

**Left-Behind Children's Educational Performance Drops Slightly After Parents  
Migrated**

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**Abstract**

Millions of children worldwide are “left behind” when their parents migrate away for work. Parents’ labor migration increases household income but decreases parental care, thereby exerting mixed influences on child development, including educational performance. To what extent do different arrangements of parental migration affect children’s schooling performance in the short term? Studying the case of China, I obtained a sample of four thousand junior high school students from a nationally representative two-wave panel survey. I differentiated household migration arrangements of any one parent, of mother only, of father only, and of both parents. I measured children’s educational performance by standardized cognitive test score and academic exam grades. For causal inference, I built difference-in-differences models with propensity score matching. Results show that the new left-behind children’s performance at school dropped slightly compared to that of non-left-behind peers. Father-only migration is negatively associated with children’s cognitive abilities, while mother-only migration is negatively associated with children’s academic grades.

*Keywords:* keywords

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## Left-Behind Children’s Educational Performance Drops Slightly After Parents Migrated

### Introduction

Worldwide, millions of children are resided in their home communities but separated from their parents as either one or both parents have migrated for work. These are the so-called “left-behind children” or “stay-behind children.” They are common in migrant-sending regions, such as Latin America, Sub-Sahara Africa, East Europe, and large parts of Asia. Researchers estimated that one-sixth of Mexican children (DeWaard et al., 2018), one-fifth of Bulgarian children (Popova, 2018), and one-fourth of Chinese children were living apart from their migrating parents (NBS et al., 2017).

How are stay-behind children faring when parents have migrated? Research results are mixed due to the differential effects of parental migration. Consider children’s education. According to the review articles by Brauw (2019) and Van Hook and Glick (2020), labor migrants send remittances back, which can fund children’s schooling as well as improve their nutritional and living conditions. The inflow of remittances, however, cannot substitute for the loss of parental care. Parental migration decreases the amount and quality of parental guidance, protection, and support. It is uncertain how these two opposing effects together shape children’s educational performance, which merits empirical investigation.

A challenge arises when we want to assess the causality between parent’s migration and children’s educational achievement. Experiments can unveil causal relations, but it is unfeasible and unethical to design an experiment that randomly assigns parents to migrate without their children. Alternatively, we can infer causality from a quasi-experimental design – that is, when the cause can be on par with random assignment to participants in the analysis, conditional on identification assumptions (Cunningham, 2021).

In this thesis, my research question is: To what extent do parental migration affect

49 the educational performance of left-behind children in the short term? I choose China as  
50 the case and analyzed data from a two-wave panel survey. The nationally representative  
51 sample includes children in both urban and rural areas. I develop a difference-in-differences  
52 model for causal inference and applied propensity score matching for robustness check. The  
53 outcome was measured with children's cognitive test score and academic exam scores. I  
54 demonstrate that parental migration reduces the educational performance of children  
55 staying behind, but only to a small extent.

## Literature Review

### Theoretical Framework

Between parental migration and children's education, the mechanisms trace to two theoretical frameworks. One is the resource generation model. It holds that parental migration brings forth greater resources in the form of economic capital. Economic capital is, in Bourdieu's words, "immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the form of property rights" (2002, p. 16). Economic capital is transferable to human capital, which is the stock of "skills, talents, health, and expertise" in people that enhance their productivity (Botev et al., 2019; Goldin, 2016). D. Yang (2008) noted that in the Philippines, a sharp depreciation of peso increased the amount of remittances from migrant laborers working abroad. This subsequently boosted children's school enrollment and educational expenditure. In China, Chang et al. (2019) interviewed migrant workers and their family members. Oftentimes, they found that labor migration presented the only way to sustain their children's education and livelihood.

The other theoretical model is the family disruption model. Children flourish under parental nurturing care. This term refers to the "stable environments that promote health and adequate nutrition, protect from threats, and provide opportunities for learning and responsive, emotionally supportive and developmentally enriching relationships" (Black et al., 2021, p. 1). Parental migration decreases nurturing care, as characterized by less homework supervision and emotional support by parents (Wen & Xie, 2019). Hong talked to a group of left-behind children at a rural school (Hong & Fuller, 2019). These students expressed the utter sense of loneliness "with no advocate, no support and with no one looking out for them" (p. 13). Many of them felt indifferent to grades and disengaged with school. Some even longed to quit school to pursue a free, independent life (p. 14).

Given the two opposing effects, researchers have obtained mixed results regarding how parental migration impacts children's education. Botezat and Pfeiffer (2020) studied

the case of Romania and found a positive effect of parents' migration on academic grades of adolescents aged eleven to fifteen. L. Wang et al. (2019) collected data from junior high school students in central China and found no effect of parental on left-behind children's achievement in mathematical test. Studying four Chinese provinces, Brauw and Giles (2017) showed that as ample migration opportunities appeared in villages, enrollment to senior high school decreased. Nguyen (2016) demonstrated that parental migration was associated with lower cognitive capabilities among Indian and Vietnamese children aged five to eight. The inconsistency can be complicated by factors such as the left-behind children's age and gender, the migrant parent's original domicile and eventual destination, and the arrangement of which parent migrate for how long.

Parental migration immediately disrupts family structure, which in turn lowers academic performance of children. It takes longer time for parental migration to generate resources that improve children's educational attainment. I propose the first hypothesis:

$H_1$  In the short term, parental migration negatively affect the cognitive development and academic performance of children left-behind.

Researchers have studied whether the impact differ between mother absence and father absence in the context of labor migration. Y. Xu et al. (2019) adopted a fixed-effects propensity score weighting model on cross-sectional data collected from seventh and ninth graders in rural areas across China. They found that the absence of father only or both parents had "little or no association with negative outcomes" on children's academic and cognitive performances. Only-mother absence, however, showed a "strong association with negative outcomes" (p. 1646). Chen et al. (2019) conducted structural equation modeling on the cross-sectional data collected from fourth to seventh graders in the countryside of one province. They found that mother migration was "negatively associated with children's social competence and academic performance," while father migration had no direct effects on the two outcomes (pp. 860-861).

Studies noted that in some Asian and Latin American societies, the social norms designate men as breadwinners and women as caregivers. Under such norms, children are more likely to accept fathers' migration than mothers' (Murphy, 2022). Left-behind children may even resent their migrant mothers for transgressing on the expected care-giving roles. I propose the second hypothesis:

$H_2$  In the short term, mother's migration negatively affect the cognitive development and academic performance of children left-behind, while father's migration does not show a effect.

## China's Context

Three features make China a suitable case for studying left-behind children. The first feature is the huge scale of internal labor migration. According to the National Bureau of Statistics, the year 2021 recorded 292.5 million in-country migrant workers (NBS, 2022). They form the backbone of essential industries, such as retail, delivery, transportation, and manufacturing. The number of left-behind Chinese children reached 68.7 million in 2015 (NBS et al., 2017). The internal migration stemmed from the neoliberal economic regime.

The neoliberal economic regime sounds at odds with China, a so-called socialist country. Actually, in the 1980s, the ruling communist party ditched the planned economy, initiated market reforms, and opened up the country. Since then, China has integrated in the world economy and contributed substantial growth to it. The economic reform and globalization have enriched the coastal cities like Shanghai and Shenzhen. The rural hinterlands, however, have lagged behind. The regional inequality needs social policy to amend, but China's welfare programs are discriminatory – it segregates the population. Those who reap the greatest benefits are public servants, urban dwellers, and formally employed people. As rural people migrate to the city, they find themselves with limited access to social welfare in the destination. The municipal governments only provide welfare to local residents and expect non-local residents access public services elsewhere (Duckett,

2020; Zhang, 2018).

