

What the 2020 Census Can Tell Us About Children in China

Facts and Figures



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The healthy development of children is the basis for sustainable human and social development. In recent years great improvements have been made in the survival and development of China's large population of children, but noticeable internal disparities remain. Rapid socio-economic transformation, unbalanced regional development, and massive internal migration have brought challenges for many children. The population census is a rich source of foundational data on children, reflecting demographic changes and the key characteristics of sub-groups. Analysis of census data can enhance understanding of the challenges faced by children and help inform more evidence-based decision making to address these challenges towards the realization of child rights. This publication describes and analyses the status of China's child population, using data from the 2020 National Population Census, previous censuses and population sample surveys.

Definitions:

Children: According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, children are persons below 18 years of age, i.e., persons aged 0–17 years.

Development stages: In this publication, child development is divided into five stages based on age range: early childhood (0–2 years), pre-primary (3–5 years), primary (6–11 years), junior secondary (12–14 years) and senior secondary (15–17 years).

Migrant children: Migrant children refers to those members of the migrant population who are aged 0–17 years. The migrant population refers to persons whose current place of residence is different from the location (e.g., town/township or street) of their household registration (*hukou*), and who have left the location of their household registration for more than six months. It excludes the population whose current place of residence is different from that of their household registration but within the same or different district(s) of the same municipality or prefecture-level city.

Children left behind: Children left behind refers to children who live in the location of their household registration, but do not live together with their both parents, as either one parent or both parents have migrated outside of hometown for more than six months.

Rural children left behind refers to children left behind whose household registration locations are in rural areas. **Urban children left behind** refers to children left behind whose household registration locations are in urban areas.

Data Sources:

The data in this publication mainly comes from the 2020 National Population Census, previous censuses and population sample surveys conducted by the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) of China. Currently, China conducts a census every ten years, with seven censuses conducted to date, namely in 1953, 1964, 1982, 1990, 2000, 2010 and 2020. China conducts an inter-census population sample survey in the middle year between two censuses and with a sampling fraction of 1%, which is also known as 'mini-census'. The most recent mini-census was conducted in 2015. In years without a census or mini-census, sample surveys on population changes are conducted, with a sampling fraction of one per thousand.

Acknowledgements:

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1. The size and trends of the child population

1.1 China

According to data from the Seventh National Population Census, the child population aged 0–17 years in China was 298 million in 2020, accounting for 21.1% of the total national population. With the rapid economic development and changing demographic structures, and the prolonged low fertility rates since the implementation of the family planning policy in the late 1970s, the size and proportion of China's child population continually declined starting in the 1980s, but it became more stable between 2010 and 2020 (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Size of the child population aged 0–17 years in China, 1953–2020¹

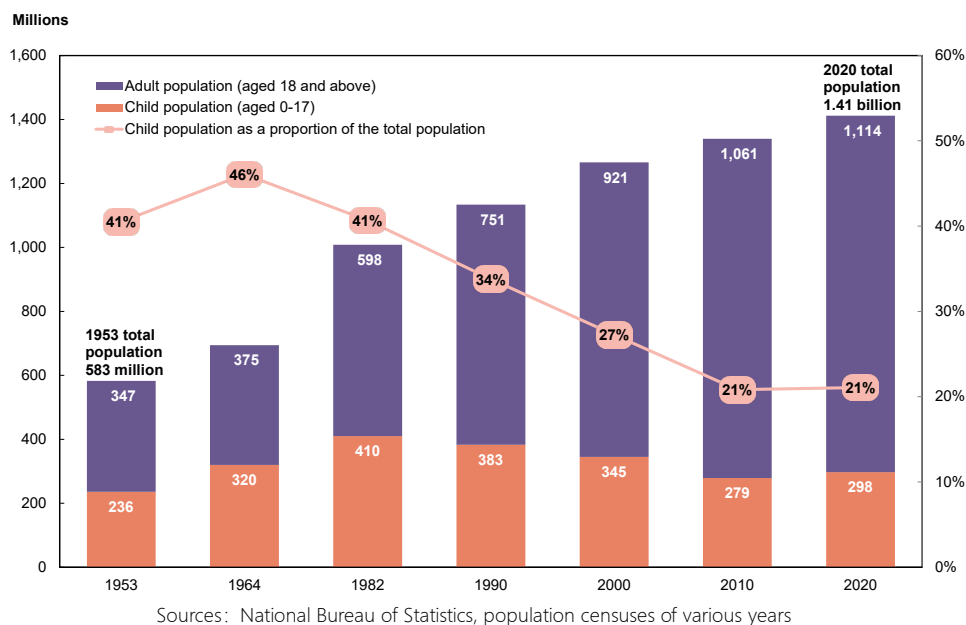
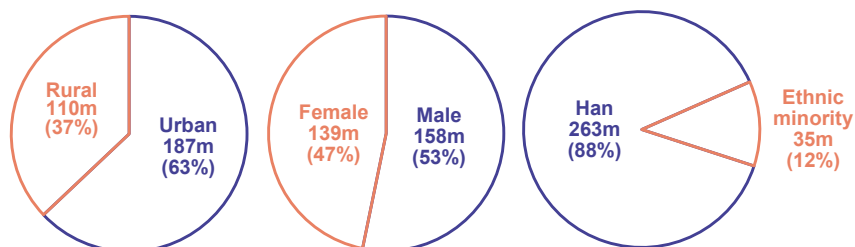


Figure 2: Overview of the child population composition in China, 2020²



Age		0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	Total 0–17
Level		Early childhood			Pre-primary			Primary				Junior Secondary		Senior Secondary						
Population (millions)	All children	41.64			52.79									108.74			50.21		44.27	297.66
	Migrant children	8.08			11.47									23.21			10.43		17.91	71.09
	Rural children left behind	7.13			7.80									15.90			6.72		4.21	41.77
	Urban children left behind	4.54			4.96									9.35			3.85		2.46	25.16

Source: National Bureau of Statistics, 2020 National Population Census

¹ The Census Day in 1953, 1964, 1982 and 1990 was July 1. The Census Day has since changed to November 1. Data presented here are slightly different from the year-end figures published in the *China Statistical Yearbook*.

² For more details on the composition of the child population, refer to part three of this publication: *The composition of the child population*.

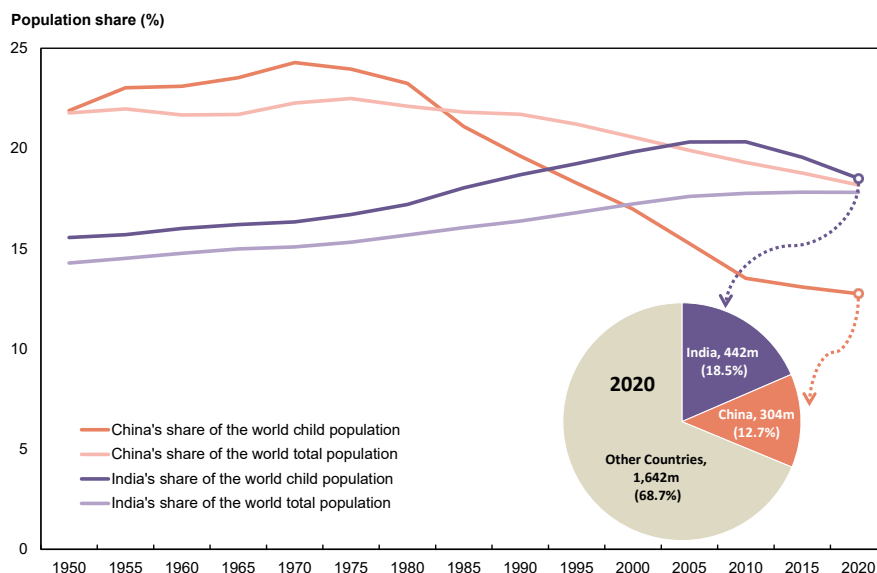
1.2 The world

According to internationally comparable estimates reported in the UN's *World Population Prospects 2022*,³ both the global total population and the global child population aged 0–17 years have grown rapidly over the past 60 years. The total population of the world has more than tripled, from 2.5 billion in 1950 to 7.8 billion in 2020; the child population has more than doubled from 1 billion in 1950 to 2.4 billion in 2020. From the 1970s, the growth rate of the world's child population started to decrease and became lower than the growth rate of the total population.

In 2020, China remained the world's most populous country, accounting for 18.2% of the world's total population. China's child population ranked second in the world, accounting for 12.7% of the world's child population, which is much lower than China's share of the world's total population. China's child population as a proportion of the global child population began to drop gradually after 1980 (Figure 3). In 2020, China's total population was 28.54 million more than that of India, but its child population was only 69% of India. India became the country with the largest child population in the world in 1993, when its child population exceeded that of China for the first time. India's total population is estimated to exceed that of China in 2023.⁴

Figure 3: China and India's share of the world's child population, 1950–2020

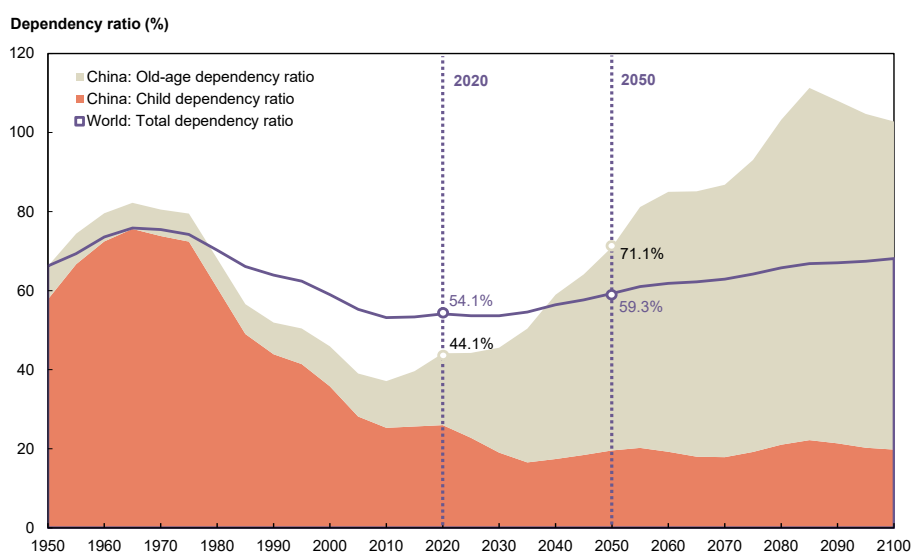
Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2022), *World Population Prospects 2022, Online Edition*



According to the UN's *World Population Prospects 2022*, the child dependency ratio in China (the ratio of the population aged 0–14 to the population aged 15–64) dropped by nearly 60% between 1980 and 2020. China now has one of the lowest child dependency ratios in the world. By contrast, the old-age dependency ratio in China (the ratio of the population aged 65 and above to the population aged 15–64) kept rising, and population ageing accelerated (Figure 4). China's total dependency ratio is still considered low globally, at 44.1% in 2020, 10 percentage points lower than the global average. However, the declining trend in China's total dependency ratio has reversed over the past decade. With the further transformation of the population structure and the decline of the 'demographic dividend', the total dependency ratio in China is expected to exceed 50% in 2035. It is expected to exceed the world's average in 2038, and exceed 70% in 2050, which is much higher than the estimated global average.

Figure 4: Dependency ratio in China and the world, estimates and projections, 1950–2100

Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2022), *World Population Prospects 2022, Online Edition*



³ The internationally comparable estimates included in this publication come from the *World Population Prospects 2022* issued by the UNDESA/Population Division, with some differences from China's official data. <https://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp/Download/Standard/Population/>, accessed August 2022.

⁴ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2022), *World Population Prospects 2022*, <https://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp/Download/Standard/Population/>, accessed August 2022.

