

From Judicial Intervention to Employment Independence: Supporting Migrant Children with Disabilities Involved in Offences

Hui Ma¹, Qiu Jin Yuan², Yuanyuan Tong³, Qiannan Guo⁴, Yang Liu^{5*}

¹School of Sociology and Anthropology, Xiamen University, Xiamen 361005, Fujian, China

²Jinling Women's College/School of Sociology/School of Accounting, Nanjing Normal University, Nanjing 210024, Jiangsu, China

³School of Foreign Languages, Zhongbei College, Nanjing Normal University, Nanjing 210046, Jiangsu, China

⁴School of Marxism, Sunshine College, Fuzhou 350000, Fujian, China

⁵Quanzhou Vocational and Technical University, Quanzhou 362268, Fujian, China

*Corresponding author: Yang Liu, 756915639@qq.com

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Abstract: This study examines how to safeguard the employment rights of migrant children with disabilities who have been involved in offenses within a multi-party collaboration mechanism. Firstly, employment support requires the joint participation of multiple stakeholders; secondly, the principle of “the best interests of the child” must be upheld; furthermore, the current lack of accommodative services within judicial social work hampers the improvement of service quality. Specific interventions should be grounded in professional assessments and thorough consultation with service recipients, and should establish clear objectives and strategies while evaluating implementation outcomes. The study further highlights the need to reflect on the tension between professional ideals and localized practice within judicial social services, as well as the systemic barriers faced by multi-professional collaboration.

Keywords: Multi-party collaboration mechanism; Juvenile justice; Children with disabilities involved in offenses; Employment assistance

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1. Introduction

With the acceleration of urbanization and socio-economic development, an increasing number of families are frequently relocating due to work or life necessities. In this process, a specific group—migrant children with disabilities involved in offenses—has gradually become more visible in unfamiliar environments at certain stages. These children face multiple forms of discrimination and exclusion in society due to their disabilities or criminal acts. Moreover, during their migration, they encounter numerous challenges, including difficulties in securing

employment, integrating into new communities, and accessing adequate education and healthcare. Therefore, exploring suitable employment assistance models for migrant children with disabilities involved in offenses has become an urgent and critical task.

Against this backdrop, employment assistance for these children should be guided by a “people-centered care” philosophy, respecting their dignity and choices, helping to reduce physical and psychological barriers in the employment process, and encouraging them to adopt a positive mindset when facing employment challenges. By providing personalized vocational guidance and training, they can enhance their capabilities and achieve self-realization. Employment assistance for migrant children with disabilities involved in offenses is not only vital for their individual survival and development but also a test of social justice and harmony. In recent years, the state has continuously rolled out policy support to ensure more robust protection of the rights and interests of persons with disabilities. The government has introduced a series of policies aimed at further safeguarding the rights of persons with disabilities. At the regional level, governments have also implemented basic services, such as establishing special funds to support employment training for persons with disabilities, facilitating job matching between enterprises and persons with disabilities, and strengthening assistance and rehabilitation efforts for children involved in offenses. While certain achievements have been made, significant challenges remain.

For migrant children with disabilities involved in offenses who lack local household registration, there are still considerable challenges in providing inclusive and refined services. Issues persist in the construction of employment assistance systems, resource allocation, and service quality, particularly regarding the inflexibility of household registration policies and the specific safeguard measures for the welfare of children with disabilities, which urgently require improvement. Thus, exploring a localized employment assistance model suitable for migrant children with disabilities involved in offenses in China has become an urgent and important task. Judicial social workers are key members of the rehabilitation and support teams for these children, playing multifaceted roles in the employment assistance process. Social workers act as team coordinators, resource linkers, psychological supporters, case managers, and other critical roles, assisting migrant children with disabilities involved in offenses explore career paths matching their abilities, which is of positive significance.

2. Literature review

2.1. Juvenile justice and social work

For over a century, since the inception of juvenile justice, its purposes, approaches, scope, procedures, and measures have been in a state of dynamic evolution ^[1]. Since the 1980s, China has undertaken numerous exploratory reforms in the areas of “juvenile justice” and its “special protection” ^[2]. China’s juvenile justice system has undergone a phased development from scratch over 76 years. This progression can be specifically divided into four stages. The first stage marks the embryonic form of the juvenile justice system (1949–1983), during which legislative and policy support were limited, but preliminary exploration was initiated through the establishment of juvenile correctional facilities. The second stage involves the initial construction and refinement of the juvenile justice system (1984–2015), focusing on legislation and the establishment of juvenile courts and prosecutorial agencies. The third stage is characterized by reflection and adjustment (2015–2019), with an emphasis on evolving philosophies—from “protection and punishment to prevention” ^[3]. Among these developments, legal scholars early on recognized the necessity of integrating social work into juvenile justice, driven by the need to “educate, influence, and rehabilitate” delinquent youth ^[4]. The essence and goal of judicial social work are to maximize children’s rights protection and interests and effectively prevent and address juvenile delinquency, and

