

# The Well-being of the Left-behind Children in Rural Sichuan, China: A Preliminary Study Report

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**Long Ling**

Faculty of Law and Public Administration  
Yibin University  
China



443676985@qq.com

## Abstract

Chinese scholars have studied the status of left-behind children's subjective and general well-being. However, one significant gap is the need to measure comprehensive well-being in China's backward economic rural areas. This study measures the well-being of left-behind children in rural Sichuan, China. Adopting the Social-Ecological Theory as its framework, this paper focused on the well-being of the left-behind children in the micro-system. The preliminary study found that left-behind children reported a very high level of individual well-being, scored lower in most of the listed essential items, and had poor scores in child protection service, stress and problem management, and community participation. In conclusion, the results from this study provide inputs to a new direction for social policies and services for left-behind children in rural areas in China.

**Keyword:** Left-behind children, well-being, multidimensional approach, Social Ecological Theory, rural Sichuan, Preliminary study

## **Introduction**

The World Migration Report estimated that there were 281 million international migrants in the world in 2020, and China was the second-ranked international migrant (IOM, 2022). Meanwhile, China had 292 million internal migrant workers at the end of 2020 (National Bureau of Statistics of the People's Republic of China, 2022). Massive population migration and mobility driven by economic income made left-behind children a common issue in China. In addition, China Statistical Yearbook (2021) reported 4,354,783 left-behind children at junior high schools and 8,541,908 left-behind children at primary schools in 2020. As a result, left-behind children have become the most debatable social issue in China.

The previous studies had researched the health, academic, psychological, and social problems of left-behind children in China. Few studies on left-behind children's well-being in China emphasise on the subjective well-being of the children. Also, previous studies on Chinese left-behind children used a particular incomprehensive dimension approach, focused on certain geographical areas of China, catered for specific social development programmes, and offered minimal measurable domains. Thus, a more comprehensive multidimensional approach must reflect the actual scenario.

Currently, there needs to be more information concerning Chinese left-behind children's well-being in a multidimensional manner. Additionally, there are no government-recognised indicators, indexes, and particular databases for child well-being in China. Therefore, comparing child well-being in China and conducting comparative studies with other countries is impossible. Without data comparison, there is no way to see the gap or progress in the welfare of children in China, and it is impossible to guide the child welfare policy more accurately.

This lack has created a research gap, urging Chinese scholars to develop child well-being indicators and multidimensional scales for Chinese children, monitor the status and progress of children's well-being and provide a basis for policymakers to safeguard their well-being. This study adopts a micro-data child well-being index for Chinese left-behind children. It uses the multidimensional scale to measure the well-being of Chinese left-behind children, who are the at-risk and most vulnerable children in rural China. Therefore, the study discovers the gaps in the well-being of rural left-behind children and gives a new direction to the social welfare policies and social services for the left-behind children in China.

## Literature Review

### *Child well-being*

The definition of child well-being varies from different perspectives and contexts. For example, the UN Charter on the Rights of the Child and the European Human Rights Charter set out children's rights as critically related to child well-being, which supports children's growth prosperously (Noralina & Siti Hajar, 2017). The ecological perspective on child development puts the child in the context where they experience the interaction between children and essential factors that influence children's well-being (Nahkur & Kutsar, 2019).

From the social policy viewpoint, child well-being refers to how a child's welfare is satisfied based on the indicators of quality of life (Ben-Arieh, 2014). From this viewpoint, children's well-being refers to children's core needs to be fulfilled, and children can access services set by the child rights (Kosher & Ben-Arieh, 2017). Axford (2014) emphasises the richness and breadth of child well-being by discussing the five concepts of needs, rights, poverty, quality of life, and social exclusion. Bradshaw (2015) defined quality of life (QoL) as children's subjective well-being and focused on outcomes, such as health and happiness.

All of the above-defined child well-being from an adult's perspective. Children can participate in activities that impact their well-being and their childhood. The child-centred perspective can better measure and understand the children's feelings, lives, and activities. Past empirical data has proven that children's views on well-being may differ from adults (Ben-Arieh, 2014; Kosher & Ben-Arieh, 2017). Children's well-being includes their views, evaluations, and aspirations about their lives and feelings.

Researchers must listen to children and value their opinions and evaluations of their well-being. This child-participatory approach concludes that children's well-being is defined through their feelings, combining happiness and sadness (Ben-Arieh, 2014).

