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CASE STUDY

Living alone in the city: Daily challenges, social support needs, and perceptions of social work intervention among urban solo-living youth in China

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Abstract

China's rapid urbanization and large-scale internal migration have given rise to a growing population of solo-living youth—young adults who live alone in major cities, far from their families of origin. Despite the expanding size of this group, qualitative research exploring their lived experiences remains scarce, and the social work perspective has been largely absent from existing scholarship. This study employed semi-structured in-depth interviews with 20 empty-nest Chinese youth aged 23 to 34 in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Chengdu, analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. Four themes emerged: (i) multilayered daily living challenges including housing insecurity and a pervasive sense of rootlessness shaped by institutional exclusion under the *hukou* system; (ii) systematic weakening of social support networks across family, peer, and community dimensions; (iii) emotional experiences characterized by concealed loneliness and unmet needs for emotional resonance; and (iv) a paradoxical pattern of high unfamiliarity with yet potential receptiveness toward social work services. Participants expressed strong expectations for low-threshold emotional support, peer mutual-aid networks, and youth-oriented community programs. Based on these findings, a multi-level social work intervention framework is proposed encompassing micro-level emotional support, meso-level peer network reconstruction, and macro-level policy advocacy. The findings contribute qualitative evidence for understanding empty-nest youth as a structurally produced demographic phenomenon and offer practice-oriented guidance for social work engagement with this emerging population.

Keywords: Empty-nest youth; Social work intervention; Qualitative research; Urbanization; Social support; Internal migration; China

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1. Introduction

Over the past four decades, China has undergone the largest urbanization process in human history. The share of the population living in urban areas rose from roughly 21% in 1982 to about 67% in 2020 (Gao *et al.*, 2023). Large-scale population mobility

has reshaped social structures and family forms. Data from the Seventh National Population Census show that China's floating population—individuals who live in a place other than their officially registered household (*hukou*) location, typically for employment purposes—reached 376 million in 2020, a nearly 70% increase from 2010 (Chan, 2021). Within this unprecedented spatial redistribution, the emergence and continued growth of solo-living youth have become a defining outcome of the interplay between urbanization and population mobility.

Solo-living youth (sometimes also referred to as "empty-nest youth" [*kongchao qingnian*] in the Chinese literature) typically refers to young people aged 20 to 39 who live alone in large cities, far from their hometowns and families of origin, and have not yet formed families of their own (Y. Wang, 2023). Although the term "empty-nest youth" appears in some Chinese-language publications, this study adopts "solo-living youth" as the primary descriptor to more accurately reflect the living arrangements of this population. The concept intersects theoretically with international scholarship on solo living and emerging adulthood. The global rise in young people living alone is widely understood as the joint product of delayed marriage and childbearing, accelerating individualization, and increasingly flexible labor markets (Choi & Ramaj, 2024). Marriage is not merely being postponed; an increasing number of adults in modern societies are choosing permanent singlehood and childlessness, fundamentally reshaping household structures (Chen *et al.*, 2025).

In the Chinese context, rising affluence has also played a role: as household incomes grow, more young people can afford to exit the family home and maintain independent living arrangements, a transition that was economically unfeasible for earlier generations. The expansion of flexible and contract-based employment, particularly in the technology, creative, and service sectors, has weakened the geographic anchoring function of stable, long-term jobs, making it both possible and sometimes necessary for young workers to relocate independently to cities where opportunities arise. What distinguishes empty-nest youth in the Chinese context is the added dimension of institutional exclusion imposed by the household registration (*hukou*) system (Zhou *et al.*, 2022). Unlike older adults who become "empty-nesters" when their children leave home, young people's solo-living status is largely a proactive choice driven by educational and career aspirations; however, this choice is shaped by tensions between structural constraints and individual agency (X. Wang *et al.*, 2024). In China, census data show that single-person households rose from about 2.52% of all households in 2000 to nearly 25% in 2020, while the average household size fell from 4.41 persons in 1982 to 2.62 in 2020 (Office of the Seventh National Census Leading Group of the State Council, 2021). This trajectory is consistent with the global rise of solo living documented across 75 countries (Cohen, 2021). These shifts indicate that empty-nest youth are not an isolated social phenomenon but a structural product closely linked to increasing urbanization, a rising age at first marriage, and persistently declining fertility (Chen *et al.*, 2025).

Existing research on this group remains predominantly quantitative. One study based on national survey data found that family health status had a significant direct effect on empty-nest youth's subjective well-being, with social support serving as a partial mediator and loneliness negatively moderating the facilitative effect of social support (Y. Wang, 2023). Another quantitative study of young people living alone revealed that self-concealment—the tendency to actively withhold personally distressing information from others—indirectly affected their perceived social support through a serial mediation pathway involving online psychological need satisfaction and social self-esteem (Zhang *et al.*, 2022). Research on the relationship between social integration and health among young migrants further showed that frequent mobility disrupted the social mentality of young migrant populations, which in turn harmed their health outcomes (Gong *et al.*, 2023). While these quantitative studies are valuable for identifying relationships among variables, their reliance on predetermined scales makes it difficult to access the complex difficulties empty-nest youth face in daily life or to capture the specific forms of social support they need.

