

Well-being of 'left behind' children in Kyrgyzstan focus of study

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Kyrgyz Republic in Central Asia is known for its dry environment, high mountains, nomadic culture and animal-husbandry heritage. Credit: Guangqing Chi

Growing up can be hard no matter what a family's circumstances, but it is often more so for children living in the Kyrgyz Republic in Central Asia, one of the poorest countries in the world, known for its dry environment, high mountains, nomadic culture and animal-husbandry heritage.

Isolation, poverty and food insecurity are among the hardships [children](#) live with, but perhaps most distressing is separation from their parents, many of whom live away from home for months and even years to work in countries like Russia, Kazakhstan and Turkey.

Understanding the economic, health, behavioral and educational effects of labor migration on children is one aspect of a three-year, interdisciplinary research project that is being carried out by researchers in Penn State's Colleges of Agricultural Sciences, Liberal Arts, Earth and Mineral Sciences, Health and Human Development, and Education.

Between 650,000 and 750,000 of Kyrgyzstan's 5 million citizens work outside of the country, making it one of the most remittance-dependent countries in the world, according to lead investigator Guangqing Chi, associate professor of rural sociology and demography and public health sciences in the Department of Agricultural Economics, Sociology, and Education.

"Those most affected by this unfortunate circumstance are the many thousands of children left behind with extended family or in residential institutions, both of which often struggle to meet the youngsters' needs," said Chi, who also serves as director of the Computational and Spatial Analysis Core of the Population Research Institute and Social Science Research Institute.

"A full understanding of the impact will enable us to advise the country's government on social supports and policies that can help improve the

quality of life for these children."

Christian Kelly Scott, a doctoral student pursuing a dual-title graduate program in rural sociology and in international agriculture and development in the College of Agricultural Sciences, noted that the findings will not just be useful for Kyrgyzstan—the second poorest country in Central Asia—but also will help other countries struggling with the effects of labor migration.

For this study, Chi conducted two work trips: the first in July 2016 to the region of At-Bashy Rayon, Naryn Oblast; and the second with Scott in 2017, to Alay Rayon, Osh Oblast, regions that are undergoing socio-environmental and economic change.

Aided by social workers, teachers and government officials, the team canvassed 26 communities—with populations ranging from 200 to more than 10,000—and interviewed families with parents living in the household and working domestically, and families in which the parents migrated for work. Researchers also collected self-completed family surveys.

These efforts resulted in 98 in-depth personal interviews and 1,821 surveys, representing more than 10,000 individuals, of which 2,763 were children. After poring over the data, the team's early assessment shows that the majority of the "left behind" children have more behavioral and educational challenges than those of their peers living with parents.

For example, in preschool and elementary school, these children experienced higher levels of separation anxiety and were more introverted. In older children, the absence of their parents made them more apt to smoke, drink alcohol, skip school and fight. Researchers found that children living in remote villages exhibited more of these behaviors than those living in cities.

"The interviews helped us examine these aspects in great detail, acknowledging the benefits and challenges of labor migration among these rural Kyrgyz communities," Chi said. For instance, he related that one family was able to improve their farm and open a small grocery store with their earnings. For another family, the absence of the head-of-household was too much to bear.

"The wife told us that she had not seen her husband in four years and how hard that was, and how she was worried about her son's education," Scott said. "Her story is one of many that speaks to how financial necessity of migration and parental absence can cause significant emotional and economic stress for both the migrants trying to provide for their families, and for the family members left behind."

Concurrent research focuses on labor [migration](#), left-behind children and food security as they relate to changing climate and high elevations. Studies are funded by the Social Science Research Institute and the Institutes of Energy and the Environment at Penn State, as well as the Land Cover/Land Use Change Program, an interdisciplinary science program in the Earth Science Division of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's Science Mission Directorate.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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