

Mental Health Issues in Chinese College Students as Former Left-Behind Children: A Literature Review

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Abstract: *The issue of left-behind children in China has been a consequence of its accelerated economic development in the past few decades. While there is a large body of literature on the physical and mental health states of this group, research on the impact of their early left-behind life on their future development, particularly on their future mental well-being, has been inadequate. This article is a literature review based on 40 prior studies of the mental health states of college students as former left-behind children in China. It encapsulates research topics, methodologies, and tools of these studies and draws the conclusion that these college students' past experiences as left-behind children have long-term impacts, primarily unfavorable ones, on their mental well-being. Also, the study summarizes the factors that possibly affect mental health in this group and proposes certain intervention suggestions.*

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Introduction

MENTAL HEALTH is about the state of emotional, psychological, and social well-being of the individual. A mentally healthy individual has the capacity to recognize and manage their emotions; establish and maintain intimate relationships with others; cope with stress and changes in life; and play various social roles in their cultural context (Bhugra et al., 2013; Fusar-Poli et al., 2020). A healthy mental state enables a person to properly perceive their own value and control over life, helping them develop a profound understanding of their internal psychological processes (such as emotions and motivations) and external behaviors (such as social interactions and workplace performance). Mental health is an integral part of overall well-being and substantively influences the physical health of the individual. Nevertheless, compared with physical problems, mental health issues are less easy to draw the attention of society.

Amid the accelerated economic development and advancement of urbanization in the past few decades, a massive population of rural labor forces left their native places to seek better employment opportunities in cities. According to the statistics of China's seventh national census, the country had a migrating population of approximately 376 million in 2020 (Lu et al., 2024). However, the majority of migrant workers were unable to have their underage children live with them due to the constraints regarding childcare, education, and living conditions. These children were left to the care of their relatives in home places and dubbed "left-behind children." The long-time separation from their parents and a lack of parental custody brought on a variety of challenges to their growth as well as many social issues, which has provoked widespread concerns in Chinese society. Early research in this area has focused on the short-term effects of the abnormal growth environment on the development of left-behind children in terms of educational opportunities, academic performance, physical health, and mental development. In recent years, a portion of researchers began to pay attention to the long-term effects of their experience as left-behind children because they have come to the realization that the negative impact of early parent-child separation may endure in the children's adulthood, despite the fact that the parents' employment in foreign places could successfully increase home incomes and input in child education, building a better foundation for their future development.

College students in China are often deemed a group with high risks of mental issues as they are at the junction of adolescence and adulthood, experiencing multiple kinds of pressures as a result of the change in the living environment, academic and employment challenges, and other factors (Yu, 2017). Many mental health education practitioners in Chinese colleges and universities observed that college students as former left-behind children

(hereinafter referred to as FLBC college students), compared with their non-FLBC peers, are more likely to suffer mental issues, such as low self-esteem, unstable emotional states, social withdrawal, and fear of developing a relationship with a member of the opposite sex (Zhang, 2006; Yu, 2017). A thorough understanding of the impact of the early left-behind life on mental health in them is of vital significance for improving their mental well-being and increasing their capacity to navigate challenges in adulthood. In this context, the present study focuses on investigating the long-term impact of childhood left-behind life experience on mental health in Chinese FLBC college students by encapsulating and analyzing existing research findings from the relevant literature.

An Overview of Prior Studies

This study sources literature from the database China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI). To ensure the academic quality of the included literature, only peer-reviewed articles published by journals listed in “A Guide to the Core Journals of China” and the Chinese Social Science Citation Index (CSSCI) were included in the screening process. “Left-behind children,” “left-behind life experience,” “college student,” and “mental health” are the search words. By December 10, 2024, 211 articles had been retrieved, among which 40 were identified as valid after duplicate articles and articles irrelevant to the research topic were removed.