Qualitative research on empty-nest youth is even scarcer. One descriptive qualitative study conducted in eastern China used semi-structured interviews with 15 empty-nest youth to identify internal and external factors contributing to social isolation (Yao *et al.*, 2023). It offered a preliminary exploration of how social isolation forms within this group, yet its analytical framework focused on the causes of isolation and did not systematically examine broader life difficulties or the need for external support. Notably, the social work perspective is nearly absent from existing scholarship. As an applied discipline centered on the principle of "helping people help themselves," social work has a distinctive advantage in linking individual needs with social resources and promoting community integration. Recently, several researchers have outlined possible pathways for social work intervention with empty-nest youth at the macro- (e.g., policy advocacy), meso- (e.g., community support), and micro-levels (e.g., individual empowerment) (L. Wang *et al.*, 2025), but this

discussion remains at the stage of theoretical reasoning and lacks empirical grounding in the perspectives of empty-nest youth themselves. Meanwhile, research on the policy tool configuration of urban community governance in China has revealed that the supply logic of existing community service systems still prioritizes retired cadres, military veterans, and disadvantaged groups, leaving ordinary residents—especially mobile young people—in a long-standing marginal position within community services (Ding *et al.*, 2022).

From a demographic perspective, the formation of the solo-living youth group is rooted in the profound demographic transition China is undergoing, including persistently declining total fertility rates, the intergenerational effects of the one-child policy, delayed marriage and childbearing driven by higher education expansion, and the *hukou* system's restrictions on the floating population's access to social welfare (Jin & Zhang, 2023). These factors collectively form the macro-level backdrop to this phenomenon. However, existing research has not adequately connected the individual experiences of empty-nest youth to these structural forces, and the social service system's response has lagged behind the demographic growth of this population.

In light of these gaps, this study adopts a qualitative approach. Through semi-structured in-depth interviews with empty-nest youth in first-tier and new first-tier cities in China, it aims to answer three research questions:

(i) What core difficulties and challenges do urban empty-nest youth face in daily life?
(ii) What forms and characteristics do their social support needs take?
(iii) What are their perceptions, attitudes, and expectations regarding social work intervention?

By situating the subjective experiences of empty-nest youth within the macro-level context of urbanization and population mobility, this study seeks to provide practice guidance, grounded in empirical evidence, for social work intervention with this emerging population group.

2. Methods

2.1. Research design

This study adopted a qualitative approach grounded in reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) using semi-structured in-depth interviews as the primary data collection method. The aim was to gain an in-depth understanding of empty-nest youth's urban life difficulties, social support needs, and perceptions and expectations of social work intervention from their own perspectives. Compared with the variable relationships captured by quantitative surveys, semi-structured interviews allow participants ample space to express personal experiences and reflections, thereby revealing the meaning structures and life contexts that lie behind statistical data (Campbell *et al.*, 2021). Data analysis followed reflexive thematic analysis, a method that emphasizes the researcher's active interpretive role during coding and theme construction and is well suited for systematically distilling meaning patterns from rich experiential material (Forbes, 2022).

2.2. Study setting and participants

The study was conducted in four cities: Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Chengdu. These cities represent typical first-tier and new first-tier cities in China where empty-nest youth are most highly concentrated. They differ in economic development, industrial structure, and cultural characteristics, allowing the study to capture diverse experiences across urban contexts. A combination of purposive sampling and snowball sampling was employed to recruit participants with relevant lived experiences (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2025). Recruitment information was posted on social media platforms (e.g., Weibo, *Xiaohongshu*, and relevant *Douban* groups), and early respondents referred subsequent participants.

Participants were eligible if they met four inclusion criteria: (i) aged 22 to 39; (ii) having lived alone in one of the above cities for at least six months; (iii) not currently living with a partner or family members; and (iv) holding a *hukou* registered in a location different from the current city of residence. After screening, 20 eligible respondents were included. Their demographic characteristics are presented in Table 1.

As shown in Table 1, the 20 participants included 11 women and 9 men, ranging in age from 23 to 34 (mean age = 28.0). Their educational backgrounds spanned associate degrees to master's degrees, and their occupations covered fields such as technology, education, the service industry, and finance. The duration of living alone ranged from one to seven years. The diversity of the sample in terms of gender, age, education level, and occupation helps reveal the heterogeneity of experiences within the empty-nest youth population.

In reflexive thematic analysis, sample adequacy is evaluated through the depth and richness of the data rather than numerical thresholds (Braun & Clarke, 2021); the 20 interviews yielded approximately 220,000 Chinese characters of transcript data, enabling the systematic development of themes across varied participant experiences. The repetition of certain occupations (e.g., two software engineers, two sales representatives) reflects the occupational distribution observed within the sample.

Table 1. Demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of participants (*n*= 20)