The institutionalized discrimination against migrant laborers find its roots in China's "multilevel citizenship" . As Vortherms (2021) demonstrated, citizenship is defined by "membership rules and rights entitlements;" they operate below the national level in China. The local state confers most of the rights and defines who is eligible to these rights through the *hukou*, or household registration system:

A political institution rooted in centuries of Chinese bureaucracy, the modern hukou is the primary identity document defining membership and entitlements for local citizenship. Accessing fundamental citizenship rights depends on your registration status . . . Registration includes basic identifying information, a specific address of registration, and a type: urban, rural, or resident.  
(Vortherms, 2021)

In other words, the hukou system binds one's citizenship rights with one's place of registry. One can move out of town freely but cannot change hukou freely. When a rural resident moves to the city, it takes months – if not years – to apply for a new hukou. Before receiving urban hukou, they can hardly send their children into public schools in the city [Gu (2021); wang2020]. Migrant workers had organized strikes and protests, only to meet with police crackdown (Chan & Selden, 2017). Facing financial and policy constraints, many migrant laborers have to leave children in their hometowns.

The existing research about China's left-behind children has three major shortcomings. The first is that most literature focuses on children left behind in rural areas while neglecting the urban counterparts. The National Bureau of Statistics stated that the number of urban left-behind children had been growing and expected that the trend would continue (NBS et al., 2017). My sample includes urban left-behind children as well. The second shortcoming lies in sampling and research design. Some studies suffer from a limited sample size of less than one thousand participants or a limited geographic coverage



of one to a few towns (Y. Liu et al., 2021; Shu, 2021; F. Yang et al., 2022). Others only  
estimated correlation using cross-sectional data (Akezhuoli et al., 2022; Jin et al., 2020).  
These studies could have employed causal inference techniques like fixed effect, matching,  
or inverse probability of treatment weighting. The third shortcoming lies in the  
measurement of outcome. Chang et al. (2019) and L. Wang et al. (2019) measured  
students' educational performance with the test score of only one academic subject, namely  
mathematics. To tackle these limitations, I adopted a nationally representative two-wave  
panel dataset. I included the test results of multiple subjects to measure comprehensive  
academic achievement.

## Methods

### Sampling

I obtained the data from the China Education Panel Survey (CEPS) (NSRC, n.d.). It is a nationally representative, school-based survey featuring junior high school students. The survey administrator is the National Survey Research Center at Renmin University of China. The survey team adopted multi-stage stratified probability proportional to size sampling and administered a paper-and-pencil questionnaire to each participant. The baseline survey took place in the 2013-2014 academic year with a sample size of about twenty thousand students in the seventh and ninth grades. These students were nested in 438 classrooms of 112 schools in 28 urban districts or rural counties. The follow-up survey in the 2014-2015 academic year lost track of the ninth grade cohort and only surveyed 9449 of the seventh grade cohort. I further restricted the sample to students staying with both parents at the original domicile at the baseline survey. To deal with missing values, I adopted list-wise deletion for dependent, independent, and control variables. The final sample size amounted to 4088 .

### Measurement

I explored two categories of educational performance: cognitive and academic abilities. One key dependent variable, the student's cognitive skill, was measured by a fifteen-minute standardized test. The test covered three types of reasoning: verbal, visuospatial, and numerical. The CEPS research team calculated the raw score based on the Item Response Theory and then standardized the score across the whole national sample with a mean of zero and standard deviation of one (W. Wang & Li, 2015).

Another dependent variable concerned students' academic performance. This was measured by the total scores of mid-term exams in Chinese, mathematics, and English as provided by each school. Exam scores are reliable indicators of learning performance, and are comparable across schools for the same cohort of students. This is related to how junior

high schools operate as part of the compulsory education system in China. According to OECD (2016), China's junior secondary education is a unified system that does not distinguish between academic and vocational tracks. At school, Chinese, mathematics, and English are core subjects and others as supplementary subjects. Throughout junior high school, students study the core subjects in preparation for the senior high school entrance exam. Within each cohort in one particular school, teachers use the same syllabus and administer the same exams during a given assessment period. Across cities and regions, junior high schools adopt the educational content and assessment set by the Ministry of Education (OECD, 2016).

I transformed the exam grades through the following steps. I first aligned different grading scales (full mark of 100, 120, and 150 for one subject) to the hundred-point scale. After the conversion, I checked for abnormal values outside the 0-100 range. 31 observations were outliers, accounting for less than one percent of the sample. I trimmed the values of subject exam score with minimum of zero and maximum of one hundred. In this way, I can limit the impact of outliers while retaining these observations in the sample. After trimming, I aggregated the subject exam scores to obtain a total score of a 300-point scale.

The key independent variable, the parental migration status, was identified by two items in the parent survey. In both the baseline and the follow-up surveys, parents specified the family members living in the same household at the time. I constructed four treatment dummy variables measuring migration arrangements: any parents absent, only father absent, only mother absent, and both parents absent. These arrangements are mutually exclusive. The control group consisted of parents staying with their children throughout at both the baseline and the follow-up surveys. I then removed the observations that reported parental divorce or death. These type of parental absence are irrelevant to migration.

The control variables on children include their age, gender, ethnicity, self-rated health, hukou type, number of siblings, whether the child had skipped grade or repeated

grade, and the level of education that the child aspires to achieve. At the household level, I controlled the level of education of the best-educated parent, the parental expectation on the child’s level of education, the perceived household financial conditions, the number of extracurricular books at home, and the internet access at home.

## Data analysis

I adopted R for all the analyses, the `fixest` package for econometric modeling (Berge et al., 2022), and the `modelsummary` package for presenting the results (Arel-Bundock, 2022). I built a two-way fixed effect model in a difference-in-differences (DID) design, following Bai and colleagues’ (2018; 2020) approach. The model served to analyze the educational outcome of children newly left behind by parents vis-a-vis that of children staying together with parents. I first specified an unrestricted and unadjusted model:

$$\Delta score_{i,j,k} = \alpha + \beta \cdot migr_i + \gamma \cdot score_{i,j;1} + \lambda \cdot C_j + \theta \cdot C_k + \varepsilon_{i,j,k}$$

For student  $i$  in class  $j$  in baseline and class  $k$  in endline,  $\Delta score_{i,j}$  is the change in test score between baseline and follow-up surveys,  $migr_i$  is the treatment dummy variable,  $score_{i,j,k;1}$  is the test score at baseline, and  $C_j$  and  $C_k$  are the classroom fixed-effects at baseline and follow-up, respectively. Classroom fixed-effect can account for differences due to time-invariant factors at the classroom level and above, as students nested in the same class are also in the same school and county. About one-sixth of the students were reassigned into new classroom at the end of baseline academic year. This necessitates adding the wave-two classroom fixed-effect.

The model is unrestricted because it does not restrict on the coefficient associated with the baseline scores. The model is unadjusted as it does not adjust for additional covariates. Theoretically, it is unnecessary to include covariates that vary over group but remain constant over time; They would cancel out in the two-way fixed effect model (Huntington-Klein, 2022). The standard errors were clustered at the classroom level.

In addition, I present an unrestricted and adjusted DID model:

$$\Delta score_{i,j,k} = \alpha + \beta \cdot migr_i + \gamma \cdot score_{i,j,k;1} + \lambda \cdot C_j + \theta \cdot C_k + \zeta \cdot X_i + \varepsilon_{i,j,k}$$

where  $X_i$  is the vector of covariates capturing the characteristics of children, their parents, and their households. The control variables were measured in the baseline survey. This version of model lifts the restriction that covariates from the baseline survey would be associated with a coefficient that equals one.

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Results

252 Descriptive Statistics

253 Table ?? below summarizes the changes in migration status in the sample. All 4088  
254 children were living together with parents in one household in baseline, but about fifteen  
255 percent saw at least one parent migrated during the two waves of survey. In these new  
256 migrant households, only-mother migration and only-father migration each accounted for  
257 two out of five cases. The remaining one-fifth was both-parents migration.

		N	%
Parental Migration	No	3452	84.4
	Yes	636	15.6
Parental Migration Type	Both Parents At Home	3452	84.4
	Both Parents Migrated	131	3.2
	Only Father Migrated	251	6.1
	Only Mother Migrated	254	6.2

258 The tables below provide the whole-sample summary statistics. In addition, the  
259 violin plots in the appendix visualize the distribution of outcome variables for the  
260 treatment group and the control group.

