

Research on the Left-behind Children Mental Health in Rural China

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Abstract: This research discusses previous research focused on left-behind children's mental health in rural China, including the potential causes, consequences, and intervention. China rapidly developed in the 1980s, which resulted in a trend where people from rural areas migrate to urban areas for employment. This phenomenon made millions of children in rural areas have to separate from their parents, which is called "left-behind children." With observation in recent years of left-behind children, it turns out that left-behind children experienced poor academic performance, issues with mental health, and low life satisfaction in adulthood. However, there is limited research demonstrating left-behind children mental health causes and results in a macro-perspective. This research is aimed to illustrate this question in a comprehensive view. While this research article mainly focuses on left-behind children mental health problems caused by various reasons, we compared and analyzed previous studies which are relevant to this topic. Left-behind children's dilemmas are not caused by a single reason but more complicated. Left-behind children due to inadequate parental care could experience school bullying, poor living conditions, and so on. Those multiple factors contribute to the left-behind children experiencing depression and anxiety symptoms. In order to improve this condition, it is necessary for society and parents to cooperate to eliminate negative effects on left-behind children.

Keywords: left-behind children, mental health, depression, migration parents, children developmental psychology

1. Introduction

Left-behind children are defined as rural children who are left at home with one or both parents who go to the city for more job opportunities[1]. Left-behind children, whose ages are under 18, are going through a significant psychological developmental stage. Based on Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development, 18-year-olds would encounter most of the life conflicts. Also, those conflicts are crucial for their later life since those are the foundation for a human-beings psychological development. Rapid development in China always has pros and cons. Within such a giant change, society could not ignore negative influences resulting in left-behind children mental health problems. The reason behind this is that China's development has heavy polarization. The rural area is a poverty-stricken area, but the urban area's economic development is thriving. Consequently, people in rural areas are inclined to work in big cities and have to leave their children in the small village, which causes plenty of left-behind children. Study shows that there are more than 61 million left-behind

children in China, with 37.7% left-behind children in rural areas[2]. The purpose of this study is analyzing complicated factors consisting of left-behind children's mental health problems. Moreover, this research is based on previous findings about left-behind children's mental health problems, and combined their main results to explain left-behind children's mental health condition. Although left-behind children seem like only prevalent in China, this phenomenon could also be generalized to other developing countries which have distinct differences between rural and urban areas. Additionally, this research paper addresses the seriousness of left-behind children' struggling right now, which could draw attention to the society and more researchers to investigate and develop treatment and intervention for left-behind children.

2. Potential Factors Contribute to the Left-behind Children Mental Health Problems

In order to study left-behind children, we need to discuss what are the potential causes of this phenomenon and what specific difficulties they are facing. This section is mainly talking about the reasons behind two major perspectives. Primarily, this section analyzed the left-behind children frequently encountered with mental health problems, which included depression and anxiety. Moreover, this section also investigated the bullying behaviors in peers toward left-behind children, which have negative influences on left-behind children in some ways.

2.1. Mental Health

Children's mental health issues exhibited an increasing growth trend in recent years, which caused concerns worldwide. Children and adolescent mental health issues had increased worldwide from the data shown[3]. While previous relevant studies on children's mental health focused on the general population, left-children mental health research should be addressed. From past left-behind children self-report research, they revealed that compared to non left-behind children, left-behind children have higher depression levels[4]. From this result, we can infer that left-behind children experienced more mental health problems than non left-behind children who have complete parental care. Moreover, it is necessary to discuss potential factors that cause such differences.

With the great economic gaps between urban areas and rural areas in China, parents in rural areas would move to urban areas seeking for work after their children are born. In this process, parents leave their children in rural areas when they are different ages, which could lead to various consequences about the left-behind children's mental health. Thus, it is inevitable for researchers to investigate whether left-behind children of different ages have different mental health conditions. In other words, children who are left by their parents when they are younger are more mentally affected than children who are left by their parents when they are older.

Anxiety and depression are two major mental health problems that left-behind children experienced by separation with their parents.

Based on a study conducted by Liu and colleagues, this research found significant effects of parents' migration to urban areas at children's different ages. In China, children usually enter primary school around age 6-7, which is a significant period for children's both psychological and intellectual development. Specifically, rural areas in China have scarce educational resources that kindergarten education is few, which means going to primary school is a milestone for children from home to school. Study shows that compared to children whose parents migrate to urban areas after entering school, whose parents leave before entering school have more symptoms of depression. Besides, in rural areas, children who were left by their parents before age 3 have the most symptoms of anxiety[5]. From birth to three years old is an important developmental stage for humans. In this crucial period, children who didn't receive comprehensive care might develop separation anxiety, which could explain why children left by parents before three years old report more symptoms of anxiety.

Although separation anxiety normally happens in childhood, it does influence people's later life performance. Moreover, this study found a trend of left-behind children's symptoms of anxiety, which is decreasing as the children's age increases when parents migrate.

