

# Chinese Endeavors to Enhance the Welfare of Left-Behind Children: A Literature Review

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**Abstract:** *The issue of left-behind children has been a serious concern of Chinese society. The Chinese government and other entities have experimented with a wide range of measures to create a sound environment for their growth. This article is a survey of existing assistance measures for improving the welfare of left-behind children in China based on a literature review of 27 prior studies. The study spots four chief categories of measures in the literature: legislative protection, social support, school assistance, and technological backing, giving each of them a detailed description. The outcomes and challenges of the work on the care and protection of left-behind children are also discussed.*

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## **Introduction**

**I**N CHINA, a left-behind child is a child aged between 0 and 17 who has both or one of their parents working outside their home places, experiencing at least six months of separation from them (Lyu et al., 2024). According to the Ministry of Education of China, the number of left-behind children in Chinese rural areas was 12.9 million in 2020. In the meantime, data released by the Ministry of Civil Affairs of China in 2020 show that the country had 6.44 million underprivileged rural left-behind children in that year. Rural left-behind children may encounter various difficulties in home and school life. First off, they receive an education of unstable standard due to subpar educational resources in rural China, particularly in its remote and border areas. Furthermore, the lack of home education as a result of the absence of the parents is unfavorable for their character building, putting their mental health at risk (Zhang, 2016). Additionally, they are more susceptible to safety hazards because of flawed safety management of the school and inadequate supervision from the family and rural community (Zhang & Li, 2016).

As per Yu's (2017) analysis, the causes of the issue of rural left-behind children in China are three-fold: First, the development gap between urban and rural areas has prompted a massive population of young and middle-aged rural labor forces to migrate to cities for better employment opportunities; second, the registered residence (Hukou) system and its consequential constraints regarding education, medical care, housing, and other issues hamper migrant workers' ability to have their family settled in cities; third, the fading traditional intergenerational bonds, as well as weakened ties of kinship, undermines the quality of custody for those left-behind children entrusted to their grandparents or relatives in native places.

In response to all these predicaments of left-behind children, governmental and non-governmental organizations have taken action to ensure the provision of care and protection for this group. The Ministry of Civil Affairs in China has provided financial support in various forms to improve their living conditions. For instance, its "Specialized Program for the Treatment of Severe Illnesses in the Poverty-Stricken Population" mandates the left-behind children's access to free medication when suffering from serious illnesses. Certain third-sector organizations have established permanent bases in remote rural areas to supply prompt services and care to vulnerable groups in villages, including left-behind children (Wang & Pan, 2020).

This article, using the method of literature review, seeks to investigate the endeavors of Chinese society to improve the welfare of left-behind children in recent years, drawing on research results of prior studies. Using search words including "left-behind children," "assistance,"

“protection,” “care,” and “support,” this study retrieves 27 articles from the database of China National Knowledge Infrastructure, published by journals listed in “A Guide to the Core Journals of China” and the “Chinese Social Science Citation Index” (CSSCI). A review of these studies finds that there are four chief categories of measures for guaranteeing the care and protection of left-behind children: legislative protection (N=6), social support (N=9), school assistance (N=8), and technological backing (N=4). It is hoped that summarizing prior experiences in this area can provide evidence and valuable references for further exploration of more effective supporting systems for left-behind children in China.

## **Legislative Protection**

On the basis of certain fundamental rules from its constitution, China has formulated a series of laws targeting its underage population, such as the Minors Protection Law, Juvenile Delinquency Prevention Law, and Compulsory Education Law, to safeguard the legitimate rights and interests of children, including left-behind children (Hou, 2018). To ensure that the protection work for left-behind children adapts to changed social circumstances, the Minors Protection Law was revised in 2020, with its article 21 stipulating that parents and other guardians shall not leave children under the age of eight unattended or allow children under the age of sixteen to live independently without supervision. Article 22 of the law provides that parents who are unable to assume the responsibility of custody due to reasons such as working away from home shall delegate the guardianship of their children to a qualified entity. This stipulation on guardianship entrusting is helpful in mitigating safety and security risks in left-behind children (Li, 2017).

