

*This article has been accepted for publication in British Journal of Social Work*

*Published by Oxford University Press, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcac122>*

## **‘Villagers in the City’: Resilience in Migrant Youth amidst Urbanization**

### **Abstract**

Rapid urbanization necessitates more research attention to the challenges and resources among families moving from rural to urban areas. Using a multisystemic resilience framework, this qualitative study explores how resilience is embodied in the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and institutional levels of the daily lives of migrant children in China, an exemplar of contemporary fast-urbanizing societies. I conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with 10 migrant children who live in Beijing, along with their parents, teachers, and social service providers. The findings suggest that rural-to-urban migration is both an empowering and a depriving experience. On the intrapersonal level, migration increases children’s independence, personal growth, future aspirations, as well as academic stress. On the interpersonal level, migrant children receive substantial support from parents, siblings, extended family, and peers; however, they are at risk of insufficient parental supervision and loss of meaningful relationships. On the institutional level, migration provides children with a better environment, better school experiences, greater material resources and social organization services, but migrant children remain vulnerable to educational discrimination, economic deprivation, and poor neighbourhood environments in the city.

**Keywords:** child, China, migration, resilience, social service, urbanization

**Summary Highlight:**

- Rising urbanization worldwide calls for more research attention to migrant families moving within their countries.
- This study explores migrant children's lived experiences in China, a fast-urbanizing country where institutional barriers remain for rural-to-urban migrant families.
- Migration is linked to adversities and resources for children's daily lives on intrapersonal, interpersonal, and institutional levels.
- Social work practice should adopt a multisystemic resilience framework that reduces risk factors and promotes protective factors for migrant children.

## Introduction

### Challenges in the Rising Internal Migration

Globalization and urbanization have prompted 763 million people to move within their own country, totalling almost three times the number of international migrants (UN-Habitat, 2020). Despite its large magnitude, research has focused less on internal migration compared with international migration (Charles-Edwards et al., 2020). Among the new urbanization centres, China, due to its rapid urban economic growth, has encountered the largest population migration in modern history. From 1978–2008, China's urban population increased from 18% to 46% (UNICEF, 2010). There has been a substantial growth of *migrant children*, whose place of residence differs from the location of their *household registration* (China's national system that registers every citizen's birthplace, i.e., the *hukou system*; see Chan, 2009) and who have been away from their registered location for over 6 months. Today, China's migrant children (age 0–17) have reached 34.26 million, representing 13% of its total child population (UNICEF, 2017).

Migrant children in China live with various adversities. Research showed that migrant students have lower school enrolment rates from middle school onward compared with urban students (Duan and Liang, 2005). Low socioeconomic status persists in migrant families due to migrant youth's limited education opportunities and career choices (Ling, 2015). Migrant children often live in poor neighbourhoods that are 'villages in the city' (De Meulder et al., 2014). They also live in poor housing conditions and bear the health consequences (Huang et al., 2018). Migrant families lack parental supervision due to parents' long work hours (Lu et al., 2016).

However, exposure to these adversities does not necessarily predict poor outcomes. For example, Zhuang (2015) did not find a significant difference in negative affect between migrant

and local children in Beijing; further, support from parents, teachers, and peers were significant protective factors for migrant children's positive affect. Lu (2020) found that migrant children presented fewer depressive symptoms compared with rural children who did not migrate, although this difference became non-significant after controlling for environmental factors. Therefore, which factors protect migrant children's well-being and how these factors help them cope with adversities warrant further exploration.

### **The Role of Resilience**

Child development research today has shifted its focus away from dysfunction and pathology to focus on resources and strengths, which embody the concept of *resilience*, "the capacity of a system to adapt successfully to significant challenges that threaten its function, viability, or development" (Masten, 2018, p. 12). From a resilience perspective, child development not only involves risk factors (experiences that increase the likelihood of forming, maintaining, or exacerbating problems), but also involves protective factors (conditions that buffer or mitigate outcomes when individuals are exposed to risk; Jenson and Fraser, 2010). Recent discussions on resilience involve a multi-level system beyond individuals' adaptive capability (Masten, 2018). Children's resilience may derive from individual (e.g., problem-solving skills), interpersonal (e.g., healthy attachment to parents), and environmental levels (e.g., education opportunities; Jenson and Fraser, 2010).

Resilience processes also take into consideration specific social and cultural context by necessity because individuals' adverse experiences and supporting resources vary across contexts (Urgar, 2011; Zimmerman and Brenner, 2010). In the migration context, on the one hand, migrant children are exposed to difficulties, such as establishing new relationships and cultural disparities. For instance, a study of Eastern European migrant children living in the U.K. showed

that migration caused family restructuring and children's detachment from parents, which disrupted normal family interaction patterns (Hamilton, 2013). On the other hand, protective factors, such as increased family social support and neighbourhood social capital, influence migrant children (Wu et al., 2014). For instance, Wu et al.'s (2014) study of migrant children in China showed that living in cities for longer produced more community social capital, which was related to higher child resilience that predicted better child educational outcomes.