Participant	Gender	Age	Education	Occupation	City	*Hukou* origin	Duration of solo living
P01	Female	25	Bachelor's degree	Marketing staff	Beijing	Hebei	2 years
P02	Male	28	Master's degree	Software engineer	Shanghai	Anhui	3 years
P03	Female	24	Bachelor's degree	Administrative assistant	Guangzhou	Hunan	1 year
P04	Male	31	Master's degree	Financial analyst	Beijing	Shandong	5 years
P05	Female	27	Bachelor's degree	Graphic designer	Chengdu	Guizhou	2.5 years
P06	Male	26	Bachelor's degree	Sales representative	Shanghai	Jiangxi	1.5 years
P07	Female	29	Master's degree	Human resources specialist	Guangzhou	Hubei	4 years
P08	Male	33	Bachelor's degree	Logistics coordinator	Chengdu	Gansu	6 years
P09	Female	23	Bachelor's degree	Customer service agent	Beijing	Henan	1 year
P10	Male	30	Master's degree	Software engineer	Shanghai	Jiangsu	3.5 years
P11	Female	26	Bachelor's degree	Primary school teacher	Chengdu	Yunnan	2 years
P12	Male	34	Bachelor's degree	Freelance photographer	Beijing	Shanxi	7 years
P13	Female	28	Master's degree	Social media editor	Guangzhou	Guangxi	3 years
P14	Male	24	Associate degree	Restaurant staff	Shanghai	Anhui	1 year
P15	Female	32	Master's degree	Project manager	Beijing	Liaoning	5 years
P16	Male	27	Bachelor's degree	E-commerce operator	Chengdu	Sichuan (non-local)	2 years
P17	Female	25	Bachelor's degree	Nurse	Guangzhou	Jiangxi	1.5 years
P18	Male	29	Bachelor's degree	Sales representative	Shanghai	Henan	3 years
P19	Female	33	Master's degree	University lecturer	Beijing	Hubei	6 years
P20	Female	26	Associate degree	Courier driver	Chengdu	Sichuan (non-local)	1 year

By city, the distribution was six participants in Beijing, five in Shanghai, five in Chengdu, and four in Guangzhou, reflecting the concentration of empty-nest youth in major first-tier and new first-tier cities across different regions of China.

2.3. Data collection

The interview guide was designed around five dimensions: (i) migration and settlement experiences; (ii) daily life and social networks; (iii) emotional states and psychological needs; (iv) perceptions and use of social support; and (v) awareness of and expectations for social work services. Interviews were conducted between June and December 2024, either online via video (Tencent Meeting or WeChat video call) or face-to-face, depending on participant preference. Each interview lasted 45 to 80 min, with an average duration of approximately 60 min. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim within 48 h, yielding a total corpus of approximately 220,000 Chinese characters.

2.4. Data analysis

Data analysis followed the six-phase reflexive thematic analysis procedure proposed by Braun and Clarke (2021). After completing all transcriptions, the researcher read through the texts repeatedly to develop an overall sense of the data, then conducted open coding segment by segment, systematically labeling content related to life difficulties, emotional experiences, support needs, and service expectations. Building on the initial codes, related codes were grouped into candidate themes through iterative comparison and aggregation.

During the theme review phase, the internal consistency between each theme, its constituent codes, and the original data was examined; themes with blurred boundaries or internal incoherence were split or merged. Once finalized, themes were named and defined to ensure each one precisely captured its scope of meaning. Throughout the analysis process, NVivo 14 (Lumivero, United States) was used for data management and code organization. The analytical procedure is illustrated in Figure 1.

2.5. Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of this study was ensured through several measures (Enworo, 2023). For credibility, the researcher shared preliminary theme summaries with six participants after the initial analysis and invited feedback on whether the interpretations resonated with their lived experiences. Participant feedback was considered during the refinement of the final themes to enhance the coherence and contextual relevance of the findings. For transferability, this study provides detailed descriptions of the research setting, participant characteristics, and the analytical process so that readers can assess the applicability of the findings to other contexts. For dependability, the researcher maintained a reflexive journal throughout the study, documenting the rationale behind coding decisions and shifts in analytical thinking. For confirmability, two researchers independently coded a portion of the data and

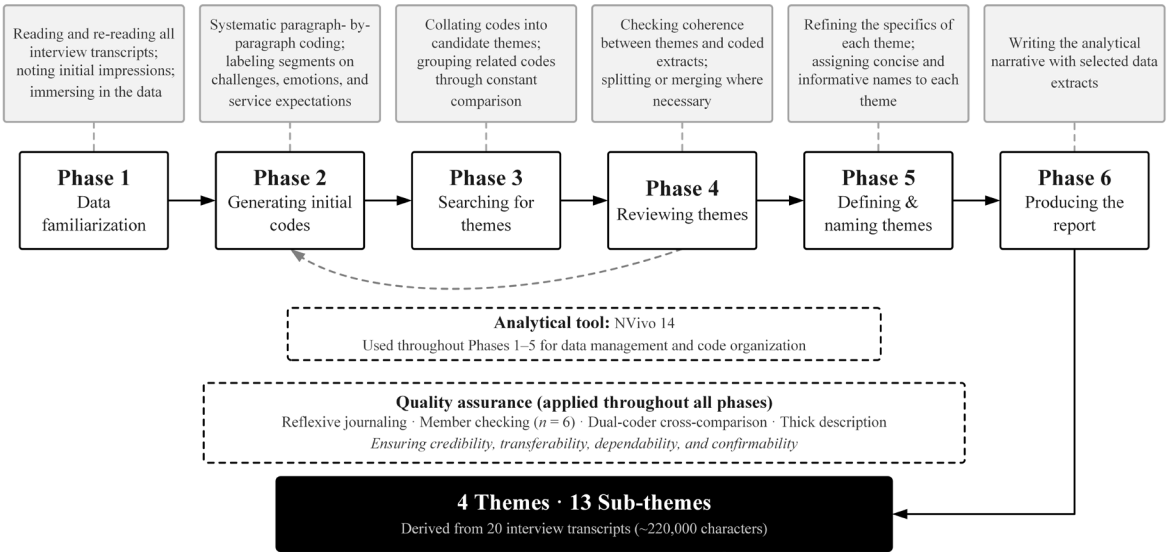


Figure 1. Flowchart of the reflexive thematic analysis process

then cross-checked and discussed their results to reduce the influence of individual bias on the analysis.