Despite the positive roles of these laws in protecting the rights of rural left-behind children, advocates for this group made the point that there should be more specific legislation targeting these children, given their peculiar childhood life experiences and psychological characteristics, which are significantly different from those of non-left-behind children (Zhang, 2020). To this end, relevant authorities have successively released a few specialized policies aimed at enhancing the protection of the rights and interests of rural left-behind children. In 2015, the State Council of China announced the National Plan for Child Development in Impoverished Areas, which emphasizes the importance of improving the care service system for left-behind children and clarifies the respective roles of the school, parents, and other possible guardians in this system. The plan also proposes the provision of mental health guidance for left-behind children to curb the occurrences of problematic behaviors in them. In the next year, 2016, the State Council released the Opinions on Strengthening the Work on the Care

and Protection of Rural Left-Behind Children. This plan is the first umbrella policy on the issue of left-behind children from the central government. The policy marks a significant step in the national action to support left-behind children as it advances a comprehensive protection system spanning multiple aspects, including enhanced care services, robust assistance and protection mechanisms, and measures for progressively reducing the number of left-behind children (Tong, 2016). Furthermore, the issue of left-behind children, a consequence of China's social transformation, is primarily caused by the huge urban-rural gap in economic development. To solve this issue, it is imperative to revitalize rural China across the board by adjusting the economic structure in rural areas to enable the rural population to have desirable employment opportunities in their home places or places in the proximity of their hometowns (Pu, 2019). In 2018, the State Council launched the Rural Revitalization Strategy, which included as major components the improvement of the social security system in rural areas, the enhancement of the care of rural left-behind children and other disadvantaged rural children, and the establishment of a dynamic monitoring mechanism for these children.

The said laws and policies have served as a basic legislative framework for the care and protection of rural left-behind children. Yet, more practical action is warranted to give full play to them (Hou, 2018; Pu, 2019; Zhang, 2020). First and foremost, more awareness and education about this issue are needed. It is imperative to heighten the awareness of self-protection in left-behind children by teaching them knowledge on how to evade criminal infringements; in the meantime, education on the safety of left-behind children should also be strengthened in adults like parents and teachers to increase their attention on the safety and security of these children. Second, there should be effective complaint and reporting channels in place so that those left-behind children coming across infringements or their parents can report their issues in a timely manner. Third, law enforcement efforts should be strengthened to impose prompt punishments on illegal and criminal acts that violate the rights of rural left-behind children. Fourth, relevant departments and individuals must be held accountable for the implementation of left-behind children protection measures stipulated by relevant laws and policies. Lastly, it is also important to develop local regulations on left-behind children protection. Subsequent to the State Council's release of the Opinions on Strengthening the Work on the Care and Protection of Rural Left-Behind Children, provincial and municipal governments have laid out corresponding implementation plans. Nevertheless, according to Yuan and Hu's (2018) review of these regional plans, the common inadequacy in them is the lack of third-party supervision and evaluation of guardianship of left-behind children, leading to the

absence of a guardianship deprivation mechanism. This is among the pronounced issues to be addressed by the local governments.

## Social Support

Parental absence results in affective deprivation in left-behind children, significantly increasing mental health risks in them. Furthermore, flawed home protection makes them more susceptible to safety threats. In addition, the incomplete family structure among migrant worker households leads to partial or complete loss of family functioning (Qiu, 2016), thereby increasing the incidence of problematic behaviors in left-behind children. To address these issues, various sectors of Chinese society have actively engaged themselves in aiding this group.

*Measures for maintaining and strengthening parent-child communication:* First off, dedicated phone lines provided by third-sector organizations have proved an effective device for aiding left-behind children in maintaining affective bonds with their parents (Sun, 2017). This measure can, to some extent, compensate for the lack of parent-child interaction in migrant worker families. With the proliferation of reports on physical and emotional injuries in left-behind children, an increased number of parents come to realize the potential detrimental effects of the long-time separation from their children. Many migrant worker mothers choose to return to their home places to live with their children, which mean they must give up employment in the city, resulting in exacerbated economic difficulties in their families. In this context, creating local employment opportunities for these mothers has become a meaningful endeavor to retain them in hometowns (Chen & Wang, 2018). Small-scale guaranteed loans, across-the-board tax and fee reductions, and social security subsidies provided by the government have been helpful in motivating them to start their businesses or become self-employed. At the same time, more practical skill training has been provided to rural mothers to enhance their capacity to seek out employment or initiate their own business, expanding their opportunities to participate in the labor force (Liu et al., 2016).