The studies included in our review were published between 2012 and 2023. Among them, 19 discussed the overall mental health states or psychological qualities of FLBC college students, and 20 addressed the factors influencing their mental well-being and one explores the intervention measures for bolstering their mental states. Frequent words in the literature related to our research topic include mental resilience, subjective well-being, depression, social support, anxiety, suicidal ideation, and childhood traumas, manifesting the focuses of these studies. The overwhelming majority of the included studies adopt the method of quantitative analysis based on questionnaires (N=38); only two of them use the method of qualitative analysis based on interviews. Both comprehensive and non-comprehensive scales are employed as measurement tools by these studies. Comprehensive scales used include the Self-report Symptom Checklist 90 (N=8), General Health Questionnaire (GHQ) (N=2), Chinese College Students Mental Health Scale (CCSMHS) (N=2), and personality questionnaires (N=4). Non-comprehensive scales have specific focuses, including the resilience scales (N=10), social support scales (N=7), well-being perception scales (N=5), trauma scales (N=7), social adaptation scales (N=3), depression scales (N=6), self-esteem scale (N=4), suicidal ideation questionnaires (N=3), self-efficacy scale (N=3), anxiety scales (N=3), and more (**Table 1**).

Table 1. A Summary of Measurement Tools Used in the 40 Studies

Categories of Scales	Types of Scales	Subdivisions	# of Studies
Comprehensive scales	Self-report	Symptom Checklist 90 (SCL-90)	8
		General Health Questionnaire (GHQ)	2
		Chinese College Students Mental Health Scale (CCSMHS)	2
	Personality questionnaires	Eysenck Personality Questionnaire, EPQ	1
		Chinese Big Five Personality Inventory Brief Version, CBF-PI-B	1
College Students Personality Questionnaires		2	
Non-comprehensive scales	Mental resilience scales	The Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC)	6
		Resilience Scale for Chinese Adolescents (RSCA)	2
		Chinese Mental Resilience Scale (CMRS)	1
		Short Form of the Resilience Scale (SFRS)	1
		Social support scales	Social Support Rating Scale (SSRS)
		Perceived Social Support Scale (PSSS)	3
	Well-being perception scales	General Well-Being (GWB)	3
		Subjective Well-Being Scale	1
		Subjective Well-Being Questionnaire (self-developed)	1
	Trauma rating scales	Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ)	3
		Childhood Trauma Questionnaire - 28 item Short-Form (CTQ-SF)	3
		Social Trauma Questionnaire (STQ)	1
	Social adaptation scales	College Students Adaptability Inventory (CSAI)	2
		Chinese College Students Adaptation Scale (CCSAS)	1
	Depression scales	Self-rating Depression Scale (SDS)	4
		Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D)	1
		Beck Depression Rating Scale	1
	Self-esteem scale	Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (SES)	4
	Suicidal ideation questionnaires	Suicidal Behaviors Questionnaire – Revised (SBQ-R)	1
		Reasons for Living Inventory for Adolescents (RFL-A)	1
		Purpose in Life Test (PIL)	1
	Self-efficacy scale	General Self-Efficacy Scale (GSES)	3
	Anxiety Scales	Self-Rating Anxiety Scale (SAS)	2
		Interaction Anxiousness Scale (IAS)	1
		Obsessive Compulsive Inventory Revised (OCI-R)	1
		Adolescent Self-Rating Life Events Check List (ASLEC)	2
		Security Questionnaire (SQ)	2
	Coping Style Questionnaire (CSQ)	2	

Adversity questionnaires	Adversity Quotient, AQ	2
	Perceived Social Adversity Questionnaire, STQ	1
Buss-Perry Aggression Questionnaire (BPAQ-CCSV)		2
Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire, RSQ		1
The Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS)		1
UCLA Loneliness Scale		1
Self- Acceptance Questionnaire (SAQ)		1
Social Avoidance and Distress Scale (SAD)		1
Self-compassion Scale (SCS)		1
College Student Behavior Problem Scale (CSBPS)		1
Positive Affect and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS)		1
Positive Mental Characters Questionnaire (PMCQ)		1

