

**LIVED EXPERIENCES OF LEFT-BEHIND  
CHILDREN IN HENAN PROVINCE, CHINA**

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# **LIVED EXPERIENCES OF LEFT-BEHIND CHILDREN IN HENAN PROVINCE, CHINA**

by

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

CPC	Communist Party of China
CSQ	Coping Strategies Questionnaire
EBPs	Externalizing behavior problems
EST	Ecological Systems Theory
IFSSW	The International Association of Schools of Social Work
IFSW	International Federation of Social Workers
LBC	Left-behind children
NPC	National People's Congress
PFC	Problem-focused coping
SCSQ	Summary Coping Strategies Questionnaire
TCSQ	Trait Coping Strategies Questionnaire
WHO	World Health Organisation

# **PENGALAMAN HIDUP KANAK-KANAK YANG DITINGGALKAN DI WILAYAH HENAN, CHINA**

## **ABSTRAK**

Sejak reformasi dan pembukaan China, terdapat penghijrahan lebih banyak buruh yang ketara dari luar bandar ke kawasan bandar. Akibatnya, populasi kanak-kanak yang semakin meningkat telah ditinggalkan di kawasan luar bandar. Kanak-kanak ini menghadapi cabaran pendidikan dan psikologi yang telah muncul sebagai isu sosial yang penting. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk meneroka cabaran utama yang dihadapi oleh kanak-kanak yang ditinggalkan ini, mengkaji strategi daya tindak mereka, dan mengenal pasti keperluan khusus mereka. Di samping itu, kajian ini bertujuan untuk membangunkan model intervensi untuk meningkatkan kesejahteraan mereka. Kajian ini dijalankan di Bandar Zhoukou, Wilayah Henan. Kajian ini tertumpu kepada perkhidmatan penjagaan yang disediakan untuk kanak-kanak yang ditinggalkan. Kajian ini menggunakan metodologi penyelidikan kualitatif dan menggunakan teknik temu bual mendalam bagi tujuan pengumpulan data. Seramai dua puluh lima (25) orang kanak-kanak yang ditinggalkan telah ditemu bual untuk memahami cabaran mereka, strategi menangani masalah yang dihadapi oleh mereka dan keperluan khusus. Kajian ini mendapati perbezaan dalam kehidupan dan persekitaran kekeluargaan menyumbang kepada kelemahan dalam pengurusan kesihatan kanak-kanak yang ditinggalkan. Penemuan utama termasuk pengurangan interaksi dengan ibu bapa, kesukaran dalam membentuk hubungan interpersonal, cabaran prestasi akademik, dan keperluan untuk memperoleh kemahiran hidup. Kanak-kanak yang ditinggalkan menggunakan pelbagai mekanisme strategi, seperti aktiviti rekreasi, penstrukturan semula emosi, mendapatkan sokongan dan mengambil inisiatif proaktif. Selain itu, kajian itu mengenal



pasti keperluan kanak-kanak yang ditinggalkan, termasuk pelaksanaan program perkhidmatan kerja sosial, penjagaan dan sokongan keluarga, penglibatan pendidikan, pembangunan dan perkhidmatan komuniti, serta sokongan kewangan dan dasar kerajaan. Berdasarkan pelbagai teori dan menggabungkan praktis kerja sosial, kajian ini mencadangkan strategi untuk meningkatkan kesejahteraan kanak-kanak yang ditinggalkan. Strategi ini termasuk memupuk mekanisme daya tindak yang positif, mewujudkan perkhidmatan kerja sosial, menambah baik persekitaran dan komunikasi asuhan keluarga, meningkatkan inisiatif pendidikan, dan menyokong sokongan dasar yang komprehensif. Kajian ini memperkaya amalan kerja sosial dan mempromosikan pembentukan model kerja sosial untuk kanak-kanak yang ditinggalkan di kawasan luar bandar. Ia memberikan perspektif dan kerangka baharu untuk teori-teori berkaitan isu kanak-kanak yang ditinggalkan, menyumbang kepada pembangunan kerja sosial tempatan di China. Selain itu, kajian ini memperkukuhkan dokumen dasar kerajaan China, memperkuat sistem perkhidmatan untuk kanak-kanak yang ditinggalkan, dan mengadvokasi pembentukan undang-undang kebajikan khusus untuk kanak-kanak yang ditinggalkan.

