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# Implementation Evaluation of the Care and Protection Program for Rural Left-Behind Children in the Northeast Frontier Region of China

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## Abstract

This study evaluates the implementation process of the rural left-behind children care and protection program in Wangqing County, Jilin Province, from a social work perspective. Through a questionnaire survey of 100 child welfare officers and in-depth interviews with 10 child welfare officers, combined with government reports and other secondary data, the study systematically examined the current status of project implementation and service outcomes. The findings reveal: (1) The project's service recipients exhibit an overflow effect, with the actual coverage exceeding the original target population and extending to vulnerable groups such as children raised by grandparents, children from single-parent families, children from families with disabled or ill parents, and disabled children; (2) The completion rates of service projects show significant differences: basic services such as guardian qualification confirmation and educational assistance have high completion rates, while developmental services such as temporary care, mental health services, and after-school learning support are severely inadequate; (3) child welfare officers have voluntarily expanded service content to include supplementary services such as household assistance, activity organization, and economic aid. The study indicates that the current child care service system in rural areas of the northeastern border regions of China suffers from structural imbalances, necessitating improvements to service supply mechanisms at the policy design level, particularly in areas such as mental health support and temporary care. The research findings provide empirical evidence for optimizing child welfare policies in border regions of China.

**Keywords:** China's child welfare program, Northeast border regions, Rural left-behind children, Program implementation process evaluation, Child welfare officers

## Introduction

### Research Questions and Research Methods

The issue of rural left-behind children is a prominent social problem in China's urbanization process. In the northeastern border regions, due to their unique geographical location and developmental conditions, the problem of left-behind children exhibits more complex characteristics. To address this challenge, the Ministry of Civil Affairs launched a national-level care and protection program for rural left-behind children in 2016[1]. However, existing research has paid insufficient attention to the implementation effectiveness

of child welfare policies in this special region of the northeastern border areas, particularly lacking empirical examination of the key issue of whether child welfare policy services accurately target the intended population. According to the policy evaluation theoretical framework[1], policy implementation fidelity is the core dimension for assessing policy effectiveness[2]. In the northeastern border regions, due to structural factors such as remote locations and scarce resources, the implementation of child welfare policies may face greater challenges in terms of fidelity. Therefore, establishing a systematic process evaluation mechanism has dual significance: on the one hand, it can dynamically monitor the degree of alignment



between policy implementation and program design; on the other hand, it can deeply analyze the logic behind the effectiveness of child welfare policies in rural border regions, including identifying the facilitating factors and obstacles to policy implementation. Based on this, this study argues that evaluating the implementation process of the care and protection plan for left-behind children in the northeastern border regions is of great theoretical and practical value. Through scientific evaluation of the policy implementation process, it is possible not only to fill existing gaps in research, but also to provide empirical evidence for policy optimization, ultimately improving the effectiveness of policy implementation in border regions.

This study adopts a policy process evaluation approach from the perspective of grassroots practitioners, with a particular focus on the experiential knowledge of child welfare officers, who are key actors in policy implementation. This research perspective is based on the following theoretical considerations: as grassroots workers at the end of the policy implementation chain[3], child welfare officers not only possess first-hand practical knowledge of policy implementation, but their daily work feedback can also effectively reveal the "implementation gap" between policy texts and the reality of implementation. This bottom-up evaluation perspective holds unique methodological value for understanding the logic of policy implementation in grassroots governance in frontier regions. With this perspective in mind, this study focuses on two interrelated core questions:

**Research Question 1:** The degree of alignment between the target population and the actual beneficiaries of the Rural Left-Behind Children Care and Protection Program;

**Research Question 2:** The alignment between the service content designed under the Rural Left-Behind Children Care and Protection Program and the actual service provision.

