

Study on the Operation Mechanism of Categorized Protection System for Kunjing Children

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Abstract. The protection of the rights and interests of Kunjing children is related to the national economy and people's livelihood. In recent years, the categorized protection policy for children in needs is the focus of the government and academia, but the related research does not pay close attention to the longitudinal context of its internal operation. Based on this, this paper adopts the method of qualitative research to study the operation mechanism of categorized protection for children in needs through field investigation and explore the problems in the process of matching and implementation of protection content by constructing the operating framework of "monitoring-evaluation-treatment". The study found that at present, there are still some problems in the categorized protection of children in needs in the country, such as imperfect construction of categorized protection policy, insufficient protection of institutions and professional personnel, difficult policy implementation and so on. In this regard, the country should promote the further implementation of categorized protection for children in needs by promoting the combination and perfection of protection projects, improving the coordination and linkage mechanism of departments, and strengthening the construction of grass-roots child welfare team.

Keywords: Kunjing Children; Categorized Protection Policy; Operation Process.

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

Kunjing Children (困境儿童) can be categorized into children in physical need, children in family need and children in custody need. The protection of the rights and interests of *Kunjing Children* has always been a matter of great concern to the government and society. The construction of China's social welfare system is evolving from a complementary type to a universal type, while the social welfare policy for *Kunjing Children* is also being perfected (Peng Huamin et al., 2021 [1]; Wu Pengfei et al., 2016 [2]). In particular, the State Council of the People's Republic of China issued the *Guidelines of the State Council on Reinforcing Support for Children in Need* in 2016, which emphasized the importance of categorized protection and accurate matching for *Kunjing Children*, stating that: "Promoting the all-round development of children should be taken as the starting point and ultimate goal, families should be strengthened in their awareness and ability to fulfill their duty of raising and guardianship, and a comprehensive range of policies and measures such as social assistance, social welfare and protection should be combined to provide targeted assistance and support on a categorized basis, so as to create a favorable environment for the healthy growth of *Kunjing Children*."

The categorized protection policy for *Kunjing Children* is to carry out targeted relief and protection, in which the matching mechanism takes targeted policy as the core idea. Firstly, the characteristics of *Kunjing Children* are understood and categorized; secondly, according to the needs of each category of *Kunjing Children*, their basic or growth needs are defined, and different protection content is matched, so as to achieve the category of protection content and balance between "supply" and "need". However, there are serious problems in the practice of categorized protection for *Kunjing Children* in China, including vague definition and category of *Kunjing Children*, omissions in the content of protection services, and difficulties in the implementation of protection (Dai Chao, 2014 [3]; Qiao Dongping, 2015 [4]; Xing Hongfang, 2016 [5]). Especially in the policy operation, due to the imperfection of the top-level design, the inadequate matching of supporting measures has become the main sticking point of the protection work. For example, some scholars pointed out that the

transformation of the basic rights of *Kunjing* Children from legal rights to practical rights has suffered obstacles: the relevant rules and regulations are not systematic, and *Kunjing* Children face a series of barriers when they get corresponding assistance (Li Hongbo, 2017 [6]).

Following the introduction of a social welfare policy, how to implement the protection content for the protection object and what kind of matching mechanism is more effective, are concerns of society and academic circle (Peng Huamin et al., 2020; Bi Tianyun, 2009 [7]; Gao Liru, 2019 [8]). In recent years, the academic circle began to study the operation mechanism of the categorized protection system for *Kunjing* Children, focusing on the issue of accurate matching. For example, certain scholars explored the reasons behind the matching and found that the matching degree between the guaranteed supply and the assessed needs of *Kunjing* Children is insufficient or inaccurate (Qiao Dongping, 2015 [9]; Lu Wei et al., 2019 [10]). Also, some others studied the improvement countermeasures and indicated that there are four ways to achieve the accurate education support for *Kunjing* Children (Deng Xu, 2018 [11]). Generally speaking, the academic circle mostly studies the elements and characteristics of the categorized protection system for *Kunjing* Children from the horizontal perspective, but the longitudinal research on how the elements interact in different links in the actual operation of the categorized protection system for *Kunjing* Children is deficient, which makes it difficult to investigate the internal operation mechanism of the categorized protection system for *Kunjing* Children in depth. Therefore, in this context, this paper focused on the accurate matching mechanism in the operation of the categorized protection system for *Kunjing* Children. Through field investigation, the matching issue in the process of categorized protection for *Kunjing* Children was studied to provide empirical support and policy suggestions for the categorized protection scheme for *Kunjing* Children.