# **LIVED EXPERIENCES OF LEFT-BEHIND CHILDREN IN HENAN PROVINCE, CHINA**

## **ABSTRACT**

Since China's reform and opening up, there has been a significant migration of surplus labourers from rural to urban areas. As a result, a growing population of children has been left behind in rural settings. These children face educational and psychological challenges that have emerged as important social issues. This study aims to explore the main challenges faced by these left-behind children, examine their coping strategies, and identify their specific needs. Additionally, the study seeks to develop an intervention model to improve their well-being. Conducted in Zhoukou City, Henan Province, the research focused on the care services provided for left-behind children. This study utilizes qualitative research methodology and employs the in-depth interview technique to gather data. Twenty-five (25) left-behind children were interviewed to understand their challenges, coping strategies, and specific needs. The study found disparities in living conditions and familial environments between left-behind children and those who were not left behind, contributing to the health vulnerabilities of left-behind children. Key findings include reduced interaction with parents, difficulties in forming interpersonal relationships, academic performance challenges, and the need for life skills acquisition. Left-behind children employ various coping mechanisms, such as recreational activities, emotional recalibration, seeking support, and taking proactive initiatives. Additionally, the study identified the needs of left-behind children, including the implementation of social work service programs, family care and support, educational engagement, community development and services, as well as national financial and policy support. Drawing from various theories and incorporating insights

from social work, this study suggests strategies to enhance the well-being of left-behind children. These strategies include nurturing positive coping mechanisms, establishing social work services, improving family nurturing environments and communication, enhancing educational initiatives, and advocating for comprehensive policy support. This study enriches social work practice and promotes the establishment of a social work model for rural left-behind children. It provides new perspectives and frameworks for theories related to the issues of left-behind children, contributing to the development of indigenous social work in China. Additionally, the study enhances the policy documents of the Chinese government, strengthens the service system for left-behind children, and advocates for the establishment of a specialized welfare law for left-behind children.

# **CHAPTER 1**

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 Introduction**

This study critically examines the life experiences of left-behind children, exploring the multifaceted aspects of their lives, the challenges they encounter, and their coping mechanisms and needs. This chapter outlines the study's background, research questions, objectives, and significance.

### **1.2 Background of Study**

The World Migration Report estimated that there were 281 million international migrants in the world in 2020, and China was the second-ranked international migrant (IOM, 2022). In 2020, China's migrant worker population reached 286 million, with 70.52 million undertaking inter-provincial migration. Recent years have witnessed a stabilization in the number of these workers, buoyed by the revitalization of rural areas and the sustained growth of the rural economy. Despite this stabilization, the figures remain substantial. A significant factor influencing this trend is the household registration system (hukou), coupled with the persistent urban-rural dichotomy, leading many migrant workers to leave their underage children in their hometowns. These children, often referred to as "left-behind children", are typically cared for by grandparents or other relatives. According to the National Bureau of Statistics of mainland China, there were approximately 12.9 million left-behind children in compulsory education as of 2020 (The National Bureau of Statistics, 2020).

Post-economic reforms and the initiation of China's open-door policy, the transformation in the economic framework, and urbanization have rendered agricultural

income insufficient for the sustenance of rural households. Consequently, the surplus rural labour force has been compelled to seek employment in urban areas. The rapid economic development of China has led to regional disparities in employment opportunities, with urban regions offering more job prospects and higher wages (Cao, 2001). This urban allure, combined with the challenges of limited land availability and an overabundance of labour in rural areas (Hou, 2004), has catalysed a significant migration of labourers from rural to urban settings, and from less developed to more developed regions within the country.

By the close of 2018, China's migrant worker population had surpassed 288 million (The National Bureau of Statistics, 2019). Migration to urban areas poses challenges for these workers, especially regarding family relocation due to the constraints of China's Household Registration System (Hukou). Hukou, a household registration policy, categorizes individuals as residents of specific areas and determines their access to public services and social programs, such as education, healthcare, and social security, based on their registered status (Meng & Yamauchi, 2017). Consequently, many migrant workers elect not to bring their children to urban locales, as doing so would place the children outside their designated Hukou, limiting their access to essential services. Additionally, the elevated cost of urban living further discourages this relocation (Cheng & Sun, 2015). As a result, numerous children of migrant workers are left in their hometowns under the care of relatives, often grandparents (Ye et al., 2006), or are left to fend for themselves (Meng & Yamauchi, 2017).

A tragic instance highlighting the severe implications of this phenomenon occurred in 2015 in Bijie, Guizhou, China, where four 'left-behind' children committed

suicide due to intense loneliness and despair, exacerbated by inadequate care and the hardships of life. These children, facing poverty and a lack of familial support, were vulnerable to psychological fragility, leading to suicidal ideation. This underscores the comparatively lower mental health levels among 'left-behind' children. Childhood is a pivotal stage for forming attachments with parents, developing habits, and shaping personality. The absence of parental figures and the disruption of family functions for 'left-behind' children often lead to neglect, a profound sense of loneliness (Man et al., 2006), and a significantly higher prevalence of depression (12.1%-51.4%) and anxiety (13.2%-57.6%) compared to their peers (Cheng & Sun, 2015). Moreover, there is a noted correlation between negative coping styles and the severity of psychological issues among these children, emphasizing the need for effective coping strategies to mitigate mental health challenges (Lazarus, 1993; Man et al., 2006).

