

Effects of Poverty Concentration: A Case of Migrant Workers' Children in China

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LONG ABSTRACT

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Introduction

The consequences of poverty concentration have drawn considerable attention in the US and other developed countries in recent decades (Duncan, Duncan, Okut, Strycker, and Hix-Small 2003; Massey 1990; Sampson, Morenoff, and Gannon-Rowley 2002). Voluminous studies have been published to explore how poverty concentration contributes to an array of social phenomena and public health issues. Largely owing to the publication of William Wilson's (1987) The Truly Disadvantaged, social scientists are again focusing on the study of ecological context, which dates back to the classical Chicago ecological school. A recent line of research has explored the effect of poverty concentration on the social well being of children (Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, Klebanov, and Sealand 1993; Browning and Laumann 1997). These studies generally confirm that poverty concentration has detrimental effects on children's school performance.

Drawing from the classical Chicago school, most studies assume that the effects of poverty concentration occur in a context where the availability of resources is well institutionalized. The flow of resources is determined and confined by well established and defined institutional arrangements in the society. Such observations, in fact, suggest that the well being of children is indirectly affected by institutional arrangements through the mechanism of poverty concentration. Once the institutional arrangements are taken into consideration in the analysis, the effect of poverty concentration on the well being of children can be substantially weakened. Therefore, the effect of poverty concentration can be considered as a classic case of spurious effect between institutional arrangements and the well being of children.

Despite the abundance of research on the effect of poverty concentration on children's social well being, the findings are subject to a weakness: Because they are based on data from developed countries, where institutional arrangements are well established and the flow of resources is clearly set, it is almost impossible to delineate and isolate the spatial poverty

concentration effect from the influence of established institutional arrangements. Therefore, we do not know clearly the independent effect of poverty concentration apart from the effect of institutional arrangements. To address this issue, the relationship should be explored beyond developed countries, in places where institutional arrangements change sporadically and the flow of resources usually is not well defined.

In this paper, we examine the poverty concentration effect on migrant children in China, specifically in Beijing. For the last few decades, China has experienced institutional changes at all levels of society. As the state injects the rules of competition and market economy into the society, institutional structures and arrangements are changing rapidly to adjust (Zhou, Tuma, and Moen 1997). Subsequently, the direction and quantity of the flow of resources is constantly changing. Informal social structures become one of the important avenues for obtaining resources (Bian 1997).

At the same time, children of migrant workers who were born in the city or moved there with their parents when they were young usually are segregated in particular areas of the city with other migrant worker families (Chen and Liang 2007; Costa, Jessor, Turbin, Dong, Zhang, and Wang 2005; Feng, Zuo, and Ruan 2002). These migrant workers came from rural areas to look for jobs in the city. With limited resources, their communities are usually characterized as having extremely poor physical and social conditions. This situation provides a unique opportunity to evaluate the effect of poverty concentration on children's social well being, in our case their social ties, within a context of changing institutional structures and arrangements.

It is important to delineate the effect of poverty concentration. Since institutions and the flow of resources have been changing in China, a strong effect of poverty concentration on the well being of these migrant workers' children (social networks in our case) will suggest the presence of a poverty concentration effect. However, an insignificant difference between the social support of children living in poor areas and that of children who live elsewhere will suggest

that there may be a spurious effect of poverty concentration, and that poverty concentration may not be the major cause of social disadvantages.

The study of the social support of migrant workers' children has empirical significance. Most studies acknowledge that the presence of migrant workers in Chinese cities has become one of the most prominent social issues in urban China. Fueled by the availability of jobs in the city during the vibrant urban economic growth of the last three decades, massive numbers of residents from rural areas moved to cities to fill all kinds of low paying jobs (French 2007). According to China's National Bureau of Statistics' estimation in 2008, there is a total of about 225.42 million migrant workers in various cities (Ming 2009). They represent about one-fourth of the labor force in China (Ming 2009). Despite their economic contribution, these migrant workers only have residency permits (*hukou*) for their rural homes, and are not entitled to many of the services provided by the government when they are living in the city (Ming 2009). Given their limited financial resources, most of them cannot afford to rent accommodation in the city. Some of them live at their work sites. Those with family members mostly cluster in undesirable areas in the city where they can afford to live with limited financial resources (Fan 2002). Many of them brought other family members with them when they left the countryside.

Although there have been studies in the last two decades that have documented various facets of these workers' social and economic lives, there has been limited information about their children, despite their numbers (Fan 2002; Feng, Zuo, and Ruan 2002; Guo and Iredale 2004). According to the 2000 Chinese census, there were about 19.8 million children of migrant workers in cities all over the country. 64% of them were between ages 6 and 14 (Ming 2009). As many studies have shown that early childhood experiences are strongly related to the later psychological and social development of individuals, the social well being of these children who are growing up in highly concentrated poor areas is timely and urgently needed.