2.6. Ethics statement

This study was approved by the Research Office of Guangzhou HuaLi College (approval number: HLKY2025-01). All participants signed written informed consent forms prior to participation. The consent forms specified the research purpose, data usage procedures, anonymization measures, and the right to withdraw at any time. All recordings and transcripts were stored in encrypted form, with access restricted to the research team. Participants were identified by codes (P01 to P20) throughout this paper, and any information potentially revealing personal identity was de-identified during the transcription phase.

3. Results

Reflexive thematic analysis identified four core themes corresponding to empty-nest youth's urban life difficulties, social networks and perceived social support, emotional experiences and psychological needs, and perceptions and expectations of social work intervention. The four themes encompassed 13 sub-themes in total. The overall structure is presented in Table 2.

3.1. Living conditions and daily challenges of urban empty-nest youth

The difficulties that empty-nest youth face in urban daily life are multilayered. Four core sub-themes run through this theme: (i) the migration journey and settlement difficulties, (ii) housing insecurity and financial pressure, (iii) work–life imbalance, and (iv) a persistent sense of "drifting."

3.1.1. Migration trajectories and settlement dilemmas

Participants' migration narratives revealed a complex set of motivations behind the decision to move to a large city. Most participants described migration as a "semi-voluntary" process—not a free choice driven entirely by personal preference, but an adaptive decision made under the real-world constraints of limited employment opportunities and narrow career prospects back home. A participant shared, "When I graduated, I actually struggled over whether to go back home, but my major had no

Table 2. Themes and sub-themes generated through thematic analysis

Theme	Sub-theme	Frequency (n = 20)
Living conditions and daily challenges	Migration trajectories and settlement dilemmas	15
	Housing insecurity and financial strain	17
	Work–life imbalance and time poverty	14
	Sense of impermanence and rootlessness	16
Social networks and perceived social support	Attenuated family ties across distance	18
	Superficiality of peer relationships	13
	Absence of community belonging	15
Emotional experiences and psychological needs	Pervasive but concealed loneliness	16
	Anxiety about the future and identity ambiguity	14
	Unmet needs for emotional resonance	12
Perceptions of and expectations for social work intervention	Limited awareness and misconceptions	17
	Desired forms of support services	15
	Barriers to help-seeking	14

matching jobs there, so I had no choice but to come to Shanghai" (P02). Another participant described a more ambivalent mindset:

> I came to Chengdu because I thought big cities had more opportunities, but after actually staying, I found that while there are more opportunities, the barriers are higher and the competition is fiercer—it's not nearly as easy to gain a foothold as I imagined. (P11)

Throughout the settlement process, the institutional restrictions tied to *hukou* status appeared repeatedly in participants' accounts—the inability to access the same entitlements as local residents in education, healthcare, and housing left "staying" in a perpetual state of uncertainty. A participant shared:

> I've paid into social insurance in Beijing for five years, but if I were to have a child who needs to go to school here in the future, it would still be very complicated. Every time I think about this, I feel like I'll always be a "temporary resident" in this city. (P15)

Indeed, under the *hukou* system, non-local residents face a range of concrete restrictions: they may be ineligible to purchase housing without meeting years-long social insurance contribution thresholds, they often cannot enroll their children in local public schools without a local hukou or a qualifying residence permit, and their access to subsidized healthcare and pension transfers remains limited (Lin *et al.*, 2024). Although some cities have recently introduced points-based *hukou* registration schemes and relaxed settlement requirements for college graduates, these reforms have been most pronounced in smaller cities, while first-tier cities such as Beijing and Shanghai continue to maintain stringent entry criteria (Jin & Zhang, 2023).

3.1.2. Housing insecurity and financial strain

Housing was the most frequently mentioned source of life stress. The vast majority of respondents lived in rented housing, with rent consuming a third or more of their monthly income. Small living spaces, outdated facilities, and unreliable landlords further intensified the sense of instability. A participant stated:

> Every time my landlord says the rent is going up or wants the apartment back, I have to start searching for a new place and move all over again. It feels like you never have a place that truly belongs to you. (P06)

Another participant stated that high rent forced careful budgeting in everyday spending: "After paying rent, the money I can freely spend each month is very limited. When I get sick, I try to tough it out first—I don't dare go to the hospital easily" (P09). Financial pressure was not limited to present hardship; several participants expressed anxiety about their long-term economic outlook, with homeownership remaining financially unattainable due to the high costs of down payments. The prospect of renting indefinitely made the goal of "settling down" feel increasingly remote.

3.1.3. Work–life imbalance and time poverty

Work–life imbalance was another difficulty that participants repeatedly raised. Intense work schedules squeezed out time for personal life and social activities, while living alone meant shouldering all domestic responsibilities single-handedly, further compounding the sense of time pressure. A participant noted, "On workdays, I get home late from overtime, and on weekends, I just want to lie down and recover. I have no energy for socializing or doing things I enjoy" (P04). Another participant described a specific experience: "Once I had a high fever and went to the hospital alone to register, wait in line, and get an IV drip. At that moment, I felt very keenly that there was no one around I could rely on" (P17). This state of coping with all life matters alone recurred across multiple participants' accounts and constituted one of the most distinctive features of empty-nest youth's daily experience.

