



Selection of intervention modes for vulnerability risks of urban children in plight

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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
urban children in plight; intervention modes for vulnerability risks	The dual vulnerability of urban children in plight and their families is dramatically amplified during major crises, plunging them into both material and social survival risks. Starting with a conceptual understanding of children in plight and their vulnerability, combined with Simmel's theory of freedom, this study summarizes the social characteristics of survival risks for children in plight and further analyzes the current risks facing urban children in plight. By integrating developmental support, social organizations' supervision, and multi-stakeholder participation into risk interventions for children in plight, this study aims to transform crises into opportunities, driven by the goal of risk governance.
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Introduction

Compared to other children, children in plight lack the growth foundation and the close family relationships. This is because the parents of urban children in plight face greater external risks of unemployment, intensified internal conflicts and other troubles, leading to an atmosphere of anxiety and depression in their family. When family members simultaneously suffer from illness, economic collapse and others, children's physical and mental health, skills and development, and even their values may be further challenged. This can significantly amplify the vulnerability of children and their families in a short period, even leading to a vicious cycle that exposes them to even more severe survival risks. Without knowledge of their environment it is impossible to understand that many of their seemingly irrational choices and hardships are consequences of a reality over which they have no control (Li et al., 2012). Therefore, it is crucial to prevent and mitigate the continued accumulation of survival risks for urban children in plight and to implement timely and effective early intervention and prevention measures.



1. Interpreting the concept of vulnerability among urban children in plight

In the “Opinions on Strengthening the Protection of Children in plight” issued by the State Council of China, children in plight are classified into three major categories: children with difficulties in living, seeking medical care, and attending school due to family poverty; children with difficulties in rehabilitation, care, nursing, and social integration due to their own disabilities; and children whose safety is threatened and violated due to abuse, abandonment, accidental injury, or unlawful infringement due to lack of family guardianship or improper guardianship (the State Council of the People’s Republic of China, 2016).

Existing studies have mainly completed the identification of children in plight by describing the “unfavorable” situation of children, but have not analyzed the deep-seated causes of their plight, resulting in the current definition of the “plight” of children in plight still being limited to superficial symptoms such as “family financial difficulties, personal disabilities, and unfavorable guardianship.”

In fact, “plight” implies the loss of “freedom” that is necessary for survival. Starting with Kantian philosophy’s theory of free will, Simmel posits that “freedom” is “will unimpeded by external forces.” He argues that “will” itself is not a subject pursuing freedom, but rather a process of intending. He interpreting “free will” as “the ability of the self to intend without external interference”(Zheng, 2015). Both “freedom” and “free will” must be realized within a network of social relations. Survival, development, and participation are concrete manifestations of individual “freedom”, all of which are grounded in certain social relationships. As social individuals, urban children in plight have an essential desire for “freedom” and “social relationships”. However, due to the reality of their material survival difficulties and the lack of social relationships, their “freedom” is restricted, leading to an even more severe social survival dilemma.

Vulnerability refers to the “lack or deficiency of coping awareness and ability that a person exhibit when encounter sudden crisis events due to lack of coping resources and external support”(Peng & Zhong, 2003). In sudden major public crises, the dual vulnerability of urban children in plight, who have limited “freedom” and lack of “social relationships”, and their families will be sharply amplified, pushing the children into an even more severe crisis.

In general, plight and vulnerability are mutually causal. Due to the difficult circumstances which urban children in plight faced, the possibility of social action for them is weakened, which in turn makes their vulnerability issues such as insufficient resources and lack of coping capabilities more prominent when facing major crisis events, thereby aggravating the crisis and putting them further at risk.

2. Analysis of the social characteristics of survival risks for urban children in plight

Simmel's theory of freedom analyzes "philosophical freedom" and "experiential freedom" as two sides of "freedom" by elaborating on two concepts: "freedom" — "the possibility of social action" and "free will" — "the ability of the self to intend without external interference". "Philosophical freedom" is the basis of empirical freedom, involving the improvement and transcendence of the self-mind behind the action, and "experiential freedom" is the realization of "philosophical freedom", which is related to how to practice and complete the self-will (Zheng, 2015).