Although resilience research started in western cultures, there has been growing attention on resilience in non-western contexts (Ungar, 2008), including in Chinese children (Mu and Hu, 2016; Wang et al., 2015). The concept of resilience is rooted in Chinese culture. For instance, the Chinese word *crisis* (*wei-ji*) is a combination of *danger* (*wei*) and *opportunity* (*ji*); according to Confucianism, people may grow through crises when they perceive a situation positively (Lee et al., 2007). Confucianism also emphasizes *forbearance* (*rennai*), which implies treating difficult people and situations with tolerance (Fu and Law, 2018).

### **The Current Study**

Rapid urbanization necessitates more research attention to children and families moving within their countries. There is also a need for inquiries into what resilience means in different sociocultural contexts (Ungar, 2008). Emerging research has begun to examine resilience within the context of internal migration in non-western societies, such as China, where the largest scale of internal migration has occurred. However, the current research needs to adopt a more systemic perspective of resilience (Wang et al., 2015). Moreover, existing resilience research on migrant children in China predominantly consists of cross-sectional surveys that identify resilience-related factors (e.g., Gao et al., 2020; Zhuang, 2015) and that examine mediating (e.g., Wu et al., 2014) or moderating (e.g., Huang et al., 2019) roles of resilience; in-depth exploration is needed

to understand *how* migrant children's daily lives embody resilience. Using a qualitative approach, this study explores how risk and protective factors impede or promote migrant children's well-being. Using a multisystemic resilience framework (Wu and Ou, 2021), I look at resilience on intrapersonal, interpersonal, and institutional levels among migrant children in China, an exemplar of contemporary urbanizing societies.

## Method

### Participants

I conducted semi-structured interviews with 10 migrant children who were fifth graders in an elementary *migrant school* ("School S" hereafter; migrant schools refer to schools that only enrol migrant children ineligible for public schools due to their non-local *hukou* status) in Beijing, one of the megacities with the densest migrant population. For each child, I also interviewed their head teacher and one of their parents. Using convenience sampling, participants were randomly selected from students interested in joining this study. Participants were recruited through the coordination of the New Citizen Program (NC), a nonprofit organization that aims to improve migrant children's educational environment.

Table 1 presents participants' demographic information. The children were between 11–13 years old; half of them were girls. They came from various regions; most moved to Beijing at a very young age (1–5 years old), two were born in Beijing, and two moved here at an older age (8 and 10 years old). Seven of them transferred at least once among schools before they enrolled in School S. Four children were the only child in their families. All of them lived with parents, except in one family where both parents left for Zhejiang Province for business several months before the interview. Three children also lived with grandparents.

The parents were approximately 30–40 years in age. Most held elementary or middle school degrees; the parent(s) in two families had associate's degrees. Almost all parents had lived in Beijing for 10 years or longer. The majority had small family businesses or informal employment (e.g., street vendors). They either worked for over 10 hours a day without weekends or holidays, or worked unstable hours depending on customer orders. In the only family where both parents held associate's degrees, the parents worked regular shifts but commuted for 3–4 hours every day as they lived on the outskirts of Beijing.

Although many previous studies have discussed the roles of the Chinese government in migrant families' experiences (e.g., Guan, 2014), research has rarely explored the roles of non-governmental organizations. Therefore, I also interviewed NC staff to explore the effects and challenges of their work. Eight interviewees were recruited from NC, including the agency director, two senior staff, and five social work interns who had worked at School S.

## **Procedures**

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of a northeast U.S. university. Participants' informed consent was obtained prior to the study. From the perspectives of children, parents, and teachers, the interviews explored multiple aspects of migrant children's lives, such as their school life, family life, and peer interaction. The interviews were triangulated with my observations, including the physical environments of participants' homes, neighbourhoods, and schools (Supplementary Table S1 presents the full interview guide).

All interviews with children and teachers took place in a private meeting room in School S during school recess or the lunch break. Parent interviews were conducted at the times and places of their choice—seven interviews at home, two at the parents' workplace, and one over the phone because the parent was not in Beijing. For interviews with NC staff, three were

conducted in the NC office, four at cafes, and one over the phone. Child interviews were on average 45 min in length, ranging 35–55 min; adult interviews on average lasted for 1 hour, ranging 40–90 min.

## **Data Analysis**

Using thematic analysis (Patton, 2002), initial open coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) and case study approach (Thomas, 2011) were used to identify emerging concepts in each interview. The initial analysis developed 57 first-order concepts. Axial coding was then performed for each concept, with constant comparison across all cases to draw common themes from the data (Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Thomas, 2011). Based on the theoretical framework, the initial concepts were summarized into 18 constructs, including seven risk factors (e.g., academic stress) and 11 protective factors (e.g., peer support). These constructs were then consolidated into six themes that jointly illustrated migrant children's pathway to resilience: intrapersonal-, interpersonal-, and institutional-level risk and protective factors. The ATLAS.ti software was used for analyses. Supplementary Table S2 illustrates the analytic process.

## **Findings**

### **The Intrapersonal Level**

***Independence.*** The 10 migrant children showed great independence in their daily lives. They took care of themselves—went to school on their own, cooked dinner for themselves, and finished their homework with minimum parental supervision. They helped with household chores, and some also assisted with family business (e.g., watching the store). All the parents highlighted their children's self-care ability as a strength. 'He takes care of all his stuff', said one parent, 'When I wash dishes after dinner, he would clean the leftovers and the table'.



