Left-Behind Children's Well-being: A Systematic Review of Parental Migration Impacts

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Abstract

This systematic review synthesizes evidence from 23 peer-reviewed studies to examine the multidimensional impacts of parental migration on the well-being of left-behind children (LBC). Given the rising global trends in labor migration, understanding its implications on child well-being is crucial for determining child protection frameworks. This review adopted the PRISMA included over 80,000 child participants from studies conducted across Asia, Eastern Europe, and Sub-Saharan Africa. It identified five core domains of child well-being affected by parental absence: psychological-emotional health, social-relational functioning, educational outcomes, physical health, and subjective well-being. Maternal migration, inconsistent caregiving, and weak parent-child communication were consistently associated with poorer emotional security and academic performance outcomes. In contrast, stable caregiving by educated guardians and sustained emotional contact with migrant parents mitigated some negative effects. Mediating factors, such as caregiver quality, peer and school support, and gender dynamics, influenced how children internalize the migration experience. These findings consistently highlighted that the nature and quality of caregiving environments are critical in mediating the developmental risks associated with parental migration. This review underscores the urgent need for migration and welfare policies prioritizing family unity and children's voices in decision-making.

Keywords: child rights, child well-being, left-behind children, parental migration, transnational families

Abstrak

Tinjauan sistematis ini mensintesis bukti dari 23 studi yang telah melalui proses *peer-review* untuk mengkaji dampak multidimensi migrasi orang tua terhadap kesejahteraan anak-anak yang ditinggalkan (*left-behind children/LBC*). Seiring dengan meningkatnya tren migrasi tenaga kerja global, pemahaman terhadap implikasinya bagi perkembangan anak menjadi sangat penting dalam merumuskan kebijakan perlindungan dan kesejahteraan anak yang efektif. Dengan berpedoman pada pedoman PRISMA, tinjauan ini menggunakan data dari lebih dari 80.000 anak di Asia, Eropa Timur, dan Afrika Sub-Sahara. Tinjauan ini mengidentifikasi lima domain utama kesejahteraan anak yang terdampak oleh ketidakhadiran orang tua, yaitu kesehatan psikologis dan emosional, fungsi sosial dan relasional, capaian pendidikan, kesehatan fisik, serta kesejahteraan subjektif. Migrasi ibu, pengasuhan yang tidak konsisten, dan lemahnya komunikasi antara orang tua dan anak secara konsisten berkaitan dengan rendahnya keamanan emosional dan capaian akademik anak. Sebaliknya, pengasuhan yang stabil oleh wali yang berpendidikan serta kontak emosional yang berkelanjutan dengan orang tua migran mampu

mengurangi sebagian dampak negatif tersebut. Faktor-faktor mediasi, seperti kualitas pengasuhan, dukungan teman sebaya dan sekolah, serta dinamika gender, memengaruhi cara anak menginternalisasi pengalaman migrasi. Secara keseluruhan, tinjauan ini menegaskan peran krusial lingkungan pengasuhan dalam membentuk luaran kesejahteraan anak di tengah migrasi orang tua. Temuan ini juga menggarisbawahi kebutuhan mendesak akan kebijakan migrasi dan kesejahteraan yang memprioritaskan kohesi keluarga, mendorong agensi anak, serta mengakui suara anak dalam proses pengambilan keputusan.

Kata kunci: hak anak, keluarga transnasional, kesejahteraan anak, *left-behind children*, migrasi orang tua

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Introduction

Globalization and economic restructuring have hastened internal and foreign worker mobility, particularly in emerging nations (Castles & Miller, 2009). One significant social result of this trend is the rise of 'left-behind children' (LBC), youngsters who stay in their native communities while one or both parents travel for employment. This trend is particularly common in nations like China, the Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam, Moldova, and Ghana, where millions of children live apart from their parents for long periods (Adhikari et al., 2013; Bălţătescu et al., 2023; Cebotari et al., 2018; Graham & Jordan, 2011; Jordan & Graham, 2012; Shen & Zhang, 2018). Though migration could bring financial benefits via remittances, it also causes complex issues for child development. Long-term separation can damage children's social and mental well-being, lower emotional security, and disturb caregiving connections (Hoang et al., 2012; Fauk et al., 2024). These dangers highlight the need to put LBC's well-being at the center of social assistance initiatives, research, and policies. In the Indonesian rural context, Primasari and Puspitawati (2016) found that children in farming families with large household sizes and limited resources often experience low levels of well-being, underscoring the importance of addressing both environmental and structural dimensions in the assessment of child well-being.

The concept of child well-being was initially influenced by needs-based and developmental psychology approaches, one of which is exemplified by Abraham Maslow's (1943) theory of the hierarchy of human needs. This paradigm helps to understand children's well-being, especially when it comes to meeting their fundamental needs and reaching their full potential as part of their optimal development. After that, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory built upon this by emphasizing that a child's well-being is not only influenced by individual factors, but also by how children interact with their social environments, such as family, school, and community. The study of child well-being has evolved to incorporate more diverse perspectives and become more subjective. Ben-Arieh (2008) suggests that well-being indicators should include children's own perspectives, demonstrating a more participatory and holistic approach. Fattore et al. (2007) concur with this, stating that children possess complex ideas about their well-being, encompassing the importance of life satisfaction, a sense of safety, and positive social relationships.

The well-being of LBC in the framework of parental migration, mainly their subjective well-being (SWB), has become a significant issue in child development. SWB is a person's self-perceived quality of life and includes evaluative aspects, such as psychological functioning, emotional experiences, and life satisfaction (Diener, 2000). SWB has changed in the context of evaluating children only via objective measures to a more holistic framework that includes the children's voices and perceptions of their lives (Bradshaw et al., 2007) due to the awareness of children's rights and the chance for every child to flourish across material, emotional, and relational domains.