Mental Health States of FLBC College Students

The literature reveals that the overall mental health standard of FLBC college students is significantly lower than that of non-FLBC ones (Zhan et al., 2016; Luo & Zhou, 2017; Zang et al., 2018; Cheng & Jiang, 2021). Specifically, there are higher detection rates of severe mental problems and common mental problems in the former than in the latter (Liu et al., 2015; Chen et al., 2017). FLBC college students are more likely to suffer from psychological disorders, including but not limited to somatization, obsessive-compulsive symptoms, inordinate interpersonal sensitivity, depression, anxiety, hostility, terror, paranoia, and psychoticism (Yang et al., 2014). These findings suggest that the negative impacts of the child’s early left-behind life are not limited to their childhood but may extend to their adulthood. The mental health issues of FLBC college students are not only harmful to their academic life but also hamper their interpersonal communication and future career development. Prior studies have looked at the mental health states of this group from the following aspects:

- *Subjective Well-being:* Subjective well-being, also known as self-reported well-being, is an individual’s self-evaluation of their quality of life and mental state, often used to measure their mental health and happiness as well as serving as an indicator of their social functioning and adaptation (He, 2012). According to Zhao et al.’s (2013) and Zhou et al.’s (2014) research findings, college students reported significantly

lower levels of subjective well-being than their non-FLBC counterparts. Wang and Xu (2023) went further to reveal that FLBC college freshmen perceived significantly lower well-being in the dimensions of life satisfaction/interest and relaxation/tension, compared to their non-FLBC peers. All these studies point to the early parent-child separation leading to compromised subjective well-being in FLBC college students as a result of the low quality of life and negative emotions they experienced.

- ***Social Adaptability:*** Social adaptation, a process of adapting oneself to constant change in the social environment, is the key to the socialization of the individual. Adjusting to the shifts in the external environment helps them maintain inner peace and mental healthiness (Sun et al., 2023). Yang et al.'s study (2021) finds that FLBC college students have lower performance in social adaptation than their non-FLBC counterparts. As per Sun et al.'s (2023) study, social maladaptation of FLBC college students is primarily manifested in their inability to establish and maintain desirable interpersonal relationships or to adapt to new roles in a changed environment. Zhang et al. (2017) argued that FLBC college students had difficulty integrating with their peers, although not all of them performed badly in social adaptation. According to Ji and Han's (2023) study, a portion of persons with prior left-behind life experience could still realize positive social development, able to develop a close relationship with parents, peer relationships on an equal footing, extroverted personalities, stable emotions, and self-efficacy. This finding indicates that FLBC college students' early life is not the decisive determinant of their social adaptability despite its potentially negative impact on their growth.
- ***Mental Resilience:*** Mental resilience, or psychological resilience, is the ability to cope mentally and emotionally with tough events, such as the adversity, trauma, tragedy, and threat, and return to pre-crisis status quickly (Song et al., 2020). Prior comparison analyses find that FLBC college students score lower in mental resilience testing than the non-FLBC group (Yang et al., 2014; Han et al., 2017; Song et al., 2020), showing that the previous left-behind life experience is not favorable for psychological resilience development in them. Lower levels of psychological resilience, in return, make it more difficult for FLBC college students to recover from adverse events or negative emotions, which may lead to significant psychological problems. This is evidenced by Zhang and Xu's (2022) research findings that for students with lower levels of psychological resilience, traumatic experiences are more likely to lead to negative emotions, whereas among those with higher levels of psychological resilience, the impact of traumatic experiences on emotions is less significant.