Combining Simmel's theory of freedom, we can find that the survival risks of children in plight can be attributed to some extent to "freedom loss risks", that is, the risk of weakening the possibility of social action. Children's pursuit of survival, be protection, development and participation is the pursuit of freedom. Survival first contains the meaning of material freedom, while be protection, development and participation mean more freedom of social interaction and social relations. When these "freedoms" cannot be actively realized and developed, the individual will fall into survival risks.

2.1 Multiple restrictions

Multiple restrictions refer to the fact that plight children's "freedom" is influenced by external forces such as their environment and interpersonal relationships, which in various ways restrict their ability to act independently. Beyond the "possibility of social action", "freedom" also implies "individuals are not subject to external influences". It is not only a special causal relationship, but also a self-initiated action process that starts with "inner desires" and ends with "acting on the external world".

Urban children in plight are part of the whole social, living in numerous social relationships, including family, community, peer, and teacher-student relationships. As they grow, children emulate the behavior of adults. In maintaining these relationships, they gradually attempt to actively restrain their overly free-spirited thinking and action. In other words, ordinary children are gradually unable to achieve a state of "intend without external interference". However, because the plight children's "freedom" is already limited, coupled with the constraints of these social relationships, they are even less able to achieve the state of "intend without external interference". This limits their actions and constrains their pursuit of "freedom".

Specifically, children in plight already have fewer resources than ordinary children, and they are left with only basic life instincts. The external world they're living is a collective world comprised of numerous selves—the world of "society". Any independence and self-reflection they possess are acquired through instruction or learning from others. The realization of freedom obviously requires a "society" beyond the self, encompassing other people, other things, and a diverse environment. Therefore, the pursuit of freedom by children in plight is also influenced by external factors, such as other selves within society and the networks of relationships they inhabit. When these influences significantly exceed their capacity to withstand, their survival and development face multiple constraints, which in turn represent the existential risks they

face.

2.2 Intergenerational transmission

Intergenerational transmission means that the difficult state of children in plight may be caused by family difficulties and will continue if their own situation cannot be resolved. The formation of society stems from some continuous interaction and rules. There must be a network of interpersonal relationships between individuals that influence and interact with each other before there can be a society. Moreover, people call it as “society” because these interactions are not random interactions, but dynamic relationships that occur repeatedly based on some identical rules, so that people can regard it as a unitary whole (Zheng, 2015).

Children in plight are affected by their innate living conditions, which results in their freedom not being a naturally given good state, but being transmitted to their living conditions and acquired actions by the social units and relationship networks they belong to. Individual freedom comes from the freedom of the group network they belong to. The larger and more powerful the group network, the greater the individual freedom will be. Conversely, the smaller the group network, the higher the risk will be.

In short, children in plight may have a negative “connecting the past and the future”. Urban children in plight come from a broader population of urban children. We suggest that this is partly due to their family circumstances and partly due to their own unresolved health issues.

Therefore, the survival risks faced by children in plight, both materially and socially, stem from the various relationship constraints they face in their pursuit of “freedom”. These constraints stem from inherited family difficulties, the added plight posed by their own health and others. When children are unable to escape these multidimensional relationship constraints, their plight not only continues with them but is instead passed down through generations due to family, social conditions, and their own personal problems, creating a vicious cycle of risk.

2.3 Cross-iteration

Cross-iteration is also a negative trait, referring to the survival risks faced by children in plight, which not only stem from the material but also from the social crises (including those caused by material hardship). The two constantly overlap, generating a chain reaction and deepening the degree of risk.

The various circumstances that children in plight are in jointly affect their vulnerability, thereby determining the severity of their survival risks. Individuals do not exist in isolation in social life. They are both restricted by social relationship networks and subject to the characteristic transmission of the group networks. In this process, the survival risks of children in plight partly stem from the lack of a good educational environment within the family and partly from the children’s own difficulty in self-discipline. There are also risks of supervision deficiency and other risks caused by

insufficient support from social organizations, and these problems often do not exist alone.