In terms of methodology, this study adopts a mixed research method[4]: for the first research question, qualitative exploration is conducted through literature review supplemented by in-depth interviews (n=10); for the second research question, quantitative analysis is conducted through questionnaire surveys (n=100). All data collection was completed in Wangqing County, Yanbian Korean Chinese Autonomous Prefecture, Jilin Province. The research location was selected for its typical characteristics: Wangqing County has an area of 9,016 square kilometers and a population of 301,000, with 9 counties and 200 townships under its jurisdiction. As an agricultural county on the northeastern frontier, its socio-economic indicators (per capita GDP of 32,000 yuan and urbanization rate of 48.7%) place it in the same development tier as the 583 impoverished counties nationwide[5]. The county possesses the triple characteristics of a border region, an ethnic minority-concentrated area, and a traditional agricultural region. Its policy implementation experience holds significant typological significance for understanding the child welfare supply model in underdeveloped regions of China.

## Research Findings: Current Status of the Rural Left-Behind Children Care and Protection Program in Wangqing County

### Matching Degree Between Target Groups and Actual Service Recipients

To investigate the characteristics of actual service recipients and the recruitment procedures for service recipients, researchers conducted in-depth interviews with 10 child welfare officers in Wangqing County, who collectively manage 36 children. Table 1 lists some basic information about these 10 interviewees:

In these interviews, researchers posed five structured interview questions, asking participants to answer each question in their own words. During their responses, participants provided information unrelated to the actual interview questions but crucial to the overall research topic. This information was also analyzed and incorporated as part of the research findings.

According to government regulations, the target population for the

**Table 1.** Basic Information of Respondents (N=10)

Respondent	Gender	Age	Years of Service (months)	Number of cases (Number of children)
C1	Female	50	2	2
C2	Women	55	13	3
C3	Female	54	13	7
C4	Female	37	26	2
C5	Female	40	11	7
C6	Female	51	21	1
C7	Female	51	21	8
C8	Female	41	19	2
C9	Female	49	12	2
C10	Female	46	11	2
<b>Total</b>				<b>36</b>

Rural Left-Behind Children Care and Protection Program must meet all three of the following criteria: (1) The child is under 16 years of age; (2) The child resides in a rural area; (3) Both of the child's parents are working outside the rural area, or one parent is working outside the rural area and the other is unable to fulfill their guardianship obligations[6]. However, based on the respondents' answers, it can be concluded that the actual scope of the target population is broader and includes the following categories of children:

### Service recipients 1: Rural left-behind children

Left-behind children can be service recipients because their parents do not live here and work in cities, so they are all cared for by their grandparents. (C8)

There is a left-behind child in our village whose parents are both alive, but the father sometimes goes to work in a big city... The mother has a physical disability and has difficulty walking, so when the father is not at home, the mother cannot properly care for the child alone, and sometimes the child also has to take care of the mother. (C5)

In the C8 case, the child's parents work in a large city and cannot personally raise the child. Therefore, according to policy regulations, these children are classified as rural left-behind children. In the C5 case, one of the child's parents works in a large city, and the other parent is unable to raise the child, so the child is also classified as a rural left-behind child. These children meet the specific criteria for the target population and automatically become service recipients under this program.

### Service Recipients 2: Rural Children Under Grandparent Custody

Not all parents leave their homes to work as migrant workers in large cities; some parents simply go missing... In our village, there is a boy whose mother left home when he was an infant. After his mother left, his father also left and never returned. Now he is being cared for by his grandparents. (C1)

There is a 4-year-old girl in our village whose father is in prison. After her father was sentenced, her mother left home, and no one knows where she went... Since then, the girl has been raised by her grandparents, so I recruited her as a service recipient. (C7)

In the village, some children live with their grandparents due to their parents' disappearance or deprivation of custody. According to the program guidelines, these children cannot be recruited as service recipients. However, in practice, regardless of the reason why the parents left (disappearance or deprivation of custody), once it is discovered that these children are being raised by their grandparents, the child welfare officer can recruit them as service recipients because their circumstances are similar to those of rural left-behind children, who are also children without parental care.

### Service Recipients 3: Rural Children from Single-Parent Families

In our village, children whose parents are divorced can become service recipients... Once parents divorce, the children live with

their fathers. However, in rural areas, single fathers often do not take good care of their children, so the children end up living with their grandparents. In such cases, we consider these children to be left-behind children as well, and therefore we recruit them as service recipients. (C2) There is only one left-behind child in our village. Her parents divorced many years ago, and she now lives with her mother. However, her mother is very lazy... and unwilling to work to earn money, so this girl is very unfortunate. In this situation, this girl can be a service recipient for our program. (C6) As revealed by the child welfare officer, divorce is a common phenomenon in rural areas. After a divorce, most children live with their fathers. However, fathers often go out to work to earn money and are unable to care for their children. Additionally, children living with single parents are more prone to poverty. Therefore, child welfare officers can recruit children from single-parent families and provide them with adequate economic support and care services.