In a life course study involving former left-behind university students, it was found that those with lower resilience often sought internal balance through external denial, escapism, and goal readjustment after encountering adverse events. Such coping mechanisms have been observed to adversely affect their academic performance and future scholarly pursuits (Du, 2017). The 2018 China Mobile Population Development Report, released by the National Health Commission, presents a concerning picture. The report, drawing on a health service needs assessment of 545,803 children in distress and left-behind children in poverty-stricken areas across 12 provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities in China, indicates that these children face significant psycho-behavioural health challenges. These challenges, which include difficulties in emotional management, academic attention, social adjustment, and an increased risk of self-injurious behaviour, tend to intensify with age. Particularly notable is the escalation

of these issues among children in difficult circumstances by the fourth grade and the first year of junior high school, compared to their peers.

Economic constraints often compel parents to seek employment away from home, leaving their children in the care of elderly relatives. Over 90% of left-behind children are primarily looked after by grandparents, with the average age of these caregivers being around 59 years. Moreover, more than 70% of these caregivers have attained education only up to the primary or elementary level. This generational and educational gap means that while grandparents may adequately provide for the physical needs of the children, such as food and clothing, they often struggle to address or even recognize the psychological and emotional needs of the children. This oversight highlights a critical gap in the care and support provided to left-behind children, underscoring the need for interventions that address not only their physical but also their emotional and psychological well-being.

Numerous school-aged children, particularly those in financially impoverished families, are compelled to manage their own daily needs while also contributing to household and farm duties. This situation often leads to diminished self-esteem and social withdrawal among these children. They exhibit a strong desire for interaction yet harbour fears of engaging with others, resulting in loneliness, emotional vulnerability, and a tendency to withdraw from social contact. These children often lack a sense of security and struggle to assimilate into broader social contexts. The infrequent interaction with their parents and the consequent distant parent-child relationship exacerbates these issues. Their parents' inability to provide timely guidance and support in facing difficulties and stress further impairs their development (National Health Commission of the People's Republic of China, 2018).

Given their young age and the absence of parental guidance and assistance, these children find it challenging to navigate and overcome these adversities. However, it is important to recognize that children in the left-behind situation are in a critical phase of growth and development, making them highly receptive to positive change. With appropriate guidance and education, they have the potential to successfully confront and surmount these adversities and challenges. Therefore, it is imperative for social workers to employ professional methodologies to develop and shape effective coping strategies in left-behind children, fostering resilience and adaptability in the face of their unique circumstances.

Coping strategies encompass a range of mechanisms, including problem-solving, rationalization, help-seeking, fantasy, avoidance, and self-accusation. These strategies can be broadly categorized into two groups: immature and mature. Immature coping strategies typically involve avoidance, fantasy, and self-accusation, whereas mature coping strategies include problem-solving, help-seeking, and rationalization. While all children have access to these coping mechanisms, individual children tend to develop a unique set of strategies that they customarily employ when faced with challenges. The selection of coping strategies theoretically influences the outcomes of life events, engendering distinct psychological and emotional experiences for each individual (Yu et al., 2020). Research has shown that left-behind children (LBC) are less inclined to utilize positive coping styles, such as problem-solving, when compared to their non-left-behind counterparts (NLBC) (Wang & Liu, 2018). Children exhibiting deficits in social problem-solving, or difficulties in identifying problems and generating appropriate solutions, are more prone to feelings of hopelessness, depression, and suicidal behaviours (Song et al., 2020). This correlation underscores the significance of



fostering effective coping mechanisms in children, particularly among those in vulnerable groups like LBC.

The escalating focus on rural regions has brought the physical, psychological, and educational challenges of left-behind children in these areas to the forefront of academic and societal discourse. These children represent a microcosm of the rural exodus and mirror the broader issue of uneven societal development in China. Consequently, the establishment of a dedicated service system for left-behind children is essential for fostering social equity and harmonizing urban-rural development within the country. Given that left-behind children constitute a significant segment of the rural demographic, it is crucial for families, society, and the state to collaboratively enhance the conditions in which these children are raised, thereby improving their overall well-being.

The current support system for rural left-behind children, encompassing government, family, and school resources, is inadequate, necessitating immediate intervention by social forces (Deng, 2016). There is a pressing need for fortified professional and social support for these children provided by various government departments and social entities. Social work interventions in this context should be grounded in established values, encompass the entire intervention process, and incorporate and leverage professional methodologies (Tang, 2017). Furthermore, grassroots governments must refine their institutional mechanisms and other frameworks to address the challenges faced by left-behind children effectively. This involves guiding social organizations and families to collaboratively explore innovative models for the care and management of left-behind children in rural areas (Geng, 2017).