3.1.4. Sense of impermanence and rootlessness

Beneath these concrete pressures, a deeper sense of "drifting" ran through most participants' narratives. This feeling pointed not only to physical rootlessness but also to a sense of identity uncertainty, reflecting how participants had left home yet struggled to build a genuine sense of belonging in the city. A participant used a vivid metaphor: "I've lived in this city for six years, but I've never felt it was my city. I'm just here to work" (P08). This sense of drifting echoed the settlement difficulties of the early migration period—the institutional exclusion and adaptive challenges respondents faced upon arrival appeared to persist over time, contributing to a diffuse feeling of rootlessness.

3.2. Social networks and perceived social support

The social networks of empty-nest youth exhibited a pattern of systematic weakening across three dimensions simultaneously: (i) family ties, (ii) peer relationships, and (iii) community connections.

3.2.1. Family ties

Long-distance contact with family was the most tension-laden aspect of participants' social networks. Nearly all participants reported maintaining regular contact with

their parents by phone or WeChat video call, yet the emotional quality of this contact was noticeably diminished by physical distance. Several respondents mentioned that, wanting to spare their families from worry, they selectively concealed difficulties and negative emotions during calls. A participant shared, "When I talk to my parents on the phone, I always say 'everything is fine,' but sometimes after I hang up I actually feel worse, because you know you were lying" (P03). Another participant described a more complex experience: "The longer I'm away from home, the fewer things my parents and I have to talk about. Every time I go back for the New Year, it feels like we're becoming strangers to each other" (P12). This formalization of family contact and the hollowing-out of its emotional content meant that the family of origin, while nominally still present, had become a substantially diminished source of practical support in daily life.

3.2.2. Peer relationships

The superficiality of peer relationships was another prominent feature. The high mobility of urban life made it difficult for social ties to deepen or endure—colleagues changed frequently with job turnover, former roommates lost touch after moving, and close college friends scattered across different cities gradually drifted apart. A participant described the impact of this relational fluidity: "I've actually met quite a few people in this city, but there probably isn't a single one I could call in the middle of the night to talk" (P10). Another participant shared that social media interaction could not substitute for in-depth face-to-face exchange: "Likes and comments on Moments look lively, but that kind of liveliness is completely different from actually having someone sit with you and talk for two h" (P16). Some participants also noted that prolonged solitary living had to some extent weakened their willingness and capacity to socialize proactively, contributing to a perceived cycle of "the lonelier I get, the less I want to socialize; the less I socialize, the lonelier I get."

3.2.3. Community connections

The absence of community belonging formed the third dimension of social network weakening. Participants generally reported having almost no awareness of their neighbors or neighborhood relations in their residential communities and no substantive interaction with community organizations such as residents' committees or property management offices. A participant shared, "I've lived here for over two years and don't even know what my neighbor across the hall looks like. Everyone in the compound is a stranger to me" (P05). Another participant described this detachment from a more practical perspective: "I've never participated in any community activities—partly because I don't know what's available, and partly because those activities are basically designed for families with children or older adults. They have nothing to do with me" (P14). This invisibility at the community level meant that when empty-nest youth encountered difficulties in daily life, they lacked nearby sources of social support. The structure of participants' social support networks is illustrated in Figure 2.

3.3. Emotional experiences and psychological needs

The emotional experiences of solo-living youth displayed a dual structure of "outward composure, inward depletion." Most respondents projected an independent and self-sufficient lifestyle on the surface, yet in interviews they revealed persistent emotional distress and unmet psychological needs.

A pervasive but concealed sense of loneliness was one of the most prominent emotional experiences. Notably, participants' expressions of loneliness were often accompanied by rhetorical strategies of self-denial or minimization—for example, "I wouldn't say I'm lonely, it's just that being alone feels a bit boring sometimes," or "you get used to it, really." These phrasing patterns themselves reflect the pressure empty-nest youth face within prevailing social discourse: admitting loneliness risks being read as a sign of failure or a character flaw, so even those who experience intense loneliness may attempt to normalize it.

A participant, after repeatedly stating that "being alone is actually fine," later reflected in the interview: "The hardest time is the New Year. Seeing everyone else with their families while I'm eating takeout alone in my rented room—in that moment, it hits you very clearly that you're on your own" (P07). A participant stated that loneliness was often triggered by specific everyday situations: "It's not that I feel lonely every minute of the day. It's at certain moments—like coming back to an empty apartment late at night after overtime—that it suddenly strikes" (P02).

Anxiety about the future and a blurred sense of identity formed another important dimension. Several respondents described a state of "being suspended in the present"—struggling to foresee long-term prospects in their current city, yet hesitant to return home and accept the limited career options and the acquaintance-based social dynamics there. A participant described this dilemma: "I've been in Beijing for six years, but I'm still far from putting down roots. Going back home feels like it's no longer possible either. It's as if I'm stuck in between" (P19). Another participant linked this anxiety to expectations around marriage: "My family keeps pressuring me to get married, but I can barely take care of myself in this city—a relationship feels like a luxury" (P11). This uncertainty

