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Guaranteeing the Achievement of Sustainable Development Goals 3 and 4 through Temporary Guardianship in Times of Sudden Public Emergencies: Analytical Evidence from China's Policies during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: The requirements for children's health, well-being, and education are covered in Sustainable Development Goals 3 and 4. In response to the crisis in survival and development sustainability faced by children during the COVID-19 pandemic, China adopted the temporary guardianship system. The purpose of this study is to examine whether this system does contribute to safeguarding children's sustainable development, well-being, and health. The study adopted a descriptive qualitative approach with content analysis and applied qualitative document analysis of relevant regulations. Data were obtained through 12 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with the institutional staff and individuals. The results indicate that the multiple supports provided to children during the COVID-19 pandemic by the institutions and individuals responsible for assuming temporary guardianship were basically adequate to meet the needs for achieving children's objective well-being and sustainable development and safeguarding their health. Despite some deficiencies, the temporary guardianship system is worthy of becoming a sustainable system for supporting children's sustainable personal development and safeguarding their health and well-being, and of serving as a blueprint for other countries to pursue Sustainable Development Goals in times of sudden public emergencies.

Keywords: SDG 3; SDG 4; children's objective well-being; sustainable development; children's health; temporary guardianship; COVID-19 pandemic; China

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Citation: Chen, S.; Zhang, Y. Guaranteeing the Achievement of Sustainable Development Goals 3 and 4 through Temporary Guardianship in Times of Sudden Public Emergencies: Analytical Evidence from China's Policies during the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Sustainability* **2024**, *16*, 5672. https://doi.org/10.3390/su16135672

Academic Editor: Gabriela Topa

Received: 23 May 2024
Revised: 1 July 2024
Accepted: 2 July 2024
Published: 3 July 2024

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1. Introduction

While Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 3 pays attention to human health and well-being, SDG 4 focuses on education and learning opportunities [1]. In the United Nations description of both goals, special attention is given to children's health, well-being, and education [2]. The occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic is partly an obstacle to the achievement of SDGs 3 and 4, with its impact on the health, sustainable personal development, and well-being of children, which are associated with numerous factors, including children's physical health, mental health, education, nutrition, and social participation, among others.

Although the lethality among children was relatively low during the COVID-19 pandemic [3], the indirect effects of this event, such as stress on the health-care system, disruption of routine immunisation, and reduced nutritional support, are potentially long-lasting effects on children's health, future personal development, and well-being, thereby undermining the achievement of SDGs 3 and 4 [4]. In 2020, the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, the sustainability of education for 1.6 billion children and young people was affected by school closures [5]. It is obvious that the occurrence of public emergencies undermines the conditions for children to achieve sustainability in their intellectual and educational development. In addition, the epidemic caused disruptions in

vaccine services in some countries, with at least 23 countries globally discontinuing measles and polio vaccinations for children in 2020 alone, which has resulted in an increased risk of preventable diseases, such as measles and polio, among local children, thereby affecting the physical support conditions for children to achieve sustainable development [6].

During the COVID-19 pandemic, one of China's strategies to cover the entire population was to medically isolate individuals infected with the COVID-19 virus. The shock to children's health, well-being, and sustainable development is even more pronounced and severe when children are deprived of parental and familial guardianship due to the isolation policies. In other words, achieving SDGs 3 and 4 has become more difficult. As a result of the loss of parental or family care, children need to live on their own as well as cope with the effects of unexpected events with their restricted physical and intellectual condition. Thus, the importance of parental or family guardianship for the children's health, development, and well-being is understandable: children have access through parental or family guardianship to the basic material conditions and timely medical assistance that sustain them, as well as to the intellectual, educational, and psychological care that supports their development [7]. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, which destroyed this original family guardianship structure, the potential for children's health and well-being, and the sustainability of their personal development to be plunged into a crisis of disruption is infinitely greater without an alternative system or measure [8]. In turn, the achievement of SDGs 3 and 4 requires ensuring that children's well-being is safeguarded in terms of health, education, and so on.

Given the above background and the requirements of achieving SDGs 3 and 4, China adopted the temporary guardianship system for the sake of safeguarding the health, well-being, and sustainable development of the children. After the destruction of the original permanent family guardianship environment, the children are provided with temporary living care from other institutions or individuals under the temporary guardianship regime. When the parents and the original family environment are restored to conditions that ensure the children's well-being and provide the necessary support for a sustainable life for the children, the children are returned to their original guardianship environment. In other words, temporary guardianship became a transition for children's continued access to permanent guardianship, which ensured that children's health, sustainable development, and well-being were adequately protected and valued at all times during the COVID-19 pandemic, and, thus, ensured the continued promotion of the SDGs in times of the sudden public event.