This multifaceted approach is integral to addressing the complex needs of left-behind children and ensuring their healthy development within the societal fabric.

In recent years, the Communist Party of China and the Chinese government have accorded substantial attention to the issue of children left behind in rural areas, initiating a series of significant decisions and actions. These efforts have been directed toward promoting the development of the rural economy through poverty alleviation and the rural revitalization strategy. The initiatives include stimulating local economic growth, encouraging migrant workers to return to their hometowns for entrepreneurship and employment, and implementing measures to address the challenges faced by left-behind children. As a result of robust policy support, the incidence of children being left behind in rural areas has markedly diminished at the source. Nonetheless, it is imperative to recognize that the total number of left-behind children in rural areas remains substantial, necessitating continued and concerted efforts from all societal sectors to fundamentally address this issue.

Given their young age and the absence of parental guidance, left-behind children face challenges in effectively coping with their circumstances. However, this demographic is in a critical phase of growth and development, and thus, highly responsive to positive interventions. Appropriate guidance and education can empower them to overcome these adversities. It is therefore crucial for social workers to employ professional methodologies to develop and refine the coping strategies of left-behind children. The research aims to explore the resilience and coping mechanisms of left-behind children in rural areas through qualitative analysis and to propose a social work intervention model that enhances the mental health of left-behind children in this new

era. This approach is vital for ensuring the well-being and holistic development of these children in contemporary society.

### **1.3 Problem Statement**

The stark dichotomy between urban and rural areas, coupled with the pronounced disparity between the wealthy and the impoverished, constitutes a defining characteristic of contemporary Chinese society. Historically, there was a prevailing societal emphasis on urban development, with rural areas primarily serving as resource pools for urban centres. However, in recent times, as China's cities have witnessed rapid growth, rural regions have experienced a gradual decline. This phenomenon is largely attributed to the migration of the young and middle-aged population to urban areas for employment, resulting in children being predominantly cared for by the elderly in rural homes. In response to these emerging rural challenges, the Chinese government has initiated targeted strategies for poverty alleviation and rural revitalization. These initiatives include the establishment of township social work service stations to enhance the provision of rural social work services.

Jiang et al. (2024) collected literature data on left-behind children from 2000 to 2023 using the CiteSpace program from the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) Chinese core journals and CSSCI journals. The main research areas on left-behind children include their mental health, education of rural left-behind children, physical health of left-behind children, the consequences of being left-behind, and the variables affecting left-behind children. There is a relative lack of comprehensive research exploring the life experiences of left-behind children and their stress coping strategies. In a study employing the Adolescent Self-Rating Life Events Checklist (ASLEC), Guang et al. (2017) conducted a survey involving 6227 rural children aged

7-17 years. The findings revealed that left-behind children (LBC, N = 4181) experienced higher levels of stress and exhibited more depressive symptoms in response to stressful life events than their non-left-behind counterparts (NLBC, N = 2046). The study noted that children left behind by both parents demonstrated the most significant levels of depression. The research concluded that stress triggered by such life events poses a substantial risk factor for depressive symptoms among LBC. Correspondingly, Han et al. (2018) observed that college students with a history of being left behind (LBE) scored higher on the ASLEC compared to those without such experiences, further highlighting the psychological impact of being a left-behind child.

Compared to their non-left-behind peers, left-behind children face numerous disadvantages both at home and in school due to the absence of their parents. This absence results in a lack of parental care and support, strained parent-child relationships, and unmet daily and emotional needs. These factors collectively contribute to a range of developmental challenges and impede the healthy development of left-behind children. However, it is noteworthy that not all left-behind children succumb to negative outcomes such as deviant behaviour or psychological problems. In fact, some demonstrate resilience, exhibiting increasingly positive responses to their circumstances. Childhood represents a critical period for developing coping strategies in response to stress. The cultivation and enhancement of such strategies can empower left-behind children to realize their potential, affirm their self-worth, and enhance their capacity to navigate and overcome difficulties in the face of adversities. Literature indicates that left-behind children are more prone to developmental issues compared to their peers, primarily due to the absence of parental care and affection and often inadequate guardianship by their grandparents (Jiang, 2017).

Li and Liu (2016) have addressed the challenges and potential interventions for the growth of left-behind children in rural areas. The majority of these children exhibit psychological traits such as loneliness, low self-esteem, and anxiety during their developmental years (Chen & Zhan, 2017). The combination of familial education dynamics and the limitations of educational support contribute to psychological, learning, and safety issues among left-behind children. Addressing these issues is crucial for ensuring the well-being and effective support of left-behind children. The psychological profile of these children typically includes feelings of loneliness, low self-esteem, and anxiety, accompanied by challenges in life, safety, and education throughout their growth process (Wang, 2012).

