

## A LITERATURE REVIEW ON LEFT-BEHIND CHILDREN

**Alina COSTIN, Ph.D.,**  
**Aurel Vlaicu University of Arad,**  
**Faculty of Educational Sciences, Psychology and Social Work,**  
**costinalina@gmail.com**

**Abstract:** *Globally, the number of people migrating in search of a better job has increased considerably: over one billion people live outside their country, migration becoming a social phenomenon with a very strong impact on children left in care to a grandfather, relative or even an institution. There is no total consensus on the impact that separation from a working parent away from home has on children, due to the complexity of the variables that act, namely the child's personality, resilience, social context, coping strategies used, cultural role of the migrating parent, the age at which the child remains alone, as depicted in the scientific literature. The present study represents a literature review aiming to highlight the main conclusions driven from recent research on the issue of the left-behind children. We have consulted 40 papers recently published in Elsevier, Medline, Springer, Wiley, and Web of Science databases. The psychological and emotional impact of the left-behind children (CLB) as well as the impact on school performance caused by parental migration were the main topics analyzed.*

**Key words:** *left-behind children; psychological impact of migration.*

### 1. Introduction

The topic of left-behind children has been approached in the broader context of globalization, where cultural values associated with a new family format make their mark on how children experience separation from their parents (Karen, 1999). No left-behind children has become a very bold goal of educational policy in the United States (Giroux, Schmidt, 2004). Fellmeth, 2018 notes the lack of studies on the impact of parental migration on children in other countries where the phenomenon is very pronounced. A significant share of lagging studies would look at the situation in China, but demographic statistics show whole populations of migrant parents looking for work away from home. There seems to be a consensus regarding the risks in the field of mental health (depression, anxiety), suicidal ideation, nutritional problems that children behind show to children living with their parents. According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989 every child should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding. A specific social problem is children left to be taken care of by relatives, while their parents are working abroad. The case studies, the dynamic and the complexity of the factors that determine the emphasis of this phenomenon, underline the need of diversification of the interventions and the need of solution-oriented approach.

Parental migration "solves the economic problem" or immunizes it, but it comes with a lot of other psychological, emotional, behavioral and social costs / losses. Browsing the literature, we have found a significant concern for this topic in countries where the migration rate is very high like China, Philippines and Bangladesh. At a completely different scale of

the phenomenon is Romania, however, compared to the total population, in our country, the left-behind children has become a phenomenon and a social problem, which also imposed the establishment of social policies. There is a trend in Romania of increasing the number of employed women on the labor market (a real wave of women providing permanent home care to the elderly in countries like Germany, Italy) and an increased willingness to migrate leaving the child in the care of extended family. The official statistics in Romania do not provide data related to the gender of the parent in whose care the child remains, only a child with one or both parents is specified. Although the topic is relevant to the situation of the child in Romania, very few studies have been dedicated to investigating the impact of parental migration on the child's emotional development and overall wellbeing.