- *Depression Symptoms and Adverse Life Events:* There are higher detection rates of depression symptoms in FLBC college students than in their non-FLBC peers (Han et al., 2017; He et al., 2018). Moreover, there is a significant correlation between their depression level and the frequency of adverse life events encountered (Li et al., 2017). FLBC college students are more likely to experience frustrations in romantic relationships and conflicts with family members, as well as other adverse events such as failures in selection activity, being criticized or punished, dropping out, fighting with others, etc. High incidence of adverse events In FLBC, college students make them more vulnerable to depressive disorders.
- *Other Negative Emotions and Problematic Behaviors:* In addition to depression, childhood left-behind life experiences have other emotional consequences in FLBC college students, such as anxiety (Yi & Zhang, 2018; Liang et al., 2019), a lack of self-efficacy (Jie et al., 2021), and security, particularly interpersonal security (Gan et al., 2017). A more concerning psychological issue in FLBC college students is the higher levels of suicidal ideation in them (Liu & Wang, 2017; Gan et al., 2017). In addition, FLBC college students are more likely to develop the obsessive-compulsive tendency, which is corroborated by Liu et al.'s (2019) research finding that the detection rate of the obsessive-compulsive disorder in this group is 26.5%, substantially higher than the normal level. Also, there is a higher incidence of problematic behaviors in FLBC college students than their non-FLBC peers. They are more likely to display impulsive or hostile tendencies in response to undesirable stimuli and even resort to aggressive behavior in extreme cases (Li et al., 2019; Jin et al., 2019; Chen et al., 2022). These behavioral problems bring damage to their interpersonal relationships.
- *Positive Impacts:* Aside from the above negative consequences, FLBC college students' early life may generate certain positive effects for their mental development. According to Wen and Zeng's (2012) study, FLBC college students can actively react to challenges by adopting positive coping strategies like rationalizing the issue and seeking other's assistance. This may be the outcome of their early-year experiences of having to confront difficulties in life and education and solve all sorts of problems independently in the absence of their parents. Also, Dong and Qi's (2014) study finds that the majority of FLBC college students have stronger senses of life purpose than their non-FLBC peers. Research findings like these imply the necessity of examining the impact of the early left-behind life on mental health in FLBC college students from a broader perspective, taking both the potentially negative and positive consequences into consideration.

Factors Related to the Mental Well-Being of FLBC College Students

External Factors

- *Childhood Traumas:* Zhang and Xu's (2022) study finds that 63.9% of FLBC college students sampled had traumatic experiences, which is overwhelmingly higher than the normative level. These traumatic experiences include, but are not limited to, emotional, physical, and sexual abuse and emotional and physical neglect. The literature reveals a close relationship between childhood traumas and adulthood mental issues in FLBC college students. According to Pan et al. (2019), childhood traumas have a direct effect on the mental health states of this group, with an effect size of 0.247. A bigger number of childhood traumatic experiences predicts a higher risk of social maladjustment and a lower level of mental health in FLBC college students (Sun et al. (2023); early traumatic experiences have a positive correlation with aggressive behavior in these students (Jin et al., 2019); childhood emotional traumas directly and positively predict social anxiety among them (Zhang et al., (2022). Drawing on the schema therapy theory, Qin et al. (2019) delved into how childhood traumas influenced adulthood mental health and discovered that children who suffered abandonment, abuse, neglect, and rejection during childhood could develop schemas related to such themes as "loss" and "worthlessness," due to their unmet basic needs for stability, security, and loving nurturing. These schemas, as the core patterns for individuals to process external information, can profoundly influence their emotional responses to life events. In later similar scenarios to childhood traumatic events, these early maladaptive schemas can be easily activated, leading to a recurrence of negative emotions like self-worth denial and distrust in others, thereby increasing the incidence of psychological problems in them. This finding provides a valuable implication for intervention of mental health issues among FLBC college students: the intervention should address not only the direct impacts of their past traumatic experiences but also the consequences of latent maladaptive schemas. Cognitive reconstruction and behavioral training, among other devices, may be helpful in correcting unfavorable schemas and improving mental health in this group.
- *Social Support:* Social support is about supportive behaviors from others, such as approval, respect, care, and assistance that an individual perceives or experiences; it can come from many sources, such as family, friends, organizations, etc. (Zhan et al., 2016). Prior studies suggest that