2. Births

2.1 Births in numbers

The annual number of births in China has shown a trend of long-term decline, with fluctuations, echoing the adjustment of the fertility policy in different periods. China's family planning policy was first introduced in the 1970s and made stricter in the 1980s with the implementation of the one-child policy.⁵ In just ten years, the total fertility rate (TFR) among women in China dropped from 6.1 in 1970 to 2.7 in 1980. The TFR fell below the replacement rate of 2.1 in 1991 and has since then remained at a low level. The TFR is estimated at 1.3 for 2020, and China is considered a low fertility country.⁶

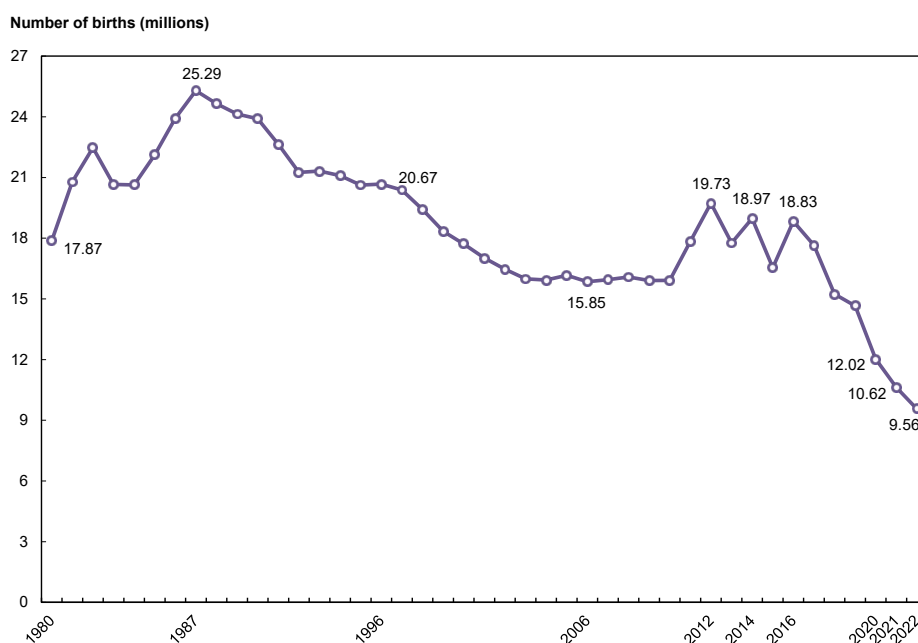
Compared with 2010, the size and proportion of the child population remained relatively stable in 2020. This is due to the immediate but short-term increase of births following the fertility policy adjustments during these ten years:

- The policy was relaxed to allow **couples to have a second child if both parents are only-children**. This was implemented across China in November 2011.
- The Government of China issued the *Opinions on Adjusting and Improving Fertility Policy* in December 2013, which allowed **couples to have a second child if either parent is an only-child**.
- In October 2015, the policy was further liberalized to allow **all couples to have two children**. This is known as the universal two-child policy and marks the end of the one-child policy.

The above policy adjustments have achieved short-term results, allowing women who previously wished to have more than one child to do so. However, due to factors such as the shrinking population size of women of reproductive age, the decline of young people's fertility intentions and the delay in first marriages, the number of births has been decreasing in recent years, with only 12.02 million births in 2020 and a new low of 10.62 million births in 2021.

In June 2021, China implemented the policy of allowing **one couple to have three children** and introduced supportive measures to reduce the cost of child bearing, child rearing and education. However, this time the policy did not have an immediate effect. The number of births in 2022 dropped further to 9.56 million and was smaller than the number of deaths. As a result, China saw negative annual population growth⁷ for the first time in over 60 years.

Figure 5: Total number of births, 1980–2022



Sources: National Bureau of Statistics, (derived from) *China Statistical Yearbook 2022*, 1980–2021 data; Statistical Communiqué, 2022 data

⁵ 'An Open Letter to All Communist Party Members and Communist Youth League Members on Control of Population Growth' by the CPC Central Committee issued on 25 September 1980, https://epaper.qilwb.com.cn/html/2010-10/23/content_31078.htm, accessed August 2022.

⁶ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2022). *World Population Prospects 2022*, <https://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp/Download/Standard/Fertility/>, accessed August 2022.

⁷ National Bureau of Statistics, 'Statistical Communiqué of the People's Republic of China on the 2022 National Economic and Social Development', http://www.stats.gov.cn/english/PressRelease/202302/t20230227_1918979.html, accessed February 2023.

2.2 The sex ratio at birth

Globally, the normal sex ratio at birth (SRB) generally ranges between 103 and 107 male births to every 100 female births in the absence of intervention. The SRB in China began to exceed the normal range in the 1980s, and it rose steadily from 108.5 in 1982 to a peak of 121.2 in 2004.⁸ It then fell to 118.6 in 2005 and decreased after that, reaching 111.3 in 2020 (Figure 6a). Although the long-term high SRB is now under control, China still has one of the most severely imbalanced SRBs in the world.⁹

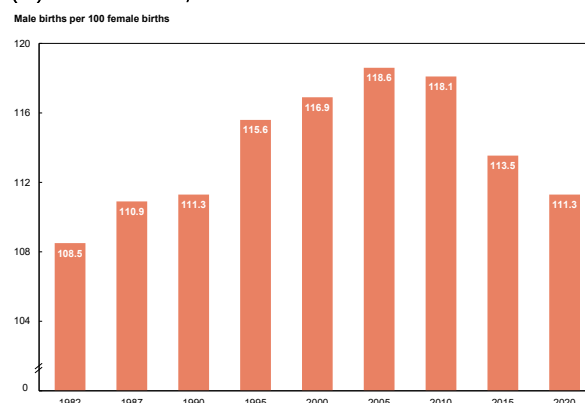
China's SRB has the following characteristics:

- The SRBs in both rural and urban areas decreased noticeably since 2010, with the urban-rural gap narrowing. By 2020, the SRB in rural areas was only slightly higher than that of urban areas (Figure 6b).
- The SRB was uneven across provinces. The SRBs in seven provinces, such as Shanxi, were under 107, while SRBs in provinces such as Hainan, Jiangxi and Fujian were still seriously imbalanced (Figure 6c).¹⁰
- The SRB of second births in 2020 was in the normal range. However, the SRB of first births was still high, and that of third and subsequent births were severely imbalanced (Figure 6d).
- The SRB of ethnic minority groups was lower than that of the Han ethnic majority. The SRB among ethnic minorities remained within the upper limit of the normal range until 1989. Since then, it has continually increased, reaching 110.7 in 2015, but it was lower than 114.8 in 2010. The SRB of ethnic minority groups continued to drop to 109.6 in 2020.
- Educational attainment has an influence on the SRB. Newborns of women who received college education or above had a lower sex ratio at birth.

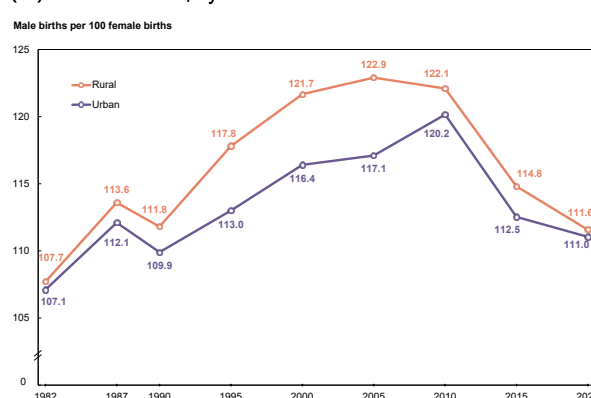
The direct and indirect factors that resulted in the high SRB include preferences for sons and corresponding sex-selection practices, the influence of the fertility policy, the unequal social and family status of females, and the incomplete coverage of the social security system, particularly in rural areas and some provinces. This highlights the extent to which girls are denied the right to life and reflects deep-seated gender discrimination that adversely affects girls' development, including possibly fuelling trafficking of women and other forms of gender-based violence. Additionally, due to long-term SRB imbalances, there were 33 million fewer women than men in 2020; in particular, there were 17.52 million fewer women than men at the age of 20–40 years,¹¹ an age range in which first marriages are more common. This imbalance also has implications for men's opportunities to get married, known as the 'marriage squeeze' phenomenon, with far-reaching effects on future population development.

Figure 6: Sex ratio at birth, 1982–2020

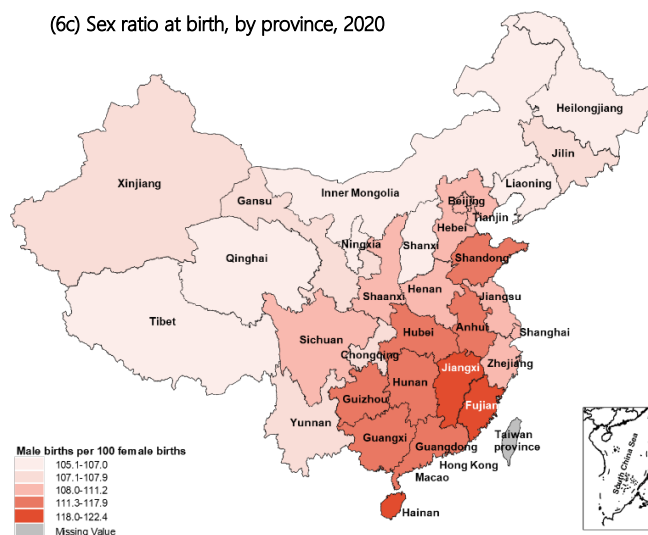
(6a) Sex ratio at birth, national



(6b) Sex ratio at birth, by urban-rural

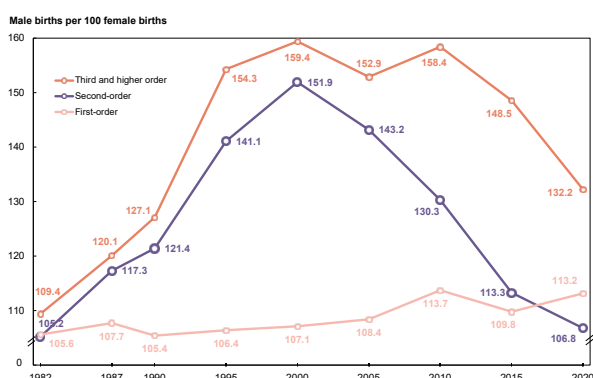


(6c) Sex ratio at birth, by province, 2020



Note: National, provincial data, and 2020 data by urban-rural residence are from the short form of the Census, while data by urban-rural residence for other years and by birth order are from the long form of the Census.

(6d) Sex ratio at birth, by birth order



Sources: National Bureau of Statistics, Population censuses and 1% population sample surveys of various years

⁸ National Bureau of Statistics, *Women and Men in China – Facts and Figures (2019)*

⁹ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2022), *World Population Prospects 2022*, <https://population.un.org/wpp/Download/Standard/MostUsed/>, accessed August 2022.

¹⁰ The boundaries and the names shown and the designations used on the maps in this publication do not necessarily imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

¹¹ National Bureau of Statistics, http://www.stats.gov.cn/xxgk/jd/sjjd2020/202105/t20210517_1817580.html, accessed August 2022.