Recent studies have increasingly emphasized the multidimensional nature of children's subjective well-being (SWB), highlighting how their experiences across school, peer relationships, and even digital environments contribute to their overall sense of well-being. Environments that allow children to express their views and participate in decision-making processes are strongly associated with higher levels of well-being (Barrance & Hampton, 2023). This is echoed in the findings of Doriza et al. (2024), who found that students' SWB is significantly influenced by peer relationships, engagement in school activities, teacher support, and a balanced academic environment. Beyond the school environment, Irzalinda and Latifah (2023) emphasize that screen time has become a significant factor in shaping the well-being of young children, with both positive and negative implications. While excessive screen exposure may hinder language development and social interaction, guided and purposeful digital engagement can promote learning and emotional stimulation. These findings collectively support the notion that SWB is not only internally constructed but also shaped by social, institutional, and increasingly digital environments.

Research consistently highlights several adverse effects of parental migration on children's well-being. Although SWB is a crucial lens for grasping the real experiences of LBC, it is just one component of a more comprehensive well-being framework. Parental migration complicates children's well-being, including physical health, academic performance, emotional functioning, and social behavior. Research has indicated that ongoing parental absence might be related to worse physical health, lower academic success, and more emotional and behavioral problems among LBC (Adhikari et al., 2013; Arlini et al., 2019; Cebotari et al., 2018). Zhou et al. (2018) revealed that LBC in China experience far more depression symptoms than their counterparts who lived with both parents. Consistent with these results, Zhou et al. (2021) revealed that psychological resilience is a key mediating factor; excellent parent-child communication helps to reduce emotional and behavioral issues in LBC. Weakened caregiving settings, uneven emotional support, and restricted access to health and education resources often magnify these impacts (Antia et al., 2020; Gassmann et al., 2018). Moreover, these results are greatly affected by gender, age, and the quality of communication between children and their migrant parents (Graham & Jordan, 2011; Lu et al., 2020). Thus, ascertaining child well-being calls for a holistic approach using subjective and objective measures, including a more general social ecology in which children grow and develop.

Policies governing temporary labor migration (TLM), as Jayasuriya (2021) argues, often interfere with children's rights protected under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), particularly the provisions safeguarding the child–parent relationship and regular contact between children and their parents. The CRC's Articles

5, 7, 10(2), 16, 18, and 27 confirm a child's right to be raised and guided by their parents, to keep consistent contact in situations of separation, and to get required support for their growth. Many migration policies' structures, especially those aimed at low-wage work, normalize long parental absence without safeguarding these relationship rights, endangering children emotionally, socially, and legally (Jayasuriya, 2021).

Institutional and systematic negligence aggravates these consequences even further. Research in various settings reveals that LBC suffers systematic exclusion from access to legal services, education, and health care, usually due to the lack of legislative tools sufficiently addressing their needs. For instance, reflecting on the invisibility of children's needs in migration policy in Southeast Asia, childcare duties are often assigned to extended family members with little institutional support or legal protections. Similar disparities have been noted in Eastern Europe and Sub-Saharan Africa, where LBC suffers psychological pressure and social marginalization without effective support systems (Raturi & Cebotari, 2022; van der Put et al., 2022). Nevertheless, children may experience emotional disengagement and disturbed developmental paths even in family-based caring when lacking more all-encompassing protective systems (Valtolina & Colombo, 2012). With possibly long-lasting effects on children's rights and developmental results, this fragmentation across systems shows a greater failure to include child-centered values in government (Zhou et al., 2018).

Although studies on left-behind children are increasing, the findings still vary across several areas and aspects of well-being. A more complete synthesis is required to catch cross-contextual trends and position these within a child's rights viewpoint. This review meets this need by thoroughly examining empirical studies about the well-being of children impacted by parental migration. Specifically, it intends to (1) map the areas of child well-being most affected by parental absence; (2) identify essential determinants and mediator's factors of left-behind children well-being; and (3) analyze the issues in the context of child rights and migration policy.

Methods

Review Design and Reporting Framework

This study employed a systematic literature review (SLR) approach to synthesize empirical evidence on the well-being of left-behind children due to parental migration. The review process follows the guidelines of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020) framework (Page et al., 2021), including systematic procedures for study identification, screening, and data synthesis. Although no protocol registration was conducted (e.g., in PROSPERO), the review adheres to key PRISMA principles for transparency and reproducibility. The detailed steps taken in this review, including the number of studies at each phase and reasons for exclusion, are illustrated in Figure 1.

Data Sources and Search Strategy

A comprehensive search was performed across seven electronic databases to identify relevant studies: *ProQuest, PubMed, Science Direct, Scopus, Semantic Scholar, Taylor & Francis Online,* and *Wiley Online Library*. The following search phrases were

used: "children well-being," "well-being of child," and "child welfare". Boolean operators (AND, OR) were used to combine keywords across title, abstract, and keyword fields (see Table 1), and all retrieved citations were subsequently exported to Zotero for reference management and deduplication.

Table 1. Search Strings Used in Databases

String ID	Search Term
S1	"Children well-being"
S2	"Well-being of child"
S3	"Child welfare"

Eligibility Criteria

A PICO-informed framework was used to create the inclusion and exclusion criteria for this review, fitting the social science research requirements. This framework allows a methodical selection procedure using appropriate populations, conceptual emphasis, and methodological breadth in line with the study goals.

Studies have to satisfy the following criteria to be eligible for inclusion: (1) involved children or adolescents aged 0–8 with typical developmental trajectories; (2) explored the perceptions or experiences of child well-being (e.g., happiness, life satisfaction, mental health) or children's positioning within broader social structures in the context of parental migration; (3) utilized empirical research designs (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods); and (4) be published in peer-reviewed journals.

Studies were omitted if they: (i) concentrated only on adult populations, (ii) investigated clinical or pathological child populations (e.g., children with severe diagnoses), (iii) did not explicitly address child well-being, or (iv) were non-empirical (e.g., reviews, opinion pieces, theoretical essays). Table 2 summarizes the requirements.

Table 2. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Category	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Population	Children and adolescents (0–18 years); typically developing	Adults; children with clinical or diagnosed developmental issues
Topic	Child well-being (subjective or objective); social context of left-behind children due to parental labor migration	Topics unrelated to child well-being
Study Design	Empirical studies (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed); peer-reviewed publications	Non-empirical articles (reviews, theoretical papers, etc.)

