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A Review of the Influence of Parental Migration on the Growth of Left-Behind Children in Rural Areas

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Abstract: Parental migration has become a common phenomenon in rural China, resulting in a large number of left-behind children (LBC). They are left behind by their parents in their hometowns while one or both parents work in distant cities. This literature review explores the multifaceted impacts of parental migration on the overall growth of rural LBC, focusing on psychological development and educational outcomes. Existing studies have confirmed that long-term absence and lack of companionship from parents increase the probability of children suffering from depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and social withdrawal. In addition, LBC often show poor academic performance and are more likely to have behavioral problems due to lack of care and emotional support. This study also explored the moderating role of caregiver type, separation time, and gender. Although existing literature suggests that some interventions show promise, there are still major gaps in policy implementation and long-term mental health support. The review highlights the need for a comprehensive, child-centered strategy dedicated to reducing the level of urban-rural disparity.

Keywords: Left-behind Children, Psychological Problems, Educational Equity, Urban-rural gap, Social Collaboration

1. Introduction

With the rapid development of urbanization in China, the economic gap between urban and rural areas has been widening. Under the impact of the reality, to seek better economic income and living conditions, more and more rural parents choose to go out to economically developed cities to seek a job to make a living. In China, economically developed areas usually bring high living costs, household registration system restrictions on the education of migrant populations, and difficulties in children's schooling. As a result, they cannot bring their children to the city with them, and can only choose to leave their children in their hometowns to be cared for by other immediate relatives or unaccompanied. Such phenomenon is becoming more and more common, and this slowly growing group of minors is called left-behind children (LBC).

Global parental labor migration has spawned a large number of left-behind children, especially in developing regions such as Asia, Africa, and South America [1]. For example, China focuses on labor mobility between urban and rural areas. In recent decades, China has experienced rapid urbanization and large-scale internal migration, with millions of rural laborers entering urban centers in search of better economic opportunities. Based on relevant statistics, this figure will account for one-third of the rural child population. China has more than 40 million left-behind children, making it one of the countries with the most serious phenomenon in the world [2]. The problem of left-behind children

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has a significant societal impact not only in China. It has also become a typical sample for key research and intervention in the international academic and policy circles.

This review will be analyzed in the following sections. First, review the impact of parental absence on mental health at LBC. Secondly, we analyze the behavioral problems that arise from psychological issues. Next, it will explore the educational and social development of LBC. Finally, this review aims to synthesize existing research results, assess the limitations and gaps of feasible solutions to address left-behind children, and provide support for future research and interventions aimed at improving the lives of left-behind children in China.

2. Mental health problems of left-behind children

2.1. The creation of negative emotions

For left-behind children, the lack of parental companionship has a profound impact on their mental health during their growth process. Children who are left behind lack daily companionship and emotional support because their parents spend a lot of time away from home at work In this process, they will fall into the dilemma of emotional loneliness, psychological anxiety and behavioral disorders. Studies have found that when adolescents are in the stage of establishing attachment relationships and developing emotional cognition, parental companionship plays an important role in this process. Because their parents work away from home, left-behind children cannot get enough emotional support in their daily lives. This lack of emotional connection makes them feel forgotten and gradually develops a strong sense of loneliness [3]. Loneliness is a negative emotion that comes from an individual's subjective feelings about interpersonal relationships, usually manifested as dissatisfaction or lack of existing interpersonal and social connections. It is different from simple "being alone" and arises when there is a significant gap between an individual's expectations of social interaction and the actual acquisition [4].

2.2. Psychological depression and anxiety

The age when left-behind children are abandoned is the initial stage of their psychological and physical development. Negative emotions of loneliness can negatively impact their mental health, persist for an extended period, and gradually lead to more severe psychological issues like social anxiety, social avoidance, feelings of inferiority, depression, and even personality disorders. Long-term loneliness interferes with children's emotional expression and interpersonal communication skills, and also weakens their establishment of social trust. Chai et al.'s analysis shows that loneliness is highly prevalent among left-behind children and is closely related to their low self-esteem, social withdrawal, and lack of support [3]. In addition, the paper emphasized that LBCs with higher loneliness tend to show greater social withdrawal, avoid peer interaction, and have a reduced sense of belonging in the school environment [5]. These behaviors not only reflect emotional distress but also become obstacles to the formation of meaningful social bonds.