	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Cognitive score difference	0.27	0.80	-2.88	4.03
Cognitive score at wave 1	0.15	0.85	-2.03	2.33
Cognitive score at wave 2	0.42	0.78	-3.14	2.06
Academic exam score difference	-8.82	33.21	-207.50	166.00
Academic exam score at wave 1	213.11	49.46	19.33	297.50

		Mean	SD	Min	Max
Academic exam score at wave 2		204.29	55.41	0.00	293.33
				N	%
migr	0			3452	84.4
	1			636	15.6
child.is.girl	0			2002	49.0
	1			2086	51.0
child.has.rural.hukou	0			2221	54.3
	1			1867	45.7
child.in.boarding.school	0			2906	71.1
	1			1182	28.9
child.is.ethnic.minority	0			3800	93.0
	1			288	7.0
child.had.skipped.grade	0			4042	98.9
	1			46	1.1
child.had.repeated.grade	0			3700	90.5
	1			388	9.5
child.went.to.preschool	0			639	15.6
	1			3449	84.4
parent.has.white.collar.job	0			3238	79.2
	1			850	20.8
home.has.internet	0			1316	32.2
	1			2772	67.8
child.health.self.rated	Very poor			21	0.5
	Not very good			113	2.8

		N	%
	Moderate	807	19.7
	Good	1383	33.8
	Very good	1764	43.2
child.educational.aspiration	Junior high school	140	3.4
	Senior high school	418	10.2
	Associate college	616	15.1
	University	1205	29.5
	Postgraduate	1709	41.8
parent.educational.level	Primary school and below	248	6.1
	Junior high school	1580	38.6
	Senior high school	1254	30.7
	Associate college	385	9.4
	University	543	13.3
	Postgraduate	78	1.9
parent.expectation.on.child	Junior high school	36	0.9
	Senior high school	257	6.3
	Associate college	426	10.4
	University	1574	38.5
	Postgraduate	1795	43.9
home.extracurricular.book	Very few	395	9.7
	Not many	414	10.1
	Some	1312	32.1
	Quite a few	1111	27.2
	A great number	856	20.9
home.economic.resource	Very poor	115	2.8



	N	%
Somewhat poor	598	14.6
Moderate	3124	76.4
Somewhat rich	239	5.8
Very rich	12	0.3

## Regression Analysis

The unrestricted DID models support my hypothesis one – newly left-behind adolescents are more likely to perform worse in cognitive and academic abilities than their non left-behind counterparts. If a household sees any parent migrated, the child's cognitive test score and total exam grade would decrease relative to that of children whose parents stay with them, holding everything else constant. Parental migration is linked to is -0.09 SD in cognitive test score and -0.09 points in academic exam grades. Both relationships are slight in strength.

The results only partially support the hypothesis two – mother migration has a more negative effect than father migration. This holds true for academic abilities. Children from only mother migrate households are associated with -0.04 points relative to that of children whose parents stay along. The performances of children with both parents migrated or only father migrated do not show statistically significant difference from the non left-behind children. Regarding cognitive abilities, the reverse is true. Children with only mother migrated do not show statistically significant difference from the non left-behind children. Children with only father absent are associated with (-0.14 SD), and both parents absent (-0.10 SD) compared to the non left-behind children.

**Table 4***Parental migration's effect on children's cognitive abilities*

	Any Parent	Only Mother	Only Father	Both Parents
	Absent	Absent	Absent	Absent
Explanator	-0.09** (0.03)	-0.04 (0.05)	-0.14** (0.04)	-0.10 (0.06)
W1 score	-0.62*** (0.02)	-0.63*** (0.02)	-0.62*** (0.02)	-0.62*** (0.02)
Num.Obs.	4088	3706	3703	3583
R2	0.494	0.502	0.505	0.499
R2 Adj.	0.424	0.426	0.430	0.419
R2 Within	0.370	0.378	0.378	0.374
FE: clsids	X	X	X	X
FE: w2clsids	X	X	X	X

**Note:** ^ ^ † p < 0.1, \* p < 0.05, \*\* p < 0.01, \*\*\* p < 0.001

**Table 5***Parental migration's effect on children's academic abilities*

	Any Parent	Only Mother	Only Father	Both Parents
	Absent	Absent	Absent	Absent
Explanator	-2.67* (1.26)	-5.85* (2.36)	-0.25 (1.66)	-1.13 (2.28)
W1 score	0.04 (0.02)	0.04† (0.02)	0.04† (0.02)	0.04 (0.02)
Num.Obs.	4088	3706	3703	3583

	Any Parent	Only Mother	Only Father	Both Parents
	Absent	Absent	Absent	Absent
R2	0.562	0.577	0.566	0.577
R2 Adj.	0.501	0.513	0.500	0.510
R2 Within	0.005	0.009	0.004	0.004
FE: clsids	X	X	X	X
FE:	X	X	X	X
w2clsids				

**Note:**  $\hat{\tau}$  p < 0.1, \* p < 0.05, \*\* p < 0.01, \*\*\* p < 0.001

The adjusted DID models produce similar results compared to the unadjusted models, with only one exception. That is, for the cognitive skills, the both-parent-absent coefficient saw a change of statistical significance level from five percent level to ten percent level.

Some predictors are strong in both models of cognitive and academic abilities. These are children's age and educational aspiration as well as parents' expectation on children. In terms of age, the older students' scores drop relatively more than younger students'. One year older in age is associated with -0.07 SD for standardized cognitive test and -1.23 points for academic exams. Parent's expectation for children completing university and children's own aspiration for finishing university are associated with higher scores. The effect sizes are 0.01 SD and 0.07 SD for standardized cognitive test, respectively; and 0.29 points and 1.82 points for academic exams, respectively.

Several predictors are strong in the model of academic grades but not in that of cognitive scores. These are children's gender and self-reported health, and the years of parental education. Girls outperform boys by 4.49 points in academic exams, but do not show advantage in cognitive test. Students who consider themselves healthier are

associated with higher scores in academic exams. Parents with more education are associated with their children's higher scores in academic exams. If the years of parental education of the best-educated among the two increase by one, it would be linked to a 0.88 points increase in the child's academic exam grade. These three predictors are not significant for cognitive outcomes.

Preschool attendance is associated with higher cognitive outcomes 0.07 SD, but its effect for academic outcomes is not significant.

**Table 6**

*Parental migration's effect on children's academic abilities*

	Any Parent	Only Mother	Only Father	Both Parents
	Absent	Absent	Absent	Absent
Explanator	-0.09** (0.03)	-0.04 (0.05)	-0.14*** (0.04)	-0.08 (0.06)
W1 score	-0.67*** (0.02)	-0.67*** (0.02)	-0.67*** (0.02)	-0.67*** (0.02)
child.age	-0.07*** (0.02)	-0.06** (0.02)	-0.07*** (0.02)	-0.08*** (0.02)
child.is.girl	-0.01 (0.02)	0.00 (0.02)	0.00 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)
child.health.self.rated	-0.02 (0.01)	-0.02 (0.01)	-0.02 (0.01)	-0.02 (0.01)
child.has.rural.hukou	-0.01 (0.02)	0.00 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.03)	0.00 (0.03)
child.number.of.sibling	-0.03 (0.02)	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.02 (0.02)
child.went.to.preschool	0.07* (0.02)	0.06† (0.02)	0.05† (0.02)	0.07* (0.02)

	Any Parent	Only Mother	Only Father	Both Parents
	Absent	Absent	Absent	Absent
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
child.had.skipped.grade	-0.17	-0.11	-0.20	-0.10
	(0.12)	(0.12)	(0.12)	(0.12)
child.had.repeated.grade	-0.08*	-0.11**	-0.07†	-0.06
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
child.in.boarding.school	0.04	0.02	0.02	0.01
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
child.educational.aspiration	0.07***	0.07***	0.07***	0.08***
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
child.is.ethnic.minority	0.04	0.04	0.02	0.02
	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)
parent.expectation.on.child	0.08***	0.09***	0.09***	0.09***
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
parent.has.white.collar.job	0.01	-0.01	0.01	0.00
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
parent.educational.level	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
home.economic.resource	-0.02	-0.01	0.00	0.00
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
home.extracurricular.book	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.00
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
home.has.internet	-0.01	-0.01	-0.02	-0.02
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Num.Obs.	4088	3706	3703	3583
R2	0.525	0.533	0.537	0.530