#### Service Target 4: Rural children whose parents are ill or disabled

If both of a child's parents are disabled and unable to earn an income, I will also recruit such children as service recipients. (C5)

Some children have parents who are in poor health and cannot engage in heavy physical labor, while others have parents who cannot even farm to make a living. These parents and their children live in poverty... When recruiting service recipients, I will also recruit children whose parents cannot earn money through physical labor (C3).

In rural areas, healthy residents with the ability to work often choose to migrate to urban areas due to the significant income disparity between urban and rural areas. However, for rural residents suffering from illnesses or disabilities they are unable to work in cities or engage in farming locally, and can only rely on government assistance to sustain their livelihoods. Patients with severe illnesses may apply to the government for major illness assistance, but the annual medical assistance amount per patient does not exceed 20,000 yuan[7]. This indicates a significant gap between the current medical assistance allocation and actual medical expenditure needs. People with disabilities can apply for a living subsidy for disabled individuals in difficult circumstances. Once registered as beneficiaries of the disability subsidy, each person receives a monthly subsidy of 300 yuan[7]. Although people with disabilities and seriously ill patients can receive economic subsidies from the government, these meager subsidies are insufficient to support their normal lives and directly lead to their children also suffering from poverty. In response to this situation, even if these children live with both parents, the children's welfare officers will still recruit them as service recipients.

#### Service Recipients 5: Children with Disabilities

There are three children with physical disabilities in our village, and they are all service recipients of the project. Although they receive subsidies, the disability allowance is only enough to cover basic survival needs, so I enrolled them as service recipients to provide them with additional benefits. (C5)

There is one intellectually disabled child in our village, and I have enrolled her as a service recipient... I saw that child welfare officers in other villages were enrolling disabled children as service recipients, so I followed suit. (C10)

To date, the welfare policies implemented by the local government in the areas where this study was conducted for children with disabilities include only (1) free rehabilitation treatment for children with disabilities aged 0-6, and (2) free compulsory education or special education for school-age children with disabilities. Therefore, children with disabilities over the age of 6 do not receive any welfare benefits and can only obtain poverty subsidies through social assistance, while the provincial government voluntarily appeals for donations and transfers the funds to the families of children with disabilities. Although the government's initiatives provide timely support for disabled children, these measures raise concerns about

**Table 2. Actual Service Recipients and Numbers of the Care and Protection Program**

Service Recipient Category	Number	Percentage (%)
Rural left-behind children	1	41.
Rural children under intergenerational care	2	5.6
Single-parent families in rural areas	6	16.7
Rural children with parents suffering from illness or disabilities	9	25
Children with disabilities	4	1
Total	36	10

long-term sustainability. Families of disabled children often face issues such as unstable subsidy disbursements and inconsistent policy implementation, making it difficult for them to form stable expectations for the future. This uncertainty may lead assisted families into a double dilemma of "subsidy dependency" and "policy anxiety." Therefore, child welfare officers recruit disabled children as service recipients to alleviate the economic burden on their families. In summary, in practice, the scope of beneficiaries under the Rural Left-Behind Children Care and Protection Program is broader than the program's target population. In addition to the original target group of rural left-behind children, the program also recruits rural children under intergenerational guardianship, rural children from single-parent families, rural children whose parents are ill or disabled, and rural children with disabilities as beneficiaries. Table 2 below lists the categories and specific numbers of actual service recipients under the care and protection program as reported by the 10 child welfare officers interviewed.

Among the 36 service recipients, rural left-behind children (the project's target population) accounted for the largest proportion, at 41.7% (N=15). However, among children receiving services from child welfare officers, other types of vulnerable children accounted for slightly over half (58.3%), including rural children with parents suffering from illness or disabilities (25%, N=9), rural children from single-parent families (16.7%, N=6), children with disabilities (11%, N=4), and rural children under the care of grandparents (5.6%, N=2).