On the basis of material survival risks, such as economic poverty and imbalance between supply and demand, social survival risks such as falling behind in learning and psychological anxiety are more likely to occur. And social survival risks, in turn, will affect the material foundation to fall into an even worse state. The two interact and stimulate each other in a cycle, resulting in fragile iteration. Therefore, when we consider resolving the survival risks of children in plight, we should not simply consider them in isolation but should analysis potential measures based on the social realistic manifestations of the risks.

3. The realistic manifestations of survival risks for urban children in plight

Due to the continuous troubles of urban children in plight and their families caused by unemployment risks, economic poverty, family anxiety, academic difficulties and other problems, the dual vulnerability has been intensifying during this period. For their families, the basic condition for survival — the economy cannot be guaranteed. Coupled with their relatively low social status, they cannot meet the need for “freedom”, which makes it impossible for them to take timely and effective actions immediately when facing sudden problems. For children in plight, due to the limitations of their family environment and social relationships, their basic survival needs are also hard to meet because of the fragility of their families. As a result, various learning requirements also encounter problems, leading to greater anxiety and psychological crises as well as difficulties in social integration. Numerous problems have exacerbated the vulnerability of children in plight and their families, curbed the “pursuit of freedom”, and thus trapped them in multi-dimensional risks. Overall, they can be classified into two major categories: one is material survival risks, and the other is social survival risks.

3.1 Material survival risks

The material survival risks faced by urban children in plight mainly stem from the scarcity of external material resources. The unemployment crisis among parents has disrupted what might have been a relatively stable family economic situation. Shortage of income and scarcity of daily necessities have plunged families of children in difficult circumstances into extreme hardship, directly affecting their survival. When facing major public crisis events, the emergence of diverse emergency education forms such as "online teaching" and "cloud courses" has turned the home into a classroom, and the Internet has become the main learning channel. However, due to the inherent poverty of the family, the high requirements for network stability and network expenses, the support of family information technology equipment conditions, the good learning atmosphere and learning space within the family, etc. cannot be well met. The connection of academic tutoring is lacking, which dampened students' enthusiasm for their studies and led to a poor learning state. The stable situation where academic achievements were made through hard work in the classroom in the past has been

disrupted. The learning process has been passively embedded with family gaps, which have turned into a kind of gap predicament for children in difficult circumstances. The emergence of "disparity" has led to an academic crisis for children. The dual vulnerabilities of families in difficult circumstances and children in difficult situations, as well as the family crises and academic crises are intertwined.

3.2 Social survival risk

Social survival risks and material survival risks have a mutually restrictive effect and more often show a cyclical and intersecting nature. Social survival risks are more often manifested as unmet "social relationship needs", such as insufficient family care, lack of family guardianship, communication needs, psychological crises and difficulties in integration, which further aggravates the vulnerability of children in difficult circumstances and restricts their physical and mental health development.

3.2.1 Lack of close family relationships

Family relationships are the fundamental ones that children come into contact with. Close family relationships are the key factors to ensure children's future survival, development and participation. The problems faced by children in difficult circumstances occur more frequently within families, between parents and children. In the context where parents are facing unemployment crises and students are confronted with academic crises, on one hand, anxiety and distress stemming from life pressure, economic pressure and social survival pressure, and on the other hand, anxiety caused by academic gaps, lack of care, poor communication and setbacks in belief, continuously spread to every corner of the family. Family conflicts are gradually intensified by anxiety. It leads to tense family relations.

In fact, peers in the family, the power of role models, and friendly communication between parents and children are of vital importance. However, compared with ordinary families, families of children in difficult circumstances already lack certain growth conditions. In a family atmosphere filled with anxiety, they are more likely to feel lonely and helpless. Due to their own anxiety, parents are unable to maintain a good family relationship. It also neglects the crucial companionship and communication for children. The exemplary power in family education cannot be exerted. Coupled with the fact that children are occupied by anxiety and develop a sense of weariness and rejection towards the things around them, the formation of close family relationships is even more out of the question. Children in difficult circumstances are thus also forced into endless distress, lacking action protection and increasing their survival risks.

