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Sons and Daughters: The One-Child Policy, Education, and Gender Stratification in Urban China

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ABSTRACT

Initiated in 1979, China’s restrictive birth policy is leaving a number of important legacies in its wake. The strict birth policy has exposed, and even exacerbated an alarming bias against female offspring, shown through sex selective abortions, unreported female children, and abandoned girl babies. It is important to note, however, that these problems are mainly confined to rural areas. By contrast, in urban areas there is reason to believe that the one-child family policy might very well be enhancing the status of females. It is only logical that, in Chinese cities, where the one-child rule is strictly enforced, parents are likely to treasure their only child, regardless of sex.

This paper reports the results of a survey that investigated the effects of the one-child policy on a sample of 200 households with secondary school age children in an urban area of China. The survey measured parents’ aspirations for their children, including educational and career goals. In addition, parents indicated how much they had spent on their child during the previous semester on a variety of expenses related to education, including tuition, school books, private lessons, and other education items. Results of the analysis indicate that there are few important differences in the aspirations of parents for male children versus female children. In addition, there are no significant differences according to gender in expenditures on educationally-related items. These results seem to indicate that, in urban areas of China today, children are receiving full and equitable investments by their families, regardless of their gender.