Using China as an empirical case, this study focuses on the temporary guardianship system adopted by China during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of this paper is to examine the relationship between the children's guardianship strategy adopted in China and the achievement of the SDGs and the protection of children's well-being. The reasons for choosing China's temporary guardianship regime to analyse in this paper include, but are not limited to, the following detailed below:

First, there is currently little research, either within China or internationally, that focuses on analysing China's guardianship strategies for children during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, and there is a lack of research on the relationship between China's temporary guardianship system for children and the achievement of the SDGs 3 and 4. It is necessary to analyse China's guardianship strategy during the COVID-19 pandemic as a whole in order to determine whether this strategy did in fact support children's well-being and sustainable development and whether it is worth continuing in the future; no one can guarantee that a sudden public emergency of global proportions like the COVID-19 pandemic will not recur in the future, which could pose an obstacle to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Second, China is a country with a relatively large child population. As of 2023, China has a population of approximately 250 million children [9]. Thus, the temporary guardianship system implemented in China during the COVID-19 pandemic has yielded a wealth of practical experience and a sufficient sample of institutional experiments. Due

to this reason, other countries could draw comprehensively on China's experience in safeguarding children's health and well-being and ensuring the achievement of the SDGs through temporary guardianship.

Accordingly, based on the goals of the legislature and the executive in initially establishing such a system, as well as the research objectives, this study proposes a hypothesis as follows: the temporary guardianship system contributes to safeguarding the health, well-being, and sustainable development of children and ensuring the achievement of SDGs 3 and 4 during the COVID-19 pandemic. These contributions are realised through the various material and mental supports provided to the children by the temporary guardianship subjects. The three core research questions explored in this paper are as follows: How does China's temporary guardianship regime institutionalise the aim of safeguarding the health, well-being, and sustainable development of children? What support can be provided for children by the temporary guardianship in China during the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure the achievement of SDGs 3 and 4? Finally, would this system be a sustainable system for safeguarding the children's health, well-being, and sustainable development?

Following this introduction, the paper consists of five interrelated sections: Section 2 analyses the shocks and adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on children's well-being and the achievement of the SDGs 3 and 4; following this, Section 3 introduces the methodology and materials used in the study; Section 4 describes the results of the study, analysing the multiple supports provided by the temporary guardianship system for children's well-being and sustainable development, drawing on interview transcripts and the relevant literature review; Section 5 then discusses the pending issues in the implementation of the temporary guardianship system, the relevant government responses, and policy recommendations, taking into account the interview transcripts; the paper is concluded in Section 6.

2. The Impact of Sudden Public Events on Children's Sustainable Personal Development, Health, and Well-Being

As children are at the early stage of personal development in terms of their physical and psychological condition, their vulnerability to sudden public events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, is more pronounced than that of adults [10]. As Pisani-Jacques K observed, the COVID-19 pandemic had a variety of short- and long-term impacts on the child welfare system in wider society [11]. In other words, if children are not properly supervised or cared for, their health, well-being, and sustainable development may be extremely challenging and crisis-prone. It could be argued that the impact of public emergencies on children is multifaceted and includes not only physical health [12], but also long-term effects in psychological health and education, which are closely linked to the achievement of SDGs 3 and 4 [13].

2.1. Physical Health Harm

During the period of sudden public events, the first possible harm that children face is harm to their physical health [14], which can be further differentiated into direct and indirect harm [15]. For example, as with adults, children infected with the COVID-19 virus experienced corresponding deterioration in their health, such as fever, pneumonia, and coughing [16], and the potential for direct harm was exaggerated when children were neglected by their original family guardianship [17]. In addition, due to their immaturity in terms of intellectual and physical development, children need to be supervised and cared for by their families [18]. When parents or family members were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and were unable to continue to assume responsibility for the guardianship and care of the children, the children may have been exposed to indirect physical harm from deteriorating nutrition and health conditions, which, in turn, affected their well-being and personal sustainability [19,20]. Furthermore, SDG 3 covers the important routine immunisation programme for children [2]. In the absence of parents' guardianship, children

may not be able to complete the vaccinations required by the childhood immunisations schedule in a timely manner, which may pose a risk to their physical health.