As scholarly and societal focus increasingly shifts towards rural areas, the multifaceted challenges faced by left-behind children in these regions have garnered significant attention. This concern encompasses the physical, psychological, and educational aspects of their well-being. A notable study involving 400 children across 10 rural communities revealed that many grandparents, serving as temporary guardians, tend to view their caregiving role as primarily providing basic necessities like food and clothing. This perspective often leads to a neglect of the children's educational and psychological needs (Ye & Pan, 2011). The study further highlights a role reversal phenomenon, wherein children, in some instances, assume the responsibility of caring for their elderly guardians. This inversion of traditional caregiving roles imposes additional responsibilities on the children, complicating their developmental and emotional landscape.

Inadequate coping strategies among left-behind children (LBC) in response to their unique challenges can precipitate a multitude of issues. Research from both China

and international sources indicates that LBC is prone to an array of emotional, behavioural, and learning difficulties, including depression, non-suicidal self-injury, and game addiction. These problems are often exacerbated by factors such as insecure physical environments, limited social resources, poor academic performance, low self-esteem, and psychological impediments. Studies reveal that guardians of left-behind children frequently exhibit minimal engagement with the children's mental health issues and often overlook their significance of such concerns.

During the critical stages of primary and secondary education, students undergo rapid physical and mental development, characterized by evolving self-perception, academic pressures, and complex interpersonal interactions. This period necessitates a supportive environment where students can freely express and discuss their emotions and experiences. However, the absence of parents and the consequent lack of adequate attention from guardians to these emotional and mood changes can severely impact the mental health of LBC. Such neglect can lead to emotional vulnerability, self-loathing, anxiety, social withdrawal, diminished confidence, pessimism, and other psychological disturbances. Furthermore, children and adolescents in compulsory education, still in the process of developing their literacy and self-regulation skills, face additional challenges due to the absence of parental guidance.

The unique dynamic between LBC and their guardians, where guardians often maintain a permissive attitude as long as significant misconduct is avoided, can lead to behavioural deviations. The absence of timely and effective disciplinary measures may result in LBC exhibiting poor moral judgment, noncompliance with rules and regulations, and engagement in problematic behaviours such as truancy, lying, and aggression. This situation underscores the need for more proactive and attentive

caregiving and mentorship to support the healthy development and well-being of left-behind children.

The absence of timely and effective discipline can lead to lax behavioural standards among some left-behind children, resulting in deviations from acceptable conduct. A survey highlighted that numerous left-behind children often disregard the traditional teachings imparted by their elders at home, demonstrating poor moral judgment in school settings. These children frequently fail to adhere to established rules and regulations, exhibiting behaviours such as habitual tardiness, early departures, truancy, dishonesty, engaging in fights, and bullying other students. Additionally, some left-behind children develop obsessions with pool rooms, internet cafes, and gaming halls, and at times, associate with adults in potentially harmful social environments. This pattern of behaviour underscores a significant concern for guardians, parents, and educational institutions alike, as detailed in the 2018 Investigation Report on the Problems of Children Left Behind in Rural Areas. These findings point to the urgent need for more structured and consistent guidance and supervision for left-behind children to prevent the escalation of such behavioural issues (Investigation Report on the Problem of Children Left Behind in Rural Areas, 2018).

In the context of parent-child separation, left-behind children inevitably encounter various challenges. Nevertheless, some exhibit remarkable resilience by actively addressing problems, seeking assistance, and adopting mature coping strategies. These children tend to refrain from self-blame and escapism, and they seldom avoid confronting their problems. Utilizing mature or intermediate coping styles can provide temporary psychological or behavioral relief (An, 2019). Furthermore, a study investigating urban-rural disparities revealed that rural junior high school students

typically encounter societal pressures at an earlier age and engage more in household and farm work. This early exposure to responsibilities contributes to their maturity in social interactions, inclining them toward problem-oriented coping styles. Such students tend to adopt coping mechanisms like problem-solving, rationalization, and seeking social help, as opposed to negative coping styles such as patience, venting, fantasy denial, and avoidance (Duan, 2018).

This study focuses on developing a professional social work service model tailored to left-behind children in rural China, with a specific emphasis on the rural areas of central China, particularly in Henan Province, which has a significant rural population. The research methodology includes in-depth interviews, and literature reviews. The aim is to understand the current circumstances and needs of left-behind children, assisting them in recognizing and addressing their negative coping strategies. The study also seeks to identify and harness the strengths of these children, utilizing available resources to address their developmental challenges and enhance their coping abilities. The ultimate goal is to construct a professional social work service model for left-behind children that not only meets their specific needs but also aligns with China's national context and correlates with the country's level of economic and social development.