## **2. Romanian context**

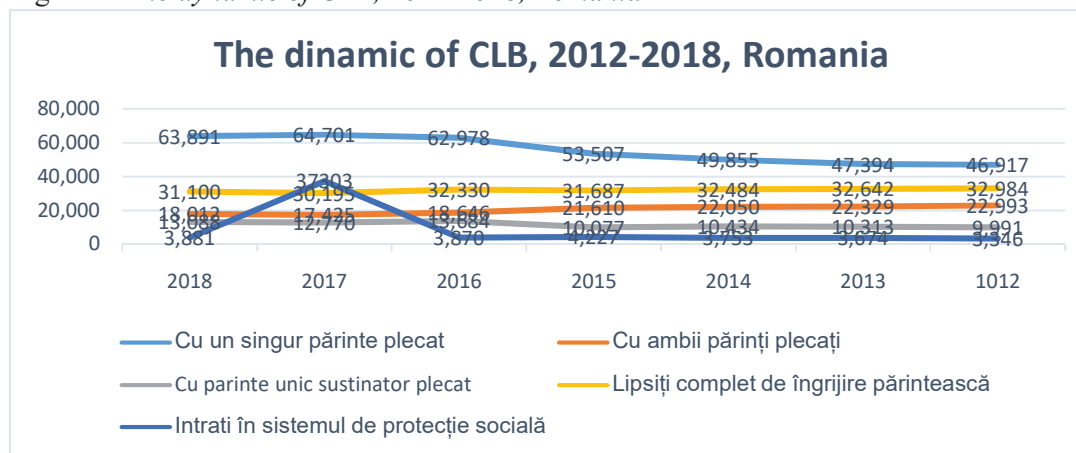
The provisions regarding the right of the child to grow up in a family are included in various normative acts, starting from the establishment of the Rights of the Child within the United Nations Convention in 1989, assumed by Romania in Law no. 18-1990 and since 2004 by Law 272 on the protection and promotion of the rights of the child which establishes that the first responsible for the upbringing, care and development of the child are the parents. The same law emphasizes the need for the support of the family by the community but also by the institutions with attributions, in fulfilling this exercise of ensuring the security context. The child left alone; the phrase used for the child whose parents are working abroad is in a state of vulnerability already confirmed by several studies. Research conducted in 2008 shows that parents under the age of 40 are the largest segment of people who emigrate. Only 7% of them informed the authorities about going abroad to work, but the situation is changing due to the legislation that introduced the obligation to announce and to prepare the child for the experience that will follow and are quite rare.

Why do Romanians, more than other people who left communism, choose to leave the country? Certainly, the attitude towards migration, respectively this exodus of Romanians to other European countries hides the values they have for life in general. UN reports place Romania in second place, after Syria, the country at war with a 7.3% increase in migration per year. Therefore, Romania, as a state that does not face the war, has the fastest increase in the number of migrants. Mediafax takes the frightening statistics and describes the reality regarding the demographic disaster caused by the decrease in the birth rate, the constant increase of emigrants and the increasing mortality, indicating a decrease of the Romanian population of 5 people per hour.

Compared to the migratory flow reported at EU level, which reached 3.8% in 2017, almost 20% of Romanians aged 20-64 chose to emigrate. In Romania in 2018, 94,991 children have one or both parents who went abroad to work. Of these, 13,344 children have both parents gone, and 48,599 children have a parent gone. More worrying is the situation of the 10773 children who have the only single parent who went to work (according to ANPDCA, 2018, June). The magnitude of this phenomenon as well as the serious consequences, in the case of many children, have imposed the establishment of protection measures for children left alone implemented at the level of local administrative structures, in the immediate vicinity of families. The obligation of parents to announce the departure to work to meet the needs of children and the need to monitor their progress is mandatory. The management of the situation of children left alone (the phrase used for children whose parents went to work abroad) was largely supported by UNICEF, which developed nationwide

additional training services for these children, social and psychological services for children and families, as well as the supervision of leisure time. 17 centers currently monitor the situation of these children by providing telephone and online information and counseling services through the Help-Line 0800.070.040 provided by the organization and through the online platform. [www.copiisinguriacasa.ro](http://www.copiisinguriacasa.ro).

Figure 1. *The dynamic of CLB, 2012-2018, Romania*



Source: ANPDCA, <http://www.copii.ro/>

### 3. Methods

This paper represents a literature review study in which we conducted a narrative / integrative review of 50 papers published in relevant databases (Elsevier, Wiley). The main trends / directions approached in the issue of the left-behind children were studied. We used as keywords the phrase left-behind children, parents' migration, psychological impact of migration, scholar performance. The titles or abstracts of the papers were scanned for relevance, selecting those that included studies on large samples.

### 4. Results and conclusion

An analysis of the studies identified, revealed some directions or themes that can be found regardless of the geographical area in which the research was carried out, namely:

- Psychological and emotional impact, self-esteem, anxiety, depression;
- Impact on physical health, nutrition, infectious diseases;
- Social consequences: unwanted pregnancies, drug use, unprotected sex, abuse;
- Impact on school performance;
- The impact of remittances on school performance;
- Gender (migrant father / mother) as a risk factor.