	Any Parent	Only Mother	Only Father	Both Parents
	Absent	Absent	Absent	Absent
R2 Adj.	0.458	0.459	0.464	0.452
R2 Within	0.409	0.416	0.418	0.413
FE: clsids	X	X	X	X
FE: w2clsids	X	X	X	X

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**Note:**  $\hat{\hat{\hat{p}}} < 0.1$ ,  $\ast p < 0.05$ ,  $\ast\ast p < 0.01$ ,  $\ast\ast\ast p < 0.001$

**Table 7**

*Parental migration's effect on children's academic abilities*

	Any Parent	Only Mother	Only Father	Both Parents
	Absent	Absent	Absent	Absent
Explanator	-2.65 $\ast$	-5.87 $\ast\ast$	-0.20	-0.92
	(1.25)	(2.24)	(1.68)	(2.35)
W1 score	-0.01	-0.01	0.00	-0.01
	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.02)
child.age	-1.23 $\dagger$	-1.04	-1.21 $\dagger$	-0.96
	(0.65)	(0.68)	(0.70)	(0.70)
child.is.girl	4.49 $\ast\ast\ast$	4.78 $\ast\ast\ast$	4.54 $\ast\ast\ast$	4.43 $\ast\ast\ast$
	(0.92)	(0.95)	(0.92)	(0.97)
child.health.self.rated	1.05 $\ast$	1.12 $\ast$	0.92 $\ast$	0.85 $\dagger$
	(0.43)	(0.45)	(0.47)	(0.47)
child.has.rural.hukou	1.08	1.50	0.80	0.98
	(1.02)	(1.06)	(1.05)	(1.07)
child.number.of.sibling	1.03 $\dagger$	0.87	1.21 $\ast$	0.66
	(0.58)	(0.59)	(0.60)	(0.62)

	Any Parent	Only Mother	Only Father	Both Parents
	Absent	Absent	Absent	Absent
child.went.to.preschool	1.65 (1.20)	2.22† (1.24)	0.85 (1.28)	1.97 (1.27)
child.had.skipped.grade	-0.73 (4.82)	0.23 (4.82)	-0.98 (5.41)	1.01 (5.07)
child.had.repeated.grade	-1.81 (1.85)	-1.22 (1.98)	-1.55 (1.89)	-0.20 (1.81)
child.in.boarding.school	-1.14 (1.65)	-0.19 (1.65)	-0.72 (1.66)	-1.19 (1.81)
child.educational.aspiration	1.82*** (0.52)	2.08*** (0.55)	1.90*** (0.51)	1.91*** (0.53)
child.is.ethnic.minority	0.48 (2.15)	-0.24 (2.29)	-0.33 (2.38)	-1.14 (2.56)
parent.expectation.on.child	0.88† (0.53)	0.85 (0.55)	0.86 (0.54)	0.96† (0.55)
parent.has.white.collar.job	0.29 (1.19)	0.03 (1.23)	0.59 (1.21)	0.42 (1.25)
parent.educational.level	1.02† (0.53)	1.14* (0.53)	1.14* (0.54)	1.15* (0.56)
home.economic.resource	-0.74 (0.81)	-0.18 (0.88)	-0.66 (0.87)	-0.24 (0.87)
home.extracurricular.book	-0.78† (0.45)	-1.18* (0.46)	-0.86† (0.45)	-0.85† (0.46)
home.has.internet	-1.41 (1.13)	-1.65 (1.14)	-1.33 (1.18)	-1.37 (1.17)
Num.Obs.	4088	3706	3703	3583

	Any Parent	Only Mother	Only Father	Both Parents
	Absent	Absent	Absent	Absent
R2	0.573	0.590	0.578	0.588
R2 Adj.	0.512	0.525	0.512	0.520
R2 Within	0.032	0.039	0.032	0.030
FE: clsids	X	X	X	X
FE: w2clsids	X	X	X	X

**Note:**  $\hat{\tau}$  p < 0.1, \* p < 0.05, \*\* p < 0.01, \*\*\* p < 0.001

## Matching

Parental migration is not a randomly assigned treatment. A possible circumstance is that smart and ambitious students perform better at school; their high performance and ambition prompt parents to migrate to support children's schooling. Another scenario is that poverty may hamper children's educational achievement while driving parents to migrate. To tackle the selection bias herein, an applicable technique is matching. This method makes two groups comparable by pairing a unit in the treatment group with one or several units in the control group based on observable covariates.

Popular choices for matching include coarsened exact matching (CEM) (Waldman, 2022) and nearest-neighbor propensity score matching (PSM) (H. Xu & Xie, 2015). As Greifer (2022) introduced, CEM is superior in achieving balance as it optimizes the entire joint distribution of covariates. The downside is that it leaves many units without an exact match and discards these unmatched units. The nearest-neighbor matching examines all the treated units and selects the closest control unit to be paired. The eligibility as the "closest" can be determined with the differences in propensity score. Propensity score denotes the probability of receiving treatment based on the specified covariates. Nearest-neighbor PSM does not try to optimize any condition; each pairing ignores how



other pairing will occur or have occurred (Greifer, 2022). King and Nielsen (2019) argued against this matching method as it risks more “imbalance, model dependence, and bias” for highly balanced data.

Using the **MatchIt** package (Ho et al., 2022), I performed matching with all the covariates of the adjusted DID model. I first attempted CEM, but it left most units unmatched and resulted in a tiny sample. I then made do with the PSM. I combined exact matching (based on the student’s county of residence) and nearest neighbor PSM (based on the other covariates) following the configuration of Bai et al. (2018). Exact matching based on county of residence preserves the original geographic distribution. The propensity score was estimated using a logistic regression of the treatment on the covariates. The matching ratio was set at one treatment unit with up to three control units. The matching produced absolute standardized mean differences below 0.1 for all but a few covariates, suggesting an improved overall balance.

Alike are the results from DID models with matching (DIDM) and those without. In the models of cognitive abilities, I obtained negative, statistically significant coefficients on the treatment variables in the any parent migrated household and only father migrated households. In the models of academic abilities, the treatment variables’ coefficients are negative and statistically significant for the any parent migrated households and only mother migrated households. The significance level of any parent migration drops to ten percent. In all models, the magnitudes of the statistically significant coefficients are similar. I present the unadjusted DIDM models below and the adjusted DIDM models in the appendix.



	Any Parent	Only Mother	Only Father	Both Parents
	Absent	Absent	Absent	Absent
	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.06)
Num.Obs.	1958	913	897	475
R2	0.590	0.682	0.637	0.706
R2 Adj.	0.457	0.413	0.319	-0.087
R2 Within	0.006	0.026	0.008	0.005
FE: clsids	X	X	X	X
FE:	X	X	X	X
w2clsids				

347       **Note:** ^ ^ † p < 0.1, \* p < 0.05, \*\* p < 0.01, \*\*\* p < 0.001

348       **Note:** ^ ^ 3:1 nearest neighbor propensity score matching with replacement; exact  
349 matching by county

## Discussion

This thesis proposes a model to assess causality between parents' migration and their stay-behind children's educational performance in the short run. I build econometric models in the difference-in-differences design to analyze data from the 2013-2014 and 2014-2015 rounds of China Education Panel Survey. Results suggest that parental migration is, in the short run, negatively associated with children's educational performance as measured by academic exams and standardized cognitive tests. I further examine whether the effect varies across different arrangements of parental migration. Results indicate that father-only migration is negatively associated with children's cognitive abilities, while mother-only migration is negatively associated with children's academic abilities. In all scenarios, the educational performance of newly left-behind children only decreases slightly compared to that of non-left-behind peers.

My research has limitations in sampling due to data constraint. Regarding sample size, the treatment group for the both-parents migration is small ( $n = 131$ ), making the statistical power low. Regarding identification, I could only identify parental migration through such a condition: parental absence from a household without parental divorce or death. This is because the CEPS questionnaire asked if parents were living in the household, but did not ask why parents were absent. If some parents were jailed or hospitalized, their absence would be wrongly attributed to migration. Besides, I could not control for the migration history of parents, which are not included in the CEPS data. Possibly, some parents out-migrated at an earlier date, returned before the baseline survey, and migrated away again during the survey period. Their children might better cope with parental absence during the survey period, yet they would be mistaken as the newly left-behind. These limitations may bias the estimation.