**Personal growth.** Parents observed that their children became more sociable as they interacted with more people every day. One child was ‘scared to cross the street’ and another was ‘too shy to say hi’ when they first arrived in Beijing; after a few months, they walked to school on their own and greeted people naturally. A parent recalled that her child was invited to a local TV show and was ‘even more eloquent than me’. Migration also exposed these children to diverse cultures and increased their awareness of social etiquette. As one parent stated, ‘We get to know many different people. Because her [the child’s] friends come from all different places, she learned to speak a little Jiangxi dialect and a little Sichuan dialect’.

**Future aspirations.** Migrating to cities exposed these children to a more colourful, wealthy world that provided them high future aspirations. They wanted to be a fashion designer, a school principal, a writer, or an astronaut. They wanted to ‘be a big boss’, ‘make a lot of money’, and ‘make my family live a good life’—goals that, as a parent said, were ‘too far for kids in the hometown’. The families considered higher education as the best approach to achieve these goals. Half of these children stressed that they would definitely go to college and get a good job. All the parents also expected their children to attain at least a college degree.

**Academic stress.** However, because the families considered education an important (and often the only) path to future success, these migrant children had significant academic stress. One child was upset for a week because she scored the second highest in her class (of 50 students). She felt that she disappointed her mother, who expected her to be the first. A boy who was planning to go to his hometown for middle school was extremely nervous when he took the admission exam: ‘I was so afraid that I would fail. My dad said if I passed, I could continue studying in [my] hometown; if I failed, he would find me a middle school in Beijing and go to work right after... I was thrilled when they announced my admission’.

## The Interpersonal Level

**Parental support.** Although long work hours constrained them, the migrant parents provided their children with care and support as much as they could. As a mother said:

‘I get up at 5am, make breakfast, open our store at 6. When I get home around 8pm, I cook dinner and we eat together. Then I wash the kids’ clothes and clean everything up. I go to bed at 11pm. A year of 365 days, every day is like this in their school days’.

The parents also tried their best to support children financially. They spared every penny in their own expense but generously invested in child education. These parents also asked often about children’s emotional status: Anything new happened at school? Is everything ok with friends? Most of the parents stressed the importance of family time for fun experiences. Whenever they had a free day, they took children out to a park, a movie, or on a hike.

**Insufficient parental company and supervision.** Despite the parents’ efforts to support their children, their capacity remained limited. As one parent who ran a small TV retail business said: ‘There’s no weekend for our job. We could rarely take her out for a short trip’. Insufficient parental company challenged these children emotionally. Some felt lonely during the weekends because their parents had to work. Some missed their parents when they were not around. As a mother recalled, ‘Sometimes when his dad [a truck driver] travels, he thinks of dad when he’s doing homework. Then he tears up right away...’ Also, most of these parents could not supervise children’s homework due to their limited education. ‘We can’t understand his homework anymore. It’s all by himself’, said one parent who had an elementary school education.

**Caring relationship with siblings.** Caring relationships with siblings for the six children who had siblings partially remedied the insufficient parental company. Older siblings often tutored younger ones’ homework and took care of younger ones’ daily lives, which somewhat

substituted for the absent parental role. As one boy said, ‘When our parents are busy, I cook for myself and my younger brother, sometimes fried rice, sometimes steam buns’. For siblings at similar ages, they were the closest friends to each other. They walked to school together, did homework together, and played together after school—they kept each other company.

**Extended family support.** Support from extended family, primarily grandparents, served as another important protective factor. In this study, parents of half of the children entrusted them to their extended family members in their hometown in the children’s younger years when their parents initially moved to Beijing. After the children left their hometown, they retained regular contact with their extended family. For the three families living with grandparents in Beijing, the grandparents stepped in when the parents were too busy (e.g., delivered lunchboxes to the children, watched the family store). ‘I watch TV with my grandma all the time. When I’m hungry, she cooks for me’, said one child.

**Peer support.** Peer support also mitigated child emotional difficulties. For these migrant children, peer support usually came from their classmates and children at similar ages in the neighbourhood, who were also migrant children. They played and walked to school together. They shared secrets and feelings with each other. These migrant children considered their friends as being just as important as family. ‘I like Beijing better than [my] hometown, because I have more friends here’, said one child. Peers also helped migrant children adjust to new environments. ‘When I first got here, the classes were difficult for me because Beijing’s curricular is different’, said one child, ‘But with my classmates’ help, I pretty much caught up in a week’.

**Loss of meaningful relationships.** Although migrant children considered extended family and peers important, they were at risk of losing these meaningful relationships due to their

frequent relocation. They gradually lost touch with old friends in their hometown. They also saw their extended family less often. These losses often made them miss their hometown, and sometimes, made them regret moving. ‘I want to make a lot of money when I grow up, so my parents can live with me’, said a boy whose grandfather raised him before he moved to Beijing, ‘Because my grandpa died at home alone [in the hometown village]. My aunt [who lives in the same village] did not find out until the next afternoon. When she stopped by Grandpa’s house, his body was already cold...’