China still needs to form a clear definition of child well-being. This paper adopts the ecological perspective, which states that child well-being is the assessment of the degree to which children's survival and development are satisfied from the perspective or voice of the children.

### *Child well-being indexes*

There are many indexes for measuring child well-being in the world. Four of which are often mentioned are the index of child and youth well-being in the

United States, by Land and colleagues (Land et al., 2007); the index of child well-being in the EU, built by Bradshaw and colleagues (Bradshaw et al., 2007; Bradshaw & Richardson, 2009), the Microdata child well-being index, by Moore and colleagues (Moore et al., 2008), and the child deprivation index, by Bastos and colleagues (Bastos et al., 2004; 2009). These four child well-being indexes adopted a multi-dimensional approach.

Among the child well-being indexes frequently mentioned globally, the Microdata child well-being index built by Moore and colleagues is consistent with the Social Ecological Theory framework. It inspires the variable set in this research. First, Moore and colleagues used single Microdata to describe the proportion of children with remarkable outcomes and proposed their indicators and the index based on the American Household Survey (NSAF) (Moore et al., 2007). Next, Moore and colleagues established domains of well-being and contextual variables to analyse the impact of children's environment on well-being (Moore et al., 2007) and selected variables and context variables from NSAF based on the most common subjects used in child well-being research.

There were three domains of well-being: child and health safety, child educational achievement and cognitive development, child social and emotional development, and two contextual variables, namely family processes and demographic, social, and economic status. Moore and colleagues used 17 indicators to summarise the dimensions of child well-being and 12 indicators to summarize the contextual dimensions. Finally, the individual child well-being index added the contextual variables to form the overall conditions of the children's index (Moore et al., 2007).

In 2008, Moore and colleagues improved the domain definition. The new children index comprised four critical individual child well-being domains and three contextual well-being domains. The four domains of individual well-being were: (1) Physical health- which includes the biological status of individuals and includes overall health and functioning, weight, and involvement in a healthy lifestyle; (2) Psychological health- which includes how individuals think about themselves and their future, how they handle and cope with situations, and is free of problems; (3) Social health- refers to several elements related to how well an individual can get along in the social ecology, including basic skills, engagement in constructive activities, ability to be able to relate emotionally to people and make friends; and (4) educational/intellectual- includes skills related to a child's ability to learn, remember, reason adequately for their age, being able to apply cognitive skills to be productive and engaged in school.

Meanwhile, the three types of contextual variables were:

- 1) Family- which includes the structure of the family, resources in the home, and relationships between the individuals;
- 2) Community-neighbourhoods and communities are the immediate contexts in which individuals and families interact and engage with others and with institutions of society, being neighbourhoods, both spatial and social units, and
- 3) Sociodemographic-social and economic features of families which affect child well-being.

Moore and colleagues selected 69 indicators from the National Child Health Survey (NSCH), created the child well-being index by adding the four individual well-being domains, and created the contextual well-being index by adding the three contextual well-being domains. Unlike previous work, these two indexes were analysed separately to distinguish trends in child well-being from trends in context (Moore et al., 2008).

The Microdata child well-being index comprised 69 indicators selected from the National Child Health Survey (NSCH) used to monitor children's health in the United States. Although the school was considered a meaningful context, the Microdata child well-being index included only a few indicators related to the school context in the NSCH. In addition, the incomplete indicators could only measure some of the children's needs. The study of the Microdata child well-being index was claimed to use children as the unit of analysis. However, this was based on the respondents from parents and not the children themselves; it ignores children's views on well-being.

The shortcomings of research on child well-being in the past have created new gaps. The present study of child well-being should take children as the investigation and analysis centre. The children self-administered the child well-being questionnaire, an essential chance for them to express their views on their well-being. In addition, the indicators and domains from the same survey may better understand children's well-being, which can be the basis for formulating social policy and services for children.

Poverty had an impact on all aspects of children's lives. Apart from the harm to children due to insufficient resources for social participation, their education and health have also been severely damaged. However, China is a developing country. Absolute poverty in rural areas was eliminated in 2020, and the relative poverty of left-behind children in rural areas is relatively standard (Zhao, 2019). So, this study refers to the Microdata child well-being index's well-being and adds material well-being. Therefore, the child well-being in the study

contains five outcome domains: material well-being, physical well-being, educational well-being, psychological well-being, and social well-being.