Limitations also arise from unaccounted endogeneity and exogeneity. As Chen et al. (2009) stated in their research on left-behind children, endogenous factors may create

selection bias. When migration opportunities arise, some parents may believe that leaving children behind would hamper children's education, thereby giving up the opportunity. Some other parents may believe that their children's schooling would not suffer from parental absence, thereby embarking on migration. Parental beliefs of this sort are unavailable in CEPS data. Exogenous factors may create omitted variable bias. Suppose that a natural hazard hit many counties of a province in the sample. This shock can simultaneously increase parents' out-migration and reduce stay-behind students' grades (Chen et al., 2009). I could not account for such shocks as CEPS data does not include detailed geographic information.

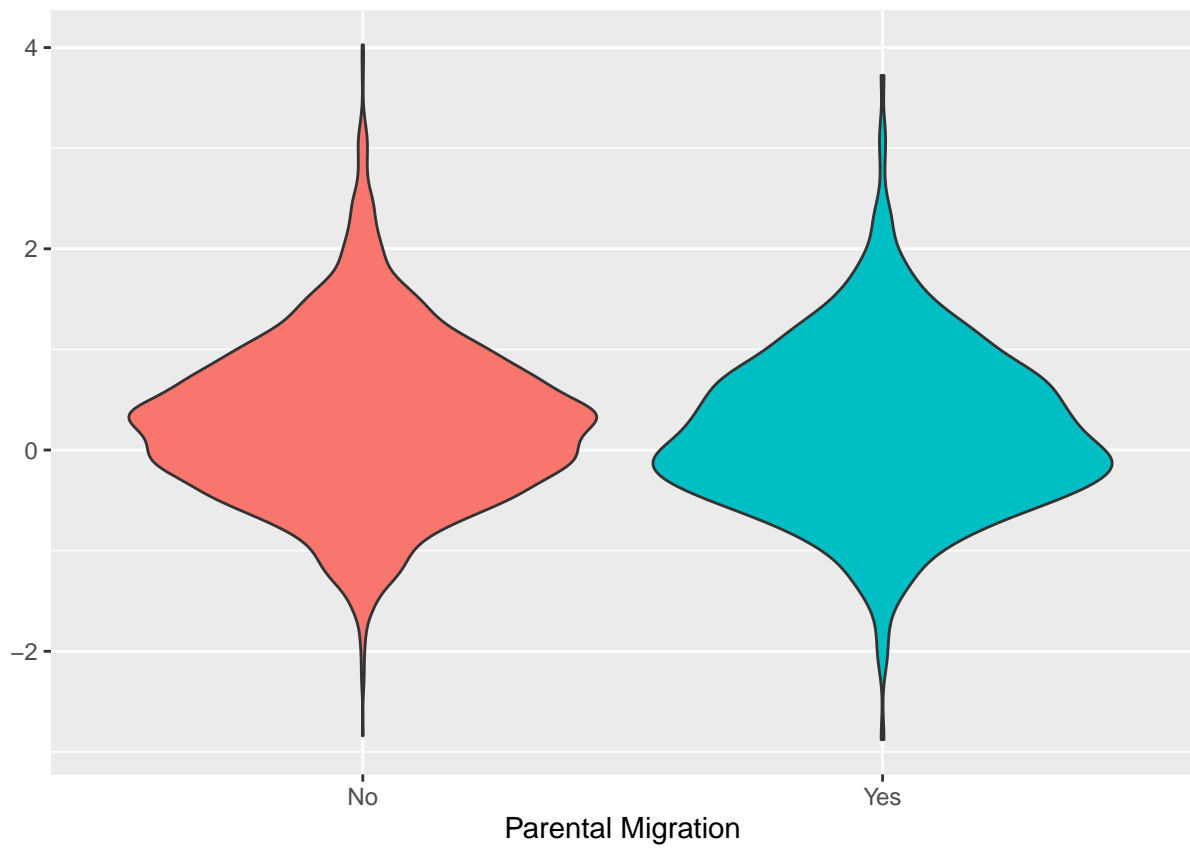
From my research, we can find new directions for scholarly inquiry. First, when the CEPS team releases the next round of data, researchers can capitalize a the three-wave panel dataset to build multi-period DID models. This would facilitate examination of the parallel trend assumption. Second, researchers can try novel methods. Machine learning, for example, can estimate the heterogeneous effects across subgroups (R. Liu, 2021). Synthetic control can evaluate the aggregate outcome of "large-scale but infrequent interventions" at municipal or provincial levels (Abadie, 2021), such as the policy experimentations that liberalize the hukou system in certain cities (X. Wang, 2020). Third, researchers can go beyond outbound migration to study return migration of parents (Liang & Li, 2021). Only a few publications, such as that of Z. Liu et al. (2018), have explored return migrants and their stay-behind children in the Chinese context.

Let us consider the policy implications for China. The small reduction of newly left behind children's schooling performance by no means suggest that policies can remain as they are. The slight reduction is only the short-term consequence. Longer duration of parental migration may hamper educational performance to a greater extent. Besides, educational performance is only part of human development outcomes (Antia et al., 2020). Other outcomes like mental health and non-cognitive skills are also subjected to parental absence's influence. Policymakers should reduce institutional barriers at destination cities,

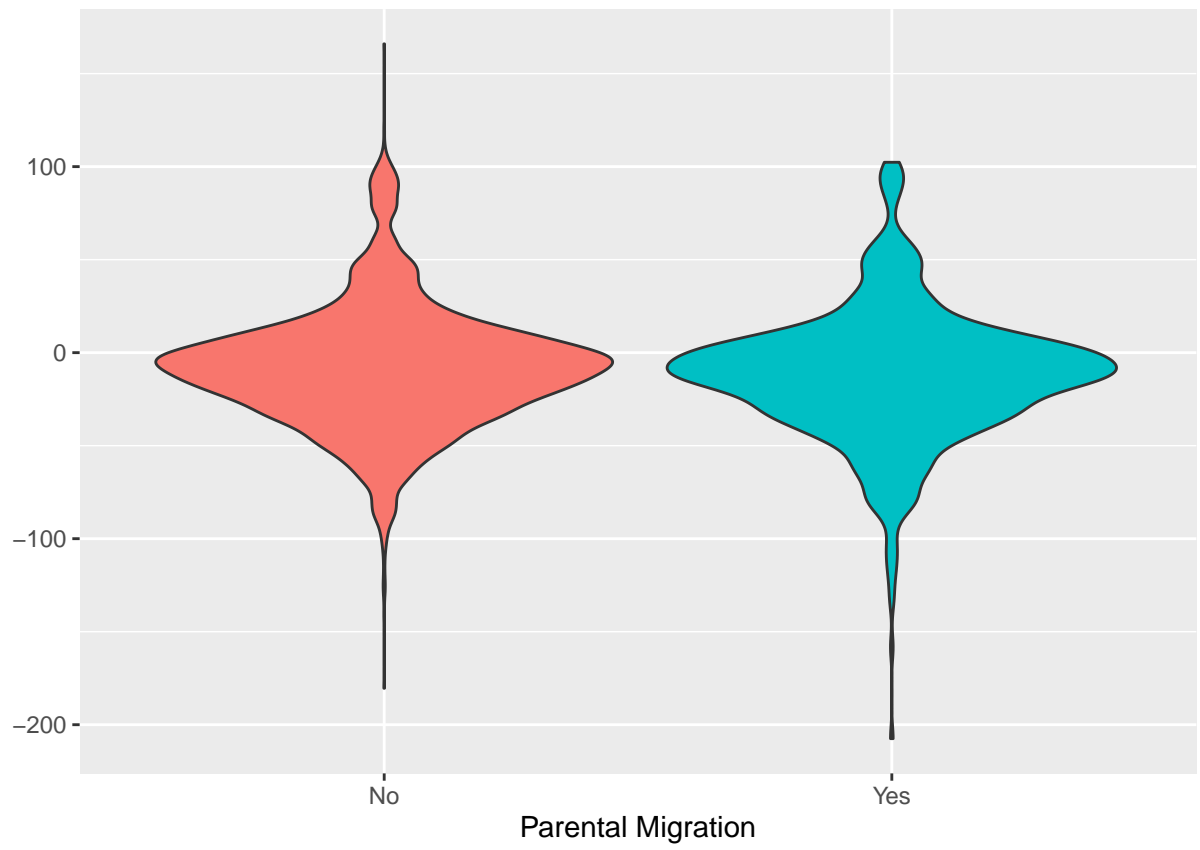
403 opening more doors for parents to migrate together with their children. Meanwhile, schools  
404 should dedicate more advisory and counseling support to children who stay behind.