#### Matching the design of service content with actual service provision

Exploring the consistency between planned services and actual services provided is the focus of the second research question in this study. To collect relevant data, researchers developed a survey questionnaire and administered it to 100 child welfare officers. The responses of the 100 survey participants are presented in Table 3 below.

The primary objective of the Rural Left-Behind Children Care and Protection Project is to ensure the safety of rural left-behind children by strengthening guardianship. Survey results indicate that 100% (N=100) of child welfare officers in the study area have communicated with the parents of rural left-behind children, urging them to fulfil their guardianship responsibilities directly or indirectly. For rural left-behind children whose parents are unable to fulfil their guardianship responsibilities, 98% (N= 98) of child welfare officers have helped them find substitute guardians, who are typically grandparents or aunts. If no substitute guardian can be found to care for the rural left-behind children, they are directly sent to social welfare institutions.

When children require temporary care services, only 32% (N=32) of child welfare officers reported that they would provide such services. Since there are no government-provided temporary shelters for children in the village, child welfare officers invite children in need of temporary care to stay temporarily in their own homes until their guardians come to pick them up. The resources required for temporary care services, such as food, daily necessities, and bedding, are all prepared and provided by the child welfare officers themselves. Therefore, the quality of temporary care services depends largely

Table 3. Work Plan Completion Rate (N=100)

	Planned Services	Implemented in Practice (Frequency, Percentage)	
		Yes	No
<b>Safety</b>	(1) Confirm that at least one parent is fulfilling their guardianship responsibilities	100 (100%)	0
	(2) Confirm the appointed guardian when both parents are unable to fulfill their guardianship responsibilities	98 (98%)	2 (2%)
	(3) Providing temporary care for rural left-behind children without guardians	32 (32%)	68 (68%)
	(4) Providing daycare services during school holidays	17 (17%)	83 (83%)
	(5) Enhancing guardians' awareness of child protection	80 (80%)	20 (20%)
<b>Physical health</b>	(6) Medical allowance for accidental injuries	95 (95%)	5 (5%)
	(7) Serious Illness Medical Allowance	95 (95%)	5 (5%)
<b>Psychological Health</b>	(8) Psychological Counseling	5 (5%)	95 (95%)
	(9) Supplementary activities to enhance children's cognitive abilities	5 (5%)	95 (95%)
<b>Education</b>	(10) Providing educational subsidies for underprivileged students	71 (71%)	29 (29%)
	(11) Waive tuition and miscellaneous fees	100 (100%)	0
	(12) No textbook fees	100 (100%)	0
	(13) School lunch subsidy	100 (100%)	0
	(14) After-school learning programs	0 (0%)	100 (100%)
<b>Additional Services</b>	(1) Household Assistant		14 (14%)
	(2) Organizing holiday events		14 (14%)
	(3) Organizing outdoor activities		11 (11%)
	(4) Providing financial assistance to child guardians		5 (5%)
	(5) Introducing sponsors for low-income families		3 (3%)
	(6) Apply for household registration books		1 (1%)

on the comprehensive capabilities of the child welfare officers, including their professional competence, service awareness, and their own living conditions.

During school holidays, only 17% (N=17) of child welfare officers were able to provide daycare services for children, while 83% (N=83) were unable to offer this service. It is worth noting that, similar to temporary care services, the provision of daycare services relies entirely on child welfare officers' self-sourced resources. This lack of systematic support results in significant variations in service quality. Since service provision is entirely dependent on individual input, the economic conditions and resource acquisition capabilities of child welfare officers directly determine the quality and sustainability of daycare services. This situation highlights the necessity of establishing an institutionalized support system.