3. The composition of the child population

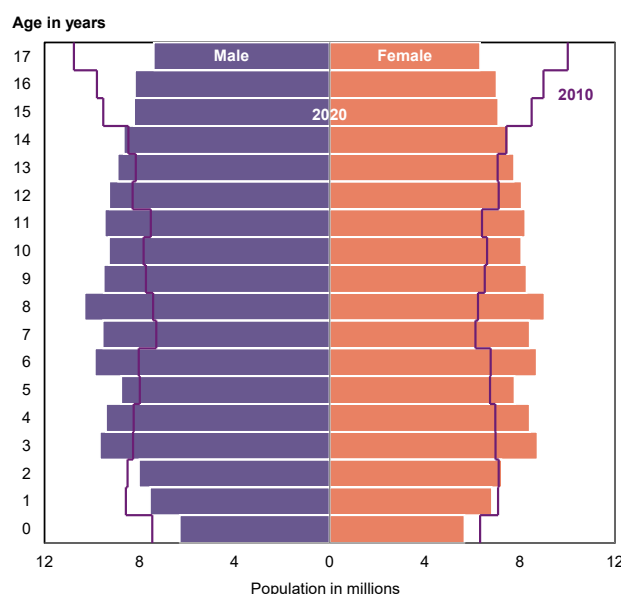
3.1 Age structure

Age structure of children

There were 94.43 million children aged 0–5 years, 159 million children in the compulsory education stage (6–14 years) and 44.27 million children in the senior secondary stage (15–17 years) in 2020 (Annex 1). Compared to 2010, there were 4.17 million more children aged 0–5, 27.89 million more children in the compulsory education stage, and 13.32 million fewer children in the senior secondary stage (Figure 7). The changes in the size of the child population at different development stages have significant implications for education infrastructure, human resources and planning.

Sources: National Bureau of Statistics, 2010 and 2020 National Population Censuses

Figure 7: Pyramid of child population aged 0–17, 2010 and 2020



Overall changes in the population age structure

China saw rapid changes in the age structure of its population between 2000 and 2020. While the child population and its proportion of the total population was in decline, the size and proportion of adolescents and youth were also in decline (Annex 2). The proportion of adolescents aged 10–19 dropped from 18.0% in 2000 to 11.2% in 2020. The proportion of youth aged 15–24 dropped from 15.6% in 2000 to 10.5% in 2020. The sharp reduction in the total number of young people aged 10–24 in 2020 was because they were born between 1996 and 2010, when the number of births was in decline (see Figure 5: Total number of births).

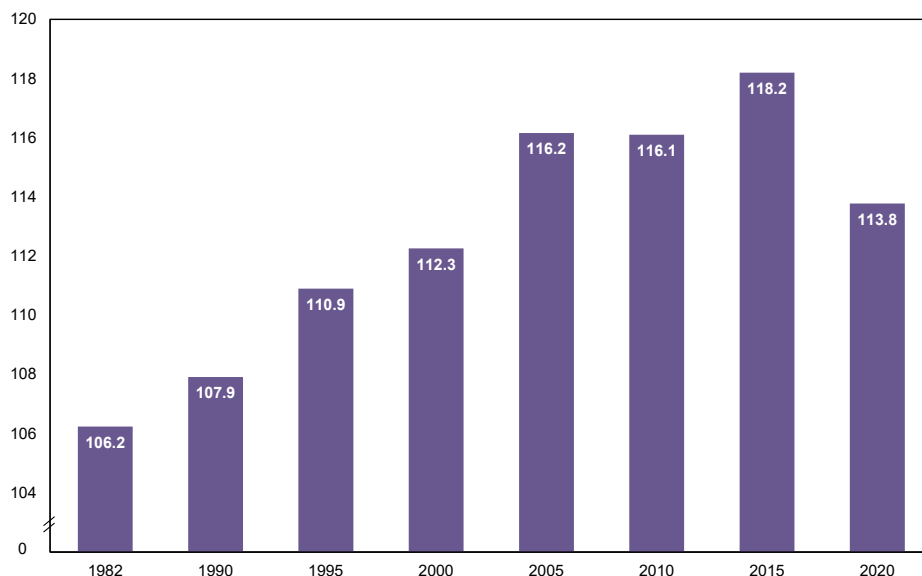
At the same time, China entered the stage of population ageing in 2000 and since then there has been a rapid trend of ageing.¹² The proportion of the population aged 60 and above rose by 3 percentage points between 2000 and 2010, then increased by another 5.4 percentage points in the ten years between 2010 and 2020, and reached 18.7% in 2020 (Annex 2). China is still at the stage of mild ageing, and it is expected to enter the moderate ageing stage during the 14th Five Year Plan period of 2021–2025.¹³

3.2 Sex composition

There were 158 million males and 139 million females, accounting for 53.2% and 46.8% of the child population respectively in 2020. There were 19.18 million more male children than female children.

Figure 8: Sex ratio of children aged 0–17, 1982–2020

Males per 100 females



Sources: National Bureau of Statistics, 1982, 1990, 2000, 2010 and 2020 National Population Censuses; 1995, 2005 and 2015 1% National Population Sample Surveys

¹² Globally, a population is defined as ‘aged’ if people aged 60 years and above account for more than 10%, or people aged 65 years and above account for more than 7% of the total population. If the proportion of the population aged 60 and above is between 10–20%, the population is in the mild ageing stage; if the proportion is between 20–30%, the moderate ageing stage; if more than 30%, the severe ageing stage.

¹³ Chen Gong, “New characteristics and trends of population development in China”, http://www.stats.gov.cn/xxgk/jd/sjjd2020/202105/t20210513_1817408.html, accessed August 2022.

China's long-term imbalance in the SRB has been reflected in the sex ratio of the child population, which continually increased from 106.2 males per 100 females in 1982 to 118.2 males per 100 females in 2015, and then decreased to 113.8 by 2020 (Figure 8). The imbalance in the sex ratio of the child population in some provinces has been exceptionally severe, with Hainan, Jiangxi, Fujian and Hubei each exceeding 118 in 2020 (Annex 3).

3.3 Urban and rural distribution

There were 187 million children in urban areas, accounting for 62.9% of the child population, and 110 million children in rural areas, accounting for 37.1%.

Figure 9: Size and proportion of children aged 0–17 in urban and rural areas, 1982–2020

	Urbanization rate of total population (%)	Child population (millions)			Percentage of urban children (%)
		Urban	Rural	National	
1982	21.1	68.08	342.02	410.10	16.6
1990	26.4	81.51	301.16	382.67	21.3
2000	36.2	107.42	237.92	345.34	31.1
2010	50.0	124.48	154.44	278.92	44.6
2020	63.9	187.34	110.31	297.66	62.9

Sources: National Bureau of Statistics, *China Statistical Yearbook*, 2021; 1982, 1990, 2000, 2010 and 2020 National Population Censuses

China has seen rapid urbanization since the Government's reform and opening up. The proportion of the urban population increased from 21.1% in 1982 to 63.9% in 2020, and the percentage of urban children increased from 16.6% in 1982 to 62.9% in 2020. Although the child population has declined since 1982, the child population in urban areas has been steadily increasing with urbanization. The number of urban children in 2020 was 2.8 times that of 1982. In contrast, the number of rural children has been rapidly decreasing.

The percentage of urban children was consistently much lower than the urbanization rate of the total population until 2010. This was closely related to the higher fertility rate in rural areas, and it may also be linked to the fact that migrant children in cities have restricted access to public services and their parents have to leave them behind in rural areas. In the ten years leading up to 2020, the urban-rural gap in fertility rate narrowed, and more children migrated together with their parents, or migrated alone for study or work, thanks to improved access to public services for migrant children. As a result, the percentage of urban children was closer to the urbanization rate of the total population in 2020.

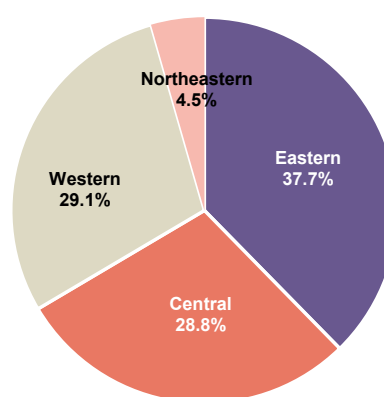
3.4 Regional distribution

In 2020, Guangdong had the largest child population, with 27.42 million, while Tibet had the smallest with 1.04 million. Some 57.9% of China's children lived in central and western regions in 2020, and the child population in the western region accounted for 29.1% of the country's total child population.

Figure 10a: Child population, by province, 2020



Figure 10b: Composition of child population, by region, 2020



Source: National Bureau of Statistics, 2020 National Population Census

3.5 Ethnic minority children

In 2020, the population of ethnic minority children aged 0–17 years was 34.59 million, an increase of 3.96 million over 2010. Two main factors have led to a gradual increase in the proportion of ethnic minority children from 7.6% in 1982 to 11.6% in 2020. Firstly, the Government of China has adopted a relatively liberal fertility policy for ethnic minorities and the TFR of ethnic minorities is higher than the national average. Secondly, parents are more likely to register their children from interethnic marriages as ethnic minorities, in order to benefit from relevant preferential policies.

The child population of different ethnic minority groups varied. The ten largest child populations from ethnic minorities were Zhuang, Uyghur, Miao, Yi, Hui, Tujia, Manchu, Tibetan, Mongolian and Yao, with a total of 27.90 million children, accounting for 80.7% of the total child population of ethnic minorities. These ten ethnic minority groups each had more than one million children. Zhuang had the largest ethnic minority child population, totaling 4.99 million and accounting for 14.4% of all ethnic minority children.

3.6 Children living in previously poverty-stricken areas

In 2020, 65.17 million children (21.9% of the child population nationwide) were found to be living in previously poverty-stricken areas (832 counties in total, including 'key poverty counties' and counties in 'poverty blocks').^{14,15} Of these children, 57.8% lived in rural poor areas, facing multiple challenges to their survival and development. There were over 15 million children left behind in previously poverty-stricken rural areas, accounting for 40.6% of rural children in those areas, which is higher than the proportion of children left behind among all children living in rural areas (37.9%). Child deprivation is multi-dimensional. Children in less developed areas lagged behind other children in terms of health, education, living conditions and other dimensions, and adolescent marriages and pregnancies were more common.

3.7 Children without household registration

Between 2000 and 2010, the population without household registration (*hukou*)¹⁶ in China was large and had grown from 8.05 million people in 2000 to 13.76 million in 2010, accounting for 0.6% and 1.0% of the total population respectively. Thanks to enhanced national efforts to verify and improve household registration since 2010, the population without *hukou* has reduced. As indicated in the 2020 Census, the total number of people without *hukou* dropped to 4.03 million, accounting for 0.3% of the total population. Among them, 2.91 million were children aged 0–17, accounting for 72.2% of all people without *hukou*, and 1.0% of the child population.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child requires that all children are registered immediately after birth. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) also set 'the proportion of children under five years of age whose births have been registered with a civil authority' as a global monitoring indicator, to provide a legal identity for all, and safeguard their rights to public services among other things. In China, children complete birth registration through acquiring *hukou*. In 2020, 84.8% of children had *hukou* within 12 months after birth, and 96.7% of children had *hukou* within five years after birth.

Among 2.91 million children aged 0–17 who did not have *hukou* in 2020, about 60% were under one year old and about 90% were under six years old. Most of these children will obtain *hukou* before they enter primary school due to admission requirements.

Figure 12: Children without household registration (*hukou*), 2020

	National	Urban	Rural	Male	Female
Number of children under one year without <i>hukou</i> (millions)	1.82	1.07	0.75	0.95	0.87
Proportion of children under one year without <i>hukou</i> (%)	15.2%	14.7%	15.9%	15.1%	15.3%
Proportion of children under one year with <i>hukou</i> (%)	84.8%	85.3%	84.1%	84.9%	84.7%
Number of children under five years without <i>hukou</i> (millions)	2.59	1.54	1.05	1.34	1.25
Proportion of children under five years without <i>hukou</i> (%)	3.3%	3.1%	3.8%	3.3%	3.4%
Proportion of children under five years with <i>hukou</i> (%)	96.7%	96.9%	96.2%	96.7%	96.6%

Source: National Bureau of Statistics, 2020 National Population Census

¹⁴ Previous poverty-stricken areas include the original 592 'key poverty counties' identified by the Government of China for focused poverty alleviation efforts, and 680 counties located in 14 'poverty blocks' (11 blocks, along with the Tibet Autonomous Region, ethnically Tibetan regions in four provinces, and South Xinjiang), as defined in the *Outline for Development-oriented Poverty Reduction for China's Rural Areas (2011-2020)*. There is an overlap of 440 counties between the list of 'key poverty counties' and the updated 'poverty blocks'. Therefore, there are 832 distinct counties previously categorized as 'poverty-stricken areas'.