### ***Child welfare services in China***

From 1st June 2021, the Chinese Law on the Protection of Minors requires family protection, school protection, social protection, network protection, government protection, and judicial protection for minors. It also builds protection networks for minors and promotes their development. At the same time, the Ministry of Education issued the Regulations on School Protection for Minors, which clearly stated that professional and personalised guidance and services would be provided to students by purchasing professional social work services.

Child protection has played an essential role in protecting children from maltreatment and minimising the subsequent child well-being in China, which combined social policies, funding mechanisms, and public and private agencies and services targeted at children at risk. The child protection system functioned in three primary areas: reporting, screening, and service provision and disposition.

In China, doctors, social workers, and teachers have duties to report the information of minors who suffer compulsorily or are suspected of being violent and sexually abused (Tan et al., 2021; Xu, 2021). In addition, the reported family was investigated and assessed, which was used to determine whether child abuse or neglect had occurred and intended to determine whether the government should supply social services for the family (Tong & Fang, 2021). Finally, the child protection department or agencies offered or mandated the families that had engaged in maltreatment or were at risk of abuse or neglect to participate in social services.

Since 2010, the Ministry of Civil Affairs and the United Nations Children's Fund have established children's friendly spaces in 120 villages in 12 provinces, such as Shaanxi, Henan, Sichuan, and Yunnan, serving tens of thousands of children to solve the difficulties in children's household registration, education, medical care, and life assistance. In addition, the successful experience of children's children-friendly space was replicated throughout the country, promoting the establishment of children's activity centres in China, and serving children in communities.

## ***Theoretical framework***

Bronfenbrenner's Social-Ecological Theory states that four systems are crucial for child development. They are (1) microsystem, (2) mesosystem, (3) exosystem, and (4) macrosystem. Researchers have debated which system presented the most significant influence over human behaviour and development. Bronfenbrenner (1979) argued that the micro-system was the most influential subsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Although past studies had considered the well-being of left-behind children in the macro background, this study only explores the well-being of left-behind children in the micro-system. The micro-system contained family, school, peer group, and community contexts, which directly influenced the development process of the left-behind children. Left-behind children usually live in complex rural environments, lack adequate supervision, and have frequent contact, such as bullying and neglect. The main interactions with family, peer groups, teachers, and neighbours are complicated. This paper uses the multi-dimensional system model to measure research variables more comprehensively and provides data to develop interventions.

## **Methods**

### ***Study's physical location***

China consists of thirty-four provincial administrative districts. The Sichuan province was selected because the most rural left-behind children were from Sichuan province (Ministry of Civil Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2020; 2018). Therefore, the location of the study is rural villages in Sichuan province, where many left-handed children live at risk and are vulnerable in backward areas.

### ***Study's approach and design***

The study followed the research direction of child well-being and used a quantitative approach to develop well-being indicators. The quantitative approach has survey designs and focuses on measuring variables to answer research questions (Creswell, 2018). Survey methods allow the researcher to examine and draw general conclusions from response patterns. Hence, the survey method is the preferred approach for this study.

### ***Data gathering technique***

The present study used a structured questionnaire and adopted the face-to-face interview to fill out the questionnaire in a left-behind children's home. First, the researcher introduced the purpose and significance of the survey to the children and their acting guardians in detail and obtained the written consent of the acting guardians before starting the questionnaire survey. Then, the researcher distributed the questionnaires. If the children could not understand the question, the researcher explained and assisted them. The data was collected in July 2022, when the left-behind children were home during the summer vacation.

### ***Research instrument***

This study referred to the Microdata child well-being index and added material well-being to develop the child well-being questionnaire based on the Social-Ecosystem Theory. The well-being of left-behind children for this study measured five outcome domains: material well-being, physical well-being, educational well-being, psychological well-being, and social well-being.

### ***Sample and sampling technique***

The study adopted the Ministry of Civil Affairs' definition of children under 16 years old who are left behind children with both parents migrating for non-farming jobs, one parent working away, and the other incapable of guardianship (The State Council, 2016). The preliminary study included seventy left-behind children aged 10 to 16 years old. A multistage sampling technique was used to choose the geographical location of the study, study area, and children as survey respondents. The researchers selected the geographical location of the study, which resulted in three villages from Yibin City, Sichuan Province, China.