social support is significantly predictive of positive mental states in FLBC college students (Xie, 2015; Wang & Xu, 2023). Support from the family, peers, and the school is a key factor for their healthy development; detrimental incidents like school bullying and parental emotional neglect can lead to increased negative emotions, impairing their mental well-being. For instance, they may internalize parental neglect and deem themselves a burden on their parents, developing a pessimistic mentality of their existence (Zheng, 2021). In the meantime, their previous life as left-behind children also poses a negative impact on their perception of social support. In her interviews with FLBC college students, He (2013) discovered that this group had difficulty communicating properly with their parents and were unwilling to turn to them for help when encountering troubles. This means they not only perceive lower levels of social support but also have lower levels of motivation for leveraging external support. Hence, it is important to improve the social support system for FLBC college students, which involves their family, peers, and the school, while also assisting them in developing a legitimate self-concept as well as the capacity for navigating life challenges by providing specialist counseling and mentoring.

- *Home Atmospheres and Parenting Style:* The family environment and home education are key to the character formulation and development of the individual. There is a significant relationship between family atmospheres and the mental health state in FLBC college students; the more harmonious the family relationships, the healthier the psychology of the FLBC college student (Cheng & Jiang, 2021). Also, the upbringing style is a critical factor for the mental development of FLBC college students. Both harsh and permissive upbringings can possibly lead to obsessive-compulsive disorders in this group (Liu et al., 2019). Unscientific upbringing may instigate neurotic personality tendencies in the younger generation, causing social interaction problems like emotional instability, self-centeredness, tension, and anxiety (Liu & Wang, 2017). Poor interpersonal communication can, in return, exacerbate the mental problems of the individual. Therefore, guiding households with left-behind children to create a desirable home environment and adopt legitimate upbringing practices is of vital importance for the long-term mental development of their younger generation.
- *Parent-Child Separation Patterns:* The duration of separation from parents, frequency of communication with migrating parents, and the number of parents absent (i.e., one or two parents working outside the homeplace) can all have impacts on the child's mental health in adulthood (Dong & Qi, 2014; Zhang et al., 2017; Chen et al., 2017;

Liang et al., 2019; Cheng & Jiang, 2021). Enduring parent-child separation, low frequency of parent-child communication (less than once every month) in separation, and the absence of both parents or the mother are factors contributing to mental health problems of FLBC college students. On the other hand, He (2012) made the point that it was the quality rather than the frequency of parent-child communication matters more during the separation. Hence, it is important for the migrating parents or parent to maintain adequate, quality interaction with their children to mitigate the adverse effects of their absence on the latter's mental health development.

Personal Factors

- ***Gender:*** There are detailed analyses of the relationship between gender and the mental health state in FLBC college students in the literature. According to Wen and Ma (2021), symptoms like psychoticism and interpersonal sensitivity are more common in male FLBC college students, as opposed to depressive and hostile emotions in their female counterparts. The incidence of problematic behaviors, particularly those moderate- and severe-level ones, is higher in male FLBC college students than in their female peers (Li et al., 2019). Comparatively, boy FLBC college students have lower levels of self-esteem and mental resilience and are more likely to produce psychosomatic reactions when encountering adverse, stressful events (Han Li et al., 2017). Girl FLBC College students score higher in subjective well-being and life satisfaction (He, 2012; Zhao et al., 2013). This may be due to the variations in social characteristics between the two gender groups: girls are more inclined to find someone to talk their problems through and seek out assistance when facing difficulties and pressures, while boys are more likely to choose to go through a difficult time independently, which is not conducive to the release of psychological stress. In addition, Liu et al.'s (2015) study finds that female FLBC college students benefit more from the positive effects of the early left-behind life experience, possibly because girls typically mature earlier and are more ready to take on the roles and responsibilities of their parents in their absence. On the other hand, despite their slightly higher level of mental health across the board, female FLBC college students received less social support than their opposite sex, which leads to their scoring higher in the dimensions of paranoia and fear. This may be attributable to the influence of the son-preference tradition in Chinese society (Zhan et al., 2016). Under this tradition and the stringent supervision over girls from their grandparents, female left-behind children could actually access less social support.