¹⁵ 65.17 million here refers to the total child population living in the 832 previously poverty-stricken counties, with the caution that not all of them are considered to be children living below the poverty standard, and not all poor children reside in poverty-stricken counties. In early 2021, China announced the eradication of absolute poverty and that "the final 98.99 million impoverished rural residents in China had all been lifted out of poverty, and all 832 impoverished counties and 128,000 villages had been removed from the poverty list by the end of 2020". http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-04/06/c_139862741.htm, accessed August 2022.

¹⁶ The 'population without household registration' refers to people whose residence after birth has not yet been registered, or who have moved out of their originally registered residence and are yet to register their new residence.

Figure 11: Total population and child population, by Han ethnic majority and ethnic minority, 1982–2020 (millions)

	National	Han	Ethnic minority	% of ethnic minority
Total population				
1982	1,008.18	940.88	67.30	6.7
1990	1,133.68	1,042.48	91.20	8.0
2000	1,265.83	1,159.40	106.43	8.4
2010	1,339.72	1,225.93	113.79	8.5
2020	1,411.78	1,286.31	125.47	8.9
Child population				
1982	410.10	378.98	31.13	7.6
1990	382.67	345.25	37.42	9.8
2000	345.34	309.94	35.39	10.2
2010	278.91	248.28	30.63	11.0
2020	297.66	263.06	34.59	11.6

Sources: National Bureau of Statistics, 1982, 1990, 2000, 2010 and 2020 National Population Censuses

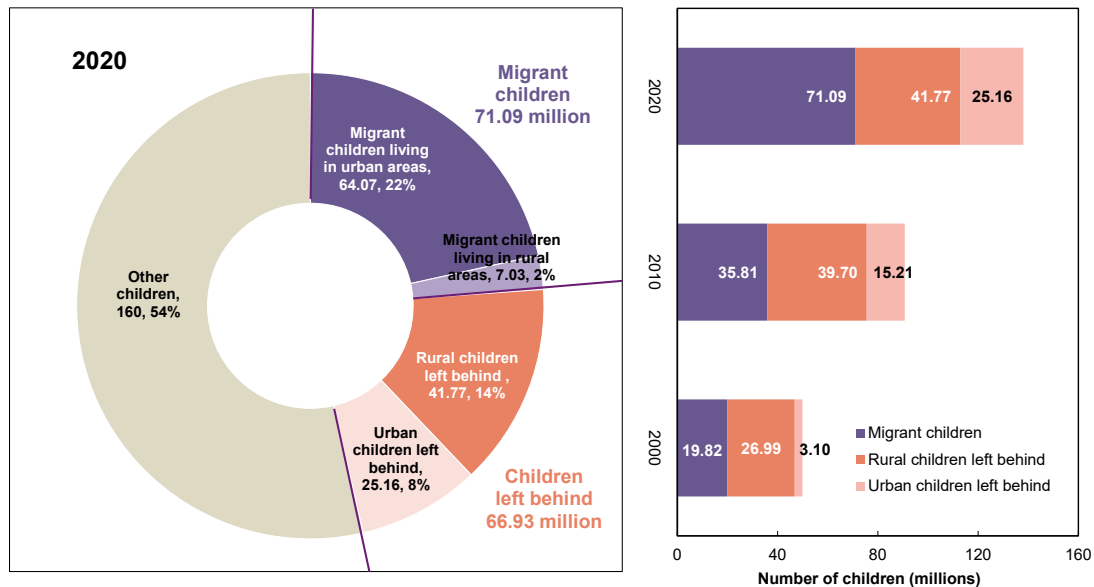
4. Children affected by migration¹⁷

Internal migration in China has become more active, with the migrant population increasing from 221 million in 2010 to 376 million in 2020, a growth of 69.7%. The proportion of migrants in the total population reached 26.6%. This massive internal migration continuously affects children in increasingly significant ways. Children are affected by migration in various scenarios: some travel with their migrant parents, some are left behind in their hometowns while one or both parents migrate, and some other children (often older) go out of their hometown by themselves for study or work. A child's identity as a 'migrant child' or 'child left behind' is often not fixed and a child might move between the two identities with changes in her or his family situation, age, and the stage of education.

4.1 Size

In 2020, the number of migrant children was 71.09 million, and the number of children left behind was 66.93 million. Adding these two groups together, the total number of children affected by migration was 138 million, accounting for 46.4% of the total child population in China. That is, nearly half of the children in China were directly affected by migration.

Figure 13: Number and composition of migrant children and children left behind, 2000, 2010 and 2020



Note: In the doughnut chart the number refers to the child population in millions, and the percentage refers to its share of the total child population.

Sources: National Bureau of Statistics, 2000, 2010 and 2020 National Population Censuses

Consistent with the general trend of urbanization, there was a large increase of 47.30 million children affected by migration in the ten years leading up to 2020. In 2020, the number of migrant children was twice that of 2010, and the number of urban children left behind had increased by 65.4%. The number of rural children left behind had only increased by 5.2%, or 2.07 million. However, against the backdrop of the 28.6% decrease in the rural child population during 2010–2020, the fact that the number of rural children left behind increased and its proportion within the rural child population increased noticeably highlights that the issue of rural children being left behind has intensified with the deepening of urbanization. It is worth noting the changing patterns: in 2010, children left behind outnumbered migrant children, but this was no longer the case in 2020 when the share of migrant children in all children affected by migration rose to 51.5%, slightly higher than that of children left behind. This means, in comparison with 2010, children affected by migration were more likely to migrate together with their parents or migrate for study or work on their own in 2020. Behind this change are a series of supporting policies, including the implementation of the new urbanization plan, reform of the household registration system, and local enrollment of migrant children, among others.

The proportion of migrant children among all children in 2020 was 23.9%, which was only slightly less than the proportion of migrants (26.6%) in the total population. While the majority (79.7%) of migrant children came from rural areas, they were highly concentrated in urban areas, with 90.1% of migrant children, or 64.07 million, living in urban areas. The proportion of migrant children among urban children was 34.2%, meaning 1 of every 3 children in urban areas was a migrant child.

Children left behind were mainly in rural areas. In 2020, the number of children left behind in rural areas reached 41.77 million,^{18,19} accounting for 62.4% of all children left behind and 37.9% of all rural children, meaning nearly 4 out of every 10 children in rural areas were left behind.

¹⁷ For more information about children affected by migration, refer to part five of this publication: *Family structure and living arrangements for children*, and part six: *The status of child and adolescent education*.

¹⁸ In most discussions of 'children left behind', this term refers to those living in rural areas, and this publication focuses on this group.

¹⁹ The definition of children left behind used in this publication is: children who live in the location of their household registration, but who do not live together with both parents, because either one parent or both parents have migrated outside their hometown for more than six months. Rural children left behind refer to children left behind whose household registration locations are in rural areas. It is important to note that this is different from the definition used by the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA), which stated in 2020 that the number of rural children left behind was 6.44 million. The definition used by the MCA is that used in the *Notice on Implementation of the Survey on Rural Children Left Behind*: "Both parents are migrant workers, or one parent is a migrant worker and the other parent lacks child supervision ability, and the child is under the age of 16".

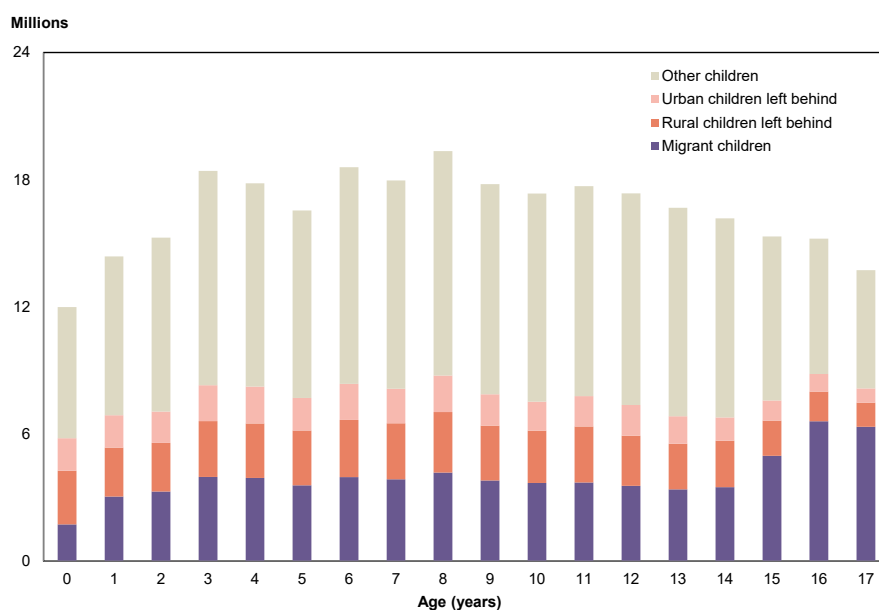
Although children left behind in rural areas continue to be a focus of policy, urban children left behind deserve increased attention along with the deepening of urbanization. Initially the migrant population in China almost all came from rural areas, so ‘migrant children’ are usually understood as children from rural areas, and ‘children left behind’ normally refers to rural children left behind. Between 2000 and 2020, the number of urban children left behind rapidly rose to 25.16 million, accounting for 37.6% of the total number of children left behind. However, existing policies focusing on children left behind almost all target rural areas. The government should proceed with designing a policy framework for urban children left behind.

Children affected by migration face a series of challenges to their development. Migrant children lose access to traditional family and community support systems, and they are confronted with difficulties and discrimination in terms of education, medical treatment, social security, among others. As for children left behind, with one or both parents working away from home, it is difficult for them to receive full emotional support and help with studies from their family, which can be detrimental to their physical, emotional and mental health. These challenges require adequate social and policy responses.

4.2 Age

Younger children are more likely to be left behind, and older children are more likely to migrate (Figure 14). In 2020, the average age of children left behind was 7.7 years, lower than the average age of migrant children (9.5 years).

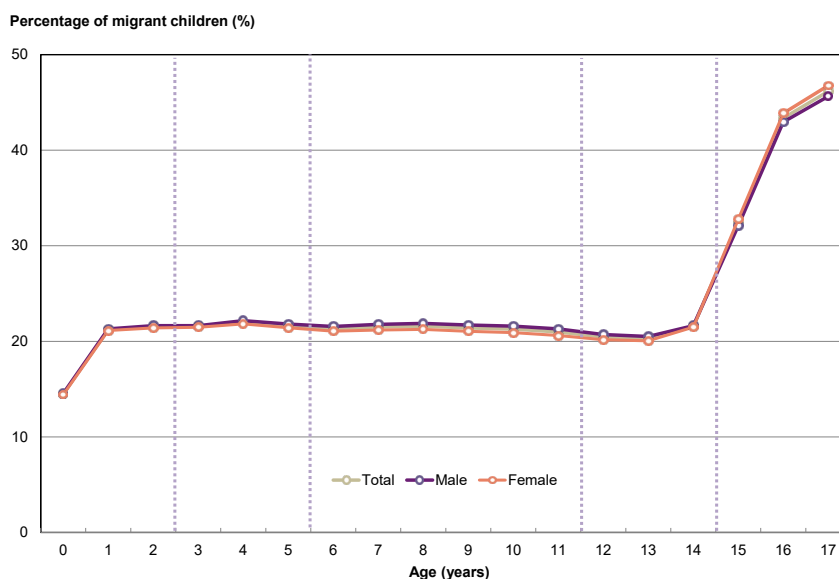
Figure 14: Number of migrant children and children left behind, by age, 2020



Source: National Bureau of Statistics, 2020 National Population Census

Children’s migration participation rates have a clear age pattern, demonstrating the barriers associated with *hukou* and restricted access to public services: (1) children under one year old have the lowest migration participation rate, and children aged 1 have a slightly higher migration participation rate. This may indicate that many migrant women return to their hometown to give birth when they are pregnant or send children back to their hometown after birth, and when their children are a little older, they bring them along when migrating for work; (2) the migration participation rate of school-age children has been stable; (3) one quarter of migrant children were aged 15–17 years, with an average migration participation rate of 40.4%, much higher than that of other age groups. Among migrant children aged 15–17 years, 71.7% migrated for study and 6.6% for work.