405

## Appendix

**Figure 1**

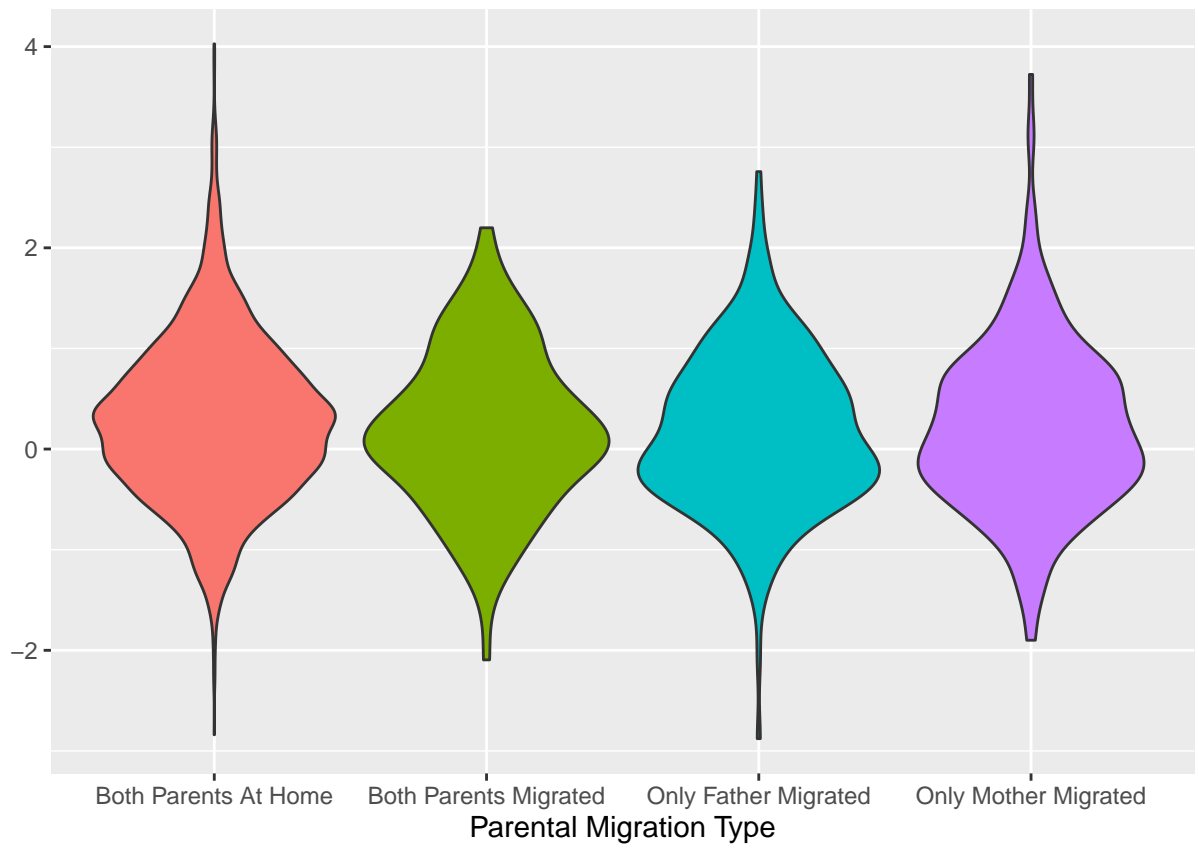
*Changes in standardized cognitive test score for new left-behind students and non-left-behind students*



**Figure 2**

*Changes in academic exam score for new left-behind students and non-left-behind students*





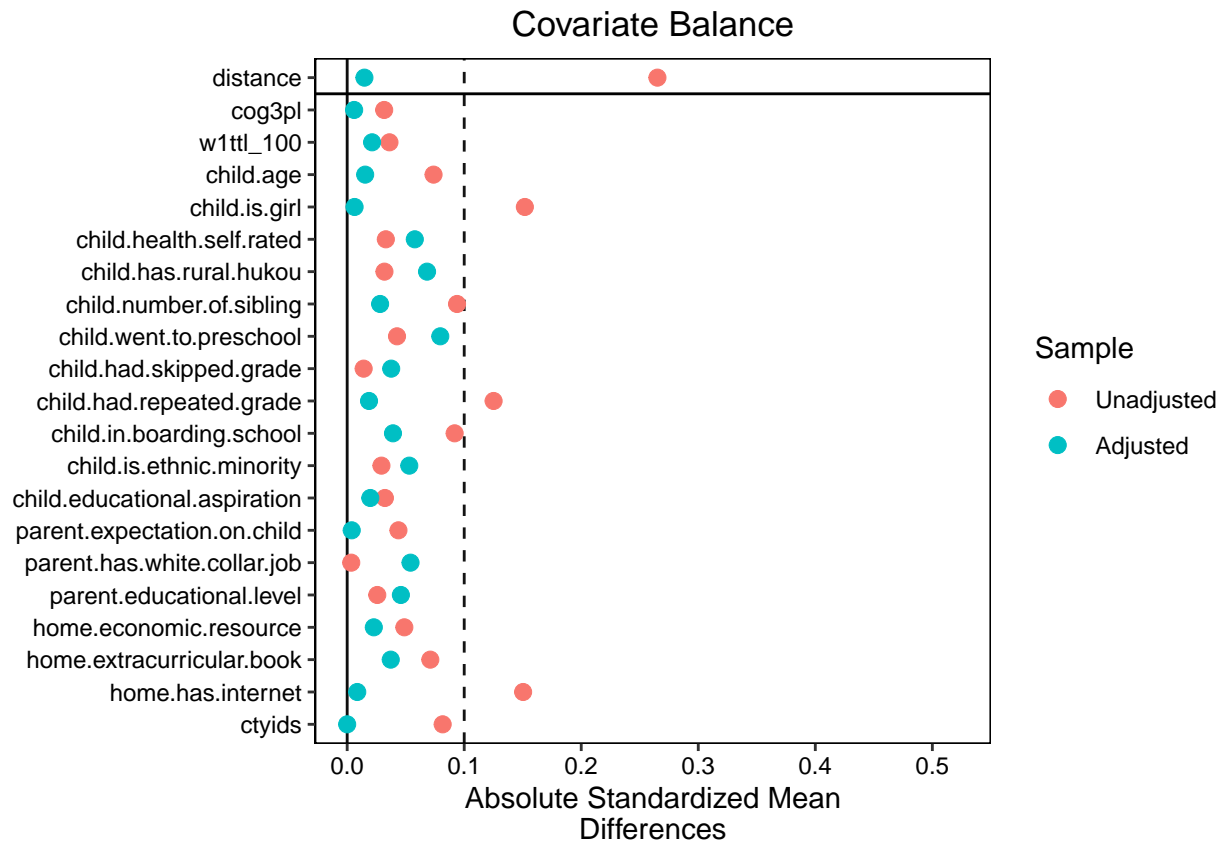
**Figure 3**

*Changes in standardized cognitive test score by household migration arrangement*

