

Two Decades of Research on Migrant Health in China: A Systematic Review

Lessons for Future Inquiry

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Migration and Health in China

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Introduction to Working Papers on Migration and Health in China

This paper is part of a series of outputs from the research project on [Migration and Health in China](#).

China is confronted by major challenges posed by the massive population movement over the past three decades. In 2009, approximately 230 million rural inhabitants moved temporarily or permanently to cities in search of employment and better livelihoods. Such large-scale mobility has huge implications for the pattern and transmission of diseases; for China's health care system and related policies; and for health of the Chinese population in both receiving and sending areas. The health and social issues associated with population movement on such an unprecedented scale have been inadequately addressed by public policy and largely neglected by researchers. Based on interdisciplinary research across the health, social science and policy fields, this project constitutes a major effort to fill research and policy gaps. Collectively, the papers and commentaries in this series aim to provide a comprehensive assessment of the health and public policy implications of rural to urban migration in China, to inform policy and to identify future research directions.

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Acronyms

AIDS	Acquired immunodeficiency syndrome
CNKI	China National Knowledge Infrastructure
HIV	Human immunodeficiency virus
NCD	Non-communicable disease
STI	Sexually transmitted infection
UNRISD	United Nations Research Institute for Social Development
WHO	World Health Organization

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Abstract

This paper examines the adequacy, quality and relevance of existing evidence on migrant health in China as a guide to future research and policy. It uses a systematic review to identify publications on migrant health issues in China between 1985 and 2010 from selected databases. It also assesses the technical focus and methodologies for the 1,216 research articles retrieved. The volume of research on migrant health issues has grown nearly 55-fold between 1985–2000 and 2006–2010, with the publication of nearly 194 studies annually during the latter period. Almost two-thirds of the studies (68 per cent) sampled *only* migrants, with no comparison group either from destination urban areas or sending rural areas. Less than one-tenth of the studies evaluated a specific intervention (9 per cent); among those, most sampled only migrants and used a before-after design. The research tended to focus on communicable diseases (43 per cent), with HIV/AIDS accounting for 26 per cent. Research on health systems and non-communicable diseases represented 9 per cent and 13 per cent of the studies, respectively. More than half of the studies (54 per cent) were carried out in cities in four provinces, with few investigating family members left behind in rural areas.

Despite a substantial increase in volume, research on migrant health in China has provided limited information to inform current policies and programmes. Most studies are descriptive and disproportionately focused on a handful of communicable diseases, neglecting some of the pressing policy-relevant issues in China on service access. Few studies have comparison populations. Increasing the rigour and relevance of future research will require better sampling frames with comparison populations; a focus on neglected research areas, including access to services; and partnerships with government and other agencies to evaluate specific interventions.

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