Figure 15: Migration participation rate of children, by sex and age, 2020



Source: National Bureau of Statistics, 2020 National Population Census

4.3 Sex

In 2020 migrant parents did not demonstrate a significant preference for boys when they migrated with their children, as seen in 2010. Figure 15 shows that the migration participation rate of girls in all age groups was similar to that of boys, indicating there were equal opportunities for both girls and boys to migrate with their parents and receive better care and benefits from urban resources and public services.

There are gender differences in terms of reasons for migration among children aged 15–17 years. In this age group 7.9% of migrant boys migrated for work, compared to 5.0% for girls; 70.0% of migrant boys migrated for study, which is lower than girls at 73.6%. Children who leave school and become the new generation of migrant workers before they reach adulthood face more challenges in receiving further education and social inclusion.

4.4 Regional distribution

Migrant children and rural children left behind were concentrated in a few provinces, with some provinces holding large numbers of both migrant children and children left behind (Figure 16a and Figure 16b). In 2020, nine provinces each had more than 3 million migrant children, with a total of 39.69 million, accounting for 55.8% of migrant children in the whole country.

Eight provinces each had more than 2 million rural children left behind, with a total of 25.70 million, accounting for 61.5% of all rural children left behind. Among these eight provinces, Henan had the largest number of rural children left behind, exceeding 6 million. In some provinces, such as Chongqing, Guangxi, Henan and Guizhou, the proportion of rural children left behind was quite high, accounting for around half of the total rural child population.

Figure 16a: Number of migrant children, by province, 2020

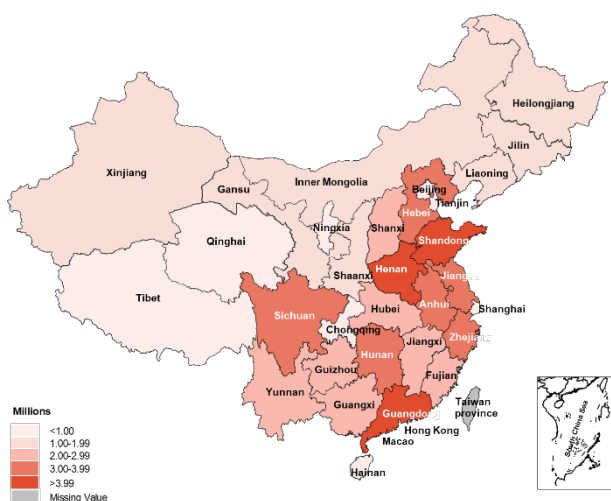
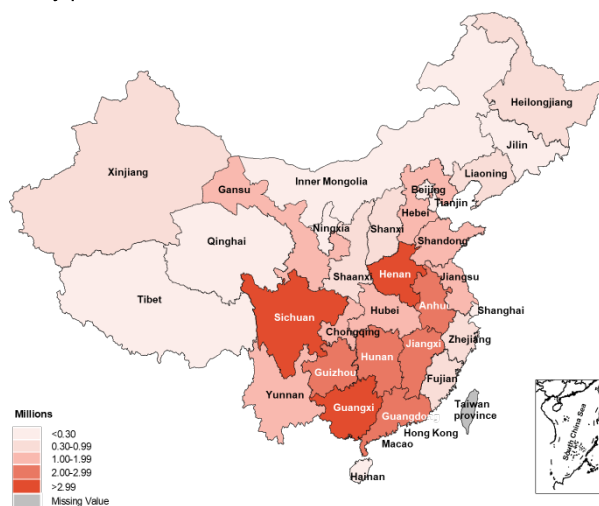


Figure 16b: Number of rural children left behind, by province, 2020



Source: National Bureau of Statistics, 2020 National Population Census

4.5 Migration distance

Looking at the flow of migration based on administrative distance, 79.4% of migrant children migrated within provinces, which means the majority was short distance flow. The remaining 20.6% of migrant children migrated to other provinces, which is much lower than the proportion of inter-province migration of adult migrants (36.2%).

Children of senior secondary stage (15–17 years) had the lowest proportion of inter-province migration (13.3%). With the advancement of senior secondary and higher education in the past ten years, the Government of China has taken several measures to resolve the issues associated with migrant children's education.²⁰ However, inter-province migrant children who have completed compulsory education continued to face barriers to accessing senior secondary education and to participating in the college entrance examination, and many returned to their home provinces where they had a registered residence.

In terms of migration destination provinces, besides municipalities such as Beijing, Shanghai and Tianjin, developed provinces including Zhejiang, Guangdong and Jiangsu were the most attractive locations for inter-province migration. In Zhejiang, 51.2% of migrant children came from other provinces in 2020. The proportion of inter-province child migration exceeded 40% in Guangdong, and reached 35.3% in Jiangsu.

²⁰ As early as 1998, the State Education Commission (the Ministry of Education at that time) and the Ministry of Public Security promulgated the *Interim Measure of School Education for Temporary Migrant Children and Adolescents*, and put forward two main practices to ensure access to compulsory education, focusing on the local government and the public schools in migration destinations. The *Compulsory Education Law*, which was amended in 2006, specifically indicated that migrant children are entitled to equal access to nine years of compulsory education. The *National Outline for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010–2020)* also reiterated the need to focus on local government efforts in migration destinations and the efforts put forth by full-time public primary and secondary schools to resolve the issue of migrant children's education.

5. Family structure and living arrangements for children

5.1 Families with children

The size of families in China is shrinking, from 3.4 persons per family in 2000 to 2.6 persons per family in 2020. Moreover, the number of families with children is declining, and the number of children in each family is also changing (Figure 17).

There were 494 million families in China, of which 184 million families (37.2%) had children aged 0–17 in 2020. The proportion of families with children varied among provinces. Only 23.4% of families in Shanghai, 27.0% in Beijing and 31.3% in Tianjin had children in 2020. The proportion was higher in central and western provinces, and in provinces with high concentrations of ethnic minorities, including Tibet where 46.2% of families had children. Tibet had a family size of 3.2 persons, the largest among all provinces.

In 2020, families with only one child accounted for 60.1% of all families with children, while families with two children accounted for 32.9%, and families with three or more children accounted for the remaining 7.0%. In urban areas 63.2% of families with children had only one child, whereas in rural areas this proportion was 54.8%.

Figure 17: Distribution of families with children, 2000, 2010 and 2020

	Family size (number of persons)	Proportion of families with children (%)	Distribution by number of children (%)			
			One	Two	Three or more	Total
2000	3.4	63.4	59.3	30.8	9.9	100
2010	3.1	47.2	66.6	27.3	6.1	100
2020	2.6	37.2	60.1	32.9	7.0	100

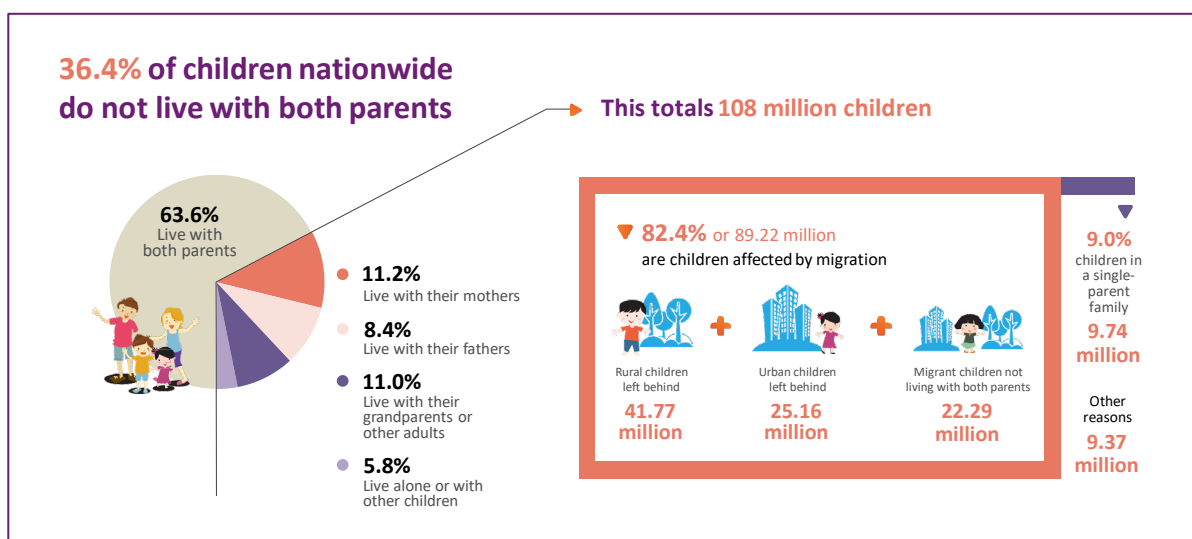
Sources: National Bureau of Statistics, 2000, 2010 and 2020 National Population Censuses

5.2 Living arrangements

In terms of children's living arrangements, in 2020 63.6% of children lived with both parents, 19.6% of children lived with one parent, and 16.8% of children could not live with either parent.

It is estimated that 108 million children did not live with both parents in 2020, an increase of 30.46 million compared to 2010. The majority of children not living with both parents were children affected by migration, including 41.77 million rural children left behind, 25.16 million urban children left behind and 22.29 million children who did not live with both parents due to migration (excluding rural children who lived in a town/township outside their household registration location but still in the same county), accounting for 82.4% in total. Another reason why children cannot live with both parents was the parents' divorce or the loss of a parent. In 2020, 3.3% of children in the country were living with only one parent because of the parents' divorce or widowhood, accounting for 9.0% of all children who cannot live with both parents (Figure 18).

Figure 18: Living arrangements for children, 2020



Source: National Bureau of Statistics, 2020 National Population Census

As indicated in Figure 19, there was no noticeable gender difference in terms of children's living arrangements. However, the proportion of rural children living with both parents was much lower than that of urban children. In particular, among rural children left behind, 54.4% lived with one of the parents, 27.1% lived with their grandparents when both parents migrated, and 5.6% lived with other adults. Moreover, 12.9% of rural children left behind lived alone or with other children, making their safety, health, living and learning conditions particular concerns.

Among migrant children, data shows that 61.8% lived with both parents, 13.1% lived with one of their parents, and 3.5% lived with their grandparents. In addition, a considerable proportion of migrant children (21.7%) lived with 'other people' rather than parents or grandparents, potentially because some of these children were attending boarding school or working outside their hometown.