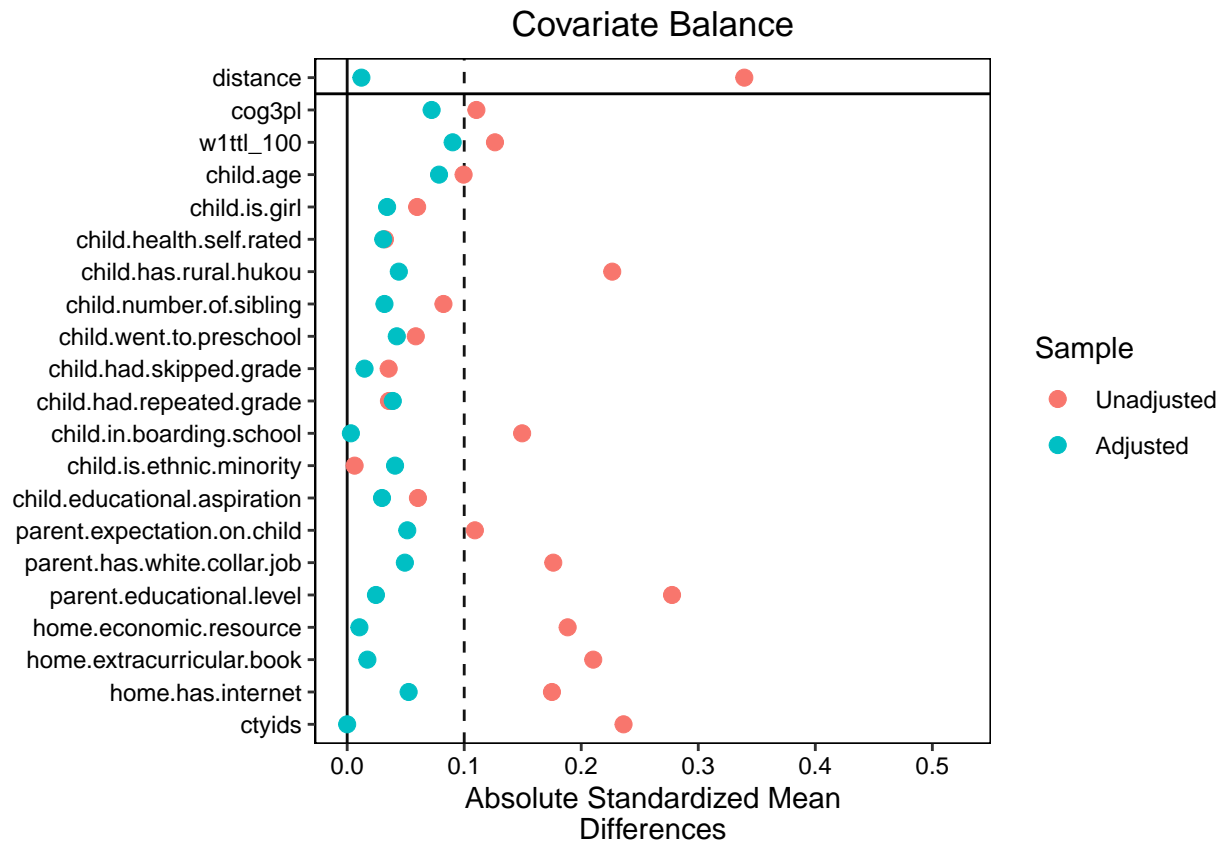


**Figure 4**

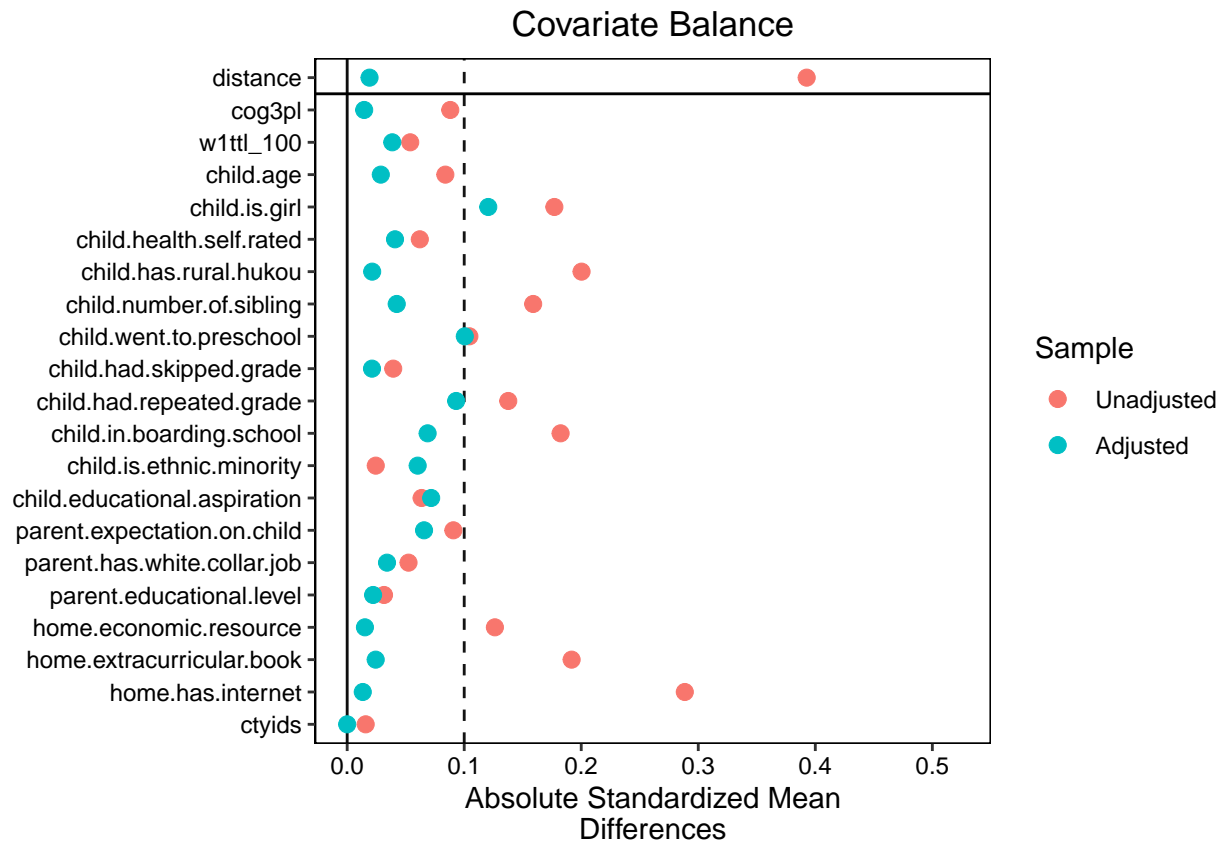
*Changes in standardized cognitive test score by household migration arrangement*