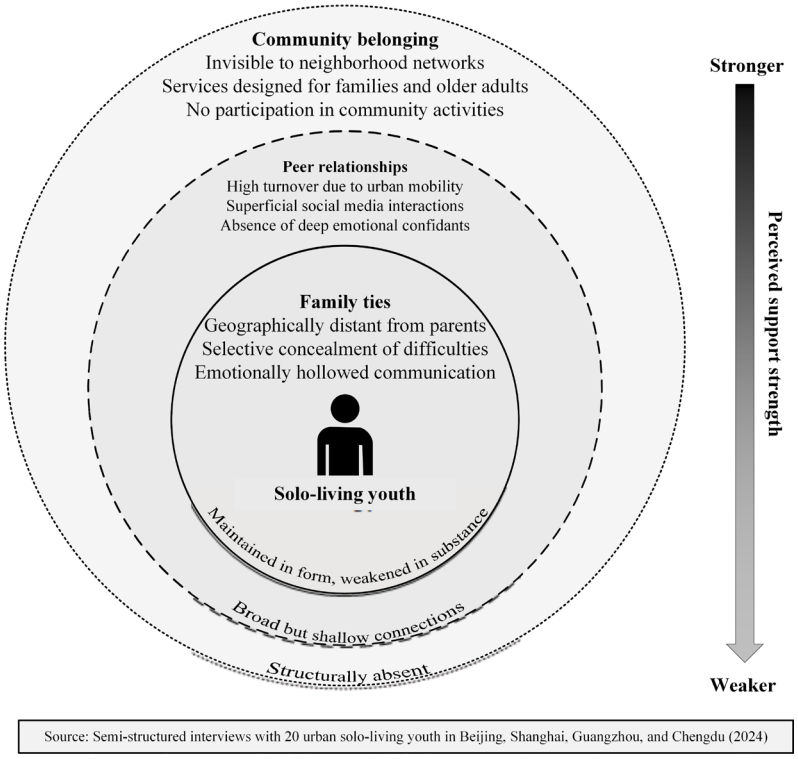


Figure 2. Perceived social support network structure of urban empty-nest youth

about future life trajectories, compounded by the housing insecurity and institutional exclusion discussed earlier, contributed to a diffuse sense of existential anxiety.

Beneath loneliness and anxiety, respondents expressed a deep need for emotional resonance, reflecting a longing to be understood and accepted rather than simply to have company. A participant said, "What I need isn't someone telling me 'hang in there' or 'you've got this.' I need someone who can truly understand why I'm exhausted and what I'm afraid of" (P13). A participant put it more simply: "Sometimes when I come home from work, I just wish someone were there. They wouldn't even need to say anything—just being there would be enough" (P20). This need for emotional resonance has gone almost entirely unaddressed by the current social support system and constitutes the most central unmet psychological need of empty-nest youth.

3.4. Perceptions of and expectations for social work intervention

Empty-nest youth's perceptions of social work intervention displayed a paradoxical pattern of "high unfamiliarity but potential receptiveness." Most respondents lacked a basic understanding of social work's professional content and service scope, yet after the researcher provided a brief introduction, most expressed positive expectations for such services.

Regarding awareness of social work, only three respondents reported having some degree of familiarity, while the remaining 17 stated at the outset that they had never encountered or received information about social work services. Among these 17, some offered specific misconceptions when probed further, and a single respondent could express multiple misconceptions simultaneously. Common misconceptions included equating social work with volunteer service (8 respondents), with community administrative work (5 respondents), and conflating it with psychological counseling (6 respondents). A participant's response was representative: "Social workers? Aren't they basically volunteers? I think they mainly help older adults and children—it doesn't seem to have much to do with me" (P01). Another participant stated directly: "I've only seen the term 'social worker' in the news, but I have no idea what they actually do" (P08). This high level of unfamiliarity itself suggests limited awareness and visibility of social work services among this group.

After the researcher briefly introduced the professional philosophy and service approaches of social work, respondents articulated relatively clear expectations for preferred support services. The most prominent service expectation was accessible psychological support—not formal psychotherapy in the traditional sense, but a low-threshold, non-pathologizing space for emotional relief and being heard. One participant (P13) hoped for "a place where you can just drop in and talk for a bit without making an appointment or registering."

Peer support networks were another prominent need—several respondents expressed a desire to meet peers in similar circumstances and build genuine social connections. A participant said, "If there were a platform like that, where I could know there are many people in this city going through the same thing, I think just knowing that alone would already make me feel a lot better" (P05). Community integration activities and career development support also appeared among participants' expectations but were mentioned less frequently than the first two. The specific content and number of mentions for each type of perception, expectation, and perceived barrier are presented in Table 3.

As shown in Table 3, the factors that discourage empty-nest youth from seeking help also deserve attention. Help-seeking stigma was the most prominent barrier—respondents frequently expressed concerns that seeking help would be perceived by others as a sign of weakness or psychological problems. A participant voiced a typical concern: "In the workplace, everyone is trying hard to look competent. If you go to a social worker to talk about your feelings and word gets out, what will people think of you?" (P04). Lack of time and energy constituted the main practical barrier, directly echoing the work–life imbalance discussed in Section 3.1—even when services were available, intensive work schedules severely limited empty-nest youth's ability to access them. Distrust of institutional services and the absence of information channels further widened the gap between service provision and actual needs.

4. Discussion

Through semi-structured in-depth interviews with 20 urban empty-nest youth, this study explored the landscape of difficulties this group faces in daily life, social support, and emotional experience, as well as their current awareness of and service expectations for social work intervention.