emphasize the establishment of a social support system for juvenile justice, highlighting the importance of social work intervention ^[5-7]. Currently, domestic evaluations of intervention outcomes are mostly “qualitative studies” or “survey research” ^[8-10]. In contrast, international scholars focus primarily on evidence-based interventions, the effectiveness of which has been empirically supported. The situation of migrant children with disabilities is relatively complex. While academic discussions have paid much attention to left-behind children involved in crime, there is limited scholarly attention on migrant children who face the “triple jeopardy” of migration, involvement in crime, and disabilities. Therefore, the term “migrant children with disabilities involved in crime” used in this paper refers to those under 18 who have migrated with their parents outside their household registration area, committed crimes in the place of migration, and cannot access welfare policies from Disabled Persons’ Federations, thus requiring both judicial and social assistance.

2.2. Social integration theory

Social integration refers to the process through which individuals or groups, upon entering a new social environment, gradually develop shared values, behavioral norms, and a sense of identity through interactions with other members of society. It provides an important theoretical framework for understanding and promoting the integration of mobile populations into new environments ^[11]. With the deepening of research on social exclusion, social integration has been proposed as a concept opposite to social exclusion. Like social exclusion, social integration is an interdisciplinary concept that has attracted attention across fields such as medicine, sociology, psychology, and policy analysis ^[12]. There is still an ongoing debate regarding the definition of social integration. Based on research methods, studies related to social integration can be divided into two fields: empirical research and policy application research. In the field of empirical research, scholars often explore the status quo, influencing factors, and measurement indicators of social integration, viewing it as either a process or a state ^[13]. In the field of policy application research, scholars argue that social integration is not only a developmental process but also a means and goal for achieving policy objectives ^[14]. In the late 1980s, France implemented its first social integration policy—the Income Support Program, which supported excluded individuals in participating in labor and social life through vocational training. In 1989, the European Commission launched its first social integration program. By the end of the 1980s, based on member states’ requirements, the European Community had set standards for the social integration of its members ^[15]. In a speech marking the establishment of the Social Exclusion Unit, the British Prime Minister stated that social integration is normatively defined as citizenship, entailing, by normative standards, having a family, work, or economic security, being a member of a community, and identifying with that community ^[16]. In 2003, the European Commission provided a relatively influential definition in the Joint Report on Social Inclusion: Social integration is a process that ensures groups at risk of poverty and exclusion have the necessary opportunities and resources to fully participate in the economic, social, and cultural life, to enjoy a standard of living and well-being considered normal in the society where they live, and to ensure their greater participation in decisions affecting their lives and the acquisition of more rights ^[17]. Therefore, behind economic self-reliance through employment lies effective social integration, which helps restore missing social functions.

3. Comprehensive reflection on the process of social work intervention

3.1. Employment assistance for migrant disabled children involved in criminal offenses requires multi-stakeholder collaboration

This case involves a child with Grade II visual impairment who was charged with affray and theft. During early

childhood, the child migrated with parents and consequently did not benefit from local social welfare services for disabled children, resulting in significant personal challenges. Due to committing offenses outside their household registration and the minor circumstances of the offenses, the child qualified for conditional non-prosecution as a minor. However, service continuity was hindered by household registration restrictions. Through multi-stakeholder coordination, the employment assistance effort involved collaborative participation from the District People's Procuratorate, the District Minor Protection Center, local community agencies, and disabled persons' federations, among other social organizations. These efforts aimed to support the minor, Xiao Yang, in achieving better "social integration", underscoring the need for standardized top-level design.

In such contexts, multi-stakeholder collaborative services for migrant offending children and their families become particularly crucial. In this case, Xiao Yang was ineligible for employment skill training and rehabilitation services for persons with disabilities offered by the local Disabled Persons' Federation due to non-local household registration. Furthermore, due to the charges of provoking disturbances and theft, most employers were reluctant to accept the child, posing significant risks in terms of transportation and training participation. Throughout this process, Xiao Yang's parents endured substantial economic hardship, long-term care pressure, and emotional distress. This situation necessitates effective collaboration among judicial social workers, psychologists, blind massage therapists, and other specialized professionals. Therefore, exploring a localized multi-disciplinary service model for migrant disabled children involved in offenses remains essential.