1.2 Research Methods

Qualitative research method was adopted in this paper and abundant data were collected through various channels, which is shown as follows:

1.2.1 Observation Method

In this paper, observation method was used for field research on neighborhood centers and district Civil Affairs Bureau in N City. During the process, the observation outline was adopted to highlight the daily work of social workers, service sites and related facilities. Meanwhile, attention was paid to the process of social workers' services, including defining categories, assessing needs, seeking policy support and other services, to mainly understand the key and difficulties of grass roots social workers in delivering the protection for *Kunjing* Children, as well as the protection knots of *Kunjing* Children and their families, in order to facilitate future analysis and solutions.

1.2.2 Interview Method

In this paper, focus group interviews with 15 social workers from the Minors Protection Program in N in July 2021 were carried out, focusing on the local policies related to the protection of *Kunjing* Children and the operation of the policies. For instance, the protection measures of different categories of *Kunjing* Children, the roles played by each subject in the process of helping and how to play their respective roles, and the difficulties in the practical operation of categorized protection. The feasibility, effectiveness and problems of the operation mechanism of categorized protection policies for *Kunjing* Children, as well as the implementation effects and existing problems of specific policies were mainly investigated. The interview process was recorded under the premise of informed consent, and then the written materials sorted out according to the recordings and the interviewees' personal reflections were used as research data sources.

2. Description of the Operation Mechanism of Categorized Protection for Kunjing Children

The whole operation mechanism of categorized protection for *Kunjing* Children can be roughly categorized into three links. The risk factors of *Kunjing* Children are “monitored, assessed and treated”, namely monitored identification, needs assessment and professional treatment.

2.1 Monitoring and Identification

According to the *Guideline on Further Improving the Care and Service System for Rural Left-behind Children and Kunjing Children* issued by the Ministry of Civil Affairs in 2019, the responsibilities of children directors are mainly to organize and carry out information screening, and achieve the realization of one file for each child in need; the responsibilities of children supervisors are to update the information of the *Kunjing* Children, as well as guide children directors to pay regular visits and focus on the verification and other matters. Therefore, the monitoring and identification of *Kunjing* Children mainly relies on the government to take the lead, centering on the information management system for *Kunjing* Children, taking the community as the subject and *Kunjing* Children as the object, and children directors, children supervisors, social workers and other people to conduct information mapping and positioning identification.

2.1.1 Information Mapping

The situation of *Kunjing* Children and their basic information are dynamically changing, which requires children directors to monitor and grasp the dynamic change of *Kunjing* Children and their basic information in time through regular visits, key verification and other ways, and update and submit the information of *Kunjing* Children quarterly. In this process, children directors take the household information recorded in the community as the direct data, and the household survey information as the supplementary data for the field investigation, and comprehensively grasp the basic situation of the *Kunjing* Children and report it to children’ supervisors after the registration. The children supervisors then report it to local social workers after review, providing a lot of information for the follow-up precise intervention. At the same time, children directors and children supervisors are more timely and effective in responding to temporary risks.

Children directors and children supervisors have a better understanding of their own communities. Although we have some understanding of *Kunjing* Children, our social workers can’t be more aware and responsive to children’s sudden problems than the children directors and children supervisors, such as learning problems and mental disorders, and need their report. (Social worker C of N City)

2.1.2 Positioning Identification

Stepwise reporting by children directors is a routine channel for monitoring and identifying *Kunjing* Children. This channel has a wide coverage and meticulous monitoring, together with lag, time-consuming and low efficiency problems. As a result, the monitoring and identification of *Kunjing* Children also depends on the channel through which *Kunjing* Children actively seek help themselves.