The housing insecurity and financial pressure identified in this study constituted a fundamental dimension of empty-nest youth's life difficulties. Participants commonly reported that rent consumed more than one-third of their monthly income, and frequent relocations along

Table 3. Participants' perceptions of social work intervention: Awareness, expectations, and barriers

Dimension	Category	Representative expressions	Frequency (n = 20)
Awareness	Equating with volunteering	"Isn't that basically volunteer work?"	8
	Equating with community administration	"Like the neighborhood committee staff?"	5
	Conflating with psychological counseling	"So it's like seeing a therapist?"	6
Expectations	Low-threshold emotional support	"A place to talk without appointments or labels"	15
	Peer support networks	"Meeting people in the same situation as me"	13
	Community integration activities	"Events designed for young people, not just retirees"	10
	Career development guidance	"Help with planning, not just job listings"	8
Barriers	Stigma associated with help-seeking	"People will think something is wrong with me"	14
	Lack of time and energy	"Too busy to seek help even if available"	11
	Distrust of institutional services	"Government services feel bureaucratic and impersonal"	9
	Information inaccessibility	"I wouldn't know where to find such services"	7

with uncertain living conditions were associated with sustained psychological stress. A systematic review of the relationship between housing insecurity and tenant mental health confirmed a robust positive association between the lack of housing affordability and residential instability and adverse mental health outcomes such as depression and anxiety (Talmatzky *et al.*, 2026). The present findings offer a qualitative complement to this association—the housing insecurity experienced by empty-nest youth was not merely an isolated economic hardship but was closely intertwined with their sense of drifting and anxieties over identity and belonging. Longitudinal research tracking the long-term effects of housing insecurity in early adulthood has found that young people who experience housing insecurity early on face higher risks of material hardship and mental health problems in later life stages (Roberts *et al.*, 2025), suggesting that the housing difficulties empty-nest youth face today may be associated with cumulative consequences extending well beyond the current period.

The recurring sense of being a "temporary resident" in participants' narratives highlighted a gap between population mobility and institutional integration in the urbanization process. By tying public service entitlements to place of birth, the *hukou* system prevents mobile young people from accessing the same social welfare benefits as local residents, even after long-term residence, employment, and tax payment in the city (Vortherms & Liu, 2022). Recent research on the impact of the *hukou* system on young people's urban rights has further shown that non-local *hukou* status not only restricts access to opportunities in education, employment, and housing but is also associated with reduced sense of belonging and psychological security in city life (Lin *et al.*, 2024). In the present study, respondents who had lived alone for more than six years still reported a strong feeling of rootlessness, suggesting that longer residence alone may not be sufficient to overcome the psychological challenges associated with institutional exclusion. Migration research informed by social identity theory has noted that a lack of belonging may negatively affect the psychological resilience and overall well-being of mobile populations (Brance *et al.*, 2024), and the suspended identity state experienced by empty-nest youth in this study is consistent with that theoretical assessment.

The simultaneous weakening of social networks across the family, peer, and community dimensions is another core finding of this study. This multi-dimensional, concurrent weakening highlights the distinctive social support predicament of empty-nest youth from that of other mobile population groups. Traditional rural-to-urban migrant workers, while also facing social network disruption, often rely on hometown-based networks and co-worker relationships to build alternative sources of social support (W. Wang, 2021). Empty-nest youth, by contrast, face a distinct set of structural obstacles to network rebuilding. Although higher education may in principle provide social skills and potential connections—such as alumni networks—these resources are often difficult to activate in practice when graduates are dispersed across different cities and industries. Unlike rural migrant workers who tend to cluster in similar occupations and residential settings, empty-nest youth occupy a wider range of professional roles with less workplace-based communal bonding. Moreover, living alone reduces the daily contact opportunities that come with shared housing. The behavioral pattern of maintaining contact with parents while selectively concealing difficulties reflected a form of "protective self-enclosure"—a mechanism consistent with research on loneliness in emerging adulthood, which has found that young people's loneliness is paradoxical in nature, with individuals simultaneously craving connection and avoiding genuine emotional exposure (Hall *et al.*, 2025). The superficiality of peer relationships was closely tied to the high mobility of urban life—cross-national comparative research has shown that people in mobile contexts face elevated loneliness risks due to the repeated disruption and rebuilding of social networks (Delaruelle, 2023). The present study further suggests that this relational superficiality is not solely a product of external circumstances but may also be reinforced through a perceived cycle of "the lonelier one gets, the more one avoids socializing." Research on the relationship between loneliness and help-seeking stigma in emerging adulthood has noted that young people's expression of loneliness may be constrained by social expectations—admitting loneliness is seen as violating the normative expectation to be "actively social" at that life stage (Hogerwerf & Suanet, 2025). The self-denial and minimization respondents in this study applied when describing their loneliness represented a concrete discursive manifestation of that social pressure.

The absence of community belonging was particularly evident in this study, pointing to a potential gap in the coverage of China's urban community governance model. Participants frequently reported that community activities targeted families and older adults, while young people living alone remained "invisible" within the community service system. The design logic of the existing community service system appears to remain influenced by a family-based population structure and may not yet fully address the shifting service demands associated with the rapid growth of the solo-living youth population. Research on policy tools in Chinese community governance has

noted a prioritization tendency in community service provision—favoring retired cadres, military veterans, and disadvantaged groups, while ordinary residents, especially the floating population, have long occupied a marginal position in service coverage (Forbes, 2022). A political economy analysis of the professionalization of social work in China further pointed out that Chinese social work practice has long been shaped by a casework-oriented, therapeutically focused approach, and its capacity for structural responses at the community level needs strengthening (Meng & Gray, 2024). The present findings are consistent with these assessments from the demand side, suggesting that solo-living youth may benefit from community-based support embedded in everyday life rather than pathologized clinical intervention.