In this study, we selected two of the above guidelines, namely, the psychological and emotional impact on CLB and the impact on their school evolution / performance. In the vast majority of studies, the sample was represented by children up to 17 years of age. Another segment investigated were young people over 20 years of age, with the aim of highlighting the impact of migration on CLB when they completed compulsory education.

Our search identified 83.797 subjects included in samples from studies conducted in several countries where migration is an exacerbated phenomenon:

**China:** atotal of43935 subjects dintre care 885 (Lu,2012), 13.000 (Bai et al., 2018), 1.274 (Fan et al, 2010), 4513 (Fu, Xue, Zhou, Yuan, 2017), 1.010 ( Zhou, Murphy, Tao, 2014), 301 (Zhang et al., 2020), 7148 (Li, 2017), 15.804 (Wu et al, 2021);

**Mexic:** 34.670 children (Antman, 2012);

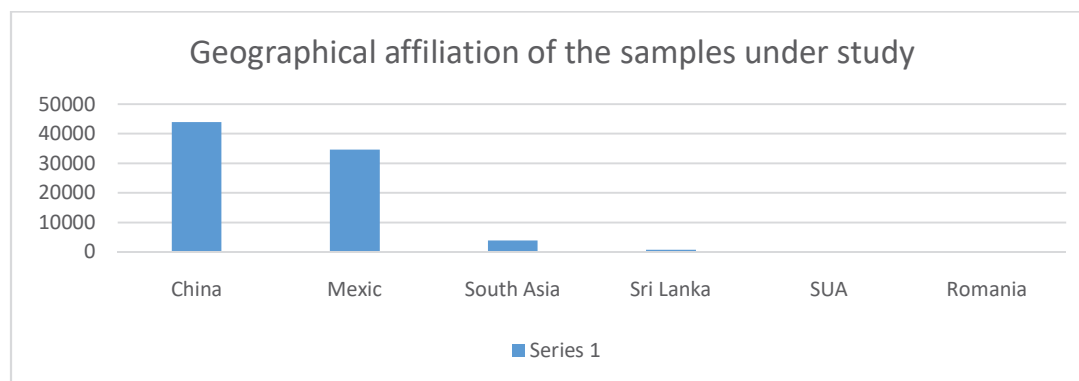
**Romania:** 163 (Sanduleasa, Matei, 2015);

**SUA:** 333 (Guzman et al., 2004);

**South Asia (Indonezia, Filipine, Thailandași Vietnam):**3876(Graham, 2019);

**Sri Lanka:** 820 (Wickramage et al., 2015).

Figure 2. *Geographical affiliation of the samples under study*



It can be seen that the large share of papers is carried out in Asian countries where migration is very high. Qualitative research used case studies or literature reviews. The thematic analysis revealed differences in the impact of migration on children depending on the gender of the parent who migrated but also the age of the child (Arlini et al., 2019) or other features related to children's perception of the global family. Graham, 2019 does not identify a general model valid for the sampled countries (Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam).

#### **4.1. The psychological impact on the child depending on the migrating parent**

Allen, Cisneros, Tellez (2015) in a study on a group of children in the United States observe that the separation of the parent who went abroad to work has an impact on the mental health of children, who are more likely to have problems of externalization and internalization than children living with their parents. And Botezat, Pfeiffer (2014) shows that migrant parent is associated with mental and even physical health problems, and these symptoms are more pronounced in rural children.

In Romania, the reality of the left-behind children is so current and frequently encountered that it is about a new family model developed in our country, namely the transnational family (Sanduleasa, Matei, 2015). The absence of one or both parents can be a CLB mental health problem.

Wickramage (2015) identifies two out of five left-behind children in Sri Lanka with mental disorders, poor socio-emotional adjustment and behavioral problems. The study by Cortes, P., (2015) provides evidence for a positive association between mother migration and children's school outcomes: the impact is lower in the case of father migration. The results are similar for children with non-migrant parents. Research highlights that boys are

significantly more adversely affected than girls, even though there is ample evidence that spending on girls' education is more costly.