### ***Analysis technique***

The data in this research was collected by questionnaires, compiled, and analysed through the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software program, version 28. The method of analysis involved in this study was descriptive analysis. The descriptive analysis reported score, percentage, mean and standard deviations of child well-being items, domains, and overall individual well-being. The study determined the level of child well-being



domains and overall individual well-being based on the scale developed by Bradshaw et al. (2007) and UNICEF (2013).

### *Research ethics*

This research strictly complied with the Universiti Malaya Research Ethics Committee (UMREC) regulations during the research process. The study was approved by UMREC (Reference Number: UM. TNC2/UMREC-1896). All left-behind children participated voluntarily and withdrew from this study at any time. Additionally, all left-behind children had informed consent signed by their acting guardians in the study.

## Results

### *Demographics profiles*

Table 1 shows that a total of seventy Chinese left-behind children participating in the preliminary study, comprising 45.7 percent boys and 54.3 percent girls. Their age range was between ten and sixteen years old, with an average age of 12.61. The study involved the left-behind children, adopting the Ministry of Civil Affairs of China's definition of under sixteen years. The study decided the age of ten as the minimum age limit because, at this level of development, the left-behind children can express their views on their well-being independently. Additionally, the left-behind time range was from six months to eleven years, and 44.1 percent included left-behind children who had separated from migrant parents at twelve months. Of seventy left-behind children, 94.3 percent of them were taken care of by their grandparents, and the rest, 5.7 percent of left-behind children, were guarded by their relatives.

**Table 1** Respondents' Demographic Profiles

<b>Gender</b>	<b>(%)</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>(%)</b>
Girl	54.3	Boy	45.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>		
<b>Age (years)</b>	<b>(%)</b>	<b>Age (years)</b>	<b>(%)</b>
10	21.4	14	15.7
11	12.9	15	11.4
12	17.1	16	10.0
13	11.4	<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Left-behind time(months)	(%)	Left-behind time(months)	(%)
6	7.1	36	2.9
7	2.9	60	1.4
8	5.7	72	7.1
9	10.0	84	1.4
10	2.9	96	1.4
11	2.9	108	1.4
12	41.4	132	2.9
24	7.1		
29	1.4	<b>Total</b>	100.0
<b>Acting guardian</b>	(%)	<b>Acting guardian</b>	(%)
Grandparents	94.3	Relatives	5.7
<b>Total</b>	100		

### *Material well-being's status*

Table 2 displays child's well-being level for this study. The analysis in Table 3 shows that most of the respondents (94.3%) stated that they ate breakfast, lunch, and dinner every day, and merely 5.7% did not eat breakfast, lunch, and dinner every day. When the left-behind children fell sick, 85.7 percent of them had medicine, and 14.3 percent did not. 68.6 percent of the left-behind children who participated in this preliminary study had enough pocket money. Additionally, 38.6 percent of the left-behind children needed more money for school trips and activities. Meanwhile, most respondents (91.4%) reported having two pairs of good shoes, and 97.1 percent reported having good clothes. The result stated that Chinese left-behind children had fulfilled the needs of pairs and clothes.

**Table 2** Children's Well-being Level

Score value (%)	The well-being level
81and above	Very high
75-80	High
41-74	Medium
20-40	Low
<20	Very low

Source: UNICEF (2013); Bradshaw et al. (2007).

**Table 3** Material Well-being Status of the Respondents

Item	Yes (%)	No (%)
Eat breakfast, lunch, and dinner every day	94.3	5.7
Medicine	85.7	14.3
Enough Pocket money	68.6	31.4
Enough money for School trips and activities	61.4	38.6
Two pairs of good shoes	91.4	8.6
Good clothes to wear	97.1	2.9
A mobile phone	64.3	35.7
A place to study at home	92.9	7.1
TV	100	0
Internet	98.6	1.4

Regarding mobile phones, 64.3 percent of respondents reported that their family had a mobile phone, which meant that one in three left-behind children could not contact their migrant parents via phone. In addition, 92.9 percent of respondents had a place to study at home. All respondents reported that their house had a TV. Finally, 98.6 percent of respondents reported that their house had internet.

Regarding the score of the material well-being domain, there are ten items in the material well-being domain. The answer "no" was coded as zero points, and "yes" was coded as one point. The researchers added the score of all items together to form the score for the material well-being domain. The same way was used to calculate the score of the physical well-being domain and educational well-being domains. Table 8 shows that the mean score of the material well-being domain was 8.54 (SD=1.51) points. The lowest and the most significant scores in the material well-being domain were 5 points and 10 points, respectively. 12.9 percent of respondents scored 8 points and had a high level of material well-being based on the principle for determining the children's well-being (Table 2). In addition, 58.6 percent of respondents scored between 9 and 10 points, with a very high level of material well-being. However, 28.6 percent of respondents scored between 5 and 7 points who had a medium level of material well-being (Table 10).