The large group of left-behind children in rural areas is a microcosm of the current hollowing out of the countryside and a reflection of the uneven development of Chinese society as a whole, so building a service system for left-behind children is an inherent requirement for achieving social equity and coordinating urban and rural development in China. As left-behind children make up a large proportion of the rural population structure, it is of great importance to families, society, and the country to



continuously improve the environment in which left-behind children grow up and to enhance their overall quality (Feng, 2019).

Like other children, left-behind children are the bearers of humanity's reproduction and the nation's wealth. Left-behind children are the ones whose interests are damaged in economic growth, and access to care and protection is the fundamental right of left-behind children. Therefore, to solve the problem of left-behind children is to invest in the country's future, especially the future of less developed regions. Doing an excellent job with left-behind children in rural areas is related to the healthy growth of minors, family happiness, and social harmony, and to the overall situation of building a well-off society in China.

In 2016, the State Council issued the "Opinions on Strengthening the Care and Protection of Rural Left-behind Children," which outlined the establishment of a protection and rescue mechanism for left-behind children led by the government with broad participation from all sectors of society. The key points are as follows: strengthening the primary responsibility of family guardianship; implementing the responsibilities of county, township governments, and village (resident) committees; county-level governments should effectively strengthen coordination and supervision, formulate feasible care and protection policies and measures for rural left-behind children based on local conditions, and ensure that care and protection work covers all rural left-behind children within their administrative regions; increasing the efforts of education departments and schools in care and protection; leveraging the advantages of mass organizations in providing care services, such as trade unions, the Communist Youth League, the Women's Federation, the Disabled Persons' Federation, and the Working Committee for the Care of the Next Generation, which should utilize their

strengths to actively provide care services such as daytime care during holidays, after-school tutoring, and psychological counseling for rural left-behind children; promoting active participation of social forces, accelerating the incubation and cultivation of social work professional service institutions, public welfare and charitable social organizations, and volunteer service organizations, and supporting these organizations in providing professional services such as guardianship guidance, psychological counseling, behavior correction, social integration, and family relationship adjustment for rural left-behind children through government service procurement and other methods (State Council, 2016).

A significant policy initiative is the Chinese government's implementation of the "dual-layer" guardianship system for left-behind children (Chen et al., 2017). Local officials select responsible community members to serve as guardians. These guardians perform essential and multifaceted roles: they provide a stable living environment, proper nutrition, and daily supervision; ensure regular school attendance, assist with homework, and communicate with teachers regarding academic progress; offer emotional stability and support to help children cope with parental absence; and serve as legal representatives, protecting the children's rights and managing legal matters such as school registration and access to social services. However, literature indicates that guardians often neglect the educational and care needs of left-behind children (Ding & Bao, 2014). The Chinese government has also introduced educational and cultural initiatives to support the development and growth of left-behind children. For example, according to the "Left-Behind Children Education Development Plan," the Chinese government provides funding to rural schools to improve the quality of education and create a more favorable and convenient learning environment for children (Hong & Fuller, 2019). Chinese government's internal coordination in improving the emotional

and psychological health of rural left-behind children has also been relatively disorganized. So far, multiple government agencies, including the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Civil Affairs, and the Ministry of Education, are jointly responsible for providing emotional and psychological services for child welfare (Xiang et al., 2012). However, inter-agency coordination is quite weak, leading to duplication of work and inefficiencies in delivering the necessary services and support (Hung, 2023).

Although China has established a relevant policy framework, there is still a lack of implementation and resource allocation, particularly in remote rural areas. The policies are more focused on basic living security and education issues, with insufficient emphasis on mental health. Additionally, the multi-departmental cooperation mechanism in China's policies is not yet well-developed. Therefore, there is significant room for improvement in the deepening and refinement of policies for left-behind children in China.

The social work practice for international migrant children and left-behind children in China has been increasingly gaining attention in research. Literature indicates that social workers play a crucial role in supporting and protecting these two groups. Social work can consider various factors to provide effective services for children and intervene across multiple systems (Garbarino, 2017). Firstly, social workers establish trust relationships, provide emotional support, and offer psychological counseling to help them cope with the emotional and psychological stress caused by parental migration or being left behind. This emotional support helps alleviate children's anxiety and loneliness, and enhances their self-esteem and psychological resilience. Secondly, social workers are essential in educational support, assisting with homework, providing after-school tutoring, and communicating with

