Prevalence and risk factors of child maltreatment among migrant families in China

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Although cases of child abuse among migrant families are often reported by social media, the issue of child maltreatment among migrant families in China has received little empirical attention. This study investigated both the prevalence of child maltreatment by parents among migrant families, and the individual, family and community-level risk factors associated with child abuse in this context. A survey was conducted with 667 migrant and 496 local adolescents in Shenzhen, South China, with a stratified two-stage cluster sampling design. Logistic regression analysis was conducted to compare the prevalence of maltreatment between migrant and local adolescents, and also to explore risk factors associated with the psychological and physical maltreatment in both groups. The results showed that parent-to-child abuse was more prevalent among migrant than local adolescents, with migrant adolescents 1.490 and 1.425 times more likely to be psychologically and physically abused by their parents than their local counterparts. Low academic performance, delinquent behavior, family economic adversity and low parent attachment put migrant adolescents at increased risk of both psychological and physical maltreatment, and neighborhood disorganization was significantly related to psychological aggression among migrant adolescents. The findings confirm that child abuse perpetuated by parents is a serious problem in Mainland China, especially among migrant families, and implications for policy and practice are discussed.

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Introduction

In China, millions of children migrate with their parents from poor areas to economically developed cities. Cases of child abuse among migrant families are often reported by social media. For example, over the last 5 years, approximately 80 percent of child abuse cases reported in media in Guangdong Province involved migrant families (Guangzhou Daily, 2013; May 29). Zhang (2012) conducted a study into cases of child abuse reported in the Chinese media, and found that at least 10 percent of reports had some association with migrant children. In these cases, migrant children were brutally beaten by parents, which resulted in serious injury and even death (Zheng, 2012).

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The relationship between migration and child abuse has been widely explored in empirical studies, and extant literature has demonstrated that migrant children are at high risk of being abused by their parents who struggle with pressures such as poverty, poor living conditions, and social isolation resulting from the process of migration (Dong et al., 2005; Jirapramukpitak, Abas, Harpham, & Prince, 2011; Larson, Doris, & Alvarez, 1990). However, relatively few studies explore the relationship between child abuse and migration in China. Although Wong, Chen, Goggins, Tang, and Leung (2009), Wong, Leung et al. (2009) found that internal migration was related to higher levels of child abuse by parents in China, they failed to delve into the issue of child maltreatment in migrant families. The prevalence of child abuse among migrant families in China still remains largely unknown, and the factors that put migrant children at high risk of being abused by their parents are under-researched. To address these lacunas, drawing data from 667 migrant and 496 local adolescents in China, this study investigates the prevalence and risk factors of child maltreatment among migrant families in China.

Literature review

The largest human migration in history has been taking place in China since the early 1980s. It was estimated that 236 million Chinese people have moved from poverty stricken areas to economically developed cities in search of better-paid jobs in 2012 (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2013a). When migrant parents settle in a new destination, they tend to bring their children with them. The number of migrant children had increased from 19.82 million in 2000–35.81 million in 2010 (Duan, Lv, Wang, & Guo, 2013).

In China, the process of migration is complicated by China's household registration (*hukou*) system. Under this system, Chinese citizens have to register their household at a particular place, and changing the registration place requires complicated administrative procedures. Public benefits are dependent on *hukou*, and Chinese citizens can only receive social welfare in their *hukou*-registered place (Chan & Buckingham, 2008). Migrants who move but do not change their registration place are denied legal rights and cannot access full citizenship, social welfare and services in their place of destination, including health care, public welfare housing, and public education (Chan & Buckingham, 2008). Therefore, migrant families usually encounter enormous pressures when they reside away from their place of registration.

Empirical studies have consistently demonstrated that migration significantly increases the likelihood of child maltreatment (Jirapramukpitak et al., 2011; Larson et al., 1990; Wong, Chen et al., 2009; Wong, Leung et al., 2009). Child abuse, as suggested by Belsky (1993), is caused by a complex interaction of a variety of factors operating at individual, interpersonal, broader community, cultural and social levels, and the probability of child maltreatment increases when risks outweigh protective factors. Residential mobility resulted from migration increases the stresses encountered by both migrant parents and children, including financial strain, adjustment to new environment, decreased social capital and social isolation (Jirapramukpitak et al., 2011). When migrants do not possess adequate social resources to cope with these increased pressures, the parent-child relationship deteriorates which is often argued to increase the risk of child maltreatment. The current study examines risk factors at individual level (i.e., delinquent behavior and low academic performance), family level (i.e., low parental education, family poverty, and low parent attachment), and community level (i.e., neighborhood disadvantage) that may put migrant children in China at high risk of maltreatment.

Individual risk factors

According to parent-child interaction theories (Patterson, 1982; Urquiza & McNeil, 1996), it is the behavior of both parent and child that contribute to the abusive parent-child interactions. Children who are noncompliant and exhibit a wide range of problem behaviors may stimulate parents to use hostile and coercive discipline practices to make the child docile (Patterson, 1982). Maltreated children are found to have high levels of aggression, antisocial behavior and noncompliance (Kolko, 1992), and their parents may escalate their discipline practices and resort to physical aggression to cope with children's similar aversive behavior (Urquiza & McNeil, 1996). Migrant adolescents were found to conduct more delinquent behavior compared to local adolescents (Chen & Zhong, 2012; Gao & Wong, 2015), and parents who lack effective skills to manage child's behaviors may use violence to respond to child's delinquent or deviant behavior. Therefore, it is expected that involvement in delinquency may expose migrant adolescents to high levels of parent-to-child abuse.

Poor school performance is one of the most common reasons for child maltreatment in China (Leung, Wong, Chen, & Tang, 2008). Children with low academic performance were found to experience more physical and emotional abuse by parents than children with high academic performance (Li, 2005). In Chinese culture, academic success is regarded as an important channel to realize upward mobility (Stevenson et al., 1990), and migrant parents of low socio-economic status may have high expectations for their children's academic performance in the hope of the child and family having a better future, and thus may exert substantial stress on their children and push them to study for long hours. However, migrant children experience unusual obstacles to achieve academic success partly due to the institutional exclusion from the urban public education system. Because a local urban *hukou* is an essential fundamental condition to the free access to the local urban public schooling, migrant students have to pay expensive extra tuitions or provide multiple certificates to study at public schools (Chen & Yang, 2010; Xia, 2006). Those failing to meet these admission requirements have to quit school or enroll in inferior private schools, which are frequently featured as poor infrastructure, limited teaching resources, and low teaching qualities (Xia, 2006). Migrant adolescents are thus often argued to demonstrate prominent risk factors of poor academic performance, such as the institutional restriction to high-quality urban public schools, studying at private schools