### ***Physical well-being's status***

The analysis in Table 4 shows that 94.3 percent of left-behind children reported being healthy. Additionally, 90 percent of the respondents reported

that they were not overweight, 84.3 percent of respondents had health insurance, 81.4 percent had adequate sleep every day, and 80 percent of them reported that they could quickly go to the nearest clinic or hospital when they were ill. In addition, 98.6 percent of the left-behind children completed health immunisations.

**Table 4** Physical Well-being Status of the Respondents

Item	Yes (%)	No (%)
Healthy	94.3	5.7
Not overweight	90.0	10.0
Health insurance	84.3	15.7
Exercise every day	54.3	45.7
Adequate sleep every day	81.4	18.6
Easily go to the nearest clinic/hospital	80.0	20.0
Immunisation	98.6	1.4
Social support services	75.7	14.3

All the respondents mentioned above had a very high level of well-being in the items. Regarding health-promoting behaviours, only 54.3 percent of the left-behind participated in this preliminary study exercise daily, with a medium level in the item. Furthermore, when left-behind children have a problem, 75.7 percent of them were available to social support services to help them, with a high level of well-being in the social support service item. Overall, the result stated that respondents had a high level of physical well-being, except for daily exercise.

There are eight items in the physical well-being domain, and the score is eight points. It must be noted that 1.4 percent of respondents had three points, and 2.9 percent had four points in the physical well-being domain (Table 8). Nearly one in three included left-behind children got the total score (Table 8). Additionally, the mean score is 6.59 points (SD=1.3), and more than half of the respondents reported that their score in the physical domain was more significant than the mean score (Table 8). Overall, 54.3 percent of the respondents had a very high level of physical well-being, 21.4 percent of them had a high level of physical well-being, 22.9 percent of respondents had a medium level of physical well-being, and 1.4 percent of the children had a low level of physical well-being—the result shown that the included left-behind children especially need to do exercise every day (Table 10).

### *Educational well-being's status*

The result in Table 5 shows the status of the educational well-being of the left-behind children participated in this preliminary study. All of them were still schooling. However, only 51.4 percent of the respondents were happy with their exam results, and merely 45.7 percent of the children reported they were doing well with their studies. In addition, more than half (51.4%) of the included left-behind children reported that they did not have free lunch at school, 12.9 percent of respondents reported that they could use accessible accommodation at school, and 47.1 percent received financial assistance at school. When the children have any problem, 68.6 percent of them can go to the counselling service at school. Additionally, if the included left-behind children have problems with their guardians, 58.6 percent of them can go to the child protection services at school for help. In sum, the included left-behind children reported a low level of well-being in the items of free accommodation and a medium level of well-being in the items of study, free lunch, counselling service, financial assistance, and child protection service.

**Table 5** Educational Well-being Status of the Respondents

Item	Yes (%)	No (%)
Go to school	100	0
Happy with my exam result	51.4	48.6
Doing well with my study	45.7	54.3
Have free lunch at school	48.6	51.4
Use all the free accommodation at school	12.9	87.1
Go to the counselling service at school	68.6	31.4
Receive financial assistance at school	47.1	52.9
Go to the child protection services at school for help	58.6	41.4

The educational well-being domain contains eight items, and the total score is eight points. The result reports that 2.9 percent of respondents merely got one point, 8.6 percent got two points, 21.4 percent got three points, and 25.7 percent got four points (Table 8). The mean score is 4.33 points (SD=1.62); merely 41.5 percent of the respondents got higher than the mean score (Table 8). Overall, merely 7.1 percent of the respondents reported a very high level of educational well-being, 20 percent of respondents had a high level of educational well-being, 40 percent of respondents had a medium level of educational well-being, 30 percent of respondents had a low level of the

educational well-being, and 2.9 percent respondents had a deficient level of educational well-being (Table 10).