3.2. How to realize the principle of the best interests of the child in employment assistance for migrant disabled children involved in offenses

As a special group, migrant disabled children involved in offenses face not only challenges arising from physical disabilities but also the adverse impact of criminal records on their future development. Therefore, the primary task of social work intervention is to gain a profound understanding of their specific needs, including psychological, educational, and vocational needs. During the intervention process, social workers must assess whether existing employment assistance policies are applicable to this group and analyze their practical effectiveness. This involves interpreting policy content, investigating implementation progress, and evaluating policy effectiveness. Through such assessments, gaps and shortcomings in policies can be identified, providing a basis for subsequent improvements. To realize the principle of the best interests of the child, collaborative efforts across multiple departments are essential. Social workers should actively establish collaboration mechanisms with government agencies, educational institutions, enterprises, and other stakeholders to jointly advance employment assistance for migrant disabled children involved in offenses. Through cross-sector collaboration, resources can be integrated and synergies formed to create a more supportive employment environment for this group.

3.3. The lack of tolerance-based services for disabled children involved in offenses in judicial social work hampers service quality improvement

In judicial social work services, disabled children involved in offenses constitute a special and vulnerable group. Due to their physical disabilities and involvement with the justice system, they face increased challenges and difficulties when receiving services. However, the current absence of accommodative services for this group in judicial social work significantly hinders the improvement of service quality. To address this situation, social workers must engage in comprehensive intervention and critical reflection.

Firstly, the lack of accommodative services for children with disabilities involved in offences primarily

manifests in service barriers. These children may encounter obstacles due to physical disabilities, such as communication difficulties and mobility challenges. The absence of accommodative services prevents these barriers from being addressed promptly, thereby undermining the effectiveness and continuity of support. Secondly, during service provision, children with disabilities involved in criminal offences often experience heightened psychological pressure, bearing greater mental strain than their non-disabled peers. The absence of disability-inclusive services may exacerbate negative emotions such as anxiety and low self-esteem, hindering their mental health and social integration. Unequal resource allocation further places children with disabilities involved in the criminal justice system at a disadvantage within judicial social work services. The lack of disability-inclusive services may result in disproportionate resource distribution, preventing them from accessing the same service opportunities and resources as other children.

Therefore, establishing an accommodative service mechanism tailored to children with disabilities involved in offences and providing personalized support services is essential. Social workers should provide tailored support based on the specific needs and circumstances of disabled children involved in crime. This includes services such as psychological counselling, physical rehabilitation, and vocational skills training to address their particular requirements. Additionally, enhanced collaboration and communication with relevant departments—such as education, healthcare, and rehabilitation services—is vital to deliver comprehensive support. Strengthening coordination ensures seamless information sharing and complementary resource allocation throughout the service provision process.

Providing a “tolerant service” is particularly crucial for disabled children involved in crime who are registered in different localities. This is vital for their more effective integration into society. Although certain systemic challenges exist in the process, social workers, as social activists, can actively advocate for greater involvement from social organizations. Through such comprehensive interventions, society can provide more effective support to disabled children involved in crime, thereby promoting their comprehensive development and social integration.

4. Research findings

4.1. Employment assistance has yielded some results

Based on social integration theory, this study has provided employment support for migrant disabled children involved in offenses. It has developed an accommodating service model, achieving holistic and multidimensional service goals, thereby securing a degree of safeguarding for the child’s best interests. In this case, the young offender Xiaoyang faced significant personal and familial hardship due to household registration restrictions and prolonged social isolation. Through repeated coordination and resource linking by social workers, community support was obtained for Xiaoyang. With collaboration between the Disabled Persons’ Federation and the community, Xiaoyang trained in blind massage therapy. Following a systematic study of fundamental Chinese medicine theory and practical massage techniques, Xiaoyang has now successfully secured employment.

4.2. Strengthening emotional bonds among family members alleviates feelings of anxiety

Xiao Yang grew up as a migrant child. After reuniting with his parents, his parents’ long work hours away from home left him frequently alone. Over time, this led to a lack of meaningful communication with his parents. Particularly upon entering adolescence, he developed many new thoughts and worries. Isolated at home with little contact with the outside world and no friends of his own, Xiao Yang gradually became peculiar and reluctant to

