

**ISA RC06-41 CONFERENCE ON
CHANGING DEMOGRAPHY ↔ CHANGING FAMILIES**

Singapore, May 17-19, 2018

**Labor Migration, Family Separation and the Long-term Outcomes
of Children: The Case of Northwest China**

Emily Hannum / Wensong Shen / Li-Chung Hu

University of Pennsylvania / National Chengchi University

The rising mobility of labor across the world has led to a rising phenomenon of so-called ‘left-behind children.’ In many settings, this phenomenon involves transnational families, but in China, great numbers of children are left behind in rural areas as parents move to cities for work. According to China’s latest population census in 2010, there were approximately 61 million left-behind children in China in 2010, which accounted for 21.88% of its total child population (Zhou, Murphy, & Tao, 2014) and almost equaled the total number of children in United States in the same year.

Many debates have emerged about the effects of parental out-migration on left-behind children’s well-being. Some scholars argue that left-behind children benefit from increased independence (Asis, 2006) and more family income, which leads to better nutrition, housing, health care, and schooling (e.g., Hadi, 1999; Jones & Kittisuksathit, 2003). However, many researchers find that left-behind children are disadvantaged in mental health and educational outcomes (Graham & Jordan, 2011; Wen & Lin, 2012; Ye & Pan, 2011). Still other findings from China indicate that there is little, if any, difference between left-behind children and other rural children in psychological conditions, cognitive development, and language skills (Xu & Xie, 2015).

The majority of these studies focus on short-term effects of parental migration on left-behind children’s welfare. Although there are a few studies about the long-term effects of parental out-migration on left-behind children in other countries, including Albania (Giannelli & Mangiavacchi, 2010) and Indonesia (Resosudarmo & Suryadarma, 2011), research about long-implications of being left-behind in China, especially after left-behind children become adults, is still rare, mainly due to the unavailability of longitudinal data. Therefore, the contested findings in the current literature and the lack of a longitudinal perspective are significant limitations in our understanding of the long-term effects of parental migration on left-behind children’s welfare. This paper aims to fill this gap.

Three main questions will be examined in this paper: What are the long-term differences in 1) educational attainment and 2) psychological well-being between children left-behind in childhood and other rural children, and 3) Are there any gender differences in these relationships? To answer these questions, we use OLS linear regression and logistic regression models to analyze data from Gansu Survey of Children

and Families (GSCF, 2000, 2015), a longitudinal study of children in 100 rural villages in northwest China. The children were first interviewed at ages 9 to 12 in the year 2000 and last interviewed in early adulthood in the year 2015. The initial sample consisted of 2000 children interviewed in the year 2000, of which 1,643 were re-interviewed in 2015. Parental migration, which was defined as either parent was absent from home for at least six months, was first measured in 2000. In the year 2000, 19.16% of the sample children had out-migrant father. (19.03% of sample children had either out-migrant father or mother, and 0.68% had both out-migrant father and out-migrant mother). Children's educational attainment and psychological well-being (CES-D depression scale and Rosenberg self-esteem scale) were measured in 2015.

After controlling for children's age, gender, the average level of parents' education, and the average annual household income per capital in 2000, parental migration is negatively related to children's educational attainment. Children whose fathers were migrants experienced 0.52 years less total years of education, and 18% lower odds of completing secondary education, compared to other children. Regarding children's psychological well-being, there is no evidence indicating that father's out-migration has any negative relationship with children's depression and self-esteem levels in early adulthood. Finally, our results suggest that father's out-migration is not dependent on children's gender and there is no gender difference in the long-term negative implications of father's out-migration for children's educational attainment. Next steps in the analyses will investigate differences in the implications of migration for children in different socioeconomic groups.