**Figure 5**

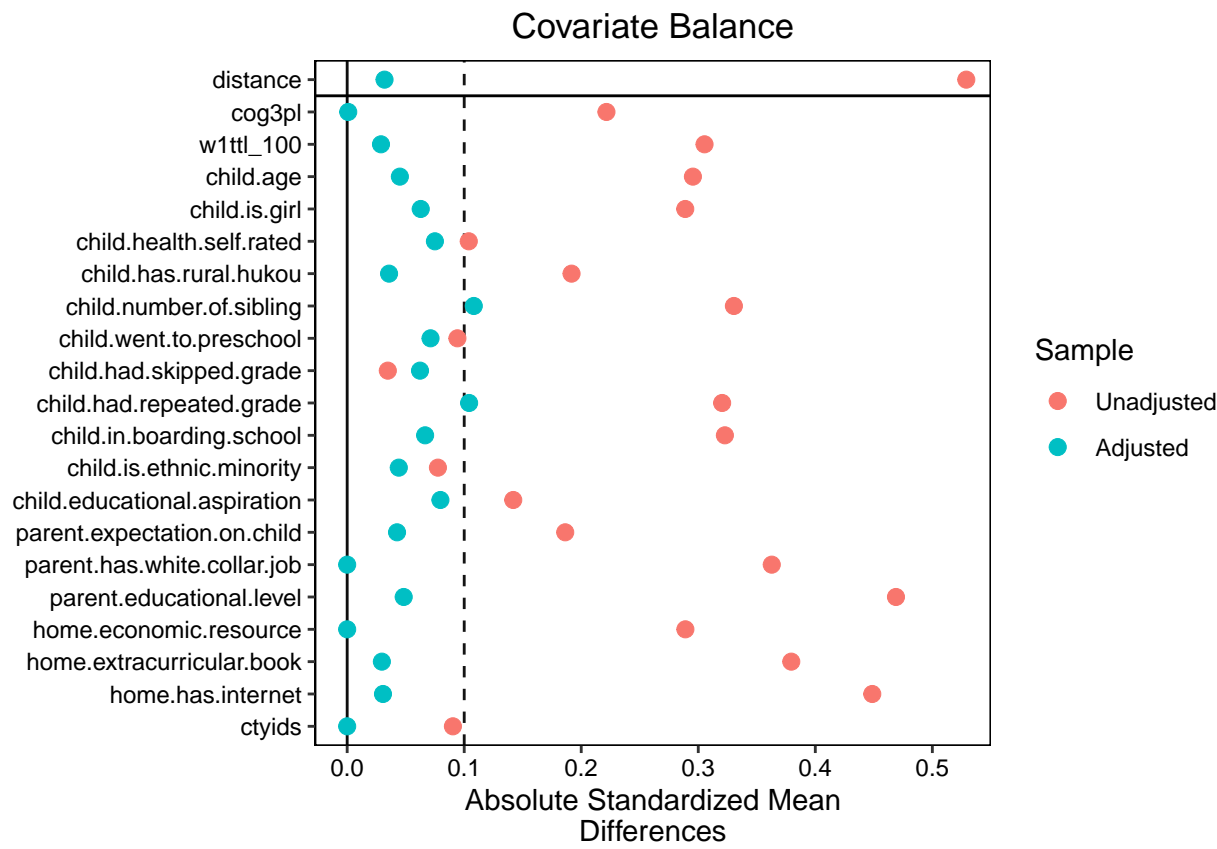
*Covariate balance before and after matching by any parent migration*

**Figure 6**

*Covariate balance before and after matching by mother-only migration*

**Figure 7**

*Covariate balance before and after matching by father-only migration*



**Figure 8**  
*Covariate balance before and after matching by both parents migration*

**Table 10***Parental migration's effect on children's academic abilities, estimated with matching*

	Any Parent	Only Mother	Only Father	Both Parents
	Absent	Absent	Absent	Absent
Explanator	-0.09** (0.03)	-0.04 (0.06)	-0.15* (0.06)	-0.08 (0.11)
W1 score	-0.67*** (0.03)	-0.67*** (0.04)	-0.67*** (0.04)	-0.69*** (0.06)
child.age	-0.08* (0.03)	-0.02 (0.05)	-0.03 (0.04)	-0.15 (0.10)
child.is.girl	0.02 (0.03)	0.01 (0.05)	0.05 (0.06)	-0.06 (0.10)
child.health.self.rated	0.00 (0.02)	-0.03 (0.03)	-0.02 (0.03)	-0.07 (0.06)
child.has.rural.hukou	0.01 (0.04)	-0.07 (0.07)	0.06 (0.07)	0.04 (0.12)
child.number.of.sibling	-0.07* (0.03)	-0.09* (0.04)	-0.05 (0.04)	-0.10 (0.07)
child.went.to.preschool	0.04 (0.04)	0.08 (0.08)	0.03 (0.06)	0.30* (0.12)
child.had.skipped.grade	-0.08 (0.16)	-0.13 (0.24)	-0.37† (0.19)	0.34 (0.45)
child.had.repeated.grade	-0.08 (0.06)	-0.26* (0.11)	-0.02 (0.11)	0.05 (0.16)
child.in.boarding.school	0.09 (0.07)	0.15 (0.12)	-0.10 (0.11)	-0.02 (0.20)
child.educational.aspiration	0.07***	0.03	0.10**	0.10†

	Any Parent	Only Mother	Only Father	Both Parents
	Absent	Absent	Absent	Absent
	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.05)
child.is.ethnic.minority	-0.01	0.01	-0.20	0.39
	(0.09)	(0.10)	(0.23)	(0.44)
parent.expectation.on.child	0.07**	0.08†	0.06†	0.01
	(0.03)	(0.05)	(0.03)	(0.06)
parent.has.white.collar.job	0.02	-0.10†	0.03	-0.15
	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.08)	(0.16)
parent.educational.level	0.01	0.03	0.00	-0.08
	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.06)
home.economic.resource	-0.05	0.00	0.02	0.05
	(0.03)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.08)
home.extracurricular.book	0.01	0.01	0.02	0.01
	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.05)
home.has.internet	-0.05	-0.07	-0.06	0.05
	(0.04)	(0.08)	(0.07)	(0.11)
Num.Obs.	1958	913	897	475
R2	0.562	0.653	0.672	0.691
R2 Adj.	0.413	0.337	0.361	-0.318
R2 Within	0.409	0.447	0.431	0.435
FE: clsids	X	X	X	X
FE: w2clsids	X	X	X	X

**Note:** †  $p < 0.1$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

**Note:** 3:1 nearest neighbor propensity score matching with replacement; exact matching by county



**Table 11***Parental migration's effect on children's academic abilities, estimated with matching*

	Any Parent	Only Mother	Only Father	Both Parents
	Absent	Absent	Absent	Absent
Explanator	-2.91† (1.48)	-5.90* (2.64)	-2.68 (2.56)	-2.94 (4.21)
W1 score	-0.01 (0.03)	0.01 (0.04)	0.00 (0.05)	-0.03 (0.06)
child.age	-0.61 (1.21)	1.45 (2.00)	2.59 (1.99)	-2.15 (3.48)
child.is.girl	4.51** (1.43)	4.40† (2.57)	6.58** (2.41)	3.76 (4.21)
child.health.self.rated	0.71 (0.69)	2.30 (1.42)	1.13 (1.15)	2.38 (2.27)
child.has.rural.hukou	0.85 (1.70)	-0.13 (3.10)	-1.10 (2.97)	-2.75 (4.45)
child.number.of.sibling	1.20 (1.06)	1.92† (1.06)	1.00 (1.61)	-2.50 (2.69)
child.went.to.preschool	1.75 (1.76)	-0.30 (2.47)	-2.26 (2.57)	6.39 (5.13)
child.had.skipped.grade	2.29 (6.62)	-9.76 (11.90)	3.12 (12.03)	32.64 (29.40)
child.had.repeated.grade	-6.07† (3.18)	-13.55† (7.61)	-13.33** (4.86)	-0.09 (5.92)
child.in.boarding.school	-0.64 (3.53)	-0.65 (5.38)	-3.42 (4.25)	-3.10 (8.17)
child.educational.aspiration	1.48†	1.63	0.37	0.44

	Any Parent	Only Mother	Only Father	Both Parents
	Absent	Absent	Absent	Absent
	(0.86)	(1.06)	(1.20)	(1.92)
child.is.ethnic.minority	3.81	4.84	2.79	-2.54
	(4.31)	(4.68)	(6.53)	(7.64)
parent.expectation.on.child	0.19	1.71	1.41	3.97
	(0.83)	(1.49)	(1.35)	(2.49)
parent.has.white.collar.job	-0.85	0.54	2.13	-1.42
	(1.82)	(2.56)	(2.87)	(6.14)
parent.educational.level	1.30	2.30**	1.91	-2.63
	(0.97)	(0.85)	(1.41)	(2.54)
home.economic.resource	-0.23	-1.90	-0.51	-0.54
	(1.23)	(2.24)	(1.81)	(4.05)
home.extracurricular.book	-0.66	-0.66	-1.59	0.08
	(0.71)	(1.24)	(1.01)	(1.93)
home.has.internet	-2.89	-1.61	0.08	3.67
	(1.81)	(2.87)	(3.26)	(4.98)
Num.Obs.	1958	913	897	475
R2	0.603	0.702	0.660	0.731
R2 Adj.	0.468	0.431	0.337	-0.150
R2 Within	0.037	0.088	0.070	0.087
FE: clsids	X	X	X	X
FE: w2clsids	X	X	X	X

**Note:**  $\hat{\tau}$  p < 0.1, \* p < 0.05, \*\* p < 0.01, \*\*\* p < 0.001

**Note:**  $\hat{\tau}$  3:1 nearest neighbor propensity score matching with replacement; exact matching by county

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