2.2. Mental Health Harm

Beyond the physical harm, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children's health, well-being, and sustainable development is also evident in the impact on their mental health status [13,21]. S Essler and others reveal that the COVID-19 pandemic can have both short- and long-term effects on children's mental health through a four-wave longitudinal model [22]. Specifically, the COVID-19 pandemic can be indelibly traumatising for children and lead to emotional and behavioural problems in children [23–25]. In addition, SDG 3 includes the promotion of children's well-being [2], and an important indicator for assessing children's well-being is their psychological state. According to A Geller and others, children who are neglected and deprived of family guardianship are susceptible to psychological problems leading to an increased risk of displaying aggressive behaviours [26].

2.3. Interruption or Disruption of Educational Sustainability

The COVID-19 pandemic has also had a detrimental impact on children's educational sustainability [27], which is an important part of SDG 4 [2,28]. The destruction or closure of schools and the relocation of families caused by the rapid and widespread spread of the COVID-19 pandemic may have interrupted the educational process and the fulfilment of children's right to education, thereby affecting their academic performance and future educational opportunities [13]. According to UNICEF, in 2020, the educational opportunities of 160 million children and young people were affected by the closure of schools [5]. Despite the subsequent emergence of online education, some children who do not have the possibility of accessing online education due to family poverty or parental neglect are still in a serious crisis of educational deprivation [29,30]. It is estimated that more than half of the world's children and young people in 2020 lack digital connectivity and, thus, have no access to distance learning opportunities [5]. In short, sustainable education for children has been undermined by the COVID-19 pandemic [31], especially when children are deprived of the care of their original families [32], which is obviously not conducive to the achievement of SDG 4.

2.4. Community Structure and Children's Social Relations

At the level of social impact, the COVID-19 pandemic damaged family and community structures to some extent. Specifically, the death or separation of family and community members resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted community structures, thereby depriving children of a sense of security and belonging within their families and communities [13]. In addition, while the COVID-19 pandemic event is still unfolding, children may be isolated from their peers because of the experience of having been infected with COVID-19 virus, or may lose their friends and familiar social networks because their families are relocated as a result of the event [33]. It is believed that children's social relationships, such as the quality of social support, family and friendships, and social participation, are strongly related to the maintenance of children's health, well-being, and sustainable development [34].

2.5. Family and Sustained Guardianship

A favourable family guardianship environment and family's financial support are considered to be important factors in ensuring the health and well-being of children and the sustainability of their development [35,36], as well as in guaranteeing the achievement of SDGs 3 and 4. However, the possibilities of unemployment, loss of property, and reduction in family income due to the COVID-19 pandemic may affect the economic situation of children's families [37,38], which, in turn, may impact children's quality of life, access to education, health care, and future development opportunities [39,40]. In addition, during the COVID-19 pandemic, family guardians, such as parents, were effectively incapacitated

from caring for their children once they were infected with the COVID-19 virus [41,42]. In other words, the COVID-19 pandemic could undermine the sustainability of children's original guardianship environment [43,44], and the realisation of children's health and well-being and the sustainability of their personal development can be greatly affected by the absence of guardianship [45].

Based on the above analyses, it can be concluded that the shocks to children's well-being, health, and personal development at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic are, to some extent, linked to the crisis of being neglected [46], which impeded the achievement of SDGs 3 and 4. Indeed, the family is the most direct source of material and moral support for children's health, well-being, and personal development. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the fulfilment of the functioning and sustainability of the original family guardianship system was somewhat limited, even to the extent that the system ceased to function in cases where the parents became seriously infected with the virus or died. In this context, in order to guarantee that the continuity of children's well-being and development and the pursuit of the SDGs are not undermined, China has adopted the temporary guardianship system.

3. Methods

3.1. Preliminary Materials: Policy Responses Related to Temporary Guardianship

When the long-term guardianship provided to children by their parents and families of origin was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, China opted for a temporary guardianship system instead, which ensured that the children's health, well-being, and development were consistently safeguarded, thereby advancing the achievement of SDGs 3 and 4. Temporary guardianship in a broad sense refers to the civil legal system that protects the legitimate rights and interests of persons without civil capacity, and persons with limited civil capacity, such as children and persons with disabilities, are protected by the subjects provided for by the law when they are in the state of having no guardian or improper guardianship for a certain period. The discussion in this paper is limited to temporary guardianship measures for children.