Study Selection Process

The initial search yielded 86 studies, which were imported into Zotero. 11 duplicate records were removed. The remaining 75 records were screened based on titles and abstracts. 21 studies were excluded for not meeting the inclusion criteria. The research team reviewed the remaining 54 full-text articles. A consensus-based approach was used to resolve disagreements regarding study inclusion. Ultimately, 23 studies were selected in the final review. This entire screening and selection process is summarized in Figure 1.
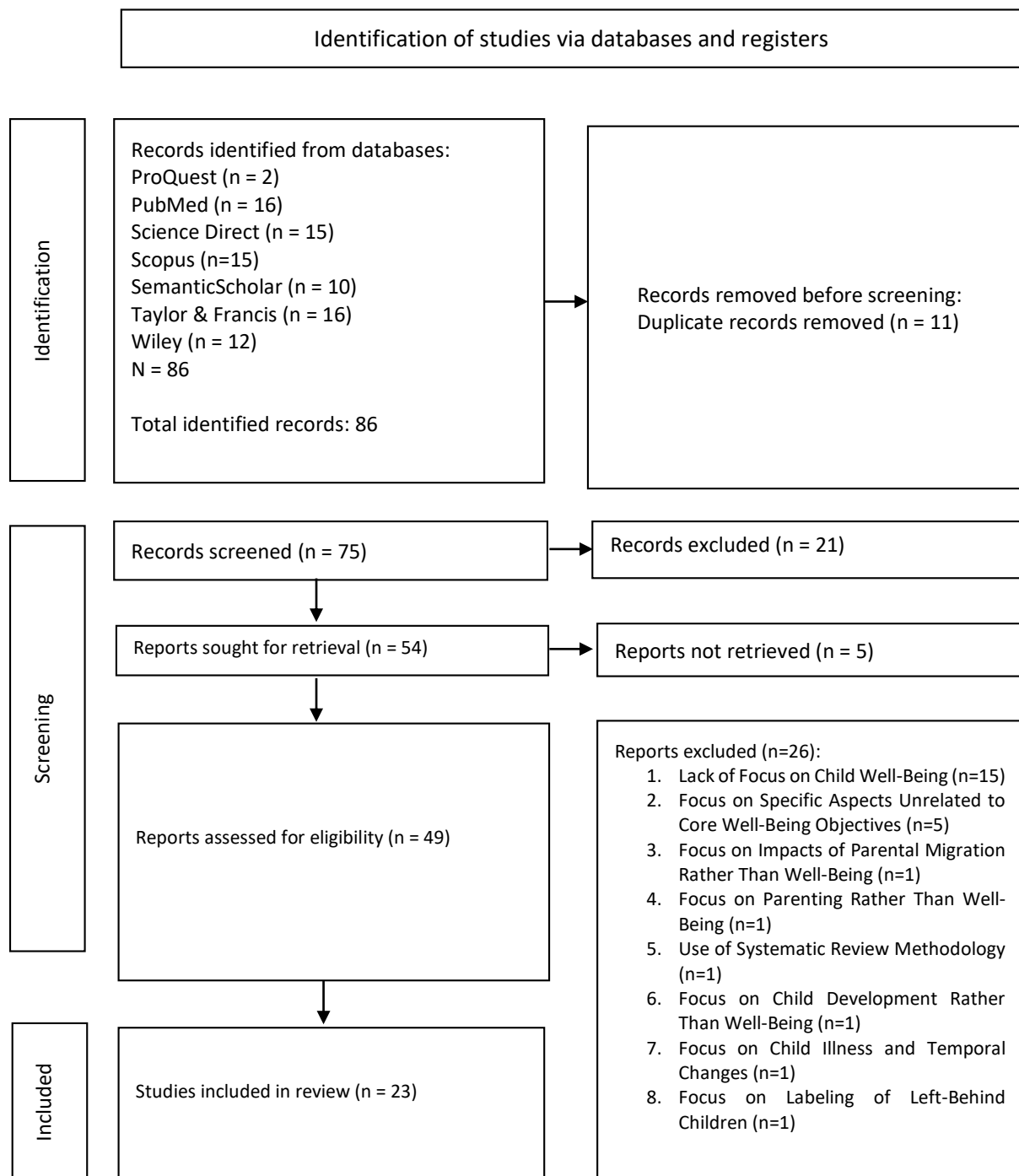
Identification of studies via databases and registers

Identification

Records identified from databases:
ProQuest (n = 2)
PubMed (n = 16)
Science Direct (n = 15)
Scopus (n=15)
SemanticScholar (n = 10)
Taylor & Francis (n = 16)
Wiley (n = 12)
N = 86

Total identified records: 86

Records removed before screening:
Duplicate records removed (n = 11)

Screening

Records screened (n = 75)

Records excluded (n = 21)

Reports sought for retrieval (n = 54)

Reports not retrieved (n = 5)

Reports assessed for eligibility (n = 49)

Reports excluded (n=26):
1. Lack of Focus on Child Well-Being (n=15)
2. Focus on Specific Aspects Unrelated to Core Well-Being Objectives (n=5)
3. Focus on Impacts of Parental Migration Rather Than Well-Being (n=1)
4. Focus on Parenting Rather Than Well-Being (n=1)
5. Use of Systematic Review Methodology (n=1)
6. Focus on Child Development Rather Than Well-Being (n=1)
7. Focus on Child Illness and Temporal Changes (n=1)
8. Focus on Labeling of Left-Behind Children (n=1)

Included

Studies included in review (n = 23)

Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram of study selection and inclusion

Data Extraction and Analysis

An organized method was used to gather descriptive and analytical data pertinent to the review goals from the 23 chosen research. Two tables were built to arrange the synthesis. Table 3 highlights the sample traits of each study, including author(s), year, nation or area, sample size, age range, and gender distribution. Table 4 captures the key analytical insights, such as study design, the well-being dimensions investigated, mediating variables (e.g., quality of caregiving, contact with migrant parents), and tools

or instruments utilized for measurement. The results obtained were thematically synthesized. A coding technique was used to classify the reported results into fundamental dimensions of child well-being: subjective well-being, emotional health, social functioning, educational outcomes, and physical health. This thematic classification revealed convergences and divergences across geographic, cultural, and methodological settings. Lastly, the synthesis was examined from a child rights perspective using CRC as a normative framework, allowing this study to examine developmental results and how migration-related family arrangements support or damage children's rights to care, protection, and involvement.