The gap between participants' limited familiarity with social work services and their potential receptiveness offers important practical implications for expanding the profession's reach. Research on the occupational status of social workers in China has revealed systemic challenges the profession faces in terms of public visibility and recognition (Yang *et al.*, 2025). The misconceptions found in this study—equating social work with volunteer service or community administration—may reflect the broader ambiguity of social work's public image in China. At the same time, the positive expectations respondents expressed after learning about social work's professional philosophy—particularly the strong demand for low-threshold emotional support and peer support networks—indicate a high degree of fit between the needs of empty-nest youth and the core professional methods of social work.

This study proposes a multi-level social work intervention framework for urban solo-living youth. At the micro level, intervention should center on low-threshold, non-pathologizing emotional support. Establishing youth-friendly community workstations or online service platforms to provide routine emotional relief and life consultation services could address participants' strong desire for "somewhere to talk whenever needed." Destigmatization strategies should be embedded in service design as a core element—research on mental health help-seeking behavior among young internal migrants in China has revealed that shame plays a complex dual moderating role between stress and willingness to seek help (Li & Li, 2025), meaning that service positioning may benefit from adopting a non-pathologizing discursive frame and everyday modes of contact to lower the psychological cost of crossing the help-seeking threshold.

At the meso level, efforts should focus on building mechanisms for social network rebuilding through peer mutual support. Prospective research on the effectiveness of digital peer support interventions has demonstrated significant effects in reducing loneliness and improving mental health among adults (Bravata *et al.*, 2024). An evaluation of a peer support program for low-income urban residents found that the flexible, non-clinical role played by peer supporters and their function of linking participants to community resources were key elements of the program's success (Fuller *et al.*, 2022). Organizing interest-based group activities, establishing mutual-aid communities for empty-nest youth, and developing community integration programs for solo-living young people may help disrupt patterns of social isolation and rebuild meaningful social connections.

Two additional institutional channels merit attention within this framework. First, given that the empty-nest youth population is disproportionately composed of university graduates—as reflected in the educational profile of the present sample—universities represent a strategic upstream setting for preventive intervention. Incorporating content on independent living skills, social network maintenance, and awareness of professional support services, including social work, into career preparation or student life programming may help graduates better anticipate and navigate the psychosocial challenges of post-graduation solo living in unfamiliar cities. Second, employers may serve as an important downstream channel. Since sound mental health is closely linked to worker productivity and organizational outcomes, employers have a practical stake in supporting the well-being of their solo-living employees. Workplace-based employee assistance programs, mental health awareness campaigns, and partnerships with social work service providers could help bridge the gap between empty-nest youth and available support resources. These institutional channels complement the peer-focused strategies outlined above and connect naturally to the broader policy advocacy efforts discussed below. At the macro level, social workers should actively engage in policy advocacy to advance the equalization of public services for mobile youth, particularly in housing security, mental health service accessibility, and the right to participate in community governance. Research on the application of community-based mental health interventions among mobile populations has shown that community-level mutual-aid activities can play an important role in alleviating loneliness, building social solidarity, and fostering long-term social network formation (Kwek, 2024).

Nevertheless, this study has several limitations. The sample was limited to 20 respondents in four cities. Although it achieved a degree of diversity in gender, age, education, and occupation, the sample size and geographic

coverage may limit the transferability of the findings. In particular, the experiences of empty-nest youth in second- and third-tier cities may differ. Participants recruited through social media may systematically differ from the broader empty-nest youth population in terms of digital engagement and willingness to express themselves. The retrospective nature of interview data means that respondents' accounts of past experiences may have been influenced by memory bias and current emotional states. Additionally, this study focused on difficulties and needs and gave relatively less attention to the potential positive experiences associated with living alone. Future research could consider adopting a longitudinal design to track the dynamic evolution of social support needs, expanding the geographic and socioeconomic diversity of samples, and incorporating empirical evaluations of social work intervention outcomes into the research agenda. Furthermore, future research could complement the present qualitative findings with quantitative approaches, enabling the examination of potential differences in life difficulties and support needs across gender, educational level, age group, income level, and duration of urban residence.

5. Conclusion

Through semi-structured in-depth interviews with 20 solo-living youth in four cities in China, this study explored the multilayered difficulties this group faces in terms of housing insecurity, work–life imbalance, institutional exclusion, and the systematic weakening of social networks. It also identified the dual structure of "outward composure, inward depletion" in their emotional experiences and the paradoxical pattern of "high unfamiliarity but potential receptiveness" in their perceptions of social work services. The findings indicate that the difficulties of empty-nest youth are not simply a matter of individual adaptation but a micro-level reflection of the structural tension among accelerating urbanization, large-scale population mobility, and the evolving capacity of the social service system to respond to emerging needs. Community service systems may need to move beyond the traditional design logic centered on the family unit and establish new service models responsive to the characteristics of the solo-living youth population. Accordingly, this study proposes a multi-level social work intervention framework encompassing micro-level emotional support, meso-level peer network rebuilding, and macro-level policy advocacy, providing an evidence-informed reference point for social work practitioners and policymakers in responding to the needs of this rapidly growing population group.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare they have no competing interests.

Author contributions

Conceptualization: Jinbo Huang
Formal analysis: Jinbo Huang
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Writing–original draft: Jinbo Huang
Writing–review & editing: All authors
All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Ethics approval and consent to participate

This study was approved by the Research Office of Guangzhou HuaLi College (approval number: HLKY2025-01). Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their participation in the study, in accordance with the ethical principles outlined in the WMA Declaration of Helsinki.

Consent for publication

Written informed consent was obtained from each participant for the disclosure of their anonymized data.

Availability of data

Data are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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