

Research Proposal

China has the largest migrant population in the world with over 200 million migrant workers and children. These migrants often come from poorer rural areas looking for jobs in the cities, and are underprotected by China's laws. This constitutes one of the largest — and most undercovered — socioeconomic issues in the world.

For migrants, healthcare and approaches towards health is key. Given that migrants are often working to support their family back home but are largely denied access to healthcare for them and their children, they serve as a population of utmost concern towards health studies as they are especially vulnerable.

In particular, migrants suffer from lack of attention towards mental health and neuropsychiatric illnesses. This is partially due to structural exclusion from health systems in their communities but also due to significant stigmatization of such illnesses in China. However, the specifics on how stigmatization affects the count of these illnesses is uncertain; stigmatization and lack of education often leads to underreporting.

Interestingly, migrants are subject to the Healthy Immigrant Effect, a global trend where migrants tend to be initially healthier relative to the surrounding population through self-selection of those who are able to travel to and work in urban cities. However, this effect quickly fades and illnesses emerge.

However, whereas elsewhere migrants that return back home tend to be those who are physically unable to continue working (known as the Salmon Effect), this largely does not hold true in China, where those who return tend to do so for familial reasons rather than health, suggesting that migrants remain in urban areas even when physical health has deteriorated substantially.

All of this past research, however, generally fails to account for psychological health, which may play a role in how migrants view themselves and the world around them in stressful conditions. It is of particular importance to examine how neuropsychiatric disorders develop as a combination of biology and societal effects within the scope of the migrant population.

This project will focus on creating a model for evaluating how neuropsychiatric illnesses emerge and are treated in migrant populations. In particular, an examination of the neurodevelopmental changes and challenges faced by migrant children and other children of migrants deserves greater exploration, as they may serve as a key model for other migrant populations around the world. The reality of the social conditions of migrants is highly complex, spanning an enormous population, and thus deserves greater focus.

With the Laidlaw Scholars program, I will research the interplay between social environment and neuropsychiatric disease. Studies demonstrate that social support networks create differences in disease progression. These support networks are markedly absent for China's migrants. In my personal experience, family members who migrated had much worse neuropsychiatric outcomes compared to those who stayed. This project will apply my previous neuropsychiatric research on a broader scale by examining its sociological underpinnings. This is important to understand how neuropsychiatric illness progresses and thus key to providing better care around the world using this model population.