Figure 19: Living arrangements for children, by urban-rural, sex and child category, 2020

	All children	Urban	Rural	Male	Female	Child category*					
						UCLB	RCLB	MC	EMC	CPPA	
Population (millions)	297.66	187.34	110.31	158.42	139.24	25.16	41.77	71.09	34.59	65.17	
Living arrangements (%)											
Living with both parents	63.6	67.2	57.9	63.8	63.3	-	-	61.8	62.9	56.3	
Not living with both parents	36.4	32.8	42.1	36.2	36.7	100	100	38.2	37.1	43.7	
Living with one parent	Living with father	8.4	6.3	11.6	8.5	8.2	27.0	24.6	3.8	8.3	9.7
	#Father divorced or widowed	1.9	1.4	2.6	2.0	1.7	-	-	1.0	2.0	2.1
	Living with mother	11.2	10.6	12.2	11.0	11.5	41.0	29.8	9.3	11.4	13.8
	#Mother divorced or widowed	1.4	1.6	1.1	1.3	1.5	-	-	1.2	1.9	1.4
Not living with either parent	Living with grandparents	6.1	3.6	10.1	6.1	6.1	16.9	27.1	3.5	6.8	9.0
	Living with other adults	4.8	6.1	2.8	4.6	5.1	8.9	5.6	11.0	5.2	4.8
	Living alone or with other children	5.8	6.1	5.4	5.9	5.7	6.1	12.9	10.6	5.4	6.5

* UCLB – Urban Children Left Behind; RCLB – Rural Children Left Behind; MC – Migrant Children; EMC – Ethnic Minority Children; CPPA – Children in Previously Poverty-stricken Areas

Source: National Bureau of Statistics, 2020 National Population Census

Children generally benefit from living with both their mother and father. When developing and improving childcare and family policies, more attention needs to be given to children who are not living with both parents, especially those who do not live with their mothers. Evidence has shown that pre-school children living with their mothers usually receive better parenting and care;²¹ for school-age children left behind, their mothers' care has shown to be positive for their academic performance.²²

More mothers migrated in the ten years leading up to 2020. This reflected the favourable growth of women's participation in the labour market over the preceding decade, however, it also led to the lack of mother's engagement in children's development. The 2020 Census data indicated that many young children did not live with their mothers. Nationally, 22.6% of children aged 0–2 years were cared for by persons other than their mothers, and over one-third of rural children aged 0–2 years were not living with their mothers. The absence of mothers during early childhood is one of the key contributors to cognitive delay, and mother-child separation is not conducive to the promotion of breastfeeding and child nutrition. Economists advocate for investing in early childhood development as the most cost-effective way to realize sustainable development. This should also include investment in parenting, by both mothers and fathers.

Whether both parents or one parent migrated, grandparents were the main caregivers of children left behind, especially for younger children left behind. Among rural children left behind aged 0–5 years, 28.0% were taken care of by their grandparents after both parents migrated, and 40.4% lived with the remaining parent and grandparents after the other parent migrated.

5.3 Household water and sanitation facilities

The water and sanitation conditions in houses²³ were greatly improved between 2000 and 2020. In 2000, 45.7% of households had piped tap water facilities. This proportion increased to 64.6% in 2010, and further increased to 91.3% in 2020. In 2000, 72% of households in the country had toilets, with a similar level (72.5%) in 2010. The proportion of households with toilets significantly increased in the following ten years, reaching 96.6% in 2020. The function and quality of toilets have also been improved, with 78.5% of households having sanitary water flushed toilets and 6.8% of households having sanitary dry latrines, which means 85.3% of households had sanitary toilets in their houses in 2020.

The gap between urban and rural areas is noticeable. In 2020, 82.4% of rural households had piped tap water in 2020, 14.1 percentage points lower than urban households; 71.0% of rural households had sanitary toilets in 2020, 22.7 percentage points lower than urban households.

²¹ Bai Yu, Yang Ning, Wang Lei, Zhang Siqi, 'The impacts of maternal migration on the cognitive development of preschool-aged children left behind in rural China', *World Development*, 158 (2022)

²² Hao Mingsong, 'Parents' migration pattern and the academic performance of rural children left behind: A further study based on two rounds of CEPS data', *Population Journal*, no. 12, 2022

²³ The Census asked about information regarding water and sanitation facilities in the houses. Those who did not have sanitation facilities in their houses might use toilets in other places, including public toilets.

6. The status of child and adolescent education

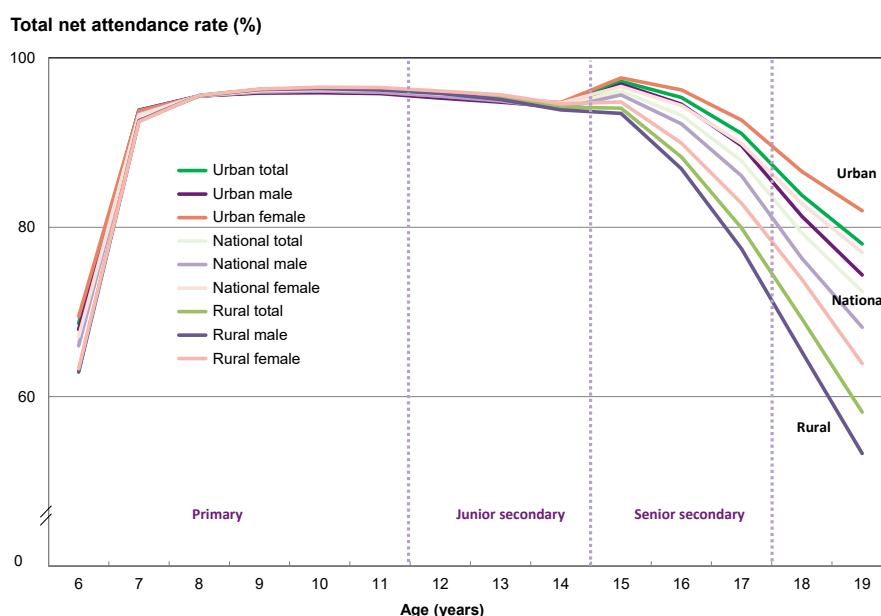
6.1 Status and progress

There was no obvious urban-rural or sex difference in terms of children's school attendance rate²⁴ at the compulsory education stage in 2010 or in 2020. However, as children get older, especially at senior secondary stage and during adolescence, their attendance rate fell gradually, and the urban-rural disparity became prominent. The education status of girls, especially urban girls, was better than that of boys (Figure 20). This trend is also reflected in other education indicators such as the completion rate (Figure 26).

In the 20-year period from 2000, China has realized the universalization of compulsory education and made significant leaps in improving access to senior secondary education. Government expenditure on education has increased substantially over the years, and expenditure as a percentage of GDP increased from 2.6% in 2000 to 3.6% in 2010, and reached 4.2% in 2020. This has provided strong financial support to the implementation of various education policies, benefiting a large number of children in urban and rural areas. Today, nine-year compulsory education has entered a new stage of consolidating the achievement of 'basically balanced development at the county level', promoting the quality and balanced development of compulsory education and urban-rural integration.²⁵ The attendance rate in senior secondary education has increased from 55.6% in 2000 to 80.6% in 2010, and to 92.4% in 2020. This has laid a good foundation for further improving the universalization of senior secondary education during the 14th Five-Year Plan period.

There are still many barriers and challenges in the education system in China. The inequality between urban and rural areas, between Han and ethnic minority children, and in specific vulnerable groups still require further attention. There are still some children who are not attending school. Moreover, over-age school enrollment among children and adolescents exists.

Figure 20: The attendance rate of children and adolescents aged 6–19, by urban-rural, sex and age, 2020



Source: National Bureau of Statistics, 2020 National Population Census

6.2 Gaps between groups

Measured by attendance rates, although rural and ethnic minority children were still lagging behind urban and Han children respectively, the gaps narrowed during 2000–2020. Differences between migrant children and all urban children, and between rural children left behind and all rural children virtually disappeared in 2020. This stands in contrast to 2000, when the attendance rate of migrant children was 12.5 percentage points lower than that of all urban children, and the attendance rate of rural children left behind was 5 percentage points higher than all rural children (Figure 21). The convergence of attendance rates in 2020 reflects the impact of relevant policies on migrant children and the improvement of education participation in both urban and rural areas. In the process of realizing equal opportunities for participation, more attention should be paid to the equality of education quality.

Figure 21: Attendance rate of children aged 6–17, 2000, 2010 and 2020 (%)

	Children aged 6–17	By urban-rural		By sex		By ethnicity		By migratory status	
		Urban	Rural	Male	Female	Han	Ethnic minority	Migrant children	Rural children left behind
2000	86.1	90.1	84.4	87.1	85.1	87.2	77.1	77.6	89.4
2010	91.8	93.7	90.3	91.6	92.1	92.4	87.0	88.0	91.4
2020	92.0	92.6	91.1	91.7	92.4	92.3	89.9	92.5	91.0

Sources: National Bureau of Statistics, 2000, 2010 and 2020 National Population Censuses

²⁴ If not specified, attendance rate means 'total net attendance rate', which is the total number of students of the official age group for a given level of education who are attending school at any level of education, expressed as a percentage of the corresponding population (UNESCO). In this publication, 'any level of education' refers to primary education and above.

²⁵ 'Outline of the 14th Five-Year Plan (2021–2025) for National Economic and Social Development and Vision 2035 of the People's Republic of China', https://www.fujian.gov.cn/english/news/202108/t20210809_5665713.htm, accessed August 2022.

The urban-rural disparity was more prominent after the compulsory education stage. For example, in 2020 the attendance rate of rural children at the age of senior secondary education (aged 15–17 years) was 88.0%, lower than that of urban children by 6.5 percentage points. Child education in rural areas of central and western provinces lagged behind significantly and this requires attention.

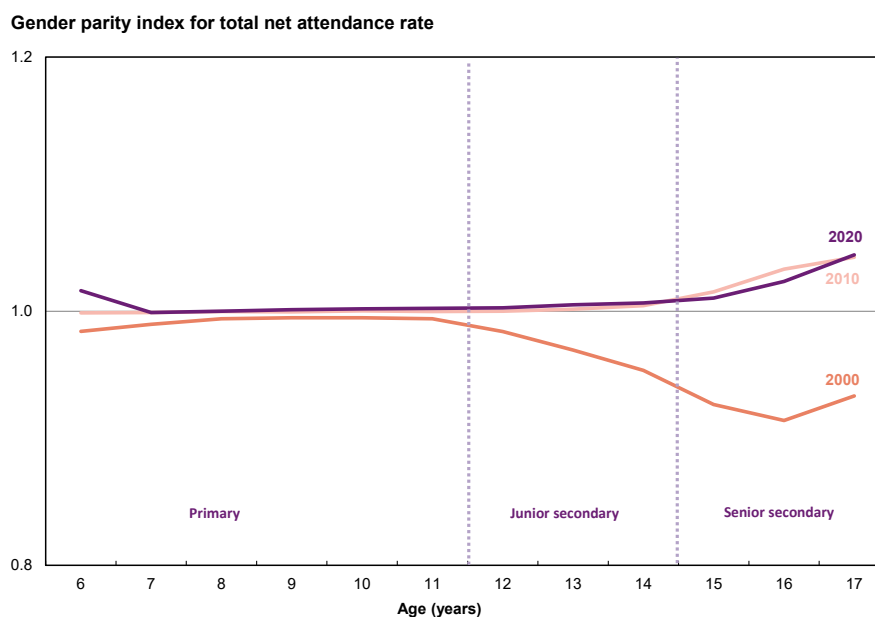
Figure 22: Attendance rate of children aged 6–17, by urban-rural, sex, age and migratory status, 2020 (%)

	Total	Urban	Rural	Male	Female	Migrant children	Rural children left behind
Aged 6–17	92.0	92.6	91.1	91.7	92.4	92.5	91.0
Aged 6–11	90.5	90.6	90.2	90.3	90.6	90.9	89.9
Aged 12–14	95.0	94.9	95.2	94.8	95.3	94.5	95.1
Aged 15–17	92.4	94.5	88.0	91.4	93.7	93.3	88.4
Aged 7–11	95.4	95.4	95.5	95.4	95.5	95.6	95.3
Aged 7–17	94.5	95.0	93.8	94.2	94.9	94.4	94.0

Source: National Bureau of Statistics, 2020 National Population Census

In terms of gender, girls' participation in education at all levels and their completion of compulsory education were lower than boys in 2000, but this 'male-advantage' has reversed since 2010. Figure 23 utilizes the gender parity index²⁶ to characterize changes in gender differences in school attendance between 2000 and 2020, and it shows that the attendance rates among boys and girls at the age of primary education have been very similar since 2000. The attendance rate was higher among boys at the age of junior secondary education in 2000, however, this difference has disappeared since 2010, with similar attendance rates among boys and girls. The difference in attendance rates between boys and girls at the age of senior secondary education was even more apparent than that of junior secondary age, with boys having obvious advantages over girls in 2000. Thus, the reversal was also more evident in this age group between 2010 and 2020, with the attendance rate of girls at the age of senior secondary education higher than that of boys since 2010.

