

The
Economist

China's left-behind Little match children

Children bear a disproportionate share of the hidden cost of China's growth

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TOWARDS the end of “Jude the Obscure”, Thomas Hardy’s final novel, comes one of the most harrowing scenes in English literature. Jude, an itinerant labourer struggling to feed his family, returns home to find his eldest son has hanged himself and his younger siblings from the coat hook on the back of the door. A note says “Done because we are too menny.”



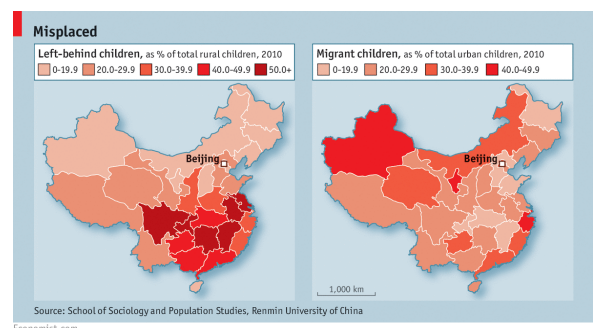
In June this year China suffered a real-life variant of this terrible scene. In a rural part of Bijie township in Guizhou province, in south-west China, a brother and three sisters, the oldest 13, the youngest five, died by drinking pesticide. They had been living alone after their mother had disappeared and their father had migrated for work. The 13-year-old boy left a note saying, “It is time for me to go—death has been my dream for years.”

Three years before that, also in Bijie, five street children died of carbon-monoxide poisoning after they had clambered into a roadside dumpster and lit charcoal to keep themselves warm. Chinese social media drew parallels with the little match girl in Hans Christian Andersen’s story of that name: afraid to return home because she has not sold any matches, she freezes to death in the winter night, burning

match after match because the light reminds her of her grandmother. It is a well known tale in China because it is taught in primary schools as an example of the uncaring nature of early capitalism.

Over the past generation, about 270m Chinese labourers have left their villages to look for work in cities. It is the biggest voluntary migration ever. Many of those workers have children; most do not take them along. The Chinese call these youngsters *liushou ertong*, or “left-behind children”. According to the All-China Women’s Federation, an official body, and UNICEF, the UN organisation for children, there were 61m children below the age of 17 left behind in rural areas in 2010. In several of China’s largest provinces, including Sichuan and Jiangsu, more than half of all rural children have been left behind (see map). In effect, some villages consist only of children and grandparents. This is a blight on the formative years of tens of millions of people. Alongside the expulsion of millions of peasants from the land they have farmed and the degradation of the country’s soil, water and air, this leaving behind is one of the three biggest costs of China’s unprecedented and transformative industrialisation.

Just over half of the 61m counted in 2010 were living with one parent while the other spouse was away working; 29m had been left in the care of others. Mostly the carers were grandparents, but about 6m were being looked after by more distant relatives or by the state (that number includes orphans and children with disabilities who have been abandoned). There were 2m children who, like the little match children of Bijie, had been left just to fend for themselves.



Not all parents who up sticks to look for work leave their kids behind: in the 2010 figures 36m children had gone to live with their migrating families in cities. But this has its own problems; very few of these children can go to a state school or see a state doctor at subsidised prices in their new homes. Moreover, their hard-working parents often cannot look after the children. Without grandparents or a state school to keep an eye on them, such migrant children can be just as neglected as those left behind in the country.

A damaged generation

On top of that there were about 9m left behind in one city when one or both parents had moved to another. Add it all up and, in 2010, 106m children’s lives were being profoundly disrupted by their parents’ restless search for jobs. For comparison, the total number of children in the United States is 73m. And the proportion of these children who were left behind, rather than migrating with their parents, grew a great deal in the late 2000s (see chart 1).

The experience of those left with one parent while the other is away working is perhaps not so different from that of the children of single parents in the West. But a study by a non-governmental organisation, called the Road to School Project, reckons that 10m left-behind children do not see their parents even once a year and 3m have not had a phone call for a year. About a third of left-behind kids see their

parents only once or twice a year, typically on Chinese New Year.