Findings

Profile of Selected Studies

This systematic review examined 23 peer-reviewed empirical research spanning a wide geographical area and various methodological techniques. Table 3 shows that most of the research was done in Asia, especially in China, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam, alongside others from Eastern Europe (e.g., Romania, Moldova, Georgia) and Sub-Saharan Africa (notably Ghana). This geographical spread highlight the worldwide relevance of parental migration and its effect on LBC.

The studies taken together covered a sample of almost 80,000 children. However, sample sizes differed significantly from as low as 25 (Zhao et al., 2018) to about 20,000 (Lu et al., 2023). Most research focused on the 9–16 age range, a vital time for emotional, cognitive, and social development. The age range varied from early infancy (3–5 years) to late adolescence (up to 21 years).

Reporting on sex-disaggregated data was uneven. Nonetheless, the gender distribution was usually equal where such data was accessible, with a little female predominance in certain situations. The rural and urban settings differed; several research concentrated only on rural areas, which are sometimes more impacted by the effects of labor migration. The chosen studies offer a strong empirical basis for comprehending the interaction between parental migration and child development across different settings and developmental phases.

Table 3. Demographic of samples selected in reviewed studies

No	Author (Publication Year)	Location of study	N of Children	Child age range and/or mean	Percentage (female:male)
1	Wen & Lin (2012)	Five rural districts in Hunan Province, China (including northern, southern, eastern, western, and central regions)	704	8-18 years	49.50% : 50.5%
2	Li & Sun (2020)	25 rural counties across China (from the China Family Panel Studies - CFPS 2014 dataset)	1,712	10–15 years (Mean = 12.6 years)	Not reported

Table 3. Demographic of samples selected in reviewed studies (Continue)

No	Author (Publication Year)	Location of study	N of Children	• Child age range and/or mean	• Percentage (female : male)
3	Wu & Cebotari (2018)	Ghana (Accra, Cape Coast, Sunyani, Kumasi) and China (Guizhou, Anhui, Jiangsu)	3,793 (1,622 in Ghana; 2,171 in China)	• Ghana: 11–20 years (Mean = 15.49) • China: 11–20 years (Mean = 13.43)	• Ghana: 52.8%: 47.2% • China: 48.3% : 51.7%
4	Lu et al. (2021)	Ye County (Henan), Chenggu and Ningqiang Counties (Shaanxi), China	4,192	12 years and older (exposure measured from ages 1–12)	49.2% : 50.8%
5	Chen et al. (2019)	Anhui Province, China	4,429	Mean = 12 years, SD = 14 months (Grades 4–7)	49.7% : 50.3%
6	Zhao et al. (2018)	Kaihua County, Zhejiang Province, China	25	7-14 years (Mean = 10.9, SD = 1.8)	Not reported
7	Yeung & Gu (2016)	China (25 provinces, CFPS dataset)	8,523	10 and 15 years	Not reported
8	Zhao et al. (2017)	Zhejiang and Guizhou Provinces, China	3,538	9–17 years (Mean = 12.4)	52.50%:47.50%
9	Liu et al. (2023)	Shandong Province, China	281	11–15 years (Mean = 12.93)	54.80%: 45.20%
10	Xu, L et al. (2018)	Tianjin, China	476	6-18 years (kindergarten to 10th grade and above)	42.9% : 57.1%
11	Xu, D et al. (2018)	China (28 counties/districts, nationally representative)	6,714	12-16 years (7th and 9th grade junior high school students)	Not reported
12	Lu et al. (2020)	China (nationally representative sample covering 25 provinces, excluding Hainan, Qinghai, and Tibet)	4,338	3-15 years	Not reported
13	Murphy et al. (2015)	Anhui and Jiangxi Provinces, China (Two agricultural provinces in the interior south of China)	992	8-17 years (Mean = 12 years)	45.06% : 54.94%

Table 3. Demographic of samples selected in reviewed studies (Continue)

No	Author (Publication Year)	Location of study	N of Children	Child age range and/or mean	Percentage (female : male)
14	Jordan & Graham (2012)	Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam	1,498	9-11 years	51.13% : 48.87%
15	Bălţătescu et al. (2023)	Six European countries: Albania, Croatia, Estonia, Hungary, Poland, and Romania	13,203	10 and 12 years	Reported separately by country; overall gender distribution approximately balanced
16	Lu et al. (2023)	China	19,487 (of which 7,527 included in final analysis)	12-15 years	Not reported
17	Botezat & Pfeiffer (2019)	Romania	1,421 (after exclusions; original survey had 2,037 children)	11–15 years old (Mean = 13.06 years)	48.0% : 52.0%
18	Raturi & Cebotari (2022)	Ghana	985	12-21 years (Mean = 15.6 years)	47.5% : 52.5%
19	Lu et al. (2020)	Anhui Province, China	2,067	11-17 years	43.91% : 56.09%
20	Shen & Zhang (2018)	China	1,364	10-15 years	46.9% : 53.1%
21	Graham et al. (2012)	Indonesia & the Philippines	1,009	3-5 and 9-12 years	Not reported
22	Gassmann et al. (2018)	Moldova & Georgia	2,637	5-17 years	Not reported
23	Zhou et al. (2021)	Hanan Province, China	519	5-9 years (Mean = 6.93 years)	48,70% : 51,30%

Domains of Child Well-Being Affected by Parental Absence

Examining 23 empirical studies reveals strong proof that parental migration affects child well-being in several areas. These effects are not uniform; instead, they are influenced by interconnected elements like the gender of the migrating parent, length and frequency of separation, quality-of-care arrangements, socioeconomic circumstances, and accessibility of support networks. Thematically combining results, this part shows that LBC is both vulnerable and resilient.