N city has established a quick response disposal mechanism, and formed a discovery report, intervention, evaluation and assistance mechanism, such as citizen hotline at 12345, civil affairs service hotline at 12349, etc. According to the *Notice of J Provincial Civil Affairs Department on the Opening of the Provincial Kunjing Children Care Service Hotline*, J province set up the provincial *Kunjing* Children care service hotline -- “The Voice of Sunshine Children”, aiming to timely find children who are in or will face difficulties through the 24-hour hotline. In addition, the survey found that in June 2020, J province launched a one-year “Policy Publicity to Village (Community) Residents” for the care and protection of rural left-behind children and *Kunjing* Children. Meanwhile, with the increase of policy publicity activities of social workers in their daily work, families of *Kunjing* Children have a more comprehensive understanding of national protection policies, and their

awareness of protecting their rights has been enhanced. Therefore, the number of children calling the hotline for help has increased.

Thanks to the productive publicity activities, three more children took the initiative to seek help this year. (Social worker A in N City)

In the early stage, substantial publicity work was conducted for children and parents, and children directors also preached, collecting materials every time to evaluate the implementation situation. Some old people do not want to listen to the lecture, which takes up their cooking time. Some parents work in other places, so I think it's better to tell them. (Social worker B in N City)

2.2 Needs Assessment

The social workers first listen to the report of children directors to obtain the needs information of *Kunjing* Children. Since the information provided by the children directors is not very comprehensive, the social workers often carry out needs assessment by means of door-to-door visits and questionnaires. Besides, some *Kunjing* Children will take the initiative to call the municipal hotline for help, and the municipal leaders will send a document to the Civil Affairs Bureau, which will then send it to the social workers, who will visit them and assess their needs.

The *Kunjing* Children focuses on life predicament and economic assistance. Their quality of life is poor, and most of their families are in poverty. The main reason is that their parents do odd jobs outside and rely on subsistence allowances to maintain their lives. The per capita income of their families is generally low. Also, it is common for *Kunjing* Children to be raised by skip-generation and previous generation. (Social worker C in N City)

Most of the *Kunjing* Children are in the school-age stage, whose one of the biggest difficulties is the learning difficulty. In most families with *Kunjing* Children, parents are busy with work and communicate less with their children, and they themselves are not highly educated. *Kunjing* Children also lack autonomy in learning, and their academic performance is generally poor. Families with *Kunjing* Children often seek help from social workers in the hope of finding educational resources and improving their children's academic performance. (Social worker D in N City)

2.3 Professional Treatment

2.3.1 Service Mode

Since the needs of *Kunjing* Children often involve economic, educational, medical, psychological and other aspects at the same time, social workers need to link resources to get cooperation and support from other responsible subjects, but it is not effective to rely on individual social workers to coordinate. It is understood that the leading group set up under the new *Law on the Protection of Minors* has played a role in coordinating the multi-sectoral work. Under the linkage mechanism, the increased sense of responsibility of leaders and the more complex and urgent events will promote the linkage effect. Moreover, some policy provisions are flexible. For example, the *Notification on Further Improving the Protection of De facto Children* in 2020 stipulates that "case-by-case discussion" can be adopted for other complicated situations that cannot be identified, which has solved some problems in practice.

As the boundaries of different systems are clear, they can only seek help from superiors, send letters (red head documents), and coordinate by superiors. Leaders attach importance to complex events, and the linkage effect is better. (Social worker D in N City)

There are some people who are in great needs but cannot be identified, so that they do not conform to the documents. Social workers make it clear through door-to-door visits and report it to the Civil Affairs Department who pays a return visit. If the situation is true, it can be resolved by means of case-by-case discussion by higher authorities. Of course, this is only a minority. (Social worker in N City)

2.3.2 Service Content

The services provided by social workers focus on the economic and psychological aspects. Social workers can provide direct and effective intervention services in accordance with the policy, including financial assistance, academic counseling, and psychological counseling. However, for some children in complicated situations, psychological counseling services will be involved but not in-depth because children are unwilling to tell or worry about secondary harm. At the same time, social workers usually use case or group social work to provide behavior correction and intervention services for children, but some of them have difficulties in finding cases.