Antman's (2012) study confirms that the impact of paternal internal migration has no statistically significant effect on children's educational attainment. Therefore, the presence of the mother would counteract the effects produced by the father's absence, perhaps due to the more frequent involvement of the mother in monitoring the children's school activity.

Valtolina, Colombo (2012), Guzman (2004) make a synthesis of the literature in the field identifying a series of psychological, emotional and social problems in left-behind children: low self-esteem, depression, school dropout, conflicts with teachers and colleagues, anxiety, apathy, suicidal tendencies, substance abuse.

Wu et al., (2021) investigated the long-term effects on mental health of the experience of being left behind in the case of (15,804 students). It is found that this experience significantly worsened the mental health of the sample studied. Separation from the parent, poor supervision, lack of encouragement, building a fragile attachment to the mother develops in the left-behind children deep feelings of abandonment, low self-esteem, sadness, loneliness (Cortes, 2007, DeWaard, 2018).

Mazzucato and Schans (2011) also draw attention to the difficulty of sharing the resources and responsibilities of family members left behind by family fragmentation. On the other hand, although it is assumed that most often, children remain in the care of grandparents or relatives, studies show that these networks are not so available, which further complicates the situation of the left-behind children (De Waard et al., 2018).

Evaluating the results of the literature in this field, Wickramage (2015) identifies sources that support the negative impact of parental migration (Cassidy et al., 2008, Howard et al., 2011, Dillon & Walsh, 2012). In a study of Filipino migrants, Battistella, & Conaco (1998) show that the impact of migration is not so disruptive if the mother stays with the child or if the extended family is involved in raising it. Fan et al. (2010) find that adolescents cope better with separation from parents, perhaps due to previously built social networks: there are pathologies, emotional and behavioral problems in children separated early from their parents and for a longer duration. In any case, the child's mental well-being is maintained if one of the parents takes care of him. Migrant children have more cellular devices than non-migrant children - this allows them to maintain constant communication with departed parents (Philippine Study, 2003).

#### **4.2. Impact on school results**

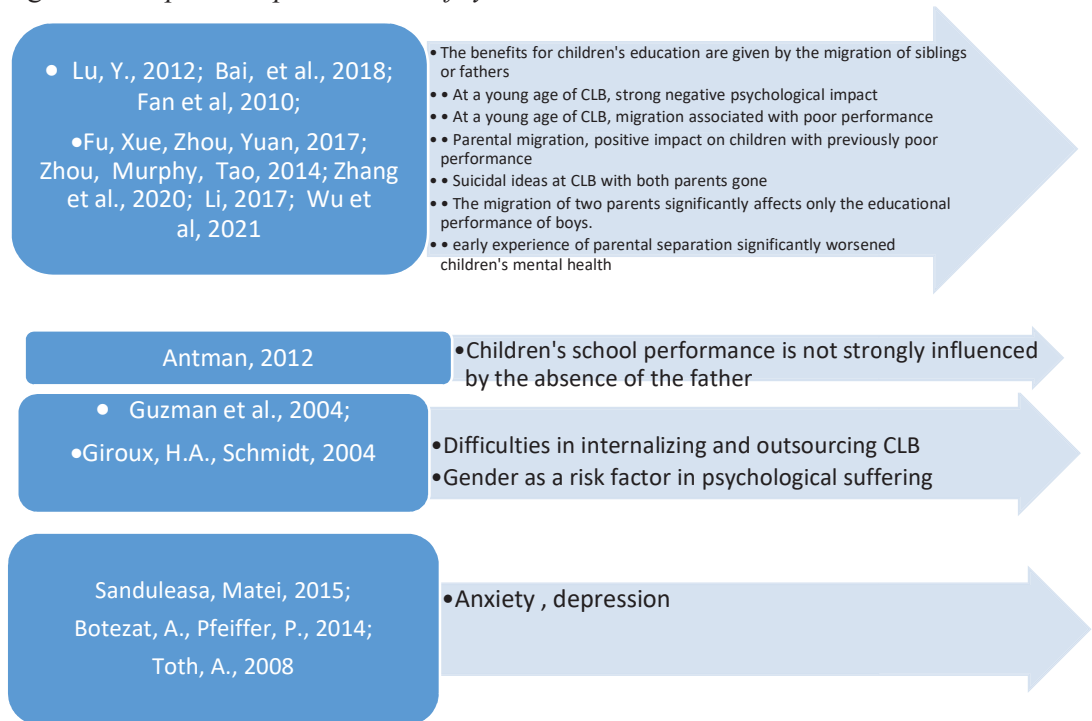
Asis (2007) and Tomsa, Jenaro (2015), finds greater anxiety and depression in Romanian left-behind children, compared to the group of children living with their parents. Zhao et al. (2015) identify associations between parent-child cohesion and friendship with the emotional state of CRU. Fu et al. (2017) suggest that the absence of parents of one or both, and regardless of the missing parent) is associated with negative emotions (depression, physical anxiety or anxiety) that actually mediate the relationship between the absence of parents and the idea of suicide.