Physical Wellbeing

The essential field that is distinguished by the parental absence is the physical well-being of children in transnational homes. In certain situations, the financial advantages of migration improved access to healthcare, housing, and nutrition (Xu, D et

al., 2018). However, such advantages were sometimes restricted to children in better-supported homes or towns with sufficient infrastructure and caregiving assistance.

In rural or low-income areas, LBC often had poorer general physical health, including more vulnerability to disease and malnutrition (Zhou et al., 2021). Usually, a lack of parents led to skipped vaccinations, erratic diets, or inadequate medical treatment. Lu et al. (2023) also found more health vulnerabilities among impoverished urban LBC, emphasizing the need for focused community-based interventions. Gassmann et al. (2018) observed that generally, the nutritional results in Moldova and Georgia differed significantly based on the caregiver's ability to distribute remittances and promote healthy habits properly. These differences highlight the need for a consistent household income, health-conscious carer and institutional access to child health services.

Educational and Cognitive Development

Parental migration's educational consequences are multifaceted and quite context-specific. In low-income rural areas, increased household income via remittances can, on one side, enhance children's access to educational resources, tutoring, or school attendance. Several research found better academic performance and cognitive function among children whose fathers moved while mothers remained primary carers (Chen et al., 2019; Shen & Zhang, 2018). Often, good parental support and home resource distribution moderated these outcomes.

When both parents are gone, emotional uncertainty, erratic monitoring, and a lack of parental academic commitment may compromise school involvement, decrease focus, and lower goals (Jordan & Graham, 2012; Yeung & Gu, 2016). The movement of mothers has been particularly connected to lower school achievement, stressing the importance of maternal presence in educational continuity. In certain cases, parental migration was linked to increased academic anxiety and a lower future orientation as children battled to balance extended family separation with their educational ambitions (Xu, D et al., 2018).

Longitudinal studies revealed these complications even further. While children who move to urban areas may show better academic performance and physical health, they also show lower educational desire and more fear about their future (Xu et al., 2018). Children living with less-educated parents scored poorer on cognitive tests. (Lu et al., 2020) showed that caregiver education is important. In a larger worldwide perspective, school unhappiness among children of migrant parents, especially girls, has been observed all across Eastern Europe, indicating the necessity to handle gender-specific weaknesses in educational well-being (Bâlțătescu et al., 2023).

Psychological and Emotional Well-Being

One major topic in the literature is the emotional price of parental absence on children. The psychological pressure is unavoidable when the mother moves, upsetting the conventional caregiving system in many cultures. LBC consistently shows higher sadness, anxiety, emotional uncertainty, and loneliness (Lu et al., 2020; Zhao et al., 2017, 2018; Zhou et al., 2021). Adolescents, particularly females, are disproportionately affected and tend to show less subjective well-being than their male counterparts

(Bâlţătescu et al., 2023; Raturi & Cebotari, 2022). In homes with unstable caregiving arrangements or where children have experienced several transitions, such as caregiver substitution, parental return from migration, or family structure changes, these impacts are magnified (Lu et al., 2021). A Romanian study by Botezat and Pfeiffer (2019) supports this trend, suggesting that although LBC often do better academically, they are also more prone to suffer sadness and health issues, primarily among girls and those in rural areas.

Furthermore, the lack of regular parental love and emotional validation might compromise the formation of a safe attachment pattern, causing behavioral withdrawal or externalizing issues (Lu et al., 2020; Zhao et al., 2018). Often, the emotional load lasts over time and affects identity development in adolescence and long-term mental health results (Raturi & Cebotari, 2022; Wu & Cebotari, 2018).

Social and Relational Well-Being

Parental migration influences children's outside relationship settings and inside psychological suffering. Many children are perceived to be alienated or different in school or peer interactions because of the stigma of being left behind (Wu & Cebotari, 2018; Murphy et al., 2015). Insufficient replacement care, especially when kids are left with overworked or emotionally distant family members, usually leads to a lack of emotional warmth and steady monitoring (Chen et al., 2019). Though in many instances such communication is sporadic or lacking emotional depth, regular and emotionally supportive contact with migrant parents can assist in offsetting these relational disruptions (Graham et al., 2012). Particularly, the absence of mothers has been connected to diminished perceptions of family closeness and increased emotional pressure, therefore highlighting the need for maternal presence for relational stability (Gassmann et al., 2018).

Wen and Lin (2011) showed that children in homes where only the mother moved reported the lowest degrees of family cohesion and perceived support, providing further evidence of these relationship effects. Decreased school participation and increased health-risk behaviors have been connected to this breakdown in family connectedness. The results support the theory that emotional isolation inside the home could aggravate LBC's social and behavioral weaknesses. Bâlţătescu et al. (2023) identified similar patterns, mostly among females, and pointed out that familial ties were damaged while peer interactions and feelings of loneliness were heightened.

Subjective Well-Being (SWB)

LBC usually scored lower on subjective measures of well-being, such as happiness, life satisfaction, and self-reported optimism, than their non-migrant family counterparts (Zhao et al., 2017; Graham et al., 2012). While certain studies, like Wen and Lin (2011), revealed no persistent variations in life satisfaction, other results imply that subjective well-being could hide more profound emotional or relational vulnerabilities. Li and Sun (2020) found that LBC claimed to feel less appreciated, understood, and supported even when their general happiness seemed comparable to that of their peers. As youngsters age and develop more consciousness of their extended parental absence, these emotional voids usually widen (Bâlţţâtescu et al., 2023). Support from schools and

communities can help youngsters to be more resilient despite this, especially if they have access to emotionally attentive adults and peers.