*Heightened Emotional Connections with Others:* The one-on-one assistance project is deemed an effective strategy for making up for the inadequacy of emotional support in left-behind children (Sun, 2017). In this project, each left-behind child has a teacher as his or her confidant in the school, and a volunteer acts as a surrogate parent or mother for him or her during their after-school hours. In certain regions, college students, especially those who were former left-behind children and have achieved academic excellence, are recruited as volunteers to keep regular contact with left-behind children in rural schools. They can serve as role models as well as emotional support providers for the latter (Wang & Liu, 2020).

*Warning Mechanisms:* Establishing a multi-agency warning mechanism is a workable measure for preventing problematic behaviors in left-behind children. For example, Qiu (2016) explored the possibility of creating a family malfunctioning warning mechanism with personal profiles of children living in separation with parents. Such a warning mechanism is helpful in spotting and reacting to behavioral problems in left-behind children in a timely manner by tracking their home economic status, school performance, and health states.

*Roles of the Rural Community:* The rural community plays a vital role in providing assistance to left-behind children and building a safe environment for their growth (Li et al., 2019). Currently, the rural community primarily provide following services to left-behind children (Liu et al., 2016; Li et al., 2019; Wang & Liu, 2020): (i) assigning a village-based, dedicated official to manage the affairs relating to left-behind children in their jurisdiction; (ii) pooling local resources to establish the “left-behind children’s home” to provide a favorable environment for their after-school learning, extracurricular activity, and cultural life; (iii) engaging professionals to provide psychological counseling for left-behind children if needed and increasing safety and security protection publicity for the guardians of these children through lectures, village broadcasts, educational videos and manuals. In addition, some researchers claimed that the rural neighborhood community played a more significant role than rural grassroots administrative organizations in safeguarding the safety of left-behind children in that neighbors were more likely to get involved in their day-to-day life and give enduring oversight and protection (Du, 2024). Specifically, the neighborhood community can provide multiple forms of care for left-behind children, including life care, emotional care, emergency assistance, moral guidance, academic tutoring, and more. At the same time, certain researchers also expressed the concern that accelerated urbanization might pose threats to the existence of the neighborhood community (Chen & Wang, 2018; Du, 2024). Therefore, it is necessary to take action to strengthen the ties between neighbors, which are a protective factor for the healthy growth of left-behind children.

In addition to emphasizing the significance of multi-agency efforts to improve the well-being of left-behind children, researchers also noted that the media had the responsibility to give objective reports on them, correcting the biased understanding of them as “problem children” in the popular public and preventing the tendency of stigmatizing them as a problem group (Zhu & Bo, 2020; Cui & Xiao, 2022). It is important to diffuse the fact that problematic behaviors in a portion of left-behind children are the product of the ongoing socioeconomic transformation as well as the longstanding bi-partite social and economic system in China, which classifies the whole population into two categories, urban and rural. They are a group of children

with basic psychological and emotional needs unmet. Blindly stereotyping and labeling them as problematic can only exacerbate the issue.

## **School Assistance**

As per Ye & Cheng's (2018) study, aside from material and financial aids, left-behind children need additional educational assistance and emotional support, of which the school is the ideal provider. China's central government and provincial governments have made it clear that schools are an important part of the system for helping children who have been left behind. These requirements include setting up a profile and contact system, starting the paired-assistance program, making an emergency response system, and improving and strengthening mental health education for students who have been left behind (Qi, 2017).

