

Influencing Factors on Left-Behind Children's Mental Health

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Abstract. A polarization between urban and rural areas has urged a growing number of people leave their hometown and go to bigger cities in search for better paying jobs. This has led to a growing number of left behind children in China. Left behind children tend to endure worse mental health. This study hopes to find the influencing factors that might impact the effect of parental separation on left behind children's mental health. By studying this, people can better protect the mental well-being of the left behind children. This study used secondary analysis, which requires synthesizing previous findings. Previous findings lack in depth investigation into each influencing factor. This study discovered that female left behind children (LBC) have higher rates of mental illness than male LBC, younger LBC have higher rates of mental illness than older LBC, and LBC who communicate with their parents less frequently have higher rates of mental illness than those who maintain close contact with them.

Keywords: Left behind children, gender, age, parental communication, mental issues.

1. Introduction

Over the last few decades, China has witnessed an exponential economic growth. However, the unbalanced development between different regions has created a polarization between the urban and the rural areas, urging a growing number of people to migrate from their hometowns to big cities in search for better-paying jobs. In China, there are about 70 million abandoned children. Only once a year, and maybe just once every few years, can these kids see their parents. Typically, kids are under the supervision of their grandparents or other relatives. However, their guardians are often too busy to take care of their emotional problems. The children who are left behind thus have a far higher likelihood of developing mental health problems. In this paper, researcher hopes to understand the different influencing factors on The children who are left behind thus have a far higher likelihood of developing mental health problems. By doing so, the public will be more aware of the prominent problem among the left behind children and thus they can potentially address them more effectively. There are many current studies that investigate the issue of left behind children's mental issues and have proposed some possible influencing factors. However, none of them have done a synthesized review on different research papers point of view or talk about multiple factors in-depth. For example, some research investigate only the impact of parental communication; some research put their attention on the emotional health of the children who are left behind, while all the influencing factors are explained in a short paragraph; some research only presents some of the contradictory view of others but does not its own stand point. Thus, a new research paper is needed. This paper will cover conceptual framework, impacts, discussion, and conclusion.

2. Influential Factors' Impact on Left Behind Children's Mental Health

2.1. Impact on LBC's Mental Health in General

Extensive research has shown that children from migrating parents have a higher likelihood to endure worse health outcomes. Besides negative health impacts, left behind children also tend to have worse emotional outcomes. Left behind children are more likely to have depression, anxiety, and inferiority complex. Chen, Ying Liang and Li Wei conducted a meta-analysis and found that the left-behind children's Depression Inventory score, which is score that measures symptoms of depression. The higher the number, the more severe the depression. There was a standardized mean difference of

-0.233, which demonstrates that the score for left-behind children is significantly higher than the score for non-left-behind children [1]. J. Cheng and Y.H. Sun have added to the evidence for their conclusion. When compared to pairings that had their parents present, they discovered that LBC exhibits a high risk of despair and anxiety. According to reports, rates of anxiety and depression for LBC range from 13.2 to 57.6% and 12.1% to 51.4%, respectively [2]. This difference between the data is probably because once their parents leave them and go to larger cities, left behind children will face many challenges including increasing workloads, school bullying, and little supervision, all of which need parental affection. While in the absence of their parent's care and the neglect of the elderly, they are very likely to have mental illnesses. In addition to having migrant parents, a number of other characteristics, including gender, age, and communication with parents, are known to affect the mental health of left-behind children.

2.2. Gender's Impact on LBC's Mental Health

It has been established that gender also affects the mental health of children who are left behind. Parental migration has different levels of impact on boys and girls [3], usually more impact on girls than on boys. A study sent out three waves of surveys, each survey collects data on left-behind children's information, including age, gender, grade, etc. It also collects data on their parents' working conditions as a variable. Then it asked the students to fill in another survey that will assess their mental state. They then accessed the factor of gender to evaluate its impact on left-behind children's mental health. They found out that girls' mental health is significantly more likely to be influenced by migrating parents.

Even though the studies have not investigated the causes of the deviation among boys and girls, they suspect that, first of all, the separation of parents is only exacerbating the difference that has always existed between the different genders. This can be shown from the national data. 2.60% of Chinese women are subjected to depression, while only 1.55% of the male have depression, showing a 1.05% difference [4]. Despite the result might not be fully representative because it is influenced by the fact that men are less likely to report depression (mental illnesses are often associated with being "weak", and men would be more stigmatized for being "weak"), it still reflects the general disparities between men and women's mental health. Second of all, girls' emotional state is more closely connected to their parents' emotional support [5]. Thus, when emotional support from parents becomes absent, the mental health of female LBCs will be more greatly impacted. Third of all, gender stereotypes exacerbates left-behind girls' mental health. Girls are more likely to take on the chores in the household, further increasing the burden of left-behind girls [6]. All these three reasons combined, possibly lead to the higher anxiety and depression rate among the left behind girls.

2.3. Age's Impact on LBC's Mental Health

Older age is a protective factor for LBC's mental health. Many studies, for example, the one conducted by Wang and colleagues reported high depression rate among younger left-behind children. Aligning with Wang's finding, a study conducted a meta-analysis on various factors that affect LBC's loneliness. It found out that older LBC are less likely to experience loneliness [7]. The age groupings are further divided into junior high school students, or those between the ages of 13 and 17, and Grades 1-6. According to the study's findings, older left-behind kids reported decreased loneliness with a negligible effect size [7]. The slightly lower loneliness among older left-behind children is potentially due to many factors. Firstly, older LBCs are physically and mentally stronger. Thus, they will be more resilient to parental separation. Thus, they are less likely to endure the same level of mental illness when compared to their younger counterparts. Secondly, older LBC are often more engaged in school and society outside of their small family [8]. As a result, other people can provide them with mental support. In school, the older LBC can possibly find that they are not the only one being left behind, rather there are many classmates just like them. These can help to ameliorate their mental stress and lead to less mental issues.