### ***Psychological well-being's status***

Table 6 reports the status of the psychological well-being of the involved left-behind children. All respondents reported a good life with their family -98.6 percent were happy, 97.1 percent appreciated, and 98.6 percent were optimistic about their life. In terms of ambition, 64.3 percent of the respondents always had the ambition to achieve, and 24.3 percent of respondents sometimes had the ambition to achieve. However, more than 10 percent of the respondents had no ambition to achieve. Regarding motivation, 65.7 percent of the respondents always had the motivation to be a successful person, 25.7 percent of them sometimes had the motivation to be a successful person, and 8.6 percent of the respondents never had the motivation to be a successful person. More than 90 percent of the respondents respected themselves and were confident with themselves. Regarding stress and problems, 21.4 percent of the children did not know how to handle their stress, and 12.9 percent did not know how to handle their problems.

**Table 6** Psychological Well-being Status of the Respondents

<b>Item</b>	<b>Always (%)</b>	<b>Sometimes (%)</b>	<b>Never (%)</b>
Have a good life with my family	85.7	14.3	0
Be happy with my life	81.4	17.1	1.4
Appreciate my life	84.3	12.9	2.9
Be positive about my life	74.3	24.3	1.4
Have an ambition to achieve	64.3	24.3	11.4
Have a motivation to be a success person	65.7	25.7	8.6
Respect myself	80.0	17.1	2.9
Be confident with myself	77.1	20.0	2.9
Handle my stress	52.9	25.7	21.4
Handle problem positively	57.1	30.0	12.9

The psychological well-being domain contained ten items. One item has three answers, namely always, sometimes, and never. The answer “always” was coded two points, the answer “sometimes” was coded one point, and the answer “never” was coded zero points. The researchers added the score of all

nine items to form the score of the psychological well-being domain. The mean score of the psychological well-being domain was 16.57 (SD=3.5) (Table 8). The lowest score was 5 points, and the most significant score was 20 points (Table 8). More than one in three (38.6%) of respondents reported that their scores in the psychological well-being domain were lower than the mean score (Table 8). In sum, 61.4 percent of the left-behind children reported a very high level of psychological well-being, 12.9 percent reported a high level of psychological well-being, 24.3 percent of the children reported a medium level of psychological well-being, and 1.4 percent reported low level of psychological well-being (Table 10).

### *Social well-being's status*

Table 7 shows that 82.9 percent of respondents always cared for their parents/grandparents. Merely 2.9 percent of respondents never trusted their parents/grandparents. 98.4 percent of the respondents could understand their parents' feelings. Regarding friends, 77.1 percent of the children always got along well with their friends, and only 20 percent sometimes got along well. Additionally, 85.7 percent of respondents often cared for their friends, and only 4.3 percent of respondents never cared for their friends. More than 80 percent of respondents reported respecting their neighbours and teachers. On the other hand, 12.9 percent of the left-behind children reported that they never help the elderly and people with disabilities in the community, and 48.6 percent of them never participated in community activities.

**Table 7** Social Well-being Status of the Respondents

Item	Always (%)	Sometimes (%)	Never (%)
Care for parents/ grandparents	82.9	15.7	1.4
Trust my parents/grandparents	75.7	21.4	2.9
Understand my parent's feelings	78.4	20.0	1.6
Get along well with my friends	77.1	20.0	2.9
Care for my friends	85.7	10.0	4.3
Respect my neighbours	82.9	14.3	2.9
Respect my teachers	85.7	10.0	4.3
Help the elderly and the disabled in my community	34.3	52.9	12.9
Participate in my community activities	14.3	37.1	48.6

The social well-being domain contains nine items. One item has three answers, namely always, sometimes, and never. The answer “always” was coded two points, the answer “sometimes” was coded one point, and the answer “never” was coded zero points. The researchers added the score of all nine items to form the score of the psychological well-being domain. Table 8 shows that the mean score of the social well-being domain was 14.36 points (SD=2.51). In addition, the lowest score was 9 points, and the most significant score was 18 points. Regarding the domain score, 61.4 percent of respondents reported that their scores were higher than the mean score, and 48.6 percent got lower scores than the mean score. Table 10 shows that 61.4 percent involved left-behind children had a very high level of social well-being, 8.6 percent involved left-behind children had a high level of social well-being, and the rest 30 percent involved left-behind children had a medium level of social well-being.

### ***The status of individual well-being of left-behind children***

The overall individual well-being score was created by adding the score of all five domains. Table 9 reports the score of involved left-behind children’s overall well-being. The mean score was 50.39 points (SD=7.52). The lowest score was 29 points, and the most significant was 63. In addition, the total score for overall individual well-being was 64 points.