Unlike LBC, children who move with their parents to metropolitan areas could feel more subjective well-being when helped by empowering family and school settings. Xu et al. (2018) discovered that migrant children's happiness was positively related to public school enrollment, inclusive classrooms, involved teachers, extracurricular activities, and open parent-child communication. These results fit with more general data indicating that constant parental involvement and emotionally responsive educational environments help children impacted by migration to have more positive self-perceptions of well-being (Graham et al., 2012; Murphy et al., 2015). Community-based support networks have also been connected to more life satisfaction, especially when they promote a feeling of belonging and stability in strange metropolitan environments (Bălțătescu et al., 2023). When considered together, these studies imply that continuous structural and relational support can help protect and enhance children's subjective well-being even amid migration-related upheaval.

Determinant and Mediating Factors

This part differentiates between mediating and determining elements affecting the well-being of LBC caused by parental relocation. While mediating variables describe the processes by which parental absence affects a child's well-being, determinant variables directly shape the child's well-being results. Drawing from cross-study comparisons, the synthesis emphasizes how these elements either buffer or increase the effects of parental migration on children's psychological, social, educational, and physical well-being. Figure 2 offers a conceptual summary of the determining and mediating elements affecting the well-being of LBC in transnational family settings after synthesizing the trends seen throughout the 23 research.
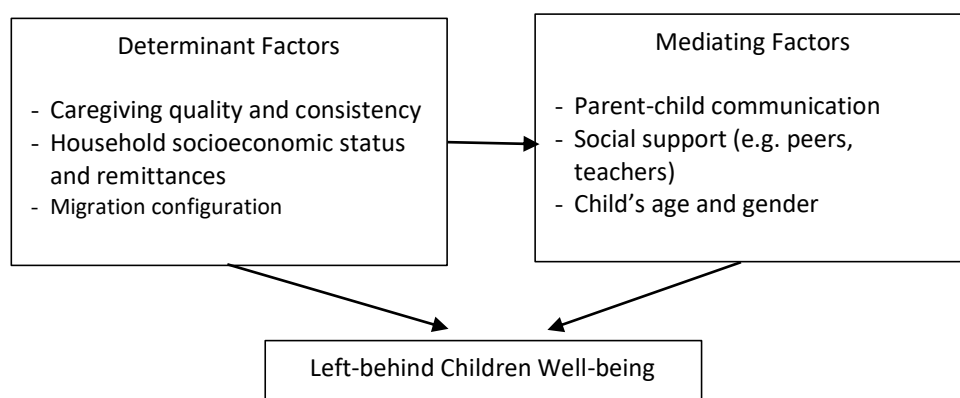

Figure 2. A conceptual overview of the determinant and mediating factors influencing the LBC well-being due to parental migration

Determinant Factors

Many studies identify several key determinants that directly, and sometimes cumulatively, shape the well-being of left-behind children (LBC) in the context of parental migration. The most frequently discussed determinants include the quality and consistency of caregiving arrangements, household socioeconomic status, particularly

remittance income, and parental migration configurations, especially the gender of the migrating parent.

Stable and emotionally responsive caregiving has been consistently associated with better psychological adjustment and stronger cognitive outcomes among children, particularly when care is provided by maternal caregivers who remain at home or by grandparents with adequate emotional and educational resources. Lu et al. (2020) reported that children under the care of better-educated caregivers performed better on cognitive assessments and exhibited fewer emotional problems, highlighting the central role of caregiver competence in shaping developmental trajectories. Similarly, Zhou et al. (2021) found that children receiving consistent and nurturing care in rural Chinese settings demonstrated higher levels of well-being and fewer health risks. Chen et al. (2019) emphasized that when fathers migrated, the presence of maternal caregivers was associated with improved school adjustment, underscoring the protective role of stable maternal care in mitigating the emotional disruptions caused by parental separation.

Conversely, unstable, emotionally neglectful, or insufficiently supervised caregiving environments have been consistently linked to poorer developmental outcomes. Gassmann et al. (2018) demonstrated that in Moldova and Georgia, children cared for by emotionally unavailable or underprepared caregivers experienced higher levels of behavioral problems, lower academic achievement, and reduced psychological well-being, reinforcing the critical importance of caregiving quality.

Household socioeconomic status, particularly access to remittances, represents another important determinant of children's well-being. Xu et al. (2018) showed that remittance income improved nutritional status and school attendance in urban China; however, these benefits were uneven and constrained by limited institutional support. Lu et al. (2023) further highlighted persistent structural inequalities, noting that children from low-income urban households remained vulnerable to undernutrition and inadequate healthcare even in remittance-receiving families.

Finally, the gender of the migrating parent plays a significant role in shaping children's emotional and social outcomes. Several studies have shown that maternal migration has a more pronounced impact on family cohesion and child well-being than paternal migration. Reflecting the central caregiving role of women in many social contexts, Gassmann et al. (2018) and Chen et al. (2019) found that children whose mothers migrated were more likely to experience emotional distress, lower school engagement, and weaker social functioning.

Mediating Factors

Many mechanisms were discovered to moderate the link between parental migration and child well-being, clarifying how the consequences of extended separation are either reduced or amplified. Among these, the quality of parent-child communication stands out as one of the most often mentioned. Whether via in-person visits, phone calls, or digital messaging platforms, studies indicate that regular and emotionally significant contact can improve children's emotional security, strengthen family ties, and lessen feelings of abandonment (Graham et al., 2012; Liu et al., 2023; Zhou et al., 2021). This communication becomes particularly important during emotionally vulnerable times,

like early adolescence, when children grow more emotional awareness and are more susceptible to relational disruptions (Liu et al., 2023; Raturi & Cebotari, 2022). Children frequently report increased psychological pain, relational pressure, and a deepening sense of emotional alienation from their migrant parents when contact is sporadic, confined to logistical check-ins, or emotionally distant. The existence and accessibility of social support systems is another important mediating element. Generally more robust to migration-related disturbances are children reared in loving surroundings where teachers, friends, and community members regularly offer emotional and practical assistance (Wu & Cebotari, 2018; Murphy et al., 2015). For LBC, these support networks sometimes act as sources of validation and secondary attachment figures. While teacher participation can mitigate the academic and behavioral effects of missing parental guidance, peer support provides a space for emotional expression and normalizing experiences (Wu & Cebotari, 2018; Murphy et al., 2015). These advantages seem especially clear for teenage girls, who often struggle with social awareness and emotional sensitivity related to their mothers' absence (Bâlţǎtescu et al., 2023).