2.4. Parental Communication's Impact on LBC's Mental Health

The children who are left behind's communication with their parents is another aspect that affects their mental health. According to several academics, migrant parents frequently don't spend enough time talking to their kids because of their long work hours and low educational levels. Kids who are left behind are therefore more likely to experience loneliness. Less frequent communication with their relocating parents increases the likelihood that children will experience loneliness or sadness. Another study included demographic factors including age, sex, educational attainment, parental communications, etc. and was done as a stratified two-stage cluster survey in a rural county of Shandong Province [9]. It found that left behind children who have bad relationships with their parents, meaning they communicate less, are subjected to more loneliness. In another research, the results show that LBC that communicate with their parents very often tend to have a higher Healthy Kids resilience assessment (HKRA) score. The score represents environmental protective factors and inner psychological traits. The score is often inversely related to depression. To conduct the research, the researchers further broke down parental communication frequency to three times per week, once per week, twice per week, only once per month, and even less [10]. The HKRA score shows a significant decline from LBCs who communicate with their parents three times per week to less than a month, 121,69,70,46,18,21 respectively. This successfully proves that parental communication has a positive influence on LBC's HKRA score, which also shows that it is beneficial for LBC's mental health (less likely to have depression) [10].

The difference between LBC's mental health caused by different communication frequencies might be a result of many reasons. Firstly, communication with parents can improve psychological resilience, which is one's ability to resist adverse mental conditions that are often associated with unfavorable life circumstances [11]. Better psychological resilience can lead to fewer mental problems among the LBC. This is probably because communicating with their parents can make the LBC feel like they are being loved and not abandoned. Secondly, talking with their parents more often means that their parents are more likely to handle the LBC's emotional upheavals [11]. When the children are feeling down or having maybe negative thoughts, communication with their parents can function like a therapy session. Thus, these children are less likely to develop severe mental illnesses. Lastly, communication level might be a good indicator of the family relationship. In other words, if the parents have always had a good relationship with their children, they will keep in contact with their children very often even when they are gone. Thus, the lower mental illness rate could also be explained by good family relationships since the beginning.

3. Discussion

According to the previous research, it is known that parental separation can lead to numerous mental illnesses among the left behind children, and gender, age, and parental communication are three factors that influence the extent of these mental issues. Therefore, there should be more policies implemented, while keeping in mind these three factors.

3.1. General Solutions

Generally speaking, the government ought to work to lower the number of children who are left behind, which can solve the problem from the roots. Many local governments have already implemented preferential policies to attract the labor force and let them stay in the rural area [12]. As a result, the migrating population can potentially show a declining trend in the future, and the number of left behind children will decrease. However, the policies have been implemented for over 10 years, while there is still a continuous trending of urban migrating. Thus, more solutions are needed to ameliorate the problem.

3.2. Solution Targeting Gender Difference

As for gender difference, the government should incorporate more gender equality lectures in the children's education, which can include ideas like housework is not only women's responsibility. This can take a very long time because the idea of the older generation is already deeply rooted, people can only hope for the younger generation to change. Thus, on top of providing related lectures in the rural areas, the government should also send paid therapists, or volunteer therapists, to the rural areas and ask them to pay specific attention to the more vulnerable left behind girls. As the result, the mental stress among the girls can hopefully be ameliorated.

3.3. Solution Targeting Age Difference

As for the age difference, the government should build facilities like nurseries to house all the pre-school-age left-behind children. This is because the younger age left behind children cannot get many mental support and care from their busy guardians or classmates. However, the nursery can fulfill their emotional needs. The nursery should have professional teachers and volunteers, and they can take on the role of the LBC's guardians. Consequently, the emotional issues of the young LBC can also be taken care of, and they will less likely to have depression and other mental illnesses later.

3.4. Solution Targeting Parental Communicational Difference

As for parental communication, the factories should offer 20 minutes of free phone time and encourage them to connect with their children. By granting this time to the workers, they will firstly have the time to contact their children, and they do not have to worry about the money. Thus, the migrating parents are more likely to call their children. They can therefore show their affection towards their kids and handle the LBC's emotional upheavals. As a result, the left behind children are going to have a more frequent communication with their parents. According to the previously stated research, they are less likely to experience mental illnesses.

4. Conclusion

Children who are left behind suffer mental health problems as a result of being separated from their parents, leaving them more prone to loneliness, melancholy, and anxiety. At the same, female left behind children are more subjected to mental illnesses than male due to the fact that they need to take on more chores in the family, their emotions are more closely connected with their parents, and the pre-existing between female and male's likelihood of having mental illnesses. Younger left behind children are more vulnerable than the older ones because they cannot get support from classmates or guardians and tend to be weaker mentally. Children who are left behind and do not speak to their parents frequently are more likely to develop mental health issues than those who speak to their parents once a week.

This is because communicating with parents can help to alleviate stress and emotional upheavals, and communication can be seen as an indicator of the family relationship. In other words LBC who don't communicate with their parents often tend to come from a less loving and close family, so they will have worse emotional outcomes. Despite the in-depth research this study has done, it does not look into how the factors may intertwine, influence one another, and create different results. For example, how would a female, young left behind children who rarely communicate to her parents react under the separation from parents. How is her mental state different or similar to that of someone who is a male, younger, and communicate with his parents often. Thus, it could be a potential area to research on in future study. Or future research can go deeply into potential remedies for the LBC's mental health. For example, future study can assess the impact of therapist session on left behind children's mental health with an experiment. This can shed light on what policies need to be implemented by the government and what are the best ways to help the LBC.

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