talk to others. Upon learning of Xiaoyang's situation, the social worker promptly conducted an assessment and initiated a "heart-to-heart" session within his family. They encouraged Xiaoyang to express his true thoughts and feelings directly to his parents. Initially, Xiaoyang was somewhat reserved and spoke little. But under the supportive gaze of those present, he confided, "When I attended primary school back home, studying in a public school meant people around me discriminated against me verbally and physically. Combined with my visual impairment, it was difficult to keep up with the academic workload in the state school system. Over time, my grades suffered greatly, leading to a lack of self-esteem and confidence. After moving in with my parents, they were preoccupied with making ends meet and rarely communicated with me. For a long time, I felt profoundly lonely and yearned for connection with the outside world." Upon hearing this, his parents acknowledged they had indeed neglected his emotional needs, believing that sheltering him at home was the best form of care. While concerned about the risks of the outside world, they had failed to recognize his need for normal social interaction and the essential development of independent living skills for future societal integration. To foster a more relaxed atmosphere throughout the family support program, the social worker, with the informed consent of all participants, integrated aromatherapy and music therapy into the family support counselling sessions, with the informed consent of all participants. After multiple heart-to-heart conversations, the parents have observed positive changes in Xiaoyang through his employment support program. Not only has he acquired professional skills, but his interpersonal communication skills have also improved, which has significantly alleviated the family's anxiety.

4.3. Linking social resources to enhance service quality

This case is a comprehensive employment support intervention for a migrant disabled child involved in offenses. The service period spanned from the commencement of rehabilitation support through to the successful completion of probationary assessment. With the collaborative efforts of multiple stakeholders, the migrant disabled child involved in criminal activity, Xiaoyang, successfully completed training in blind massage and therapeutic massage techniques and secured employment within a blind massage establishment. Through this case, the social worker facilitated a multidisciplinary, multi-professional, and multi-sectoral collaborative working model. A multi-agency communication and feedback mechanism was gradually established through the multi-party coordination mechanism, forming an accommodative service model for migrant disabled children involved in criminal activities. Effective phased assessments were conducted throughout the pre-, mid-, and post-intervention stages, with regular home visits and follow-ups for Xiao Yang to dynamically monitor his skill acquisition progress, ensuring holistic service outcomes.

Secondly, collaborative relationships were forged with social welfare and charitable organizations, establishing an accommodative service provision model for migrant disabled children involved in criminal activities. It included multi-agency collaboration, liaison with social organizations and charitable foundations, and engagement of university student volunteers to provide diverse and specialized services. These measures significantly enhanced the diversity and multifaceted nature of support services for this vulnerable group.

5. Professional reflection

5.1. The challenges between professional ideals and localized practice in judicial social services

Within the field of judicial social services, the integration of professional ideals with localized practice frequently encounters numerous challenges. This challenge is particularly pronounced when dealing with migrant children

involved in offences. As a distinct group, these children share common characteristics while possessing unique backgrounds and requirements. How to uphold professional principles while accommodating local culture and practical circumstances requires in-depth consideration by social workers. The professional ideals of judicial social services typically emphasize justice, equality, respect, and the protection of children's rights. This necessitates that social workers adhere to established professional standards and ethics throughout the service process, ensuring children receive appropriate care and support. However, localized practice is frequently influenced by multiple factors such as regional culture, social customs, and legal systems, which may diverge from or conflict with professional ideals. The particularity and complexity of migrant children involved in offenses stem from family relocation, poor social adaptation, and a lack of legal awareness. These children require not only legal assistance within judicial social services but also comprehensive support spanning psychological, educational, and vocational domains. Moreover, they may confront multiple challenges, including identity crises, cultural dissonance, and social discrimination. In the case of Xiaoyang, the main difficulties stemmed from the lack of early special educational rehabilitation during his preschool years, as well as the failure of China's welfare system to identify and intervene early on. His personal circumstances were significantly compounded, particularly due to his non-local household registration status, which prevented him from directly accessing preferential benefits such as free employment training quotas offered by the regional Disabled Persons' Federation.

5.2. Institutional barriers to multidisciplinary collaboration in the development of judicial social service systems

The growing number of migrant disabled children involved in offenses poses unique challenges. Due to multiple issues, including family background, educational environment, and social integration, these children face a relatively higher risk of criminal involvement. However, current judicial social services for migrant children involved in offenses are inadequate in several respects, such as a narrow service scope and a lack of institutional guarantees. Firstly, service content is incomplete: current judicial social services primarily focus on education and psychological counselling, neglecting their specific needs, such as cultural adaptation and family relationship mediation. Secondly, institutional safeguards are lacking: judicial social services for this group currently lack clear legal and regulatory support, resulting in inadequate implementation and hindering the establishment of long-term mechanisms. Finally, inter-departmental coordination remains inadequate. Although such services require multi-agency collaboration, inadequate inter-departmental communication in practice impairs service outcomes. This paper emphasizes that employment independence is not merely about securing a job, but a vital pathway to economic self-sufficiency, social integration, and personal reconstruction — one of the ultimate objectives of support. Moving forward, establishing a high-quality, comprehensive service system adapted to China's local context with multi-disciplinary collaboration remains an area requiring further exploration for migrant disabled children involved in offenses.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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