Since this district is very large and it takes several hours to reach distant places, the continuous follow-up of cases will be greatly compromised. Therefore, we now prefer cases in areas close to N County. But the more remote the place is, the more it needs help, so we're conflicted. (Social worker B in N City)

In group social work, social workers carry out group activities in schools and communities. They identify appropriate themes for the needs of *Kunjing* Children. However, there are problems in staff recruitment and time coordination in group social work. In practice, social workers are also summing up experience to make group activities better carried out.

Social work agencies set the number of times to be completed, but the team members thought that compared with other organizations such as women's Federation, there were no prizes or subsidies, which could not motivate them to participate in the activities, so they stopped coming after several times. It was difficult to carry out. This year, the group activities were performed in schools, and the effect was remarkable. (Social worker B in N City)

3. Existing Problems

3.1 Imperfect Construction of Categorized Protection Policies for *Kunjing* Children

First of all, the protection content is not comprehensive enough. The smooth implementation of categorized protection of *Kunjing* Children is subject to the two ends of "supply" and "need". The plight state of *Kunjing* Children is diverse and even multiple, so their needs often involve many aspects, and different categories of *Kunjing* Children have various needs for the same protection content. However, the protection content of the current policy focuses on economic subsidies, not enough attention to psychological and service protection, and the protection project is single, which fails to meet the individual needs and expanding needs of specific types of groups, and lacks the combination and collocation of protection projects. In the meantime, the overall protection of the families in need is not in place. There is a lack of preventive services such as family support, upbringing and ability improvement, which are often carried out in the form of a single event and lack of long-term mechanism of regular and institutionalized services.

Secondly, the supporting policies are not perfect. The two key points concerning the implementation of categorized protection policies lie in the implementation rules and the linkage mechanism between departments, both of which have problems in reality. On the one hand, due to the unfulfillment of the implementation rules and the slow implementation speed, social workers often encounter the problem of broad policies without matching implementation rules, which consequently leads the practical protection not to be matched to the *Kunjing* Children by law. On the other hand, the coordination and linkage mechanism of departments is not perfect. The cooperation mechanism with a clear division of labor has not been established among the main subjects of responsibility, the rights and responsibilities of different systems are not clear, and there are buck-passing situations. Although a leading group is established, the linkage effect of departments is not brought into play. Facing the various needs of *Kunjing* Children, social workers cannot coordinate with other departments by their own strength. Therefore, they often report to their superiors and let them solve the problem. However, this method is complicated and inefficient.

3.2 Insufficient Organization and Qualified Personnel Protection

3.2.1 Lack of Professional Personnel

Children supervisors and children directors are important personnel in the accurate matching mechanism, who serve as an important role in recognizing *Kunjing* Children, understanding their needs, and assisting them to obtain protection. The study found that children directors in N city are part-time, bearing workload but enjoying little subsidy, generally appointed by the superior. As shown in Table 1, each region can basically determine one children supervisor in each township and one children director in each village. But the number of *Kunjing* Children is different in various regions, and the ratio of *Kunjing* Children and children directors is also different, and the burden of children directors is heavy in some regions. Moreover, the quality of the staff is uneven, and their overall willingness to work is not high. In some villages, the personnel responsible for children's work are older and lack of professional ability, which leads to difficulties in policy publicity and implementation.

Children directors received a financial subsidy of 60 yuan per month last year and 80 yuan this year. As children directors are appointed, some are reluctant to work for the money. Many children directors are in their 70s and 80s and are not familiar with daily material work. Children director age gap is larger, and their communications also suffer from certain problems. (Social worker B in N City)

In rural and other remote regions, children directors are usually held part-time by local village heads or powerful people. Due to the lack of financial support, many local children directors have become reluctant to talk to social workers, leading to some work difficulties. (Social worker C in N City)

Generally speaking, the categorized protection for children lacks professional service team and the professional level is low.