school teachers to ensure that migrant and left-behind children receive equitable educational opportunities . Additionally, social workers integrate community resources, organize community activities, and establish support networks to enhance children's sense of social inclusion and belonging (Chen & Zhan, 2017). In underdeveloped rural societies, the practices and mechanisms for child protection have not yet been fully established, and there are very few professional social service organizations. These conditions indicate that the current forms of child protection services in rural areas are not yet adequate, suggesting significant room for growth in these services (Hung, 2023). These community support measures help children build social connections and receive more social support. However, literature also points out that current social work practice faces several challenges, such as insufficient resources, varying professional competence of social workers, and inadequate policy support (Zhao & Xu, 2021). Therefore, future research and practice need to further explore ways to enhance the professional capacity of social workers, strengthen inter-departmental cooperation, and optimize policy support to better serve migrant and left-behind children.

#### **1.4 Research Questions**

The primary aim of this study is to understand the life experiences faced by left-behind children. The ultimate goal is to develop a more strategic and practical social work intervention framework for left-behind children in Henan Province, China. The research questions are as follows:

- i. What are the main problems faced by left-behind children in Henan Province, China?
- ii. What coping strategies are used by left-behind children in Henan Province, China when they are faced with stressful situations?

- iii. What are the needs of left-behind children in Henan Province, China?

## **1.5 Research Objectives**

Specifically, the primary objectives of this study are:

- i. To explore the main problems faced by left-behind children in Henan Province, China.
- ii. To examine the coping strategies used by left-behind children in Henan Province, China when faced with stressful situations.
- iii. To analyse the needs of left-behind children in Henan Province, China.
- iv. To propose an intervention model for enhancing the well-being of left-behind children in Henan Province, China.

## **1.6 Significance of the Study**

### **1.6.1 Significance to Government Policy**

The exploration of this study is conducive to achieving Common Prosperity in China, appropriate for the effective implementation of China's comprehensive rural revitalization strategy, and conducive to promoting the construction of rural social workstations advocated by the Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs. The study's recommendations can guide guardians, caregivers, and teachers of children left behind in rural areas and improve the implementation of grassroots services in China.

This study will systematically explore measures and policies to address the problem of children left behind in rural areas. After comparing the similarities and differences between China and developing and developed countries, the study will explore specific policies suitable for the problem of children left behind in China, taking

into account the actual situation in China, which will be conducive to a deeper theoretical discussion of the welfare attributes of children and a more precise construction of a local social work intervention model in China. At the same time, China is the country with the wealthiest research resources on left-behind children in the world. This research is conducive to the theoretical dialogue between China and other countries in this field to jointly promote the development of service policies for left-behind children.

### **1.6.2 Significance to Target Group**

LBCs are in a critical period of psychological growth. The long-term absence of the role of parents will cause lasting negative impacts on their psychological development (Zhao et al., 2017), which is prone to more serious behavioural problems (Chen et al., 2014), among which delinquency, aggression, and other EBPs are being increasingly viewed as a public health problem. If these problems are not corrected, they will seriously affect the healthy development of adolescents and lead to social problems such as juvenile delinquency and adult violence (Wichers et al., 2013). Moreover, the EBPs in children and adolescents predicted anxiety disorders in young adulthood. Therefore, this study mainly focuses on the EBPs of LBC, which greatly reduces juvenile delinquency and maintains national stability (Roza et al., 2013).

In the face of the massive number of left-behind children in rural areas in China, it has become urgent to solve their practical problems, protect their legal rights and interests, and help them grow healthily. The United Nations model of children's rights and human rights holds that children enjoy the same general human rights as adults. The Convention on the Rights of the Child stipulates the rights that children must have to fully realize their potential and be protected from hunger, deprivation, neglect, and abuse. Children are neither the property of their parents nor helpless objects of charity.

They are individuals and holders of their own rights (UNICEF, 2016). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child stipulates that "countries that ratify this Convention are bound by international law" (UNICEF, 2014). Ratifying countries must prioritize the best interests of the child. The Convention has transformed the perception and treatment of children, recognizing them as individuals with unique rights rather than passive recipients of care. It addresses the specific needs and rights of children, which can be broadly divided into three categories: Provision, which includes the right to essential services such as basic living conditions, healthcare, and education necessary for the child's survival and holistic development; Protection, which encompasses the right to be shielded from harmful actions and practices such as separation from parents and abuse. Most national and international efforts have focused on protection rights (Heimer & Palme, 2016); and Participation, which grants children the right to express their opinions on decisions affecting their lives. As their abilities develop, children should have increasing opportunities to participate in social activities, preparing them for adult life (Eriksson, Bruno, & Näsman, 2013; Global Human Rights Education and Training Centre, 2016). Since June 1, 2021, China's Law on the Protection of Minors has required the implementation of family protection, school protection, social protection, network protection, government protection, and judicial protection for minors. The law also establishes a protection network for minors to promote their development. Simultaneously, the Ministry of Education issued the Regulations on the School Protection of Minors, which clearly states that professional, individualized guidance and services will be provided to students by purchasing professional social work services. In China, child protection plays a crucial role in safeguarding children from abuse and minimizing subsequent welfare issues. It integrates social policies, funding mechanisms, public and private institutions, and services targeting high-risk