2.2. Bullying Behaviors among Left-behind Children

In school, bullying behaviors commonly appeared worldwide, which do emerge at an increasing rate in recent studies. [6] Although bullying behaviors are strictly prohibited in most of the schools, left-behind children lack sufficient protection due to their special conditions. Also, experiencing bullying as a victim are related to a series of mental health problems. Since left-behind children in rural areas have limited parent care, they face more long-term, continuous bullying from peers. According to previous studies, bullying behaviors have a clear definition that bullying is aggression behavior on purpose by an individual or group towards other individuals while there is a clear power difference among them[7]. During bullying behaviors, both physical, verbal, psychological aggression would be included. Since China has a large amount of left-behind children, there are considerable numbers of middle school students who have been bullied at least once, even in developed areas like Beijing, Hangzhou, and so on[8]. Although there are previous studies present bullying victimization in many countries and areas, there is limited research specifically for left-behind children in rural areas, which would best illustrate and represent left-behind children's condition. According to a current study using data from the China Youth University for Political Sciences (CYUPS), which was designed to study left-behind children's bullying victimization, left-behind children experienced more bullying behaviors compared to the non-left-behind children, according to their self-reports. Moreover, the analysis demonstrates that more than $\frac{1}{3}$ left-behind children have been bullied [6]. While left-behind children already have tons of disadvantages compared to the non left-behind children, such as not optimal living conditions, lack of caring, and so on, being bullied worsen the mental health condition for them. Meanwhile, it is worth studying what factors have relationships with left-behind children being bullied more than non left-behind children. Social skill is an important factor that determines whether left-behind children would be bullied, since having bad social skills has a relationship with popularity in the school environment. Previous study found that rural left-behind children have significantly lower social skills than non-left-behind children[9]. Left-behind children who have insufficient social skills tend to be less talkative, unsocial, and other characteristics which would result in being bullied by peers. However, this point was contradicted by another study based on an anonymous questionnaire which argues that left-behind children participated in more social activities than non left-behind children. Also this study suggests that peer relationships make left-behind children happier and could be a protective factor for left-behind children development. This finding complements previous ideas[4]. Specifically, peers of left-behind children tend to bully them because they are left by their parents. However, studies merely focus on the factors that are related to the left-behind children being bullied, instead of seeking for the direct causal relationship, which is the key to this field. According to previous studies, most researchers are focusing on at least one experiencing being bullied. Current study verified that left-behind children actually suffer from multiple times bullying behaviors from others.

3. Ways to Prevent Left-behind Children Experiencing Mental Health Problems

According to previous discussion, bullying victimization is serious among left-behind children, which would contribute to negative mental health conditions. Previous studies found that although rural left-behind children who are bullied have terrible relationships with peers, being bullied didn't influence their relationships with teachers in school. Consequently, it suggests that left-behind children's teachers could play a role in helping improve left-behind children relationships and poor academic

performance[6]. Furthermore, teachers could protect left-behind children from bullying behaviors so that left-behind children would suffer less mental health problems.

Although left-behind children reported higher depression rates than non left-behind children, a relative study suggests that frequent parent contact has a positive impact on left-behind children's mental health, since such behaviors lessen children experience loneliness and so on[4]. Parenting style is always a determinative factor for children's mental health. Although left-behind children have insufficient time together with their parents, keeping in contact in various forms, including writing letters, phone calls, texting, is helpful for them.

Moreover, rural areas in China also developed some community intervention targeted for left-behind children, such as Children's Companion Mother Program. This program is designed for left-behind children in rural areas in China and delivers beneficial services to children. There is a quasi-experimental evaluation suggesting that this program is helpful for left-behind children in their personal development and later academic performance. This study also suggests that there are other effective interventions for left-behind children's mental health conditions that involve both community-based and public policy-based programs[10]. While the public couldn't eliminate parents' migration phenomenon, they can work with relative communities to start programs in order to take care of left-behind children. Since such programs have been proved effective for left-behind children, the government and community could launch more intervention programs for left-behind children to compensate for their insufficient parental care.

4. Discussion

From all previous research, the majority of studies are based on self-report questionnaires with comparisons between left-behind children and non-left-behind children in order to investigate the differences. Also, there are some studies aimed at finding out the consequences of parents' migration and leaving children in rural areas. However, left-behind children's mental health problems require more causal relationship studies after a series of association studies. Specifically, left-behind children are different in many aspects, including parents' education level, contact frequency, poverty status, school life, age, and so on. More deep research about causation, the left-behind children's mental health problems would come up with more effective treatments and interventions. Self-report questionnaire is able to gather data in a large participant sample, but there are obvious drawbacks behind. On the one hand, self-report surveys have difficulties to ensure honesty, so the validity would be affected. In addition, there are plenty of left-behind children who are below preschool age, resulting in having difficulties finishing the self-report survey and lacking information about the younger left-behind children's mental health. Within all these drawbacks about the self-report questionnaire that studies left-behind children's mental health problems, future research has a long way to go after those trailblazers. For instance, more experiments needed to be done under experimental conditions. Moreover, observation experiments would be more visual to study left-behind children's mental health problems. In order to study causal relationships, longitudinal experiments are an ideal method. By doing such a technique, it is possible for researchers to observe cause and effect directly since longitudinal study has to be measured at different time points.

5. Conclusion

Left-behind children's mental health has become a crucial topic in recent years, which has gradually happened not only in rural China but in other areas also experiencing similar problems. Separation from parents in childhood could elicit a series of consequences, including depression, anxiety, being bullied, and even suicide attempts. In addition, negative influence could extend to adulthood, even across the life course, by showing poor academic performance, serious mental health problems,

undesirable career performance, and so on. From the analysis of previous relevant studies, we still have inadequate research on this significant topic. For future research, it is necessary to focus on the causal relationship between left-behind children's mental health and what interventions are effective.

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