Child welfare officers have played a positive role in enhancing guardians' awareness of child protection. Survey data show that 80% (N=80) of child welfare officers have visited households to educate guardians on child protection. Thanks to the relatively close spatial relationships in rural communities, child welfare officers can conduct face-to-face guidance within families. This localized service model has effectively improved guardians' ability to provide safe care for children. This "door-to-door service" approach not only demonstrates the proactivity of the service but also fully leverages the advantages of the familiar social networks in rural communities. According to official data from the study area, in response to the dual-track medical insurance system, the region established two types of medical insurance for children: major illness insurance (with a maximum payout of 200,000 RMB) and accidental injury insurance (with a maximum payout of 100,000 RMB). This medical insurance system adopts a cost-oriented reimbursement mechanism, meaning reimbursement is based on actual treatment costs rather than specific diseases. When a family's medical expenses reach the reimbursement threshold, they are eligible for corresponding compensation. As shown in Table 3, in terms of the implementation of children's medical insurance, 95% (N=95) of child welfare officers actively assisted children in enrolling in the insurance program.

The insurance is fully subsidized by the government, with an annual premium of 50 yuan per child covered by local government budgets, ensuring free enrollment for all children and effectively reducing the risk of poverty caused by major illnesses. However, 5% (N=5) of child welfare officers have not carried out this work, a phenomenon that warrants attention.

In terms of mental health service provision, survey data showed that only 5% (N=5) of child welfare officers were able to provide psychological counseling or support activities for children in difficult circumstances, while 95% (N=95) of workers were unable to provide such services. This lack of services faces similar institutional challenges as temporary care and daycare services—the provision of mental health services relies entirely on the individual initiative and resource investment of workers. Due to a lack of professional training, funding, and institutional support, the vast majority of workers objectively lack the ability and conditions to provide professional mental health services, resulting in a significant shortage of mental health services for children at the grassroots level. This situation highlights the urgent need to establish a professional and institutionalized mental health service system for children.

One of the core objectives of the plan is to ensure that rural left-behind children receive a complete nine-year compulsory education. To achieve this goal, the research region has responded to national policies by constructing a multi-dimensional education support system, which includes the following measures: first, implementing a tiered education subsidy system (800 yuan per year for primary school students and 1,000 yuan per year for junior high school students); second, waiving tuition and miscellaneous fees for public schools at the compulsory education stage; third, waiving textbook fees; and fourth, providing lunch subsidies for students attending school. Survey data show that 71% of child welfare officers (N=71) have assisted in applying for educational subsidies, and 100% of child welfare officers (N=100) have successfully helped children obtain the "three exemptions and one subsidy" policy support (exemption from tuition and miscellaneous fees, exemption from textbook fees, and lunch subsidies). These economic support measures

have effectively reduced the financial burden of education expenses for families, thereby mitigating the risk of children dropping out of school due to poverty from an economic perspective. However, the survey found that the program has significant shortcomings in terms of academic support. All interviewed child welfare officers (N=100) reported that they had never organized after-school tutoring activities. This phenomenon reflects the structural challenges of inadequate quality educational resources in rural areas—not only do child welfare officers generally lack tutoring capabilities, but the entire community also struggles to provide necessary academic support for left-behind children. This service model, which prioritizes economic security over capacity building, has addressed the issue of access to education but has yet to address the deeper challenge of achieving equitable educational quality between urban and rural areas.

The survey found that in addition to fulfilling the services mandated by their plans, child welfare officers voluntarily expanded their services into six additional categories, all of which were organized and implemented using their own personal resources. The specific service types and coverage rates are as follows:

- Family support services (14%, N=14): Child welfare officers provide household assistance to rural children whose parents are ill or disabled, alleviating their caregiving pressures.
- Festival Care Activities (14%, N=14): Organizing family gatherings during major festivals such as the Spring Festival and Children's Day to enhance children's sense of social participation through interactive games.
- Quality Development Activities (11%, N=11): Addressing the issue of monotonous after-school lives among left-behind children, outdoor activities such as spring outings and sports meets are organized to promote children's physical and mental health.
- Policy Coordination Services (5%, N=5): Assist eligible families in applying for low-income assistance (assistance standard: 4,833 yuan per person per year) and help disabled families apply for living subsidies for disabled individuals in difficulty (300 yuan per person per month). These policies are implemented on a lifelong basis[8].
- Social Resource Linkage (3%, N=3): Child welfare officers successfully connected children in extreme poverty with long-term sponsors through their personal networks, establishing sustainable support mechanisms.
- Protection of Identity and Rights (1%, N=1): Assisted in resolving household registration issues for "unregistered" children, enabling them to attend school and access government-provided benefits.