Data and Methods

Data

Migrant students in middle schools (Grades 7, 8 and 9) were selected for this study. The sample includes children born in the city and children born in their hometowns in rural areas who joined their parents in cities. Four schools were selected for the survey. To provide comparison between migrant and local students, we selected two public schools that have significant numbers of migrant students, comprising over 30% of the student population. Systematic and stratified samplings are not practical, especially in public schools because of the sensitive issues involved. Research at public schools usually requires endorsement or permission from government authorities in the city. Therefore we used public schools to which we had access through our collaboration with local researchers. One school is in Shanghai (School ML), the other in Beijing (School ZY). In comparison to other public schools in these cities, the schools we selected have lower ranking in terms of the academic performance of their students. Middle to high ranking schools usually do not admit migrant students. The other two schools in our sample are migrant schools, both in Beijing. These migrant schools are privately run, with much lower standards than public schools. They have many fewer resources, and less qualified teachers. One of these schools (School DN) is run by a retired university professor who founded the school as a charity organization with private donations, while the other (School HZ) is run by a migrant entrepreneur as a business. The former is a middle school with Grades 7 through 9; the latter has Kindergarten through Grade 9.

The total sample size was 1196, and included 268 local students from Schools ML and ZY. Both ML and ZY had a minimal number of local students in Grade 9, because they needed to prepare for the city-wide entrance exam for high school

In terms of the comparability of the students in the schools, they are very similar in terms of their SES and academic performance level, though students in the public schools are slightly better off economically than those in the private migrant schools, and those in the Shanghai public school (ML) are slightly better off than those in the Beijing public school (ZY).

The surveys were administered by university seniors and graduate students in social work and psychology, who went through a 45-minute training session on the procedure. The survey took about 40 to 45 minutes to complete. The completion rate was over 99%, and over 95% of the questionnaires collected were valid. The students were mostly cooperative.

Dependent Variable

The survey adopted identical instruments for the measurement of social support in all four schools. Specifically, there are eight items on friendship support and four items on family support. A standard principal factor analysis shows that 12 items are coherently driven by a single dimension with a high reliability of 0.90. In the near future, we will also obtain scores based on factor models that explicitly allow for the ordinal scale of the indicator items.

To facilitate the interpretation of group differences, we implement a procedure to normalize the factor score (z): $y=100*[z-\min(z)] /[\max(z) - \min(z)]$. A score of $y=0$ may be interpreted as absolute zero support, and a score of 100 as the best possible level of support. Absolute zero corresponds to respondents (two in a sample of 1088 cases) who indicate the lowest possible support on all items, whereas a score of 100 is given to those who indicate the highest possible support on all items.

Although the scale of the normalized scores is arbitrary, the measurement level of the scores is ratio scale. In other words, differences in social support can be discussed in the same way we discuss the effects on a ratio-scale metric such as income.

Independent Variables

The independent variables in the analysis are: family socioeconomic status, duration of the child in the city, age at migration if they moved from rural to urban area, original county of parents, number of places lived before the current residential location, number of schools attended before attending the present school, and experiences of discrimination.

Research Methods

We ran regression models to compare the social support of the migrant workers' children with that of the local children. We focus on the intercept, controlling for other factors. We expect that a strong poverty concentration effect will show considerable differences in social support between the two groups. Small differences would suggest a weak poverty concentration effect.

Background

The massive urban migration from rural areas in China in the early 1980s was triggered by the economic reforms introduced by Deng Xiaoping. Since then, the rural to urban migration has increased exponentially. This phenomenon has been supported by the ongoing economic expansion in Chinese cities, which require large pools of unskilled and cheap labor. Many of the workers live with their children. According to a 2008 estimate, about 8.8 million migrants in cities were aged between 6 and 14. Given that most of the migrant workers occupy low paying jobs in manufacturing and construction industries without *hukou*, migrant worker families usually cluster together in undesirable areas.

Most children of migrant workers face discrimination in gaining access to public schools. They also have difficulty taking public examinations, as they do not have local *hukou*. Thus, it is almost impossible for these children to follow the educational path normally taken by local children. Although some migrant workers' children eventually return to their rural areas for schooling, their educational experiences are seriously affected as they face different curricula in different provinces. Some children take another route by enrolling in private schools. These schools usually are located in warehouses and run by teachers of similar background who do not have *hukou*. They are not licensed and therefore not "regulated" by the government. Some of these schools are run by profit making groups. They maximize their profits by providing minimal facilities. However, the establishment of these private schools suggests that there are resources that flow from sources other than formal government channels.

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