Migrant children also faced separation with new friends they had made in the city. ‘I transferred to a new school almost every grade’, said a boy whose parents had changed several jobs. The young children found such frequent separation emotionally difficult. When thinking about leaving for a middle school in their hometown soon, one child noted, ‘I’m excited to see my old friends; but I’m sad for leaving my friends and teachers here’. Another said: ‘Two of my four best friends are leaving next semester too. The other two are not sure yet’. When asked whether they would keep in touch, the child responded with certainty: ‘Of course! We have each other’s QQ [a live chat software]. We made a deal. We’ll meet in Beijing every summer’. These children were hopeful of maintaining their friendships, but this is probably not feasible when they drift apart.

### **The Institutional Level**

**Better urban environment.** These children liked Beijing’s good infrastructure. The transportation is much more convenient; they could take the bus and subway almost anywhere. In contrast, transportation in their hometown relied on riding mopeds and pedicabs on unsurfaced roads. Beijing also has better-organized neighbourhoods. ‘I don’t like the river in our village’, said a boy, ‘It got full of garbage since it dried up. It smells so bad’. An urban environment is

also more stimulating. The children often visited libraries, parks, and museums, places that did not exist in their hometown. Parents also considered Beijing more convenient and safer: ‘We can get any food we want every day; in our hometown, the farmer’s market only gathers every three to four days’.

**Poor housing conditions and neighbourhood environment.** Despite Beijing’s good infrastructure, migrant families live in poor environments. In this study, nine families lived in rented places on outskirts of Beijing, the cheapest places on the rental market; one family lived in a self-built home (made of titanium plates) in a market where the family sold rockery. None of them had permanent residence in Beijing. Seven of them had moved at least twice. ‘My dad built our house. It’s a cuboid, mobile room’, said one child, ‘It’s not grounded on the floor, so it’s easier for us to move’. Most of them had a 200-square-foot bedsit (Figure 1). Seven families did not have a private bathroom. The interior was shoddy—peeling wall, unfurnished floor, and dim lights (Figure 2). As one parent mentioned: ‘In [our] hometown, we have our own house and a yard. Here, our room is small, and the rent is not cheap. This place is better than our last one though; at least we have a bathroom now’. The poor neighbourhood environment also increased safety and health risks (Figure 3). As these children described: ‘Our neighbours’ houses have many mice. They squeak in the night’; ‘The storms flooded our home last summer. Our bed legs were half in the water’; ‘There used to be buildings here. Now most were torn down. It’s all debris.’

**Better school experiences.** The better urban educational system made school experiences more enjoyable. The curricular were more diverse—English, art, and music, which were rarely offered in rural schools. School S also had afterschool activities, such as violin and martial arts. The children also joined extracurricular activities the school or NC organized (e.g., field trips,

reading festivals). In contrast, schools in their hometown solely focused on Chinese and math grades. The parents also spoke highly of School S's teaching quality: 'The teachers are more professional and responsible here. His [the child's] study improved a lot'.

**Educational deprivation.** Migrant children may enjoy better school experiences than their rural peers do, but their education rights are deprived in the city. All the families encountered difficulties when they applied for public schools. Although the Chinese government stipulated that migrant students should enjoy equal compulsory education as locals, many studies have documented that migrant children rarely receive public education due to schools' extra charges or residency requirements (Dong, 2010; Wang and Holland, 2011). As a parent who worked as a street vendor said, 'It's too hard to send kids to school. Public schools' thresholds are too high. They ask for this document, that document: temporary residence permit, social security document.... To be honest, for migrant workers like us, how many have social security?'

Consequently, migrant families turn to private migrant schools such as School S. Although the parents felt satisfied with School S's teaching quality, this was hardly a calculated choice. Some chose School S because their neighbours sent their children there; some randomly passed by and found the school looked adequate.

After primary school, these children would face even more obstacles to pursuing further education. Chinese universities require students to take admission exams at their *hukou* registration area where the school curriculum differs from that of Beijing's. Therefore, most parents planned to send their children to middle schools in their hometown to make the transition to high school easier. Forcing children to transit between different school systems would inevitably disrupt their education. Some parents were worried. 'The curriculum in [our]

hometown is harder. People in our village always say kids who come back from Beijing won't do well'. After middle school (i.e., the final years the national compulsory education covers), migrant children would again face a dilemma. Private high schools in cities are too expensive; attending high schools in the hometown means even higher academic stress. Some migrant students may attend vocational schools; yet that likely ends their path towards higher education (see Ling, 2015).

**Greater material resources.** Working in cities improved migrant families' financial status. All parents commented that there were no jobs in their hometown except farming, which barely sustained a family, whereas they had more options in Beijing and the income was considerable. 'If we were still in [our] hometown, I wouldn't be able to afford anything my kids wanted; although we don't make much money here, at least we can buy them something nice', said one parent.