Though any child may be left behind, there are some patterns. The youngest children are the most likely to be left, and girls are slightly more likely to be left than boys. This preference for taking boys along means that in cities the

Sorry state

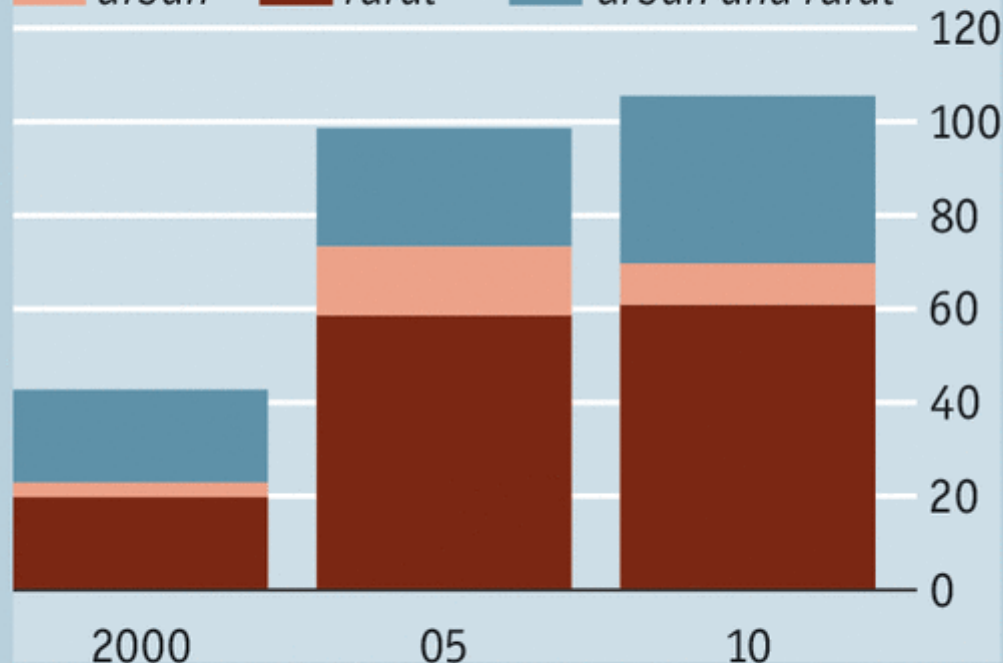
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Children affected by migration in China, m

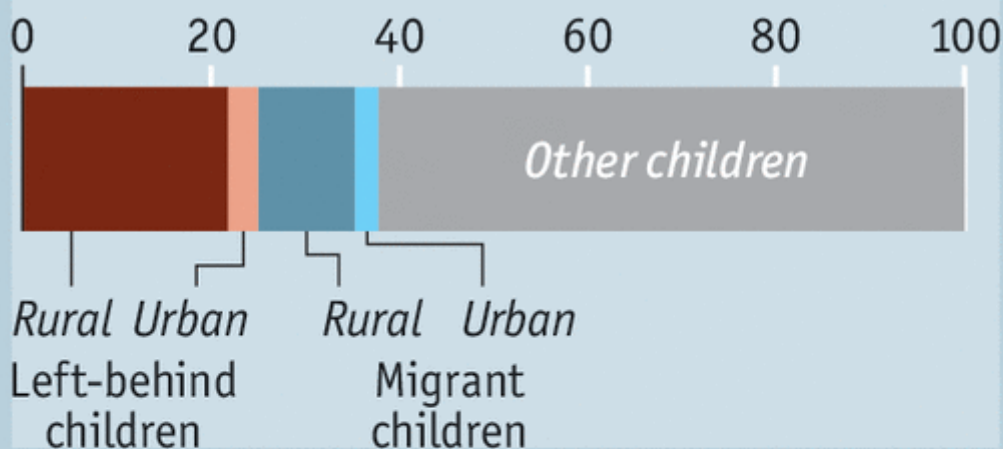
Left-behind children:

Migrant children:

urban rural urban and rural



As % of all children, 2010



Source: School of Sociology and Population Studies, Renmin University of China

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preponderance of boys over girls that has been produced by sex-selective abortions is exaggerated further. Anecdotal evidence suggests that an unusual number of left-behind children have siblings. One

reason for this is that China's one-child policy has been implemented less strictly in the countryside, and so more rural families have two children to leave behind.