Figure 23: Gender parity index for attendance rate, by age, 2000, 2010 and 2020



Sources: National Bureau of Statistics, 2000, 2010 and 2020 National Population Censuses

6.3 Out-of-school children

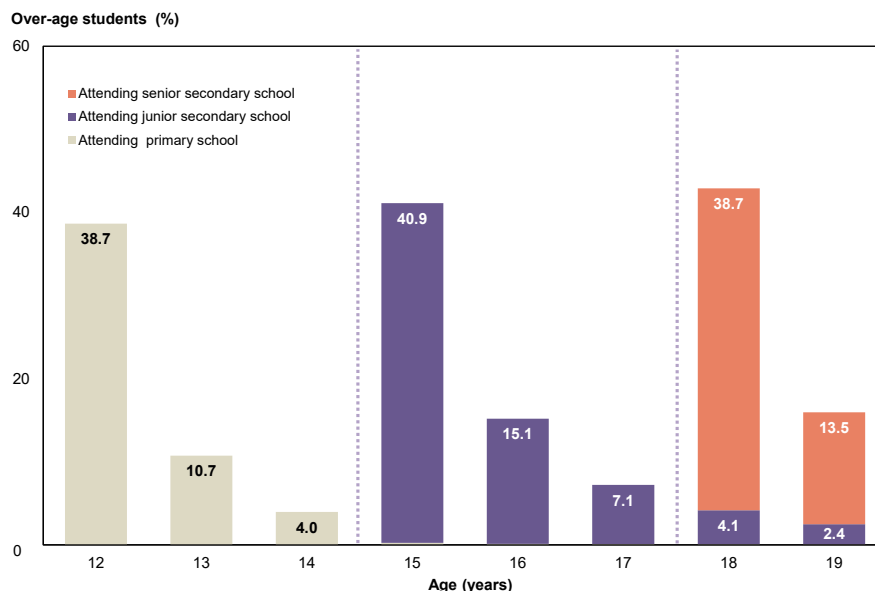
Some 8.0% of all children aged 6–17 years, or an estimated 16 million children, were out of school. Apart from 6.21 million children aged 6 who had not yet begun schooling, there were 9.79 million children aged 7–17 who were out of school, including 3.16 million children who were at the age of senior secondary education (aged 15–17). Correspondingly, the attendance rate of children at the age of senior secondary education was also relatively low (92.4%), with a much lower attendance rate among rural adolescents aged 19 at 58.2%, indicating that a considerable proportion of children and adolescents had no opportunities to access senior secondary education or above after they completed compulsory education.

²⁶ The gender parity index is defined as the ratio of female to male values of a given indicator. Here the gender parity index is used to represent the gender difference in the total net attendance rate. A gender parity index equal to 1 indicates parity between females and males. In general, a value less than 1 indicates a disparity in favour of boys and a value greater than 1 indicates a disparity in favour of girls (UNESCO).

6.4 Over-age students

In this publication, over-age attendance refers to children and adolescents who are attending a level of education even though their age exceeds the prescribed age range for that level. According to the provisions of the Compulsory Education Law, China's prescribed age range²⁷ for primary education is 6–11 years old, for junior secondary education it is 12–14 years old, and for senior secondary education it is 15–17 years old. The revised Compulsory Education Law of 2006 reaffirmed the importance of age-appropriate school enrollment and defined the relevant obligations of the child's legal guardian.²⁸ Studies have shown that over-age students face more challenges, for example, they are more likely to drop out of school. Therefore, in addition to ensuring children and adolescents have access to education, efforts should be undertaken to ensure they are accessing age-appropriate education. Although over-age attendance of children and adolescents decreased overall between 2000 and 2020, it is relatively common in rural areas.

Figure 24: Proportion of over-age students among all children of the same age group, by age, 2020



Source: National Bureau of Statistics, 2020 National Population Census

Based on the 2020 Census data, although about one third of children aged 6 were not attending primary school, the percentage of children aged 7 attending school was 93.3%. When examining the proportion of over-age students, it may be more practical to assume that children enroll in primary school at age 7.²⁹ In this scenario, 10.7% of children aged 13 were attending primary school, 15.1% of children aged 16 were attending junior secondary school, and 13.5% of students aged 19 were attending senior secondary school. A smaller proportion of students aged 18–19 were attending junior secondary school. Among over-age students there were no differences in terms of gender, but urban-rural differences are clear: 14.5% of children aged 13 and 5.2% aged 14 in rural areas were attending primary school, 27.1% of rural children aged 16, 12.8% aged 17 and 6.8% aged 18 were attending junior secondary school, and 17.2% of rural adolescents aged 19 were attending senior secondary school. Over-age attendance was also more common among ethnic minority children.

The SDG indicator measuring over-age attendance is the “percentage of pupils in each level of education (primary and lower secondary general education) who are at least 2 years above the intended age for their grade”. However, this cannot be estimated using China's census data because information about students' grades in education was not collected. As a proxy and shown in Figure 25, nationally 2.4% of primary school students were aged 13 or above, and 9.8% of junior secondary school students were aged 16 or above.

Figure 25: Proportion of over-age students in primary and junior secondary education, 2020 (%)

	National	Urban	Rural	Male	Female
Proportion of students aged 13 and above among all primary school students	2.4	1.8	3.3	2.4	2.4
Proportion of students aged 16 and above among all junior secondary school students	9.8	8.2	11.9	10.0	9.6

Source: National Bureau of Statistics, 2020 National Population Census

²⁷ The Compulsory Education Law stipulates that “children who are at least six years of age, regardless of gender, ethnicity and race, shall be enrolled in compulsory education for a specified period of time, and in areas where conditions are inadequate, children can postpone primary school enrollment to age 7”.

²⁸ Article 58 of the revised Compulsory Education Law promulgated in 2006 stipulates that “parents or legal guardians of school-age children and adolescents, who have not provided opportunities to access compulsory education in accordance with the provisions, will be warned by the local town/township government or the county government's education department and ordered to make corrections within a specified time”.

²⁹ There are a small number of areas in China that allow children to enroll in primary school at age 7. Furthermore, the Census Day is November 1, but the school year starts on September 1. Due to the difference of two months, children at the appropriate education stage born in September or October would have aged by one year and may be counted as over-age students.

6.5 Completion of compulsory and senior secondary education

The SDG uses the indicator of completion rate to assess the status of children and adolescents in completing a certain level of education. It is defined as the “percentage of a cohort of children or young people aged 3–5 years above the intended age for the last grade of each level of education who have completed that grade”. As per China’s official primary school’s entrance age and number of grades in each level of education, the reference age group is 14–16 years old for completing primary education, 17–19 years old for completing junior secondary education, and 20–22 years old for completing senior secondary education. In 2020, the completion rate of primary education was 98.2%, the completion rate of junior secondary education was 93.8%, and the completion rate of senior secondary education was 73.9%.

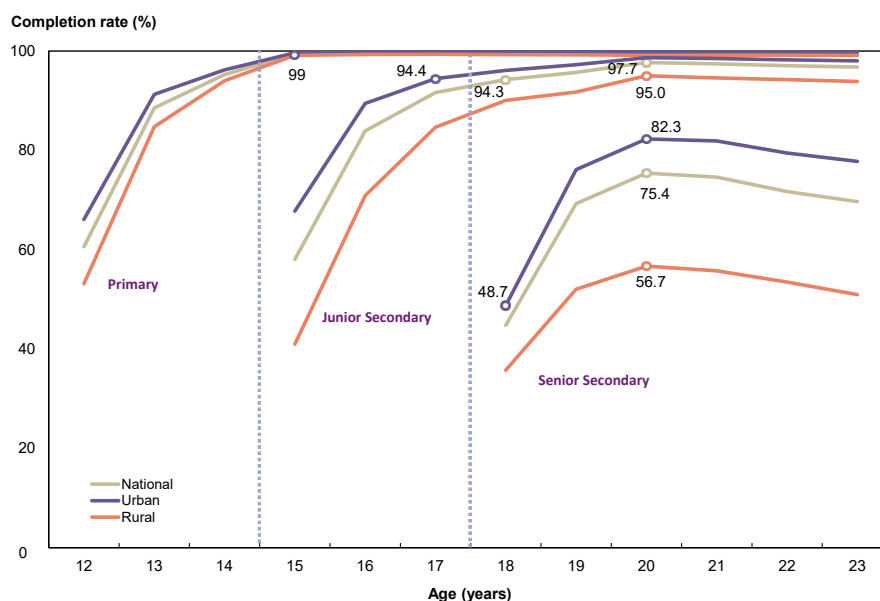
Figure 26: Completion rates of primary, junior secondary and senior secondary education, 2020 (%)

	National	Urban	Rural	Male	Female
Completion rate of primary education (aged 14–16)	98.2	98.7	97.3	98.2	98.2
Completion rate of junior secondary education (aged 17–19)	93.8	95.9	88.8	93.5	94.1
Completion rate of senior secondary education (aged 20–22)	73.9	81.2	55.3	71.0	77.0

Source: National Bureau of Statistics, 2020 National Population Census

By individual age, in 2020, the completion rate of primary education was basically stabilized at above 99% by age 15. The completion rate of junior secondary education reached 94.3% at age 18, and it reached a peak of 97.7% at age 20. This is consistent with the fact that some students aged 18–19 were still attending junior secondary school. The completion rate of senior secondary education reached a peak of 75.4% at age 20.

Figure 27: Completion rates of primary, junior secondary and senior secondary education, by urban-rural and age, 2020



Source: National Bureau of Statistics, 2020 National Population Census

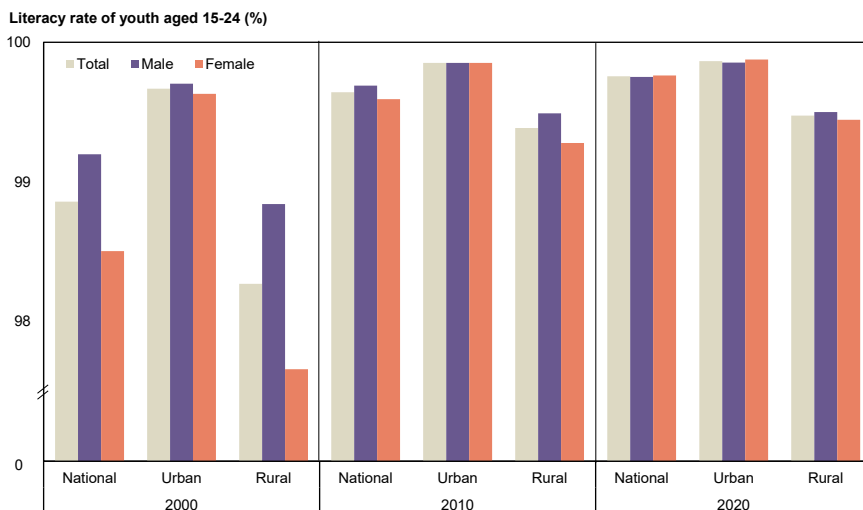
There was no significant urban-rural difference in the completion rate of primary education, but on average the age of rural children who completed primary education was older than that of urban children. The completion rate of junior secondary education in rural areas was slightly lower than urban areas, and the issue of over-age attendance was more apparent. The majority of students in rural areas completed junior secondary school by age 20 (95.0%), while students in urban areas reached a similar level by age 17. In addition to the fact that children in rural areas complete senior secondary education at older ages, there were also differences in the completion rate. The completion rate of senior secondary education at age 20 was 56.7% in rural areas, 25.6 percentage points lower than that in urban areas.