**Low economic opportunity.** Despite the financial improvement, migrants' economic status remained much lower compared with local families. 'Living in Beijing is very stressful', said one parent, 'Unlike those with regular wages, if you don't work hard for one day, you lose money'. The high living costs left the families little disposable income. Children also learned that every nickel and dime counted. As one parent recalled:

'He envies his friends who have a computer. We can't afford it, so he's saving money by himself. On weekends, he collects recyclables [e.g., cardboards] to sell. Sometimes we give him three *yuan* [GBP £0.35] for breakfast, he only uses one *yuan* and saves the rest'.

**Support from social organizations.** Another protective factor was support from social organizations such as NC. According to the teachers and parents, NC services (e.g., visiting nursing homes, group work) improved migrant children's social skills and sense of belonging.

However, the effect is limited for two reasons. First, NC lacked stable funding and staff. ‘Sometimes we really have too much on our plate’, said a social work intern, ‘I’ve joined many agencies’ programs. They all have a great vision, but the implementation is not ideal. They simply don’t have enough people’. Second, nonprofits cannot tackle the fundamental inequalities rooted in the *hukou* system. As the NC director concluded, ‘The whole issue is related to China’s restriction on migration. This is not a problem that can be solved by any single agency. One day, when there’s no *hukou*, the education problems of migrant children will be naturally solved’.

## Discussion

### Resilience in Migrant Children

Through migrant children’s lived experiences, this study portrayed how they struggled with institutional exclusions and how they coped with the adversities. In summary, migrating to cities can be both empowering and disenfranchising for migrant children (Ling, 2015). As shown in Table 2, on the intrapersonal level, the migration life experience fosters migrant children’s independence, personal growth, and future aspirations. However, although high parental expectations of child’s future can promote migrant children’s resilience (Gao et al., 2020), migrant children may experience significant stress because they internalize the high parental expectations of academic achievement, which is considered the only path to their upward social mobility. The harsh reality of their lack of access to education opportunities further intensifies this academic stress (Koo, 2012; Ling, 2015).

On the interpersonal level, migrant children are at risk of insufficient parental supervision and losing meaningful relationships. However, supports from their parents, siblings, extended families, and peers protect their well-being to a certain extent. Notably, extended family, primarily grandparents, play a significant role in these migrant families. While the strong



connection between adult children and their elder parents is fundamental to Chinese culture, Chinese grandparents today are assuming more childcare roles to reduce their adult children's parenting burdens. A national study found that nearly half of the sampled Chinese households with children aged 0–6 have co-resided grandparents, a prevalence substantially higher than in many western countries (Chen et al., 2011). Grandparental support is even more crucial to migrant families due to parental absence and lack of formal support. This finding is consistent with attachment theory that stated the importance of alternative attachment figures (Ainsworth, 1985; Bowlby, 1969). Although inadequate attachment with parents adversely affects child development, children can develop attachment with multiple surrogate caregivers, such as extended family members, in the case of parental absence.

On the institutional level, migration provides these children better school experiences, greater material resources, and better physical environments and social services compared with their rural hometown. However, their poor housing and neighbourhood environment, educational deprivation, and highly restricted economic opportunities compromise these positive effects. The educational and economic deprivation symbolizes the institutional marginalization of migrant families in China. Although these migrant families have been living in Beijing for a decade, they are still denied an urban residential status. Many migrant parents work at low-wage jobs due to their non-local *hukou* status, low educational background, and limited job skills (Ling, 2015). To them, Beijing represents a temporary home, a city they cannot afford to have permanent residence. During the interviews, all the parents mentioned that they hoped their children would not follow their steps to take low-income jobs in cities. They did not want their children to return to the rural hometown either because 'it's just too poor'. Instead, they wanted their children to

take a ‘decent job’—such as a doctor or a manager—some indoor job that did not require much physical labour and ‘makes easier money’.

Migrant children carry these aspirations as well. They want to be successful and affluent, providing a better life for their families. They study hard with the hope for social mobility, and the key to achieving these goals is to ‘go to college’, which symbolizes to these families a path to higher socioeconomic status. As an old Chinese saying goes, ‘Knowledge changes your fate’—a motto in which all these migrant families believe.

Yet the reality is that these children can barely pursue further education in the city. Even though the children have been in the city since they were very young or even born there, they may have to leave for their estranged hometown due to state restrictions on their access to public education. Moreover, migrant children in Beijing are sometimes forced to change schools due to abrupt government crackdowns on migrant schools (Hernández and Zhao, 2017). Despite social organizations’ advocacy, the migrant children’s future remains uncertain because state policy largely determines their life choices. Within China’s current *hukou* system, they are unlikely to cross the rural–urban, local–outsider boundary.

### **Social Work Practice and Policy Implications**

The findings provide social work practice and policy suggestions for improving migrant children’s well-being in fast-urbanizing societies. On the intrapersonal level, schools and social organizations may collaboratively provide resilience-based interventions, such as academic stress reduction and social-emotional learning skills training. These skills can strengthen children’s internal capacity to cope with difficulties and build healthy bonding with others, which enhances their sense of security and personality development (Ainsworth, 1985; Bowlby, 1969).

On the interpersonal level, social organizations should expand social work services in migrant schools, helping students manage academic stress and process losses of meaningful relationships through individual and group work. Organizations could also offer parenting workshops in migrant communities to reduce parents' stress and foster parent–child attachment.