On top of these mandatory requirements from the government, rural schools have developed more specific measures to meet the diverse needs of left-behind children. First, hold the teacher accountable for the academic progress of left-behind children in their class. The teacher shall be the first responder when a left-behind child encounters learning difficulties. Helping these children develop positive attitudes toward learning is beneficial for improving their academic results. To do so, the teacher needs to listen patiently to left-behind children on their current challenges or give pro-active encouragement to fuel academic aspirations in them (Zhao et al., 2020). Second, place special weight on social-emotional development in left-behind children. Social-emotional skills are crucial for the all-round development and lifelong well-being of this group. Pu et al. (2024) argued that home-school co-education is an effective approach to promoting the development of social-emotional skills in left-behind children. Nevertheless, the schools have reported less-than-desirable outcomes of their cooperation with the students' families because they can only communicate with the parents through phone calls and have few opportunities for in-person meetings with the grandparents or other relatives as guardians (Zheng & Li, 2014). To address this issue, the school needs to resort to the administrative power of the local government and public opinion of the community to raise the awareness of home-school co-education in the parents or other guardians of left-behind children. Third, improve after-school service. When the custodian is unavailable, the left-behind child risks is going unattended during the after-school hours. After-school service can ideally make up for this gap (Ma & Cui, 2024). After-school service typically includes components such as homework tutoring, club activity, and mental health education. Sports, collective social activity, and individualized psychological counseling in after-school hours are deemed exceptionally effective in mitigating the loneliness (Zhang & Zhu, 2019), boosting self-confidence,



and promoting mental health development in left-behind children (Ma & Cui, 2024).

With the continuously improved left-behind children welfare system in China, the educational environment of these children has been significantly enhanced in recent years (Zhou & Wang, 2021). Specifically, rural compulsory education schools are better structured, with large-size classes becoming rare; students with rural boarding schools enjoy better material conditions, particularly the significantly improved accommodation; the financial aid system is accessible to impoverished students, resulting in a prominent decline in dropout rates in left-behind children. Amid the ongoing advancement of educational technology, rural schools have the potential to provide more personalized, higher-quality education for left-behind children by harnessing more abundant educational resources and adopting more advanced teaching modalities. In the meantime, rural schools need to strengthen mental health education and provide sound psychological counseling services to help left-behind children develop healthy, upbeat mentalities. In addition, they should increase partnership with the community and student families for a more complete care and protection network for left-behind children to support their all-round development.

## **Technological Backing**

Liang (2020) made the point that families of left-behind children varied by economic status, parental education level, and educational notion, and that not all of them are the victims of the early left-behind life. That implies the need for more targeted welfare policies for these children. Due to the large number of left-behind children in China, collecting and managing data on this population and their families was a challenging task. The use of information technology (IT) in education can help realize personalized assistance for left-behind children.

The current introduction of big data, mobile internet, and other forms of IT in education have largely facilitated the formulation of more precise assistance policies, establishment of an across-the-board assistance system, and improvement of the standard of rural education. First off, collecting, storing, processing, and analyzing personal information about left-behind children in a large region can be completed in an efficient manner by establishing a big data platform and collecting relevant data on a household basis. This is beneficial for the government's comprehensive knowledge of the developmental states of left-behind children as well as its reaching data-based decision-making on left-behind children welfare (Zhou et al., 2019). Furthermore, assistance efforts for the large population of left-behind children in varied circumstances often involve multiple entities (such as

government departments, non-governmental organizations, businesses, and individuals) and can turn out to be disorderly. Yet, with the help of IT, establishing a nationwide information system for left-behind children has become feasible. Such a system can gather and record detailed information on the specific needs of each left-behind child, providing accurate guidance for various assistance actors using data analysis. At the same time, thanks to the advances in mobile internet technology, assistance providers in different regions can develop synergies to jointly address problems faced by left-behind children (Zhao & Tian, 2017). Additionally, the applications of digital technology in education helps rural schools access richer instructional resources and enhance their teaching outcomes by promoting the balanced distribution of educational resources.