Gender differences in completion rates of primary and junior secondary education were not significant, but noticeable in senior secondary education, in both urban and rural areas. The senior secondary completion rate among women aged 18 was 47.6%, 5.2 percentage points higher than men. It was 78.5% among women aged 20, 6.0 percentage points higher than men.

6.6 Youth literacy rate

Basic reading, writing and numeracy skills are crucial for personal development. It is particularly important for youth aged 15–24 years who are about to or have just entered adulthood, and their human capital can predict the future social and economic development of a country. With the universalization of compulsory education, the literacy rate of China’s youth aged 15–24 years remained high between 2010 (99.6%) and 2020 (99.8%), having increased from 2000. There was no clear gender difference in youth literacy rates in 2020. There was only a slight difference between urban and rural areas, but the difference is not as apparent as in 2000.

Figure 28: Literacy rate of youth aged 15–24, by urban-rural, sex, 2000, 2010 and 2020



Sources: National Bureau of Statistics, 2000, 2010 and 2020 National Population Censuses

7. Marriage and fertility among adolescents aged 15–19

The adolescent marriage rate in China remained low between 2000 and 2020. In 2020, there were 72.68 million people aged 15–19 years, of which about 500,000 or 0.7% were married. Significant differences by sex, age, urban-rural residence and ethnicity were found among married adolescents:

- The proportion of adolescent females married was higher than adolescent males. The marriage rate of women aged 15–19 was 1.1%, corresponding to about 380,000 adolescent females. The marriage rate of men of the same age group was only 0.3%, corresponding to about 120,000 adolescent males.
- Most of the married adolescents were aged 18–19 years, accounting for 80.9% of the married population aged 15–19 years.
- The adolescent marriage rate in rural areas (1.3%) was higher than that of urban areas (0.4%). The marriage rate of adolescent females aged 19 years in rural areas was high at 6.1%.
- The marriage rate was higher among ethnic minority adolescents, with a high marriage rate of adolescent females aged 19 years at 7.8%.
- Nationally, the proportion of young people aged 20–24 years who were married before age 18 was 1.7%. The proportion was higher for women (2.8%) than men (0.7%), and higher in rural areas (3.4%) than in urban areas (1.0%).

Figure 29: Adolescent marriage rate, 2000, 2010 and 2020 (%)

	National			Urban			Rural		
	T	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F
2000	0.7	0.3	1.2	0.3	0.1	0.5	1.0	0.4	1.7
2010	1.3	0.6	2.1	0.7	0.3	1.2	1.9	0.9	3.1
2020	0.7	0.3	1.1	0.4	0.2	0.7	1.3	0.5	2.1

Note: T-Total; M-Male; F-Female

Sources: National Bureau of Statistics, 2000, 2010 and 2020 National Population Censuses

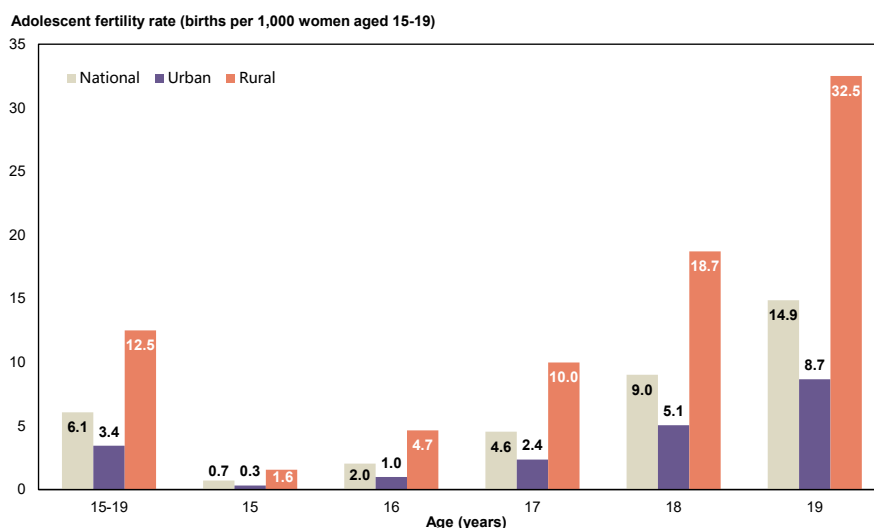
Figure 30: Proportion of young people aged 20–24 years who were married before age 18, 2020 (%)

	Total	Male	Female
National	1.7	0.7	2.8
Urban	1.0	0.5	1.6
Rural	3.4	1.3	5.8

Source: National Bureau of Statistics, 2020 National Population Census

In 2020, the adolescent fertility rate was 6.1 per 1,000 women aged 15–19 years. Like the marriage rate, the adolescent fertility rate also showed significant differences by age and urban-rural residence. The majority of adolescent girls who had children were aged 18–19 years, and the adolescent fertility rate reached 32.5 per 1,000 women aged 19 years in rural areas. Overall, China is still one of the countries with the lowest adolescent fertility rates, with births delivered by adolescent girls only accounting for 1.8% of the total number of births.

Figure 31: Adolescent fertility rate, by urban-rural and age, 2020



Source: National Bureau of Statistics, 2020 National Population Census

8. The employment status of adolescents aged 16–19

The legal age of employment in China is 16 years old. In 2020, there were 57.36 million adolescents aged 16–19 in China, of which about 7 million or 12.4% were employed. Some 83.7% of adolescents aged 16–19 were still attending school, and 3.8% (over 2 million) were neither at school nor employed. Adolescents who are neither at school nor employed need special attention.

Figure 32: Employment and school attendance status of adolescents aged 16–19, 2000, 2010 and 2020 (%)

	2000	2010	2020
Employed	50.8	30.9	12.4
At school	39.3	62.9	83.7
Neither at school nor employed	9.9	6.2	3.8
Total	100	100	100

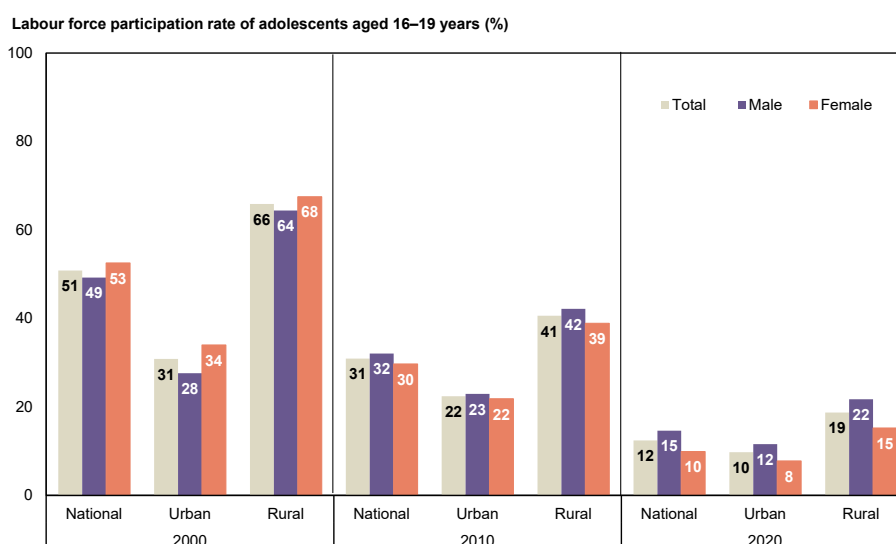
Sources: National Bureau of Statistics, 2000, 2010 and 2020 National Population Censuses

The labour force participation rate of adolescents aged 16–19³⁰ has steadily decreased, from 50.8% in 2000 to 12.4% in 2020. Meanwhile, school attendance rates of this age group increased rapidly, from 39.3% in 2000 to 83.7% in 2020. The decline of the labour force participation rate among adolescents aged 16–19 was closely related to the development of senior secondary education and higher education since the turn of the century.

Rural adolescents entered the labour market at a younger age. The labour force participation rate of adolescents aged 16–19 in rural areas was significantly higher, about twice that of urban areas from 2000 onwards.

In 2000, the labour force participation rates of urban and rural adolescent females were higher than that of adolescent males. Yet, this later reversed, and in 2010 and 2020 the labour force participation rates of urban and rural adolescent females were lower than that of adolescent males, which is in line with the higher school attendance rates of females in this age group.

Figure 33: Labour force participation rate of adolescents aged 16–19, by urban-rural and sex, 2000, 2010 and 2020



Sources: National Bureau of Statistics, 2000, 2010 and 2020 National Population Censuses

³⁰ The calculation of labour force participation rate of adolescents aged 16–19 does not take into account the unemployed population for census years of 2000, 2010 and 2020.

UNICEF

UNICEF is mandated by the United Nations General Assembly to help children around the world realize their rights to survival, development, protection and participation. Our work is guided by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and we are committed to establishing children's rights as enduring ethical principles and international standards for children. Together with our partners, we work in over 190 countries and territories to translate that commitment into practical action for the benefit of children, everywhere.

UNICEF defends and promotes the rights and wellbeing of 298 million children across China. Since 1979, we have worked in partnership with the Government of China in education, water and sanitation, child health and nutrition, and child protection for those who are most in need. UNICEF also provides humanitarian assistance during emergencies.

Our approach begins with gathering data and research. We work with the Government of China to carry out innovative projects to improve children's lives. The results of these projects inform national policies, legislation and guidelines so children come first. This helps improve the lives of millions of children across China.

For more information on UNICEF China, please visit <http://www.unicef.cn>.

UNFPA

UNFPA – the United Nations Population Fund – is the UN's sexual and reproductive health agency. It works in more than 150 countries, to deliver a world where every pregnancy is wanted, every childbirth is safe and every young person's potential is fulfilled.

Through research, capacity building, advocacy, pilot projects and interventions, UNFPA aims at:

- Enabling women and young people, particularly groups left behind, to access high quality, rights-based, gender responsive, affordable sexual and reproductive health services.
- Enhancing youth leadership and participation in implementing the International Conference on Population and Development Programme of Action and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.
- Providing comprehensive preventative and response services to women and girls in need of protection and care, and promoting positive social norms to support the realization of gender equality and women's rights.
- Inclusion of population issues into policy-making and better responding to low fertility and population ageing by employing a rights-based life-cycle approach.
- Increasing availability of reliable and disaggregated data to address emerging population issues and track the Sustainable Development Goals progress, with a focus on left-behind groups.
- Facilitating knowledge exchange and experience sharing between China and other developing countries through South-South and global cooperation for the achievement of the global agenda, particularly those on reducing maternal deaths, ensuring voluntary family planning, and preventing reproductive cancers including cervical cancer.
- Strengthening collaboration with Chinese institutions and partners to design and deliver evidence-based and demand-driven development and humanitarian cooperation.

For more information on UNFPA in China, please visit <https://china.unfpa.org>.

Data is the foundation for good policy making. In China, UNICEF and UNFPA have been working with the National Bureau of Statistics and other partners to improve availability, analysis and use of data from both regular population census/surveys and administrative reporting systems, and disaggregated by sex, age, region, and other characteristics. The aim is to enhance monitoring and reporting by the national statistical systems on national development plans such as the National Programmes of Action for Women and Children, the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Annex

Annex 1: Child population by age, urban-rural and sex, 2020

Annex 2: Population by broad age group, urban-rural and sex, 2000, 2010 and 2020

Annex 3: Child population aged 0–17 years by province, urban-rural and sex, 2020

Annex 4: Children affected by migration, by urban-rural, sex and age, 2020

Annex 5: Education participation and completion of children and adolescents, by urban-rural, sex and age, 2020

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