children. Through the review and analysis of the literature on left-behind children, this study presents the problems and needs of left-behind children in rural areas, the root causes of the problems, and the influencing factors so that more people can pay attention to this massive group of left-behind children and contribute to the mental health, academic and family education problems faced by this group, to effectively solve the practical problems of left-behind children and make them feel the warmth of society, develop a good personality and build up a healthy personality. It will help them to develop a good personality and establish a correct outlook on the world, life, and values.

This study provides a comprehensive understanding of the children left behind and how they cope with the adversity of being left behind. It analyses left-behind children's strengths and resources in themselves and their surroundings. The study will focus on exploring the left-behind children's coping strategies in times of stress, summarise the positive strategies that left-behind children use to cope with adversity, and provide a helpful reference for left-behind children facing similar adversity. It is of great practical importance to explore how society can improve the coping skills of left-behind children to help and maintain their healthy growth fundamentally.

### **1.6.3 Significance to Social Work Practice**

Research has found that many rural areas in China need more professionals and systematic service programs. Although there is social work intervention, the mobility of social workers is high, the workforce is small, and professionalism is weak. Many rural areas lack professional social work services. Left-behind children face certain issues in their growth and development, which require professional social work intervention to improve their developmental processes (Li, 2021). Social work aligns with the values and functions needed to address the issues of rural left-behind children.



Social work methods are suitable for solving the problems faced by left-behind children. China is an agriculture-based country, and building a social work intervention mechanism for rural left-behind children is a comprehensive application of social work's professional values, theories, and methods to address issues related to minors and rural areas. It is an innovative means to transform traditional work with left-behind children and rural work. This approach is crucial for effectively resolving the socialization crisis of rural left-behind children brought about by social changes, promoting their healthy growth, and advancing the localization of social work in China.

This research enhances the understanding of left-behind children within social work, broadens the research horizons of the field, promotes the development of the social work profession, and improves the professional qualities and capabilities of social workers in this area. Additionally, in-depth research into the problems of left-behind children allows social workers to explore and innovate more suitable methods and service models, thereby increasing the effectiveness of social work practice. This contributes to enriching social work practice.

The study will help promote the establishment of a social work intervention model for rural left-behind children and explore social service models that better meet the specific needs of the service targets and provide appropriate services. It can offer new perspectives and frameworks for related theories on left-behind children issues, contributing to the deepening and development of social work-related theories.

This study fully utilizes the advantages of social work theories and methods, collaborates with government departments, and integrates social forces to improve and establish a service system for left-behind children. The development of social work in China is just beginning and needs to be strengthened. Through this research, we can

also promote a comprehensive understanding of the value of social work by government departments and further introduce relevant policy measures to promote the development of social work. The promotion and application of this research can advance the professionalization and standardization of the social work field, enhance the professional competence of social workers, and thereby contribute to the overall development of the social work profession in China.

## **1.7 Summation**

This chapter introduces the main topics and background of the research. It also presents statistical data aimed at providing an overview of the study. Additionally, the chapter reviews research related to the issues of left-behind children. Furthermore, it outlines the problem statement, research questions, and objectives of the study. The chapter concludes by explaining the significance and scope of the research and provides a brief summary of each chapter in the thesis.

The next chapter provides a comprehensive literature review, covering studies on left-behind children, their issues, and coping strategies. It also discusses relevant research on the needs of left-behind children. The second chapter further explores social work practices, theories, and conceptual frameworks in the context of left-behind children. The literature is carefully selected to ensure alignment with the research questions and objectives.

Chapter Three details the research methodology used in this study. It describes the research design, subjects, sample, and basic principles. The chapter provides a thorough explanation of the research tools, location, data collection, and analysis procedures. It concludes with a discussion of the pilot study, validity and reliability of the research, and ethical considerations.

Chapter Four presents the research findings derived from data collected from the study's informants, along with their socio-demographic information. The chapter delves into the context of the research, analyzing the data comprehensively. Given that the data sources rely on in-depth interviews, this chapter offers narrative statements. Overall, the findings cover stressors faced by left-behind children, their coping strategies, and their needs. The results are reported in line with the research objectives.

Finally, the fifth chapter provides an in-depth discussion of the research findings. It comprehensively addresses the issues faced by left-behind children, their coping strategies, and their needs.