This series of negative psychological experiences caused by loneliness not only stays at the emotional level but also further transforms into specific behavioral problems. When left-behind children are in a state of emotional emptiness, neglect and misunderstanding for a long time, and lack effective psychological support and emotional regulation channels, they tend to release psychological pressure through externalized or internalized behaviors.

3. Behavioral problems and social adaptation

According to academic research, the long-term absence of parents has a more profound negative impact on children's psychological and behavioral development. Fu et al. pointed out that the longer

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the parents are away, the higher the probability of left-behind children having psychological and behavioral disorders, especially in terms of bullying behavior, aggressive tendencies and impulse control [6]. The lack of close parent-child interaction not only reduces children's emotional regulation ability, but also weakens their social cognition and compliance. Parents play an important role as leaders and guides in the process of children's socialization. When such relationships are interrupted or absent for a long time, children are more likely to seek attention or release emotional pressure through extreme or destructive behaviors. For example, some studies have found that such children lack appropriate communication and negotiation skills when facing peer conflicts, which will further lead to physical entanglement and resistance and violent behavior [7]. Such behavior not only poses a threat to their interpersonal relationships, but may also trigger a chain reaction of school bullying.

In addition, the emotional absence of parents will also interfere with the social adaptability of left-behind children. They may mistakenly regard their parents' departure as "abandonment" or "neglect," forming a negative self-cognition and worldview, which further damages their social adaptability. Sun et al. pointed out that these children are more likely to show inferiority, avoid communication and distrust authority in school. In the long run, this not only affects their academic performance, but also limits their social integration and mental health development [8]. More importantly, If these behavioral and mental health issues are not addressed and treated quickly, they could lead to long-lasting aggressive behavior, difficulties in forming close relationships, and a tendency to be socially isolated [9]. Their behavioral deviations are caused by multiple factors at the family, social, and institutional levels, rather than a single individual problem. In order to effectively solve this complex problem and provide intervention, it is necessary to start from the system level, evaluate the current policies, and build a multi-faceted and coordinated support mechanism to protect the mental health and social adaptability of left-behind children.

4. Social support and educational policies for left-behind children

4.1. The supporting role of educational groups

To alleviate the severe problems faced by left-behind children in terms of mental health, the establishment of a school-based psychological service system is currently widely regarded as a feasible intervention strategy. By setting up mental health education courses on campus, equipping professional psychological counselors, and conducting psychological assessments and intervention activities regularly, schools can not only improve the psychological literacy of all students, but also provide targeted attention and support to the special group of left-behind children [10].

A significant advantage of this strategy is that schools have natural contact and observation advantages. Teachers and counselors can capture subtle changes in LBC's emotions and behaviors in daily learning and life, so as to achieve early identification and early intervention, and naturally integrate the prevention of psychological problems and health promotion into the campus education system. They can identify the psychological problems of left-behind children faster than other groups. In addition, Doll et al. also emphasized that schools are more "familiar" and "safe" than hospitals or social institutions [10]. For LBC who experience emotional neglect and social isolation, this familiar environment can reduce their resistance and shame to psychological help to a certain extent, help rebuild their trust and belonging, and enhance their psychological recovery ability.

However, this strategy also faces practical limitations. Schools are not omnipotent in psychological intervention, and many educators lack sufficient time, energy, and professional background to deeply understand the real living conditions of left-behind children in their family environment. Ormiston et al. pointed out that although teachers can provide basic care and observation in the classroom, they often find it difficult to assume the role of "half a psychological counselor" or "social worker," especially in rural areas where there is a lack of community resources [11]. Therefore, if only relying

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on the unilateral intervention of the school, it may not be able to fully solve the deep psychological dilemma faced by LBC.

Therefore, although school-based psychological services are difficult to implement, they are still an indispensable part of ensuring the mental health and learning development of LBC. The most ideal solution should be the collaboration between schools and communities to build a "school-family-community" trinity mental health support network. For example, schools can invite psychological institutions to regularly enter the school to carry out group counseling, home visits and crisis intervention, and the community should establish supplementary platforms such as psychological counseling centers and parent-child communication lectures to form a closed-loop support system. This multi-faceted linkage model not only facilitates precise intervention, but also creates a good atmosphere of understanding, care and co-education in the whole society, providing systematic guarantees for the healthy growth of left-behind children.