Although these spontaneous services have limited coverage, they demonstrate the proactive spirit of child welfare officers as frontline workers who act on the ground and take initiative. Through these innovative practices, child welfare officers have to some extent, filled the gaps in institutional services. However, in-depth analysis reveals that these extended services face three major challenges: first, resource supply is unsustainable, relying entirely on the personal efforts of child welfare officers; second, professional support is inadequate, with a lack of systematic training and guidance; third, service standards are absent, leading to inconsistent quality, with the overall competence of child welfare officers determining the quality of services provided. While this "bottom-up" service model offers flexibility and adaptability, its fragmented nature also limits the maximization of service benefits.

## Policy Recommendations

Since the implementation of the Rural Left-Behind Children Care and Protection Program, through systematic institutional design and the construction of grassroots service networks, government child welfare services have effectively covered remote rural areas such as the northeastern border regions. The program has achieved

dual services: on the one hand, it has established a standardized basic service supply mechanism to ensure that left-behind children can stably obtain all necessary government welfare services; on the other hand, it has built a "last mile" instant response network relying on grassroots workers such as child welfare officers, enabling children to receive timely, convenient, and localized assistance when facing urgent needs. This dual-track model of "institutionalized guarantee + humanized services" has significantly improved the accessibility and effectiveness of child welfare services in rural areas of the northeastern border regions. Although the project has achieved some successes in many areas, there are still many aspects that require adjustment and improvement. To better implement the project and develop China's child welfare system, this study proposes the following recommendations based on the research findings.

### Recommendations for Expanding the Coverage of Child Welfare Policies in Border Rural Areas

China's current child welfare policy system urgently needs improvement, as its coverage and service content are insufficient to fully meet the diverse needs of rural children living in poverty. Based on the findings of Research Question 1, the project has spontaneously expanded its service recipients to include multiple vulnerable groups of children, such as children under the care of grandparents, children from single-parent families, children whose parents have serious illnesses or disabilities, and children with disabilities. This phenomenon reflects the obvious gaps in China's current child welfare system. Specifically, the welfare policies of local governments in the study areas currently only benefit three categories of impoverished children:

- orphans,
- some disabled children, and
- children from registered impoverished households.

Other vulnerable children, such as those from low-income families, are largely excluded from the specialized welfare system, except for access to universal compulsory education policies. This limited welfare provision model means that a large number of rural children in difficult circumstances are unable to obtain the government support they need, and their rights to survival and development are not adequately guaranteed. This situation highlights the urgent need for China's child welfare system to transition from a "supplementary" model to a "moderately universal" model, and to expand the scope of protection through policy innovation in order to build a more equitable and sustainable child welfare system. To establish a universal child welfare system, the primary task is to develop a scientific and systematic classification standard and identification mechanism for impoverished children. As early as 2015, China's Ministry of Civil Affairs established a three-dimensional classification framework for impoverished children:

- Children in self-induced hardship, including children with disabilities and those suffering from severe illnesses;
- Children in guardianship hardship: referring to children whose parents lack or have insufficient guardianship capacity;
- Children in family distress: children from low-income or special difficulty families[9].

However, in rural areas along the northeastern border, this classification system has shown significant lag in actual policy implementation: on the one hand, the collection of basic data on various categories of children in distress has progressed slowly; on the other hand, the differentiated welfare service system has yet to be fully established. Therefore, rural border regions urgently need to establish a dynamic database encompassing categories such as disability, severe illness, and lack of guardianship; secondly, professional teams should be organized to conduct multi-dimensional

needs assessments, with a focus on core areas such as medical care, education, and psychological support; finally, based on data analysis and needs assessment, differentiated welfare policy packages should be formulated to establish a multi-tiered support system comprising "basic guarantee + targeted assistance + development services," thereby effectively addressing the actual difficulties faced by impoverished children in rural areas.