Table 1. Number of *Kunjing* Children and the Allocation of Children Supervisors and Children Directors

Regions		Township (Subdistrict Office)	Village (Community)	Children Supervisors	Children Directors	<i>Kunjing</i> Children
J province	D District in N City	10	111	10	111	423
	S District in N City	5	214	5	214	625
	N County in N City	20	391	20	379	509
	Y District in N City	7	89	7	89	275

3.2.2 Insufficient Institutional Resources

In the *Opinions on Further Promoting the Optimization of system and Innovation of High-Quality Development of Child Welfare Institutions*, the Ministry of Civil Affairs advocates the transformation of county-level child welfare institutions into uninsured institutions and emphasizes the application of professional methods in social work. However, the survey found that the civil affairs department of N city purchased the Minor Protection Project of Wuhan Yifei Social Work Service Center and set up a minor protection station at each station. But before that, most of the staff serving *Kunjing* Children in local institutions were student volunteers, with few professional social workers involved.

3.3 Difficulties in Policy Implementation

3.3.1 Difficulty in Identification

It is stipulated at the national level that children who lose their parents and cannot find their biological parents shall be put into the channels of orphan placement and properly settled by means

of family support, institutional support, family foster care and adoption in accordance with the law (Guo Fa [2016] No. 36). But the reality is that some of the children's parents or one of them actively evade the responsibility of raising children, resulting in the "de facto unsupported" state of children. However, parents can be found in the public protection system and are identified as having guardianship ability, which makes children unable to enjoy relevant protection, leading to a difficult and insecure situation for some children.

The mother left, but it was difficult for the police to prove that she had lost contact (the policy was strict, so she could only collect evidence from multiple parties accompanied by social workers). She lacked qualification and could only apply for the minimum allowance (Social worker E in N City).

If the child is successfully identified as unsupported, we will give a subsidy of 1,200 yuan per month. However, according to the feedback of children directors, many parents have lost contact, but the public protection department can find them, which makes it impossible to handle the certificate of unsupported fact (Social worker B in N City).

3.3.2 Poor Policy Delivery

The study also found that some *Kunjing* Children were not able to access services already provided by the policy, and they are seldom able to actively ask for help. The unfamiliarity of children and families with the policy partly reflects the lack of publicity. At the same time, due to insufficient cognitive level, some children and families are unable to timely and comprehensively understand the policies beneficial to them, and cannot seek effective help.

Most of them are in adolescence, so they rarely seek help from children directors or relevant department. Also, parents with low education level are unwilling to admit that their children have some psychological or physiological problems, which leads to difficulties in helping them, and few knowledge about counseling or social worker intervention. (Social worker B in N City)

4. Summary and Prospect

This paper found that the operation mechanism of the categorized protection system for *Kunjing* Children achieves resource matching through top-down coordination and cooperation between the government and social workers, but it still faces many problems in the practical process. To this end, multidimensional improvement measures should be promoted. The first is to promote the integration and perfection of protection projects. Some flexibility should be made in the project and a long-term service mechanism should be established to avoid fragmented single service activities. Second, the coordination and linkage mechanism among different departments should be improved. Top-level design should be performed well and the centralized leadership of the Civil Affairs Department should be strengthened in supporting *Kunjing* Children. Joint meetings should be organized to strengthen accountability, and a linkage and coordination mechanism for division of labor and cooperation among various departments should be constructed. Third, policies should be made more operable and flexible. Policy provisions should be adjusted in a timely manner to expand the scope of identification of children who are unsupported in fact. At the same time, the law should be followed to formulate detailed rules; each case should be explored on its own basis and the practice of allocating funds should be piloted according to their needs in places. Fourth, the development of community-level children's welfare teams should be strengthened. Attention should be paid to the position of social workers in the protection work system for *Kunjing* Children, as well as the construction of qualified personnel should be further strengthened to cultivate professional protection work team for *Kunjing* Children.

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