**Table 9** Individual Well-being Score

Score	(%)	Score	(%)
29.00	1.4	51.00	2.9
34.00	1.4	52.00	4.3
35.00	1.4	53.00	7.1
36.00	1.4	54.00	8.6
37.00	1.4	55.00	2.9
39.00	1.4	56.00	7.1
41.00	7.1	57.00	5.7
42.00	2.9	58.00	5.7
43.00	2.9	59.00	2.9
45.00	4.3	60.00	4.3
46.00	2.9	61.00	1.4
47.00	2.9	62.00	1.4
48.00	5.7	63.00	1.4
49.00	2.9	<b>Total</b>	100.0
50.00	4.3		
<b>Mean</b>	50.39		
<b>SD</b>	7.52		



**Table 8** Score of Child Well-being Domain

Domain	Score (%)																				Mean	SD
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20		
Material Well-being					4.3	5.7	18.6	12.9	20	38.6											8.54	1.51
Physical Well-being			1.4	2.9	20	21.4	20	34.3													6.59	1.30
Educational Well-being	2.9	8.6	21.4	25.7	14.3	20	2.9	4.3													4.33	1.62
Psychological well-being					1.4					5.7	5.7	1.4	7.1	4.3	5.7	7.1	15.7	5.7	10	30	16.57	3.50
Social well-being									5.7	7.1	2.9	8.6	5.7	8.6	24.3	17.1	14.3	5.7			14.36	2.51

**Table 10** Level of Child Well-being

Domain	The well-being level				
	Very low	Low	Medium	High	Very high
Material Well-being	0	0	28.6%	12.9%	58.6%
Physical Well-being	0	1.4%	22.9%	21.4%	54.3%
Educational Well-being	2.9%	30%	40%	20%	7.1 %
Psychological well-being	0	1.4%	24.3%	12.9%	61.4%
Social well-being	0	0	30%	8.6%	61.4%
Individual well-being	0	0	31.4%	15.7%	52.9%

Thus, 52.9 percent of included left-behind children reported a very high level of individual well-being, 15.7 percent of respondents reported a high level of individual well-being, and the rest, 31.4 percent, reported medium individual well-being (Table 10).

## Discussion

This study reported the well-being status of left-behind children in Sichuan province, China. Regarding material well-being, one in three involved left-behind children needed more pocket money and more money for school trips and activities. Migration improves the welfare of the whole family economically (World Bank, 2017). In addition, remittances were financial transfers made directly by migrants to families (IOM, 2022). The remittances were used to support the health, education, and well-being of the children left behind (World Bank, 2017). However, the analysis of the study had the contrary result that Chinese left-behind children did not have enough financial support from their migrant parents.

In addition, 35.7 percent of respondents' families did not have a mobile phone, which may limit communication between left-behind children and migrant parents. The mobile phone is one of the essential communication tools in China. The family without a mobile phone may be in poverty status, which can be the basis for the Child Welfare Department to supply exceptional support for families without a mobile phone to contact migrant parents.

Additionally, 5.7 percent of left-behind children did not eat breakfast, lunch, and dinner daily. Balanced three meals are the primary component of nutrition, which needs the family and school to fulfil children's basic needs in rural areas. 14.3 percent of the left-behind children who participated in this preliminary study did not have medicine when they fell ill. The child protection department should pay attention to this finding, investigate why left-behind children lack necessary medicines and develop coping strategies accordingly and effectively. 28.6 percent of left-behind children reported a medium level of material well-being. They should be the targets of material assistance from the Child Protection Department to safeguard their nutrition, enough pocket money, and essential medicines.

About the physical well-being domain, one in five involved left behind children could not quickly go to the nearest clinic/hospital, which may harm children's health when they fall ill at home. In addition, the Chinese government advised children to exercise for one hour daily. However, 45.7 percent involved left-behind children who did not exercise. Doing adequate exercise may promote children's physical health, which can be a new direction for schools and the community to supply sports services for children.

Furthermore, 15.7 percent of respondents reported not having health insurance, and 14.3 percent could not access social support services if they had problems. The left-behind children without health insurance should be the core targets of the child welfare department, which may be the most vulnerable and poorest children if they become seriously ill or suffer a major accident. The child welfare department must contact children's migrant parents to inform them that the acting guardian did not buy health insurance for left-behind children and advise migrant parents to pay for children's health insurance. Suppose the left-behind children's family was a registered poverty family, in that case, the children should be eligible for the government health insurance subsidy, funded by the government, to purchase health insurance for low-income families in China.