#### **Service Model Transformation: Suggestions for Building a Multi-dimensional Development Support System for Rural Children in Border Areas**

Currently, assistance for impoverished children in border rural areas primarily remains at the level of economic aid. While this single support model can ensure basic survival, it fails to meet the multidimensional needs of children for safety and development. As China's first social policy initiative aimed at the comprehensive development of children, the Rural Left-Behind Children Care and Protection Project has exhibited significant structural imbalances during implementation: while service projects explicitly supported by policies have achieved high completion rates, services such as temporary foster care and mental health support, which lack policy backing, have progressed slowly. To overcome this dilemma, it is recommended to strengthen service provision in the following areas:

- Through government procurement of services, recruit and train local villagers to serve as full-time caregivers and establish "children's homes" in their families to provide temporary foster care and day care services. This model has three advantages: first, it provides services close to home, which is in line with the characteristics of rural communities; second, it creates local employment opportunities; and third, it alleviates the work pressure on child welfare officers. The government can set up a special operating fund to cover costs such as venue renovation and service subsidies.
- In response to the prominent mental health needs of rural children, it is recommended to establish a "child welfare officer + professional institution" service system. Through the establishment of a system of regular visits by psychologists to rural areas, the launch of mental health training courses for child welfare officers, and the establishment of a remote psychological counseling platform, an online and offline professional support network can be formed to systematically improve the mental health service capabilities of grassroots workers.
- Based on the actual situation of rural education, it is recommended to establish a "teacher professional tutoring + child welfare officer quality enhancement" dual-track academic support model: school teachers should leverage their professional expertise and daily contact advantages to lead routine academic tutoring, while child welfare officers focus on organizing weekend and holiday quality enhancement activities. A "primary school-junior high school" service transition mechanism should be established to ensure the continuity of educational support. This reform breaks through the professional limitations of child welfare officers while achieving efficient integration of educational resources. The government should establish teacher service subsidies and performance incentive mechanisms to ensure the sustainability of services.
- Increase fiscal special allocations to ensure service funding, establish service standards and operational guidelines, and establish cross-departmental coordination mechanisms. Through systematic institutional design, truly achieve a service transformation from "economic assistance" to "comprehensive development," ensuring that policy objectives are effectively implemented.

#### **Expanding Coverage: Recommendations for Incorporating Children without Household Registration into the Welfare Security System**

In terms of service recipient selection, it is recommended that the government appropriately relax eligibility requirements to include children without household registration in the coverage scope of child welfare programs. Research has found that current policies require applicants to provide identity proof documents, resulting in some children in urgent need of assistance being excluded from the welfare system due to their "unregistered" status. Taking the study area as an example, according to estimates by child welfare officers, there are an average of 1-2 children without household registration in each administrative village. If such children are included in the service scope, the scale of the beneficiary group will significantly expand. In accordance with the principle of "the best interests of the child" established by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the government has an obligation to provide equal protection to all children within its jurisdiction. Therefore, it is recommended that the government optimize the requirements for application materials, establish a more inclusive eligibility determination mechanism, and ensure that welfare policies truly cover all children in need of assistance. This is not only a responsibility under international conventions but also an important measure to achieve equal protection of children's rights.

#### **Recommendations for Improving the Support System for Child Welfare Officers**

In the study area, child welfare officers are concurrently appointed as women's affairs officers at the village level, requiring them to allocate significant time and effort to child protection work while fulfilling their primary duties. The government should provide reasonable compensation for their work through special subsidies from local finances. This would not only demonstrate recognition of grassroots child welfare workers but also effectively enhance their work enthusiasm. Secondly, a training system should be improved. It is recommended to adopt a combination of online and offline methods: organize at least one expert-led training session per month; simultaneously collaborate with professional institutions to develop a mobile learning platform offering systematic courses. A credit-based assessment system should be established, with a withdrawal mechanism for child welfare officers who fail to complete the required training hours, ensuring the professionalism of the workforce. Third, to address the issue of inadequate workplaces for child welfare officers, it is recommended to plan and establish child welfare centers at the regional level, with each center covering 5-6 administrative villages. When selecting locations, factors such as the density of villages and the number of children should be comprehensively considered. Each center should integrate three functions: office space for child welfare officers, activity spaces for children, and family counseling services. Through centralized construction, resource sharing can be achieved, facilitating the exchange of experiences among workers while reducing government management costs.

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