The Consequences of Parental Labor Migration in China for Children's Emotional Well-being

Qiang Ren, Peking University
Donald J. Treiman, UCLA

Extended Abstract

Using data from the 2010 Chinese Family Panel Survey (CFPS), we study the effects of internal migration in China on the emotional well-being of children age 10-15. The CFPS, a national probability sample survey of the Chinese population, includes 3,464 children within this age range.

China has experienced massive internal migration in recent years, mostly (although not entirely) rural-to-urban labor migration. Current estimates put the migrant population (those not living where they are registered) around 220 million. Many migrants are married with children, and thus face the dilemma of whether to leave children behind with a single parent (usually the mother) or, if both parents go out for work, with another relative, often a grandmother, or whether to bring their children with them. Both solutions are problematic. Children left behind (currently about 60 million) are subject to the privation of living without both parents, which, as we know from the U.S. literature on divorce and military service, creates a heightened risk of emotional problems. Children accompanying their migrant parents (currently about 20 million) face the difficulties of being uprooted from a familiar environment, often being marginalized with respect to education, and suffering from inadequate supervision because of the long hours their parents devote to work. On the other hand they may gain confidence because of their increased independence and necessary self-reliance. In sum, migrant children have a heightened

risk of emotional problems but may do unusually well with respect to feelings of personal efficacy.

To test these possibilities, we compare four groups: rural children with local registration living with both parents; urban children with local registration living with both parents; children left behind by migrant parents; and children accompanying their migrant parents. In our sample, there are 1,441 children in the first group, 469 in the second, 1,327 in the third, and 227 in the fourth. We expect the third and fourth groups to be at risk of increased emotional difficulties compared to children living with both parents, except—as noted above—the possibility that migrant children experience a heightened sense of self-efficacy. We first study these possibilities via conventional OLS and logistic regression procedures, where the key coefficients of interest are those associated with a set of dummy variables contrasting the four groups, controlling for the usual determinants of emotional well-being. This strategy enables us to contrast all four groups.

We then employ community fixed effects modeling. Because well-being may be correlated with characteristics of the communities in which children reside—the level of poverty, the degree of crowding, etc.—it is useful to control community characteristics by estimating community fixed effects models. Such models estimate the relationship between outcome variables (here, indicators of emotional well-being) and determining factors, all expressed as deviations from the community average, and thus purge the effects of both measured and unmeasured differences between communities. Specifically, we contrast children left behind with children in the same communities living with both parents, and we contrast migrant

children with children in the same communities living with both parents and enjoying local registration.

The dependent variables to be explored include a multiple-item depression scale, a multiple-item self-efficacy scale, and questions about the child's happiness, the child's report as to whether it is easy to get along well with others, the frequency of quarreling with parents or caregivers, and whether the child has any good friends. The depression scale will be constructed from six items drawn from the CES-D. The self-efficacy scale will be constructed from 14 items. Unfortunately, the self-efficacy items were asked only of 10-year olds and so this analysis will be restricted to approximately 1,100 children of this age in the sample.[1]

The independent variables include the living circumstance of the child (that is, the 4-category typology discussed above), and a number of control variables: the child's age, sex, agricultural vs. non-agricultural *hukou*, size of place of residence, who is the primary caregiver, number and ages of siblings, parental and family socioeconomic characteristics (education, occupation, income), school characteristics (whether in school, level, type of school attended), employment situation, and extent and characteristics of the child's friendship network (except when whether the child has any good friends is the dependent variable).

[1] In fact, there are only 566 children age 10 in the 2010 sample, yielding quite small numbers of cases when the sample is divided into the four residence-registration categories identified above. Thus, we plan to supplement the 2010 data with all children age 10 in 2011, which will approximately double the sample size. Since the 2011 data are not yet available for analysis, we cannot yet get exact counts of the number of 10 year olds in each category in 2011.