Regarding educational well-being, half of the involved left-behind children do poorly with their studies and are unhappy with the examined results. In the study, 94.3 percent of left-behind children are guarded by their grandparents, who could not supervise their studies. Based on the analysis, the left-behind children need study support services. More than 50 percent of the respondents reported not having free lunch at school. The free lunch can promote the nutrition of the left-behind children, and the government should support more township schools to supply free lunch for left-behind children.

Merely 12.9 percent of left-behind children reported that they could use the accessible accommodation at school. The left-behind children studied at town or county schools, and their families lived in villages, so they needed accommodation at school because of the long distance between school and family. Suppose schools can provide free accommodation for left-behind children, which may safeguard children's safety because of the possibility of accidental injuries on their journey from home to school.

Furthermore, the left-behind children are the vulnerable and poor children in China who need financial assistance to attend school trips and activities. However, 52.9 percent included left-behind children who did not receive financial assistance at school. Therefore, the schools should provide child protection services for left-behind children if they have problems with guardians, as the government requires the schools to protect children based on the Chinese law of minor protection.

Based on the result of the psychological well-being domain, 21.4 percent of left-behind children do not know how to handle their stress, and 12.9 percent of left-behind children do not know how to handle problems. They should study how to deal with stress and problems, which can be the direction for group social work services in school. Additionally, 24.3 percent of left-behind children reported a medium level of psychological well-being, and 1.4 percent reported a low level of psychological well-being. The school can supply casework services for the low-level psychological well-being of left-behind children and group work services for the medium level of psychological well-being of left-behind children.

Regarding the social well-being domain, only 51.4 percent of left-behind children participate in activities in their villages, and 12.9 percent of left-behind children never help elderly and disabled persons in their villages. The result reflected that the children did not care for the community and neighbours, which created a new gap for community services to promote social support between children, the elderly, and disabled people in villages. In addition, the left-behind children can volunteer to improve community activities and participate in community service development. Additionally, the rest (30%) of the involved left-behind children had a medium level of social well-being and were the targets of community service in child-friendly spaces. Of the individual well-being, 31.4 percent involved left-behind children with a medium level of individual well-being, which is the target for the social service of the child protection department.

## **Practice Implications and Conclusion**

The result of the study presented that most left-behind children are guarded by their grandparents. Therefore, the child protection department should assess the guardian abilities of grandparents and teach them how to take care of the children at home. The grandparents could not fulfil the guardianship. The child protection department should announce the migrant parents and provide temporary foster care for left-behind children before migrant parents appoint a new acting guardian.

Furthermore, the child protection department should evaluate the material status of the left-behind children and provide financial assistance for the poverty left-behind children to fulfil their studies, life, and development. UNICEF (2020) stated that child support grants could improve cognitive development and health and reduce children's illness. Next, the Child Protection Department should assess the risk of safety, nutrition, dropping out of school, and mental health of the left-behind children and supply protection services for the at-risk and vulnerable children.

The study stated that 40 percent and 30 percent left-behind children participated in this study reported a medium and low level of educational well-being, respectively. Additionally, 24.2 percent of the children reported a medium level of psychological well-being, and 1.4 percent of them reported a low level of psychological well-being. Therefore, they are the targets of school social work services, a crucial way to promote children's educational and psychological well-being. Based on the result, schools can supply study support, free lunch and accommodation, financial assistance, child protection services, and counselling services for left-behind children at school.

The Chinese government creates child-friendly spaces in communities, which can provide social services for left-behind children in villages. The study's results showed that 30 percent of the left-behind children involved had a medium level of social well-being, and the left-behind children scored lower in the items of community participation and community support, which led to new directions of social service for child-friendly spaces. Social services in child-friendly spaces need to be improved, and professional support for rural left-behind children is also insufficient. Because of the long-distance separation of migrant parents and left-behind children, they cannot participate in traditional face-to-face social services. During COVID-19, online social services used for left-behind children and migrant parents. The diversified

online and offline social services for left-behind children should be integrated with the child protection department, neighbours, social workers, migrant parents, left-behind children, teachers, peers, and volunteers, to promote the well-being of left-behind children in China. Inputs from the multidimensional approach to child well-being are instrumental in helping the government of China to restructure and strategize its social services for the left-behind children; thus, the children's well-being can be maintained and safeguarded.

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