

Child suicides highlight growing social crisis in China

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The apparent suicide deaths of four young children in the impoverished Guizhou province in south-western China has highlighted mounting social inequality, and the increasingly dire situation of internal migrants forced to travel to the major cities for work, often leaving behind their children.

According to Chinese state media, the boy and three girls, aged between 5 and 13, died on June 9 after drinking pesticide. The children had lived on their own in the village of Cizhou, in Guizhou province, since at least March and perhaps, according to some reports, for over a year.

All the circumstances of the tragedy point to the absence of even a minimal social safety net for the children of migrant workers. According to *China Youth Daily*, the eldest child, the 13-year-old boy named Zhang Qigang, was found sprawled outside the family home by a passerby at 11pm, having drunk a substantial quantity of pesticide. The three girls were found inside the house. They were taken to hospital and subsequently pronounced dead.

According to Guizhou provincial officials, the family had lived in Hainan province, then moved to Guizhou in 2011. Ren Xifen, the mother of the children, left in 2014 after reportedly suffering domestic violence at the hands of her husband. He later left the children to look for work in Guangdong province. Some accounts suggest that he also abused the children, with reports of the eldest boy suffering a broken arm and a torn ear.

Local police said the father continued to send around 700 yuan (about \$US100) to the children each month. The bank account they accessed held some 3,500 yuan at the time of their deaths.

The children's elderly grandparents lived some distance from the house, and the children appear to have been left to their own devices. According to the state news agency, Xinhua, they stopped going to school a month before their

deaths, and became increasingly isolated and withdrawn. They largely subsisted on ground corn flour from the previous year's crop.

Images posted online show an unkempt and austere room in the house where the children lived.

According to the *China News Service*, Zhang Qigang, the boy, left a suicide note that stated: "Thanks for your kindness. I know you mean well for us, but we should go now."

Ren Xifen, the children's mother, returned to Cizhou after their deaths. She told the Xinhua news agency that she left out of fear of her husband and went to work at a toy factory in Guangdong. "I did not shoulder my responsibility for them," she said. "I had to come back for a final look at them. I am illiterate and cannot even write my own name. I wanted them to perform well in school, unlike me, living a hard life."

The response of the Chinese regime followed a well-worn pattern. In an attempt to create scapegoats and obscure the broader social issues, as many as a dozen local officials were sacked last week for not aiding the children, or compelling them to attend school. The state-media disapprovingly referred to the conduct of the children's parents, suggesting they were to blame.

Nervous that the incident could provoke broad public outrage, Premier Li Keqiang issued a statement on June 12. "Those who fail to act or pretend to act must be held responsible," he declared. "Such a tragedy cannot be allowed to happen again." An official inquiry into the deaths has been initiated.

Far from being an isolated episode, the deaths highlight the plight of millions of rural poor in China. According to official census figures, at least 61 million children have been "left behind" by parents who had to migrate to larger cities in search of work. The figure represents some 22 percent of children nationwide. In rural areas, it is estimated at around one in three.

“Left behind” children are frequently put in the care of their grandparents. Internal migrant workers are forced to work in large factory complexes with long hours, and no chance of looking after their children. In addition, discriminatory government regulations largely exclude the children of migrant workers from schools in the major cities.

Guizhou province is a microcosm of the issues facing the rural poor in China, with some 6.3 million people forced to find work outside the province, and an estimated 1.16 million “left behind” children.

At the same time, basic facilities and services in rural areas have been run-down. According to figures from Growing Home, a non-government organisation, cited in a *Market Watch* report, around 37,000 schools in rural areas have been closed over the past decade. Some 33 million primary and high school-aged children from rural areas are living in boarding schools, with about 60 percent of them “left behind.”

The latest deaths follow a similar incident in 2012, which triggered widespread anger. The bodies of five children, aged between 9 and 13, were found in a rubbish bin in the city of Bijie, also in Guizhou province. The children, whose parents left the city to find work, were living in the rubbish bin and asphyxiated after lighting a fire to keep warm. That calamity “trended” on social media, with many bloggers and others contrasting the plight of the children with the wealth of ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) officials.

The regime responded by blaming local officials and the children’s parents, and arresting the journalist who reported the story.

The recent boom on Chinese share markets has highlighted both the obscene wealth, and the parasitic character, of China’s burgeoning ruling elite. Fearful that the growing slowdown of the Chinese economy will provoke social opposition, the CCP regime responds with anxiety to any incident that exposes the immense social crisis facing masses of Chinese workers.



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