Moreover, children's unique traits, particularly age and gender, affect how migratory experiences are processed and internalized. Given their higher cognitive and emotional maturity, older children are frequently more acutely aware of the consequences of extended absence, which may reflect heightened worry, self-doubt, or identity conflict (Raturi & Cebotari, 2022). Gender also has a major impact: girls in several studies reported less subjective well-being, higher emotional responses to changes in their caregivers, and more school disengagement than boys (Yeung & Gu, 2016; Bâlşâtescu et al., 2023). These results highlight the need for support structures and interventions tailored to the home setting and the child's stage of development and gender-specific vulnerabilities.

Framing the Findings within the CRC Framework

The empirical results are found in the United Nations CRC. It is a universally approved legal framework describing the civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights of children, which addresses the third goal of this review. The CRC offers a complete picture of child well-being, including survival and development, care, protection, and participation as interdependent rights. However, the reality of LBC in transnational family settings sometimes differs from these normative expectations, particularly when migration laws lack sufficient child protections. This study draws attention to notable conflicts between international child rights obligations and the structural issues brought on by the parental labor movement.

Right to Parental Care and Contact (Articles 5, 7, 10, 18)

Multiple provisions of the CRC guarantee the child's right to know and be cared for by their parents and to keep direct and regular contact with them. Studies in this review reveal consistently across several settings how parental relocation, especially maternal absence, violates this entitlement. A decline in daily care, emotional nurturing, and relational stability compromises the children's emotional security and stable attachment (Liu et al., 2023; Zhou et al., 2021). Although several families tried to make up with phone or video chats, the quality and frequency of these contacts usually fell short of

maintaining significant relationships. Given the conventional caring role of mothers in many countries, Gassmann et al. (2018) and Chen et al. (2019) underlined that children with migrant moms were especially susceptible to relationship rupture and emotional stress. Driven by migratory systems that favor economic need above family togetherness, these trends point to a systematic disparity between the lived experiences of LBC and the normative right to parental care.

Right to Development and Well-Being (Article 27)

Article 27 acknowledges every child's right to a standard of living sufficient for their physical, mental, spiritual, moral, and social development. Although many people migrate for work to raise family income using remittances, the findings of this study show varied and unequal results. Xu et al. (2018) observed that remittance income enhanced access to improved food, school supplies, or medical treatment in certain urban settings. On the other hand, Lu et al. (2023) discovered that these advantages were not universal. Often, structural inequalities, such as inadequate access to services, insufficient caregiver ability, or lack of institutional coordination, made LBC vulnerable to nutritional shortfalls, underachievement, and ill health. Rural locations make the problem even more difficult since caregiver weariness, insufficient infrastructure, and few child-focused services further pressure child development (Zhou et al., 2021; Gassmann et al., 2018). These results draw attention to the disparity between official rights and actual results and reveal the fragility of economic advantages as a replacement for regular care.

Right to Protection and Participation (Articles 12, 19)

Articles 12 and 19 ensure a child's right to voice opinions on issues concerning them and to be shielded from neglect, abuse, or exploitation. However, the results of this study reveal that LBC is sometimes institutionally undetectable. Local government bodies, social welfare institutions, and schools often lack the tools to find or assist these youngsters. While Wu and Cebotari (2018) underlined the lack of focused social protection initiatives in migrant-sending areas, Murphy et al. (2015) recorded how schools often ignore the psychosocial needs of LBC. Apart from protection, child involvement is also significant. Children are seldom asked about parental departures, caregiving changes, or reintegration procedures, therefore lacking a say in choices that impact their lives (Bâlțtâtescu et al., 2023; Raturi & Cebotari, 2022). The institutions around LBC fall short of the CRC's vision of children as active rights-holders, not only passive beneficiaries of care, by failing to guarantee safety and agency.

Table 4 maps the examined studies against important CRC papers and synthesizes the topics and empirical patterns mentioned before. This review shows how migration-related disturbances correspond with or contradict particular child rights, stressing areas of normative conflict and policy relevance. Table 4 reveals that whereas economic benefits or informal caregiving practices address some child rights, many others stay systemically unfulfilled. The ensuing conversation on structural issues and policy responses is critically based on the disparity between legal requirements and actual experiences.

Table 4. Mapping of empirical findings of selected articles to CRC

CRC Article(s)	Empirical Themes from SLR	Key Supporting Studies
Articles 5, 7, 10, 18 (Parental care and contact)	Disruption in caregiving, weakened attachment, emotional insecurity; limited quality of digital communication with migrant parents.	Liu et al. (2023); Zhou et al. (2021); Chen et al. (2019); Gassmann et al. (2018)
Article 27 (Standard of living and development)	Uneven benefits of remittances; caregiver capacity and structural supports determine whether physical and educational needs are met.	Xu, D et al. (2018); Lu et al. (2023); Zhou et al. (2021); Gassmann et al. (2018)
Articles 12, 19 (Protection and participation)	Institutional neglect in schools and services; limited inclusion of children's voices in caregiving or migration decisions.	Murphy et al. (2015); Wu & Cebotari (2018); Baltătescu et al. (2023); Raturi & Cebotari (2022)

Discussion

The synthesis of 23 empirical investigations shows a complex combination of structural, familial, and individual-level elements shapes the well-being of LBC in transnational family settings. Although often motivated by economic need, parental migration has effects on children that go well beyond tangible benefits like remittances. This study uncovers ongoing conflicts between economic progress and the preservation of continuity in caring, between development objectives and protection of child rights, and between institutional constraints and the ability of families and children to adjust.