3.2.2 Incidents of guardianship infringement occur frequently

The General Provisions of the Civil Law stipulates two major types of guardianship infringement, namely, "active infringement" with greater subjective malice and "passive inaction" manifested as "negligence in guardianship". Both of them cause

children to fall into varying degrees of distress and cause serious physical and mental damage to children. The frequent exposure of the problem of children in difficult circumstances on the Internet has not only turned the majority of netizens into "spectators", but also warned people to deeply reflect on family education and incidents of child abuse. The perpetrators take advantage of children's self-esteem and their fear of "moral condemnation" and "family upbringing", acting wantonly frequently and causing indelible harm to children in difficult situations.

While we condemn, it is not difficult to notice the lack of family protection and the fact that negative inaction contributes to positive infringement. Due to insufficient care, poor communication and improper guardianship, parents and children have become "the most familiar strangers". Children in difficult circumstances are left isolated and helpless when they need understanding and help the most, which emboldens the malice of the perpetrators. Moreover, malice from within the family is more likely to plunge children in difficult circumstances into despair. Additionally, some cases of guardianship abuse due to children's rebelliousness, poor academic performance or health issues, as well as the loss of parents' own hope, directly strike at the hearts of children in difficult circumstances. The forms of infringement are diverse, the frequency is increasing, the duration is longer, and the degree of damage is becoming more and more serious. It should be noted that infringement incidents are a long-standing and highly damaging issue. To prevent such incidents, families themselves need to do more.

3.2.3 Insufficient multi-dimensional support

For children, family and school are two important places in their living world. Besides parents, teachers have become another key and significant other in their growth process. In the face of special circumstances, due to the form of remote teaching, face-to-face communication has become an increase in the actual distance. The teaching group is under certain pressure when confronted with the new teaching methods under emergency measures. Moreover, they cannot actually contact the children and discover the hidden problems existing in them. In addition, the participation of parents of children in difficult circumstances in home-school communication is already relatively low. There is a lack of guidance on children's studies, and there is a lack of vigilance against children's abnormal behaviors caused by online traps. Both home and school have lax control measures.

The formatting of social relations, the interruption of communication in common fields, and the homogeneity among neighbors have led to an extreme shortage of applicable materials in the families of children in difficult circumstances. There are also difficulties in community attention, which have caused children in difficult circumstances to fall into significant public health problems. The risk governance in the "last mile" of caring for and protecting children in difficult circumstances has weakened. The lack of support from families, schools, communities and other aspects will push children in difficult circumstances into a vacuum of control, accelerating the accumulation of risks.

4. Support, supervision and participation: Targeted prevention and resolution of survival risks for children in urban difficult circumstances

The most prominent key feature of children in urban difficult circumstances is the "lack of effective guardianship" and "dual vulnerability of family and children". Coupled with the material poverty of the family itself and the health deficiency of some children, the dual survival risks of material and social aspects keep piling up in different forms. The predicament of children has transformed from the previously emphasized "static crisis" to a multi-dimensional and mixed "dynamic crisis". Therefore, the rapid and effective identification of survival risks and the timely integration of good support, supervision and participation are particularly important for the governance of survival risks of children in difficult circumstances in cities.

4.1 Empower the parent group and improve developmental assistance and support

The unemployment risk among parents can lead to economic hardship and panic in their lives. While tracing the source of responsibility for families of children in difficult circumstances, it is necessary to pay attention to the inherent vulnerabilities of these families, such as economic downturn, weak human resources, and insufficient skills of the labor force. Therefore, while holding families accountable, it is even more important to empower them and provide multi-dimensional support to family members. In terms of assistance to families of children in difficult circumstances in our country, in the past, more emphasis was placed on welfare assistance and economic support, while "developmental support" for such families, such as skills training, opportunity creation, and incentive mechanisms, was relatively lacking (Bu, 2019).

To prevent the occurrence and transmission of risks from the root, enable families of children in difficult circumstances and the children themselves to live with more dignity, break the "freedom restrictions", improve their vulnerability, and jointly enjoy the rights to survival and development, so that they can fundamentally get out of their predicament, the assistance and support we provide should be an important developmental measure of "teaching them how to fish". Rather than merely providing economic support by "giving them fish".