- **Age:** The literature reveals a decline in the incidence of mental problems in FLBC college students with the increase of their ages. As their grades advance, FLBC college students undergo cognitive progress, develop more effective coping strategies for academic pressures and adverse events, and become better adapted to college life. Han et al.'s (2017) research results demonstrate that first-grade FLBC college students have higher levels of mental well-being than second-grade ones. Despite such a positive tendency, FLBC college students still have higher mental health risks at certain critical points like graduation, postgraduate program application, and employment (Liu et al., 2015). These research findings imply that psychological counseling services for FLBC college students should focus more on the first and fourth graders in this group.
- **Psychological Qualities:** Prior studies also find that positive psychological qualities can successfully moderate the negative effects of the childhood left-behind life on mental health in FLBC college students. First, individuals with high levels of mental resilience can continuously work hard towards established goals, managing negative emotions carefully, viewing setbacks and adversities rationally, and being more ready to seek for assistance from family and others (Yang et al., 2014). This psychological quality is favorable for lowering the risk of mental disorders in FLBC college students (Yue et al., 2019; Liang et al., 2019). Second, personal beliefs about adversity, entailing the individual's perceptions of the nature, causes, and consequences of adversities, as well as coping strategies for them, could be a valuable resource (Xie, 2015). If the adversity is not merely seen as a disadvantage but also an opportunity, its negative impact on the individual experiencing it can be significantly lessened. Ji and Han's (2023) research findings demonstrate that those FLBC college students with positive beliefs about adversity are less susceptible to the mental health consequences of their early left-behind life. Third, the ability to develop active coping strategies is a protective factor for healthy mental development in FLBC college students, potentially making up for the deficits in social support accessible to them (Jie et al., 2021). On the other hand, the literature also discusses certain negative psychological qualities that may exacerbate the mental health consequences of childhood left-behind life in FLBC college students. Yang et al. (2021), for example, investigated the relationship between rejection sensitivity and the mental health state in this group. Rejection sensitivity is about the individual's vulnerability to social rejection and tendency to overreact to it. FLBC college students with higher levels of rejection sensitivity are more likely to develop negative emotions after perceiving rejection, leading to a decline in their social adaptability.

Discussion

Our review of existing investigations of the mental health states of FLBC college students shows that the early left-behind life potentially has a long-term impact on the mental well-being of the individual. Its mental health consequences can possibly endure until their college years, or even longer. These negative consequences include low subjective well-being, hampered social adaptability, a lack of mental resilience, and susceptibility to negative emotions such as depression and anxiety. It is noteworthy that prior research results also indicate the possibility that this childhood experience becomes a positive driver for their future mental development.

Factors influencing the mental health states of FLBC college students are many, including external factors, such as the availability of social support, childhood traumatic incidents, family upbringing style, and parent-child separation pattern, and personal ones like gender, age, and psychological qualities of the student. Furthermore, there exist mutual interactions between these factors (Liu et al., 2019), pointing to the complexity of the issue of mental health in this group and making relevant intervention a challenging task. Currently, research on psychological intervention for FLBC college students remains scarce. Among the 40 studies included in this review, only Zhang (2018) investigated the effects of psychological intervention in improving the mental well-being of this group. This study finds that Naikan Cognitive Therapy (NCT) is effective in enhancing the levels of mental resilience and perceived social support in FLBC college students. This may be because NCT encourages the subjects to perceive the love and care from their loved ones and friends, thereby facilitating their integration into the family and other environments and successfully improving their social psychological capability.

An important implication of Zhang's (2018) research finding is that the various mental health risks faced by FLBC college students can be alleviated by effective interventions. To prevent the long-term negative impacts of the early left-behind life, the interventions should be administered to left-behind children in both the period of their separation from parents in childhood and the post-childhood period.