It is not yet possible to say whether the phenomenal level of leaving behind found in the late 2000s persists. There is some evidence that with the slowdown in the economy migrant labourers are starting to drift back to their villages. But even if the trend has slowed, the dislocation still represents a third blow to the traditional Chinese family. First came the one-child-policy. Then the enormously distorted sex ratio. Now a mass abandonment.

Being left behind damages children in many ways. In Cangxi county, Sichuan province, in south-west China, the local education authority (as part of a study) gave eight- and nine-year-old left-behind children video cameras and taught them to film their lives. Sun Xiaobing, who is eight years old, is in the charge of her grandparents, but she is left alone for days on end. She shares her lunch with a stray dog to attract its companionship. Her two days of video consist almost entirely of her conversations with farm animals; she has no one else. Wang Kanjun's film is about his little sister. The five-year-old girl spends most of her time at home playing with the phone; she is waiting for her mother to call.

Most left-behind children are lonely. Many live in rural boarding schools far from their villages because, in an attempt to improve educational standards in the countryside, the government shut many village schools down in favour of bigger institutions. About 60% of children in the new boarding schools have been left behind. A non-governmental organisation, Growing Home, surveyed them this year and found that they were more introverted than their peers and more vulnerable to being bullied; they also had "significantly higher states of anxiety and depression" than their peers. Many say they do not remember what their parents look like. A few say that they no longer want to see their parents.

In 2010 researchers at the Second Military Medical University in Shanghai studied over 600 children in 12 villages in Shandong province, in the north-east, half left behind and half not. The difference in the physical condition of the children was minor. But the difference in their school performance was substantial and so was the emotional and social damage to them, as measured by a standard questionnaire (see chart 2). "The psychological effect on left behind children is huge," argues Tong Xiao, the director of the China Institute of Children and Adolescents. "The kids will have big issues with communications. Their mental state and their development might suffer."

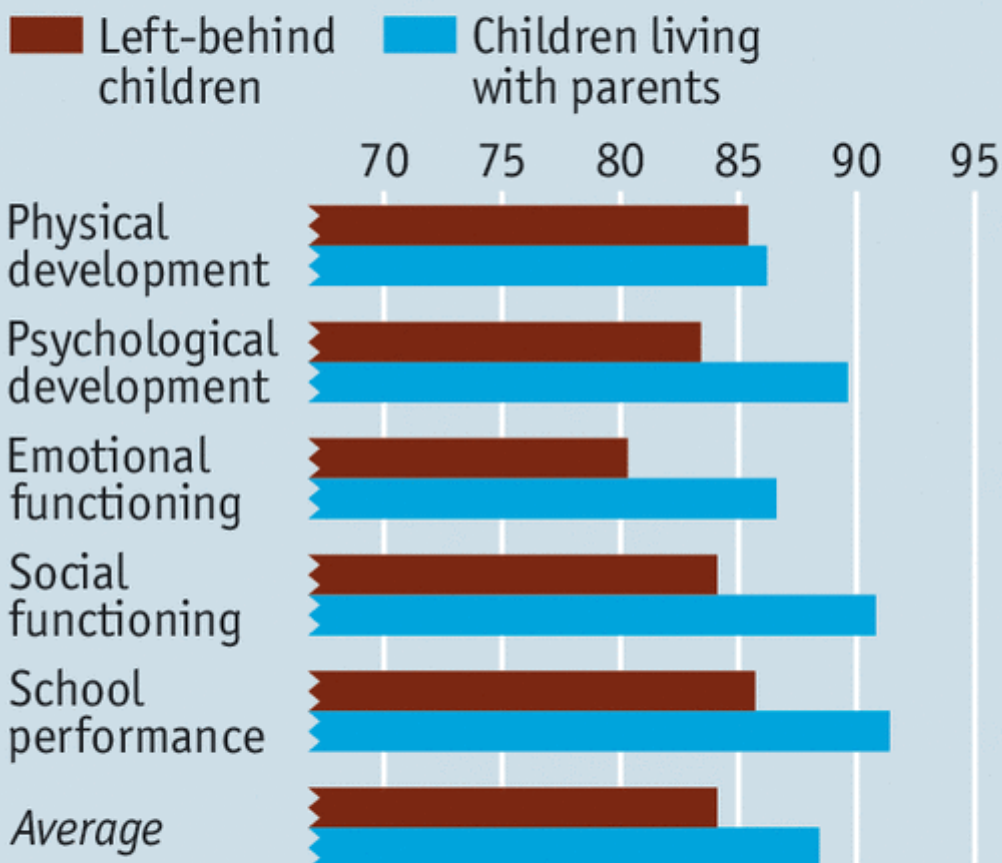
Being brought up by grandparents is a common experience worldwide, and by no means necessarily harmful. But China's rapid development does make it more of a problem now than it was in the past. Unlike their parents, the left-behind children's grandparents are often illiterate; their schooling can suffer accordingly. According to the All-China Women's Federation, a quarter of the grandmothers who are looking after small children never attended school. Most of the rest had only primary education. In one school in Sichuan visited by Save the Children, an international charity, an 11-year-old girl spent most of the lesson caring for her infant sister. As the visitors started to leave, though, she ran up and begged them to look at her homework: she seemed torn between being *in loco parentis* and a normal 11-year-old.