The first major result concerns the need for emotional connection and stability in caregiving. Children who stay in the care of emotionally responsive and consistent people, especially moms or grandparents with more education, usually show more favorable psychological development and more active participation in school (Lu et al., 2020; Zhou et al., 2021). This finding is consistent with the results of Botezat and Pfeiffer (2019), who found that while LBC in Romania often outperform their peers academically, they are also at a higher risk of emotional distress and health issues, especially among girls and those living in rural areas. On the other hand, changes in caregiving that sometimes follow mother relocation are usually linked to more emotional sensitivity, worse social ties, and lower academic achievement (Chen et al., 2019; Gassmann et al., 2018). These results fit more general developmental studies stressing the importance of safe relationships during childhood and adolescence (Shen & Zhang, 2018).

The second significant aspect is communication between migrant parents and their children. Regular and emotionally significant communication acts as a protective mechanism, helping youngsters cope with the psychological stress of separation and improving their subjective well-being (Liu et al., 2023). Digital infrastructure, budgetary constraints, and the type of job might limit access to regular communication (Wu & Cebotari, 2018). Mothers generally play key central caring roles in many societies, so the difficulties are usually more noticeable in maternal migration (Raturi & Cebotari, 2022). Consistent with these results, Lu et al. (2020) found that emotionally supportive parent-child contact usually reduces sensations of abandonment and promotes emotional security, especially during early adolescence.

The third problem is the allocation of financial advantages. Although remittances have been demonstrated to enhance children's access to nourishment, education, and medical treatment in certain situations (Xu et al., 2018), these advantages are not universal. Children in low-income or rural areas frequently stay exposed to educational exclusion, health problems, and food poverty. The caring environment and the degree of local institutional support determine mostly the good effects of remittances (Lu et al., 2023; Gassmann et al., 2018). Botezat and Pfeiffer (2019) additionally verified that when the caregiving systems are unstable or under-supported, the well-being of LBC may still be affected even with possible economic gains.

The fourth main topic is how child-specific variables, including gender and age, shape migration-related results. When their mothers move, girls are more likely than boys to report lower subjective well-being levels and suffer emotional stress and disengagement from school (Yeung & Gu, 2016; Bâlţătescu et al., 2023). Older children, too, often show more emotional sensitivity to extended separation and are more likely to internalize family disturbances that influence their self-concept and psychological well-being (Raturi & Cebotari, 2022; Shen & Zhang, 2018). Botezat and Pfeiffer's (2019) research backs up this perspective by pointing out that girls, particularly those in rural areas, are more vulnerable to psychological and physical health problems when distanced from their parents.

Ultimately, when the outcomes are seen in light of the United Nations CRC, the results point to systematic discrepancies between child rights and migration reality. Migration policies that ignore the need for family unity typically impair the right to parental care and continuous contact, as described in Articles 5, 7, 10, and 18. When economic support is not accompanied by stable caregiving and accessible services, the right to an acceptable standard of living and full development, as set out in Article 27, is compromised (Lu et al., 2023; Zhou et al., 2021). Moreover, when children are excluded from caregiving arrangements and stay invisible within education or welfare systems, the rights to protection from neglect and the chance to participate in decisions affecting their lives, enshrined in Articles 12 and 19, are compromised (Murphy et al., 2015; Wu & Cebotari, 2018). The data provided by Botezat and Pfeiffer (2019) supports concerns that, especially in rural areas, the absence of support networks aggravates the mental and physical hazards that LBC experience.

These revelations, taken together, underline the necessity for a basic reorientation of child welfare policy and migration control. Economic factors must be matched with comprehensive approaches that guarantee communities and schools are ready to assist children impacted by migration, improve legal safeguards for family unity, and boost capacity for care. Future studies should prioritize children's viewpoints to guide rights-based and context-sensitive therapies and use longitudinal methods tracking developmental trajectories throughout time.

Despite the valuable insights this article offers on the theorization and development of child well-being, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the discussion is primarily based on secondary sources and conceptual frameworks, which may limit the empirical grounding of specific claims. Second, although efforts were made to incorporate diverse perspectives, this article does not fully capture the wide variation in types of parental migration, such as internal, seasonal, or transnational labor, which

may differently shape children's well-being across contexts. Lastly, this paper does not directly address how its conceptual insights might be translated into practice or policy. Future research may explore these areas by combining field-based studies with the voices and lived experiences of children from diverse socio-economic backgrounds.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Conclusion

This systematic analysis combines cross-regional insights and thematic topics to thoroughly synthesize empirical data on the well-being of LBC impacted by parental migration through a child rights lens. It shows that a complicated interplay of structural, family, and personal elements shapes the well-being of LBC. These multidimensional effects, which range in severity depending on context and individual characteristics, influence psychological, social, educational, and physical well-being.

One notable finding is that increased emotional insecurity and relational stress are linked to the absence of mothers. Adolescent girls, especially, tend to struggle more with school involvement and personal well-being. The results show that parental relocation does not always have detrimental repercussions everywhere. In certain situations, steady care from left-behind family members and regular emotional contact with migrant parents can offset the unfavorable effects of separation, producing relatively stable subjective well-being even if other developmental domains may be affected.

This study emphasizes the importance of parental migratory patterns, socioeconomic status, and quality of care as major factors influencing well-being. How children handle their parents' absence is affected by mediating variables, including the frequency and quality of parent-child communication, social support networks, and personal traits, including age and gender. These elements highlight that changing social and structural circumstances affect rather than determine the effects of parental mobility.

This review reveals notable differences between children's rights and their lived realities from the United Nations CRC viewpoint. When migration policies do not sufficiently guarantee family unity, the rights to parental care, regular contact, growth and well-being, and protection and participation are frequently undermined. Dealing with these disparities calls for a rights-based approach that places children's well-being at the center of migration policy and goes beyond economic measures.

Recommendations

Given these results, migration policies should give holistic approaches that include family assistance, improve caregiving abilities, and promote stable social surroundings as a top priority. This involves educating replacement carers, enabling regular and significant communication between children and migrant parents, and reinforcing the role of schools and communities in LBC support. Future studies should focus on children's voices and changing needs using longitudinal and interactive approaches. Such data is crucial for driving responsive policies guaranteeing children's protection and complete development in transnational family settings.

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