trouble or experiencing a decline in academic results and is usually fraught with blame and criticism, substantially exacerbating the disappointment and helplessness of the child (48). Dou interviewed certain families in Dongchangfu District, Liaocheng City, Shandong Province, in his 2022 research on the home education of left-behind children. In response to the question about their communication with their guardians, A, a left-behind child, said that he had little chance to talk to his parents, though he wanted very much to tell them his school experiences and that

he would rather disclose his mind to his friends in that his parents always appeared very busy and could not be held too long on the phone (49).

In the meantime, there are inadequacies in the communication between urban left-behind children and their temporary caregivers, mainly their grandparents. First, the generation gap is a barrier to the grandparents' understanding of the mind of the young child. Growing up in a totally different social context, the older generation has difficulty giving appropriate responses to the seemingly "complex" perplexities of their grandchildren (50). Second, there are limitations in the educational background and knowledge repertoire of some of the grandparents, which reduces the chance of their grandchildren getting timely help when encountering learning difficulties. Third, in the context of digital education development, the limited digital literacy of the older generation places them at a disadvantage in communicating with young children on their academic issues (51).

Conclusion

Amid the industrial transformation and economic development, there is a growing trend in the number of urban left-behind children in China. The issues they face have negative impacts not only on their own growth but also on the harmony and security of society as a whole. We anticipate more attention being paid to the challenges confronting them by all concerned. It is important for the government to come up with specialized policies to support the provision of favorable conditions for their healthy growth. Equally, other stakeholders, including communities, schools, and parents, should endeavor to help this group with the complications in their early childhood or adolescence by providing targeted education resources, psychological counseling, and more. ■

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