There are many successful experiments in applying IT to boost the welfare of left-behind children. For example, Lin et al. (2017) developed a WeChat public platform targeting the issue of deprived parental companionship and undesirable interpersonal relationships in left-behind children. The platform hosts regular interactive activities for the community of left-behind children and their parents. The researchers conducted a two-month follow-up survey, which reveals that the platform is effective in strengthening the relationships between left-behind children and their parents and instigating more active peer communication. Fu et al. (2022) investigated the effects of “smart homework” as an application on assignment completion in left-behind children using data from 78 counties (districts) in 11 municipal regions in Jiangxi Province. The application integrates big data and artificial intelligence technology into the traditional homework design, collection, and grading processes. It can design and assign stratified homework tasks to students with distinct academic levels (Ke et al., 2022), while also providing real-time feedback to them, assisting with their self-regulation of learning progress. According to Fu et al.’s (2022) research findings, the use of “smart homework” can not only improve the quality and efficiency of homework completion in left-behind children, largely lightening their afterschool academic burdens, but also is effective in alleviating their psychological pressures.

To sum up, the application of IT has helped increase the involvement of assistance actors, expand the coverage of assistance measures, and improve the efficiency of the implementation of these measures, providing strong impetus for the improvement of welfare in left-behind children.

## **Discussion**

At the time when the Opinions on Strengthening the Work on the Care and Protection of Rural Left-Behind Children were released, researchers argued that left-behind children welfare systems in China were still in their infancy,

with relevant government departments underperforming and few third-sector entities being mobilized (Shi, 2016). However, recent years have seen noticeable progress in this regard as a result of the aforementioned assistance measures taken by various stakeholders. First off, a basic care service system for left-behind children has been established. Wu (2021) conducted a field study involving Guizhou, Anhui, Sichuan, and Hebei Provinces, each with a large population of left-behind children. The study suggests that China has developed a preliminary left-behind children support model where government procurement of care and protection services predominates, with contributions from other social entities, and that basic care and protection networks entailing governmental leadership, family custody, school supervision, and community involvement are in place for left-behind children. Furthermore, the joint efforts of all stakeholders have resulted in a significant decline in the number of rural left-behind children; the occurrences of left-behind children being left unattended have been reduced to almost zero (Luo, 2021). Furthermore, with the increased number of assistance actors, more diverse varieties of aiding measures have emerged, ranging from material backing to mental health as well as spiritual life support. For example, a total of 4421 village-level children's homes and psychological counseling rooms have been created in Guizhou Province, involving inputs of roughly 530 million CYN (Wu, 2021), to assist the physical and mental development of left-behind children.

Still, certain issues deserve special consideration in future work on the welfare of left-behind children. First, dedicated professional staffs are warranted to ensure the services for left-behind children are of high quality rather than mere formalities to avoid the waste of resources. Second, some studies suggest that the decline in the number of left-behind children may be partially due to the decreased fertility rate in China. In effect, the percentage of left-behind children among Chinese school-age children remains relatively high (Wu, 2024). Hence, relevant authorities must be cautious about using the number of left-behind children as an indicator of the effectiveness of their assistance efforts. Third, illegitimate assistance measures and the hype from irresponsible media and businesses have negative impacts on the welfare of left-behind children (Qu, 2017). Thus, a rigid accountability mechanism is necessitated to prevent casual decision-making; regulation of media coverage needs to be strengthened to avoid dissemination of misleading information on left-behind children in the public. Lastly, it is noteworthy that a portion of left-behind children may end up becoming migrant children, leaving home places to join their parents. Still, migrant children face more difficulties than their urban peers. The erratic nature of migrant workers' employment makes the development of migrant children welfare policies a challenging task (Li & Liu, 2024). How to guarantee the rights of migrant children is pending further research.

## Conclusion

This survey is an encapsulation of current assistance measures for rural left-behind children in the dimensions of legislative protection, social support, school assistance, and technological backing, exhibiting the current state of the care and protection of left-behind children in China. Based on prior experiences in this regard, future work should focus on addressing those unresolved issues to build a more efficient, complete left-behind children welfare system to provide more comprehensive and sustainable services and support for this group.

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*(The 26 Studies included in the literature review are marked with asterisks)*

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