During the separation from their parents, left-behind children suffer a variety of challenges, such as a lack of parental companionship, financial difficulties, and peer bullying. These challenges not only pose damage to their childhood lives but also have far-reaching negative impacts on their mental health as adults (Zheng, 2021). In addition, left-behind children experience heavier academic pressures than their non-left-behind peers because of their strong desire for academic success, which they hope can bring changes to their own fate as well as their parents' status as migrant workers. This results in high motivation levels and academic achievement

targets in this group. Yet, due to the shortages of high-quality educational resources in rural areas, they need to put in more effort than their urban peers to obtain higher education opportunities, which evidently causes them additional academic pressures. Among these negative factors, Li et al. (2017) ranked the long-term separation from parents as the most detrimental one, followed by the overly heavy academic burdens and the family's financial difficulties. This indicates that parents of left-behind children should pay more attention to keeping stable and warm parent-child communication, enabling their kids to perceive their love and care in their absence via means like the video call. At the same time, the school and the community should strengthen support for left-behind children, providing supplementary tutoring, after-school entertainment, and psychological counseling if needed, to ease their academic pressures and help them alleviate loneliness and senses of inferiority and improve self-esteem and social skills.

In effect, the majority of Chinese parents as migrant workers have realized parent-child separation is detrimental to the kids' growth. Some of them have opted to have their kids live with them, making the latter "migrant children." This approach is far from ideal even though it significantly increases parental companionship. According to Cheng and Jiang's (2021) study, college students as former migrant children, generally, exhibit a higher mental health standard than those as former left-behind children, a standard comparable to that of ordinary students; still, they suffer higher pressures and perceive inadequacy in social support like their peers as former left-behind children do. Therefore, it is important for migrant worker parents to pay attention to their kids' needs for emotional support even if they can have their children live with them.

Furthermore, mental health support for left-behind children should continue after they enter adulthood. For those proceeding to tertiary education, the school should consider their family background and provide them with personalized psychological support and professional counseling, assisting with their adaptation to college life. Psychological counseling providers should focus on guiding FLBC college students to develop an objective understanding of their early left-behind life, learning to examine the positive and negative sides of their childhood experience no matter how painful it was. Also, establishing a mutual support group for FLBC college students is beneficial for their access to peer assistance. At the same time, the parents of FLBC college students ought to continue to give their adult children emotional support, encouraging them to share mental perplexities and confront mental issues with the assistance of parents. Additionally, society should increase their awareness of mental health issues of FLBC college students, working to create an inclusive and supportive social environment for this group.

Conclusion

Based on 40 prior studies on the mental well-being of Chinese FLBC college students, this survey reveals the long-term impact of the early left-behind life on mental health in this group. It also finds that the literature primarily focuses on the mental health issues in FLBC college students, as well as the factors related to them, but pays disproportionately inadequate attention to interventions in this regard. This area deserves more research in the future. Furthermore, the majority of the studies included in this review are cross-sectional analyses, and the several longitudinal analyses in the literature do not show sufficiently extended observation spans. To delve in depth into the patterns of the impact of the childhood left-behind life and explore relevant interventions, more longitudinal follow-up studies are warranted.

The limitations of this study should also be acknowledged. The search for relevant studies is inexhaustive, constrained by our literature searching method. In the meantime, it should be noted that the mental health consequences of the childhood left-behind life are not confined to FLBC college students. Certain studies demonstrate that the early left-behind life predicts a significantly slimmer chance of the individual's proceeding to higher education (Hu & Yan, 2020; Xie & Zhao, 2022). That means FLBC college students constitute only a very small portion of the adults with childhood left-behind life experience. Other groups with the same experience may face even more challenges and difficulties. Researchers need to pay comparable attention to them in order to examine the impact of the early left-behind life on mental development from a broader perspective.

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