Psychological and Behavioral Well-being of Chinese Children, and Variations by Migration Status: Evidence from A Recent National Survey on Migration and Children

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Abstract
Internal migration in China on an unprecedented scale has affected a large fraction of Chinese children. A sizeable fraction of children have experienced parental migration during the course of their childhoods, either accompanying their migrant parents (migrant children) or left behind by one or both parents (left-behind children). Migration represents a distinct form of family transition and one that likely has important effects on child development. It often brings considerable economic improvement through increased income or remittances. But it also often adversely affects children’s lives, by depriving children of parental presence or subjecting them to the difficulties of being uprooted and adapting to a new environment. The present study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the influences of migration on children in China using a newly available national survey with extensive information on family structure and child outcomes. We focus on children’s psychological and behavioral development in China (i.e., self-esteem, emotional distress, social skills, BPI), an area that is relatively less well understood than other child outcomes. We will use a range of statistical techniques to assess both the overall effect of migration for different groups of children involved, and the mediating and moderating mechanisms underlying the migration effect.
Extended Abstract

Increasing globalization and urbanization worldwide have profoundly altered the state of the family in many societies. In particular, a sizeable fraction of children have experienced parental migration during the course of their childhoods, either accompanying their migrant parents (migrant children) or left behind by one or both parents (left-behind children). Migration represents a distinct form of family transition and one that likely has important effects on child development. It often brings considerable economic improvement through increased income or remittances. But it also often adversely affects children’s lives, by depriving children of parental presence or subjecting them to the difficulties of being uprooted and adapting to a new environment.

China represents one of the most prominent examples of human migration. Over the last three decades, more than 220 million Chinese have left their home places to move across the country, mostly from rural to urban areas, mainly to secure better jobs (NBS 2011). A large fraction of migrants have children. In China, children affected by migration constitute over 31% of the population under age 18 and the fraction is increasing steadily (All-China Women’s Federation 2013). Because of the difficulty of arranging adequate childcare and schooling, migrants often leave their families behind. Even when both parents migrate, they often leave their children with grandparents or other relatives. More than 61 million children, or over 21.9% of all children in China, have been left behind by one or both parents (ACWF 2013), leading to substantial disruptions in family practices and relationships. Nevertheless, despite harsh conditions and restrictions at destinations, an increasing fraction of migrants bring their children to cities or start families and raise children in their work locales. The number of children accompanying their migrant parents is estimated to be over 28 million, representing over 10% of all Chinese children (ACWF 2013). China’s internal registration system limits many social benefits to migrants and their families. Therefore, whereas migrant children enjoy preserved family unity and improved economic conditions, they often confront various institutional and social barriers (e.g., to education and health care) that prevent them from fully integrating into the host communities. Overall, the plight of such huge numbers of children of China’s tidal wave of migrants, altogether approaching 90 million, present major challenges not only to these children’s development but also to the future social and economic development of China. A systematic study of their well-being is therefore an enormously important and urgent topic with substantial policy implications.

The present research seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the influences of migration on children in China using a newly available national survey with extensive information on family structure and child outcomes. The data are from the Chinese Internal Migration and Children Study (CIMACS) (the child component of the Urbanization and Labor Migration Survey conducted by Tsinghua University in 2012-13). It is a nationally representative survey (in 500 villages and neighborhoods in 28 provinces) designed to study the effect of migration on families and children, with oversampling of high in-migration and out-migration areas. The survey collected data on a total of more than 7,000 children age 0-15 in four groups: children living with migrant parents, children left behind by migrant parents, rural children living
with both parents, and urban children living with both parents. Data were collected from children’s primary caregivers and older children themselves (age 10 and above). A rich set of information is available, including family environment, parenting practices, household socioeconomic conditions, and a wide range of child outcomes (emotional, behavioral, social, and cognitive development and physical health). In this paper, we focus on children’s psychological and behavioral development in China (i.e., self-esteem, emotional distress, social skills, BPI), an area that is relatively less well understood, especially at a national level.

Specifically, we will first compare rural-to-urban migrant children with both rural and urban nonmigrant children (i.e., children living with nonmigrant parents) to study the effect of migration (rural nonmigrant children as the counterfactual) and the level of assimilation (urban nonmigrant children as the comparison). We expect migrant children to have poorer psychosocial development than both rural and urban nonmigrant children, due to various difficulties and stressors in the adjustment process and the structural barriers facing migrants in China, though they may show greater coping skills than either comparison group (Hypothesis 1). Second, we will examine the impacts of parental out-migration on the psychosocial development of left-behind children by comparing rural left-behind children with rural nonmigrant children. We expect left-behind children to be more susceptible to psychosocial problems due to family disruption and parental absence (Hypothesis 2). We also will pool all four groups of children to assess the comparative advantage and disadvantage that each group faces. Third, we will take advantage of the rich information on family environments to explore the mediating and moderating effects of migration.

Because we use cross-sectional data, in the analysis we will use propensity score adjustment procedures to minimize the effect of confounding factors. The propensity score method is a useful strategy for reducing potential biases in the absence of experimental designs or longitudinal data (Morgan and Winship 2007). Although the new data are cross-sectional, children’s full migration histories and family structure histories are available. This will allow for a better understanding of the dynamics of the migration effect on child wellbeing, by examining how family and migration transitions (e.g., the number, sequence and timing of transitions) affect children across different developmental stages.