On the institutional level, the findings call for four areas of intervention—human capital building among the migrant workforce, rural development, sustainable urban planning, and *hukou* system reforms. First, migrant parents have remarkably lower education attainment and lower income compared with their urban counterparts (Lu, 2020). Therefore, building human capital is critical to move migrant families to upper rungs of the labour market, which can be achieved through subsidizing migrants' continuing education and occupation skill training. Second, in addition to rural economic development, rural areas also need infrastructure development (e.g., transportation, libraries), educational resources (e.g., school buildings, qualified teachers), healthcare resources (e.g., qualified clinics, insurance networks), and community development (e.g., garbage disposal system).

Third, urban societies need more sustainable planning to accommodate their growing population's needs. While China's urban economy has rapidly expanded, its urban planning lags. This creates problems for its cities—such as housing shortages, air pollution, and inadequate infrastructure (hospitals, schools, etc.)—problems especially striking in metropolises such as Beijing. Migrant families, due to their lack of resources, are most vulnerable to these problems. This calls for more rational urban development, especially in migrant neighbourhoods. More community support should also be provided. For example, community centres may organize weekend activities and afterschool tutoring sessions when parental supervision is unavailable.

Last, removing the institutional barriers to migrant families eventually lies in radical reforms of the *hukou* system and *hukou*-based welfare provisions. An urban *hukou* is linked to over 20 types of public services to which migrants do not have access, including employment, education, and healthcare (Ge, 2016). For many migrant children, they can neither choose their *hukou* at birth, nor can they change their registration throughout their lives (Guan, 2014). Under these restrictions, they lack economic capital because of low household income, and they lack cultural capital due to limited school options and substandard educational quality. Furthermore, they lack social capital because they are marginalized as ‘villagers in the city’. Altogether, the *hukou* system reproduces a generation of second-class citizens. Only through systematic reforms will migrant children break this institutional discrimination.

### **Limitation and Future Research Directions**

Note that this study was conducted in one migrant school in Beijing, the capital city with the most stringent population control. Therefore, the findings may not represent the experiences of migrant children in other cities. When resources allow, future research should include more participants in multiple cities. On the other hand, conducting fieldwork in Beijing potentially exposes me to migrant families with the most diverse backgrounds. The Chinese central government directly governs Beijing. Therefore, the research findings suggest the direct policy effects on migrant families in China.

With immigrant crises emerging globally, many local governments have not yet included migrant populations in their development planning (International Organization for Migration, 2015). The current internal migration issues in China mirrors western societies’ historical migration tensions. In the early European capitalist societies and the modern U.S., public welfare had been adopted as a means of regulating labour and upholding socioeconomic arrangements

(Piven and Cloward, 1993). Considering Chinese migrant workers were excluded from social insurance until the mid-1990s, and that today few of them receive social assistance, this pinpoints a startling gap in China's welfare system. Therefore, this study serves as a starting point for future cross-national resilience research in migrant communities and for identifying sustainable urban development strategies across geopolitical contexts.

## References

- Ainsworth, M. (1985) 'Attachments across the life span', *Bulletin of the New York Academy of Medicine*, 61(9), pp. 792–812.
- Bowlby, J. (1969) *Attachment and loss (Vol. 1)*, New York, Basic Books.
- Charles-Edwards, E., Bell, M., Bernard, A. and Zhu, Y. (2020) 'IMAGE-Asia: An Introduction', In Bell, M., Bernard, A., Charles-Edwards, E. and Zhu, Y. (eds), *Internal migration in the countries of Asia*, Cham, Springer, pp. 3–13. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-44010-7\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-44010-7_1)
- Chan, K. W. (2009) 'The Chinese *Hukou* system at 50', *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 50(2), pp. 197–221. <https://doi.org/10.2747/1539-7216.50.2.197>
- Chen, F., Liu, G. and Mair, C. A. (2011) 'Intergenerational ties in context: Grandparents caring for grandchildren in China', *Social Forces*, 90, pp. 571–594. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/sor012>
- De Meulder, B., Lin, Y. and Shannon, K. (eds), (2014) *Village in the city*, Zurich, Park Books.
- Dong, J. (2010) 'Neo-Liberalism and the evolvement of China's education policies on migrant children's schooling', *Journal of Critical Education Policy Studies*, 8(1), pp. 137–160. <http://www.jceps.com/archives/629>
- Duan, C. and Liang, H. (2005) 'A study on the compulsory education for temporary migrant children', *Population & Economics*, 148(1), pp. 11–17.
- Fu, Y. and Law, Y. W. (2018) 'Chinese adolescents' meaning-focused coping with prolonged parent-child separation', *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 33, pp. 752–773. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558417700271>