There are few studies of the health of left-behind children. But given that they account for almost half of all rural children, rural health indicators are a proxy. These are worrying: 12% of rural children under five in China are stunted (ie, are short for their age)—four times as many as in urban areas; 13% of rural children under five are anaemic, compared with 10% for urban children.

Worse all round

2

Mean scores on health-related quality of life indicators*, 2010



Source: Second Military Medical University, Shanghai

* Sample of 640 8-14-year-olds in Shanting, Shandong Province

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Little father time bomb

Breastfeeding rates in China are low; only two in seven Chinese children are exclusively breastfed at six months, compared with half in South-East Asia and two-thirds in Bangladesh. Part of the explanation must be that so many infants are brought up by grandparents. International studies show that breastfeeding during a child's first 1,000 days has lifetime benefits. Children who are not breastfed or get poor food early on do worse at school, are more likely to suffer from serious diseases and have worse job prospects.

Lastly, left-behind children are vulnerable to sexual and other abuse. Back in Bijie, two more left-behind children were found dead in August. One, a disabled 15-year-old girl, had been repeatedly raped by two of her distant relatives. Fearing discovery they had murdered both her and her 12-year-old brother.

Child abuse is distressingly common anyway. An analysis of 47 studies in Chinese and English this year estimated that over a quarter of Chinese children are physically abused at some point in their lives. The left behind are among the most vulnerable to such abuse, especially those in boarding schools, because any adults who might speak up for them are far away. In May a teacher in one such school in Gansu province in the north-west was executed for abusing 26 primary-school students. In Ningxia province in June, a teacher got life in prison for raping 12 of his pupils, 11 of whom had been left behind.

Those left behind can be perpetrators of crime as well as victims. Earlier this year a prostitution ring was broken up in Macao. The alleged ringleader turned out to be a 16-year-old boy from Chongqing. Juvenile offences are rising in China, which may well in part be because of the increased numbers of left-behind children. Two-thirds of all Chinese juvenile offenders came from rural areas in 2010, up from half in 2000. When they are brought before the law, left-behind or migrant children are much more likely to go to jail than other children because courts are reluctant to grant probation in the absence of a guardian. In Shanghai, the children of migrant labourers get probation in only 15% of cases, compared with 63% of cases involving local juveniles.