A consistent direction of research on the impact on children / students (Zhou et al, 2014) finds that the educational performance of children is adversely affected when both parents migrate or when the guardian with whom he remains is not one of the parents. Long-term separation from parents influences the school results of boys, not girls. Zhang et al. (2021) identifies problems with self-esteem and outsourcing in left-behind children.

TomşaandJenaro(2015) in a study carried out on a group of 163 Romanian children, higher anxiety and depression were observed in left-behind children, compared to the control group living with their parents. Biblarz and Raftery (1999) found that children's outcomes were poorer in the single-parent than in single-parent households because mothers were often primary caregivers, while a recent study by Dufur et al. (2010) showed negligible differences of parents according to sex in single-parent families. Sung won Kim (2019), Arlini (2019) focuses on her research on children's perception of mothers' migratory efforts; the results show that this motivates some to continue their studies, burdens others and makes them less burdened with financial burdens.

An aspect often studied related to the issue of migration is related to the remittances / money sent from abroad to the family left in the country of origin. Li (2017) raises the issue of the human capital of left-behind children in addition to the negative impact on school results, including in the context of serious investments in their school education facilitated by remittance. A year later, Bai et al. (2018) in a very large study in acres were involved 13,000 levs identify positive results of parental migration on children, especially those with poor performance, this being mediated by increased support for remittances. Contradictory results appear from one country to another; it is possible that these results are moderated by the multitude of variables such as the age of the left-behind children, the associated roles of parents in different cultures, the duration of migration (Song, Glick, 2020). Fitting is also encountered by children who migrate with one or both parents; susceptibility to not being admitted to public schools in the destination country, poor access to medical or social services (Jan, Zhou, Stafford, 2017).

Figure 3. *Graphical representation of synthesized data*



## 5. Implications



Even if they are well dressed and have state-of-the-art phones or tablets, most children in Romania cry every day or get sick. This is due to the longing of the parents who are always gone to work abroad. Their pain can only be alleviated with specialized help. Thousands of children have benefited from the advice of psychologists, teachers and social workers across the country, people who reached out to them when they were on the verge of increasing school dropout or juvenile delinquency statistics. They did homework together, played games, went on trips, and together they got over the lack of loved ones more easily.

The psychological impact produced by the parent who leaves his child at home while he goes to work abroad is overwhelming, regardless of the young person's age. Depending on this, the reactions also appear: in the preschool child there is often a separation anxiety fixed on the grandmother, who usually takes the role of the mother. Most of the time, these children are withdrawn and have a hard time participating in group activities, but among them are those who defy the rules and do everything to attract the attention of those around them, even if this means that they should be punished.

From the desire of the parent to give his child a better life, the effect produced is often the opposite. Thus, the little one is unconsciously taught that love is replaced by received material objects. One solution to avoid such situations is for parents to find the shortest possible ways to leave home and, if possible, to alternate, so that while the mother is away, the father is home with the little one. Many more such cases are found in rural areas. The souls of the little ones cry every time they remember their parents gone thousands of miles away, this can be seen especially in their eyes. Even if in many places this situation is not intended to be visible, the children's pain cannot be hidden, their behavior speaking for itself.

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