- Gao, Y., Xie, S. and Frost, C. J. (2020) 'An ecological investigation of resilience among rural-urban migrant adolescents of low socioeconomic status families in China', *Journal of Community Psychology*, 48, pp. 862–878. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.22303>
- Ge, D. (2016, January 13) 'The key role of public service reform in the Hukou settlement policy', *People's Daily*. <http://opinion.people.com.cn/n1/2016/0113/c1003-28044714.html>
- Guan, X. (2014) 'Analysis of the nature and related policies of China's migrant population issue', *Journal of Chinese Academy of Governance*, 15(5), pp. 70–76. <http://theory.people.com.cn/n/2014/1212/c217905-26196251.html>
- Hamilton, P. L. (2013) 'It's not all about academic achievement: Supporting the social and emotional needs of migrant worker children', *Pastoral Care in Education*, 31(2), pp. 173–190. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02643944.2012.747555>
- Hernández, J. C. and Zhao, I. (2017, December 24) 'One target in Beijing's migrant crackdown: Schoolchildren', *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/24/world/asia/china-schools-migrants.html>
- Huang, S., Han, M., Sun, L., Zhang, H. and Li, H.-J. (2019) 'Family socioeconomic status and emotional adaptation among rural-to-urban migrant adolescents in China: The moderating roles of adolescent's resilience and parental positive emotion', *International Journal of Psychology*, 54, pp. 573–581. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ijop.12499>
- Huang, Y., Song, Q., Tao, R. and Liang, Z. (2018) 'Migration, family arrangement, and children's health in China', *Child Development*, 89, pp. e74–e90. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12699>

International Organization for Migration. (2015) *World migration report 2015*, Geneva, IOM.

<https://worldmigrationreport.iom.int/2015>

Jenson, J. M. and Fraser, M. W. (2010) 'A risk and resilience framework for child, youth, and family policy', In Jenson, J. M. and Fraser, M. W. (eds), *Social policy for children and families: A risk and resilience perspective*, Thousand Oaks, Sage, pp. 5–24.

Koo, A. (2012) 'Is there any chance to get ahead? Education aspirations and expectations of migrant families in China', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 33(4), pp. 547–564. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2012.678755>

Lee, T-Y., Shek, D. and Kwong, W-M. (2007) 'Chinese approaches to understanding and building resilience in at-risk children and adolescents', *Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics of North America*, 16, pp. 377–392. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chc.2006.12.001>

Ling, M. (2015) "“Bad students go to vocational schools!”: Education, social reproduction and migrant youth in urban China', *The China Journal*, 73, pp. 108–131. <https://doi.org/10.1086/679271>

Lu, S., Lin, Y-T., Vikse, J. H. and Huang, C-C. (2016) 'Well-being of migrant and left-behind children in China: Education, health, parenting, and personal values', *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 25(1), pp. 58–68. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijsw.12162>

Lu, S. (2020) 'Family migration and youth psychosocial development: An ecological perspective', *Children and Youth Services Review*, 113, 104953. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.104953>

Masten, A. (2018) 'Resilience theory and research on children and families: Past, present, and promise', *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 10, pp. 12–31. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jftr.12255>



Mu, G. M. and Hu, Y. (2016) 'Validation of the Chinese version of the 12-item Child and Youth Resilience Measure', *Children and Youth Services Review*, 70, pp. 332-339.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chidyouth.2016.09.037>

Patton, M. Q. (2002) *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.), Thousand Oaks, Sage Publications.

Piven, F. F. and Cloward, R. A. (1993) *Regulating the poor* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed), New York, Vintage Books.

Strauss, A. and Corbin, J. (1998) *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed), Thousand Oaks, Sage Publications.

Thomas, G. (2011) *How to do your case study*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Ungar, M. (2008) 'Resilience across cultures', *British Journal of Social Work*, 38(2), pp. 218–235. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcl343>

Ungar, M. (2011) 'The social ecology of resilience: Addressing contextual and cultural ambiguity of a nascent construct', *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 81, pp. 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1939-0025.2010.01067.x>

UN-Habitat. (2020) *World cities report 2020: The value of sustainable urbanization*, Nairobi, UN-Habitat. <https://unhabitat.org/World%20Cities%20Report%202020>

UNICEF. (2010) 'Children affected by migration', *Children in China: An atlas of social indicators*. <https://www.unicef.cn/en/atlas-social-indicators-children-china-2010>

UNICEF. (2017) *Population status of children in China in 2015*. <https://www.unicef.cn/en/reports/population-status-children-china-2015>

Wang, J-L., Zhang, D-J. and Zimmerman, M. (2015) 'Resilience theory and its implications for Chinese adolescents', *Psychological Reports: Disability & Trauma*, 117, pp. 354–375. <https://doi.org/10.2466/16.17.PR0.117c21z8>

- Wang, L. and Holland, T. (2011) 'In search of educational equity for the migrant children of Shanghai', *Comparative Education*, 47(4), pp. 471–487.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03050068.2011.559701>
- Wu, Q., Tsang, B. and Ming, H. (2014) 'Social capital, family support, resilience and educational outcomes of Chinese migrant children', *British Journal of Social Work*, 44, pp. 636–656. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcs139>
- Wu, Q. and Ou, Y. (2021) 'Toward a multisystemic resilience framework for migrant youth', In Ungar, M. (ed), *Multisystemic resilience: Adaptation and transformation in contexts of change*, New York, Oxford University Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190095888.003.0021>
- Zhuang, X. (2015) 'Risk and resilience of Chinese migrant adolescents: In comparison with urban counterparts' [unpublished doctoral dissertation], City University of Hong Kong.  
[https://scholars.cityu.edu.hk/en/theses/theses\(a45ee547-c47e-4c82-8381-5b4ead54d103\).html](https://scholars.cityu.edu.hk/en/theses/theses(a45ee547-c47e-4c82-8381-5b4ead54d103).html)
- Zimmerman, M. A. and Brenner, A. B. (2010) 'Resilience in adolescence: Overcoming neighborhood disadvantage', In Reich, J. W., Zautra, A. and Hall, J. S. (eds), *Handbook of adult resilience*, New York, Guilford, pp. 283–308.