Given the harm that being left behind does to children's health, education and emotional development, it is not hard to imagine that the damage will be felt not just by the left-behind themselves but by society as a whole. The phenomenon is sufficiently recent that there is little compelling evidence of increased criminality, anti-social behaviour and so on. And adding to the burdens of the left-behind by prejudging them to be miscreants would clearly add injustice to injury. But in other countries—South Africa, where apartheid often broke families up, is one example—being left alone has been found to be a risk factor in children turning to crime.

Leaving such broader consequences aside, the decision to leave behind a child is a hard one. Why do so many migrants make it? A survey by the Centre for Child Rights and Corporate Social Responsibility, a consulting firm, put the question to 1,500 workers in the Pearl River Delta in the south and Chongqing in the south-west. Two-thirds said they would not have enough time to look after them while working in the city; half said it was too expensive to bring up children there.

The long established and valued role Chinese grandparents play in bringing up grandchildren doubtless makes the decision easier for many. And if grandparents are the solution, then leaving behind is a necessary corollary. In principle migrants might take along their grandparents rather than leaving behind their children. But the restrictions of the *hukou* system make that almost impossible. The *hukou* or household-registration document is a bit like an internal passport, giving people access to various services. When registered in the country, grandparents get a lower pension than urban dwellers—and the money is not enough for them to live in the city.

The *hukou* system also exacerbates things by making it very hard for children registered in a rural area to get state schooling or health care in the city. Private schools that exploit the opportunity this presents are often crowded, substandard and constantly threatened with closure by city governments. On top of this vital school-leaving exams have to be sat where a child is registered. So even if children accompany their parents to the city, they are almost always sent back again at the age of 14 to prepare for the exam.

Wanted: several million social workers

Millions of parents defy the *hukou* system; less than a third of those questioned in the Pearl River Delta survey cited it as an issue. The objective problems of city life are harder to ignore. Many migrant labourers work 12 or more hours a day on construction sites or in export-oriented manufacturing companies. They may commute for four hours more; they may live in dormitories with no provision for children, or where children are not allowed. Understandably, most fear that they will not have enough time to look after their kids.

Zhao Yanjun, who is from Anhui province in eastern China but works in Fujian province most of the year, sums up the problems: “I’m really torn about this. I could go back [to Anhui] but I won’t have the opportunities and connections I have here. If I bring my son and my wife [to Fujian], one of us will have to quit to look after him, or we’ll have to hire a nanny or bring his grandparents here. Any of these choices would be a heavy burden for us.”



Grandma holds the fort

Reform of the *hukou* system—already under way, in a piecemeal fashion—can address some of the problems of the left-behind and those who leave them. But given the underlying factors at work a full response will require China to build a child-welfare system almost from scratch.

China’s government long assumed that the family would look after children’s needs, so no child-welfare system was needed. As recently as 2006, there was no nationally recognised qualification for social workers. To its credit, the government has started to make up for lost time. It has set up a pilot programme to train “child-welfare directors”, otherwise known as barefoot social workers, in five provinces.

The social workers are a bit like China’s barefoot doctors: villagers trained in a few simple skills to take the social-welfare system into remote villages. Each looks after between 200 and 1,000 children. So far, the results of the pilot projects are promising. In 120 villages more than 10,000 extra children were

enrolled in the state medical scheme between the start of the programme, in 2010, and 2012. The share of children who had not been registered under the *hukou* system and were therefore not eligible for help fell from 5% to 2%. The school drop-out rate fell by roughly the same amount. The government is expanding the pilot programme into three more provinces and twice as many villages.

But this only scratches the surface. Even in its expanded form the programme will reach roughly 250,000 children, less than 0.5% of all rural left-behind children. A response proportionate to the problem would not just see such interventions hugely increased and the *hukou* system relaxed a great deal more; it would entail more job-creation in areas where migrants can take all their family members.

At its heart, the problem of the left-behind is one of misplaced hopes. Like so many parents, China's migrants are deferring pleasure now (that of raising their children) for the hope of a better life later (to be bought with the money they earn). One result has been the stunning growth of cities and the income they generate. Another has been a vast disruption of families—and the children left behind are bearing the burden of loss.

From the print edition: Briefing