Therefore, while providing welfare assistance, the focus of rescue should be placed on opportunity support, improving development-oriented assistance policies, and emphasizing assistance measures that balance survival and development. For instance, strengthen the specialized employment skills training for the parents of children in difficult circumstances and enhance their ability to participate in work. On this basis, it is necessary to ensure the employment opportunities for the parent group, promote the implementation of the incentive mechanism for nearby employment and entrepreneurship, and guarantee that individuals can smoothly maintain their livelihoods, etc. So as to achieve the source governance of risk issues and better improve the various survival conditions of children in difficult circumstances.

4.2 Strengthen the supervision of social organizations and integrate supervisory actions into daily intimate relationships

When people enter society, it is like stepping into some strange place. In an unfamiliar environment, individuals will develop emotional needs such as intimate relationships and mutual trust and reliance (Jia, 2008). If individuals want to pursue a true shared life and an organic intimate relationship, they need to consciously transform "strangeness" into "familiarity", "trust" and "reliance", and form such an organic connection within the social organization.

As individuals in society, children in difficult circumstances, apart from their families, are closely related to social organizations such as communities and schools, which bear the responsibility of supervising their families. At present, the protection of children has permeated all aspects. In the process of protecting children in difficult circumstances, the system of intervening public power in the guardianship of minors and granting social organizations the right to file lawsuits for the revocation of improper guardianship subjects has received increasing attention.

Strengthen the guardianship and supervision of children in difficult circumstances, and provide them with more opportunities to seek help in terms of access channels and the convenience of seeking assistance. However, incidents such as child guardianship violations are highly concealed when they occur, which hinders the demands of the person under guardianship. Social organizations cannot reach out to their supervision and can only exercise part of their guardianship functions, and their role in providing assistance cannot be fully and effectively exerted. Therefore, it is indispensable to form an organic and close connection between families of children in difficult circumstances and social organizations, enhance mutual trust between families and social organizations, provide better emotional support, and supplement it with face-to-face meetings and in-depth integration. Efforts should be made to weaken organizational boundaries and break communication barriers with families, especially those of children in difficult circumstances, and incorporate supervision into daily intimate interviews and exchanges. Thus, potential problems can be effectively identified and curbed, ensuring that children in difficult circumstances are kept away from harm.

4.3 Form a joint force of care and participation from multiple parties to ensure the physical and mental health of urban children in plight

While the actual distance between home and school remains, the cloud connects them. While parents are receiving information about their children's online course assignments, they have, in an intangible way, formed a form of participation in distance education at a distance, generating a willingness to supervise students' learning and cooperating with teachers to conduct remote offline academic supervision of students. It is more convenient than the traditional communication between home and school.

However, for parents of children in difficult circumstances, the passivity of their online participation remains quite significant. Due to their lack of thorough understanding of their children's learning, they can only follow the professional

guidance of teachers, becoming the "communicators lacking in education" for their children and the "remote marginal assistants" for teachers (Xie, 2020). This does not play a good guiding role in alleviating the academic pressure on children in difficult circumstances.

Therefore, in terms of schools fulfilling their responsibilities, the first step should be to encourage the teaching staff to pay timely attention to children in difficult circumstances. At the same time, educational rights should be appropriately allocated to parents to promote an equal cooperative relationship between parents and the teaching staff, promptly address families' educational concerns, and form an educational synergy. Parents should also attach importance to reflecting on their own behavior during the process of family education, and offer more care to children in difficult circumstances instead of speaking ill of them. At the same time, due to difficulties in social integration and communication barriers, along with possible accompanying psychological crises and health problems, they will be exposed to more survival risks. They need the joint care of families, schools, communities and other entities, providing them with psychological support, supplemented by timely mental health construction, strengthened psychological counseling and individual care. In conjunction with the study of corresponding health and hygiene protection knowledge, we should jointly ensure the physical and mental health development of urban children in plight.

Conflict of interests

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Short bio

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