Table 1. Participant demographic characteristics

|      | Gender | Age | Hometown     | When came to Beijing | Transfer among schools | Number of siblings | Living with                    | Parent age (Mother Father) | Parent education (Mother Father)                   | Parents in Beijing (years) | Parent occupation (Mother Father)                       | Parent work hours (Mother Father)                   |
|------|--------|-----|--------------|----------------------|------------------------|--------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|
| Feng | M      | 12  | Shandong     | Born                 | 0                      | 1                  | Parents, grandparents, brother | 34<br>36                   | Elementary school (incomplete)<br>Associate degree | 14                         | Family business: construction material retail/wholesale | 14 hrs/day; no weekend/holiday                      |
| Guan | M      | 11  | Henan        | Age 5                | 2                      | 0                  | Parents, grandparents          | 27<br>32                   | Elementary school<br>Middle school                 | 10                         | Department store sales<br>Rockery retail                | 9 hr/day; 6 days/wk<br>Unstable, no weekend/holiday |
| Jing | F      | 11  | Hebei        | Born                 | 0                      | 2                  | Parents, brother, sister       | 33<br>34                   | Middle school<br>Middle school                     | 18                         | Family business: TV retail/wholesale                    | 11–14 hrs/day; no weekend/holiday                   |
| Tian | M      | 12  | Heilongjiang | Age 3                | 0                      | 0                  | Parents                        | 32<br>36                   | Middle school<br>Middle school                     | 8                          | Housewife<br>Truck driver                               | N/A<br>Unstable, half away & half home              |
| Xiao | F      | 11  | Henan        | Age 3                | 2                      | 0                  | Parents                        | 36<br>37                   | Associate degree<br>Associate degree               | 10                         | Cosmetics tech reporter<br>Pharmaceutical retail        | 8 hrs/day + 3–4 hrs commute; 5 days/wk              |
| Xin  | F      | 11  | Heilongjiang | Age 1                | 1                      | 0                  | Grandparents                   | 32<br>35                   | Middle school<br>Middle school                     | 10                         | Family business: clothing wholesale                     | Unstable, depends on orders                         |
| Yan  | M      | 11  | Henan        | Age 1                | 1                      | 1                  | Parents, sister                | 36<br>37                   | Elementary school<br>Elementary school             | 11<br>12                   | Street vendor: sale vegetables                          | 11hrs/day; no weekend/holiday                       |
| Yi   | F      | 11  | Hubei        | Age 10               | 2                      | 1                  | Parents, brother               | 34<br>40                   | Middle school<br>Middle school                     | 13<br>18                   | Family business: engraving & printing                   | Unstable, depends on orders                         |
| Zhen | M      | 13  | Hebei        | Age 8                | 2                      | 1                  | Parents, brother               | 35<br>35                   | Elementary school<br>Middle school                 | 12                         | Housewife<br>Family business: furniture retail          | N/A<br>Unstable, depends on orders                  |
| Han  | F      | 11  | Henan        | Age 3                | 2                      | 2                  | Parents, brothers              | 39<br>41                   | Elementary school<br>Elementary school             | 9                          | Street vendor: sale vegetables                          | 10 hrs/day; no weekend/holiday                      |

Note: All child names are pseudonyms.

Table 2. Multisystemic risk and protective factors for Chinese migrant children's well-being

|                     | Risk Factor                               | Protective Factor                               |
|---------------------|-------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| Intrapersonal Level | Academic stress                           | Independence                                    |
|                     |                                           | Personal growth from new life experiences       |
|                     |                                           | Future aspiration                               |
| Interpersonal Level | Insufficient parental company/supervision | Parental emotional/financial/daily life support |
|                     |                                           | Caring relationship with siblings               |
|                     | Loss of meaningful relationships          | Support from extended family members            |
|                     |                                           | Peer support                                    |
| Institutional Level | Poor housing conditions                   | Better urban infrastructure/environment         |
|                     | Poor neighbourhood environment            |                                                 |
|                     | Educational deprivation                   | Better urban school experiences                 |
|                     | Low economic opportunity                  | Greater material resources in urban areas       |
|                     |                                           | Support from social organizations               |



Figure 1. The entire home of a family interviewed, rent CNY 1,100 (GBP £128)/month.



Figure 2. The living room/kitchen of a family interviewed, rent CNY 1,000 (GBP £116)/month.





Figure 3. Boys playing on debris in a migrant neighbourhood where buildings were being torn down for new high-rise apartment building construction.