4.2. Community intervention and support

As an effective supplement to school intervention, community psychological assistance has been widely regarded as an important strategic approach to further improve the mental health of left-behind children (LBC). Compared with school-based psychological services, community intervention has stronger daily, continuous and life-related characteristics. This strategy is usually implemented by establishing a psychological care platform specifically for LBC at the community level, such as children's activity centers, community psychological counseling rooms, family support groups, etc. Such a mechanism can provide left-behind children with continuous companionship, emotional support and psychological guidance during their spare time and holidays, thereby establishing a long-term mental health protection system for them.

Guan and Deng pointed out that community psychological assistance can not only effectively alleviate the negative emotional fluctuations faced by LBC, but also improve their daily quality of life and social adaptability [12]. In the process of long-term interaction with children, community workers can establish a trusting relationship, thereby enhancing LBC's emotional dependence and sense of security on others, and helping them gradually make up for the emotional loss caused by the absence of their parents during their growth. It is particularly worth emphasizing that in actual operations, some community volunteers or psychological counselors often accompany children in the role of "surrogate parents," such as playing close family roles such as "mother" and "father," so that children can have psychological compensation experiences similar to family affection in daily communication. This symbolic family relationship has an important emotional healing function for LBCs who have been unable to see their parents for a long time, which helps to alleviate their loneliness and sense of abandonment.

However, despite the significant advantages of community intervention, its feasibility is still constrained by realistic resource constraints. On the one hand, the normal operation of community psychological services cannot be separated from the government's financial investment; on the other hand, this model also requires a large number of professionally trained psychological personnel to continue to participate and serve. In low- and middle-income countries or regions, fiscal deficits and shortages of professional talents have become the biggest obstacles to the promotion of community psychological assistance programs. As Guan and Deng pointed out, governments in middle-income countries often find it difficult to make long-term investments in children's mental health projects under the premise that basic public services are already stretched, resulting in many community projects lacking the ability to systematically plan and continuously operate [12].

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4.3. Current education policies and expectations

At present, policy support and education for left-behind children also face a series of institutional barriers. For example, they cannot enjoy urban medical insurance, social welfare, and local compulsory education resources. Tang et al. pointed out that left-behind children often cannot enter urban public schools and can only choose private schools with higher tuition fees, which not only increases the economic burden of their families, but also puts them at a disadvantage in obtaining educational resources [13]. The uneven distribution of urban and rural educational resources and the general weakness of rural schools in teachers, teaching facilities and curriculum make it difficult for left-behind youth to compete with urban students in academic development. Studies have shown that despite China's rapid economic development, the urban-rural education gap is still obvious and has further widened with the marketization of the economy. Education investment, school quality, children's educational performance, and education returns all reflect urban-rural education inequality [14]. Due to the lack of educational resources and limited opportunities for quality education, rural children face a high dropout rate, which not only affects their education quality but also weakens their possibility of changing their destiny through knowledge to a certain extent. After entering rural schools, many young teachers find that their career development space is narrow and there is no opportunity for professional growth. They choose to leave the countryside and return to the city for development [9]. This is another reason for the lack of rural education resources.

In response to this situation, the Chinese government has introduced the "two exemptions and one subsidy" policy, exempting rural compulsory education students from tuition and book fees and providing living subsidies for poor boarding students to reduce the burden on families [15]. A study by Guan and Deng reported that community help can not only improve LBCs' ability to adapt to negative psychological fluctuations, but also improve their quality of life [12]. The issue of educational equity for left-behind children is not just a dilemma for an individual family, but a systemic problem that requires the joint efforts of the state, schools, families, and society to solve. Reforming the household registration system, expanding the number of places for migrant children to enter school, improving the "two exemptions and one subsidy" policy, improving the quality of rural education, and strengthening communication between home and school are all key to solving this problem.

5. Conclusion

Parents' migration to work has a profound and lasting impact on the mental health, behavioral development, and educational outcomes of left-behind children in rural China. The long-term lack of family affection has caused left-behind children to face emotional deprivation, which in turn leads to behavioral problems such as aggression, bullying, and social withdrawal. These problems are not only individual difficulties, but also reflect multiple structural factors such as unbalanced family structure, insufficient social support, and lack of institutional guarantees. Although school and community interventions have shown positive results to a certain extent, they still face a lack of resources and difficulties in implementation in reality. Therefore, it is urgent to build a comprehensive support system covering the collaboration of families, schools, communities, and governments to effectively ensure the healthy growth of left-behind children and narrow the gap in the welfare of urban and rural children. Only when the government, schools, families, and all sectors of society work together, truly pay attention to the actual needs of left-behind children, and create a fair learning environment for them, can they have a better future. Realizing their happiness is an important element in achieving social progress in China.

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