In the process of designing and implementing the system, China has made reference to numerous international standards, in particular Sustainable Development Goals 3 and 4, as well as the principles and provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). The design and implementation of the system involves multiple considerations, including legal, social welfare, educational, and medical considerations, and aims to provide the necessary protection and care for children who are unable to receive regular parental guardian. Such protection and care usually include providing the child with temporary accommodation, necessary living and medical care, and educational opportunities until a more permanent solution is found, such as returning the child to parental guardian or seeking adoption. Regarding concrete implementation, China has also tried to incorporate the advanced experience of other jurisdictions in child welfare and protection, such as the diversified establishment of protection agencies under the Children Act 1989 of the UK [47], the specialised social work services under the Family Preservation and Support Services Program Act of the US [48], and the guarantee of children's right to participation, among others.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, China enacted the following laws and policies relating to the temporary guardianship of children:

The first is Law on the Protection of Minors 2020 [49]. Article 92 of the law stipulates the subjects of temporary guardianship and the persons to whom it applies: the civil affairs department of the place where the child is living shall assume temporary guardianship. The civil affairs department may entrust the child to a relative or a foster family for placement, or it may place the child in the care of minors' assistance and protection institutions or child welfare institutions.

The second is China's Civil Code 2020. China's Civil Code [50], following the provisions on temporary guardianship in China's General Principles of Civil Law, provides for a

multitude of subjects to undertake temporary guardianship, such as villages' committees, urban residents' committees, civil affairs departments, and other organisations prescribed by law. Particularly since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, many children lost the care of their parents and other guardians because of China's policy of isolating those infected with the virus. Undoubtedly, there was an urgent need for the state, society, and other individuals to undertake temporary replacement work during the absence of these original guardians. This social need is met by the new article 34 of the Chinese Civil Code, which proposes a temporary guardianship system for the absence of guardians due to sudden emergencies, so that children in the midst of sudden public health emergencies can be cared for to maintain their survival and sustainable development.

The third is the Proposing Measures to Care for, Protect, and Aid Children Left Unattended after the Virus Outbreak [51], issued by the Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs in 2020, which emphasises the obligation of parents, the public, and health and hygiene authorities to report promptly when children are found to be in a state of guardianship deficiency. In addition, the regulation provides for the temporary guardianship of children by the villages' committees, urban residents' committees, civil affairs departments, and minors' assistance and protection institutions as temporary guardianship institutions. The most distinctive feature of this regulation in comparison with other laws and regulations is that it explicitly requires institutions or individuals undertaking temporary guardianship to give priority care to children who have lost their guardianship, and to support social workers, legal workers, and other professionals in the provision of services such as psychological counselling, spiritual care, and affectionate accompaniment for children of different age groups. Meanwhile, it requires education departments and schools to strengthen guidance and services for home learning for school-age children without guardianship, and to ensure that children can maintain the same sustainability of educational opportunities during temporary guardianship as they receive during permanent guardianship.

The fourth is the Opinions on Doing a Good Job of Rescuing and Protecting Minors in Custody Deficit Due to the Impact of Emergencies [52], issued by the State Council of the People's Republic of China in 2021. This regulation further regulates the treatment of children who are in a state of care deficit due to emergencies, and guides the government, society, and individuals to participate in efforts to maintain the sustainability of children's survival and development, including urging civil affairs departments (which represent the government) to assume temporary guardianship of children in a timely manner, and encouraging social organisations and individuals to report and provide assistance to children whose survival and sustainable development have been violated due to emergencies.

In light of what has been mentioned above, and as shown in Table 1, it can be seen that during the COVID-19 pandemic, the institutions and individuals responsible for providing support for the health, education, housing, and other aspects of well-being of children included the civil affairs departments of the children's places of residence, the villages' committees, the urban residents' committees, the minors' assistance and protection institutions, the children's welfare institutions, the relatives, and the foster families.

3.2. Design

The study employed an interpretive descriptive approach to gain better insights from informants regarding what support temporary guardianship systems can provide to children and, thus, contribute to the achievement of SDGs 3 and 4 [53]. In order to verify whether the temporary guardianship system adopted in China during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic really helped to safeguard children's health, well-being, and sustainable development, as well as to ensure the fulfilment of SDGs 3 and 4, this study used a multiple mutual proof methodology consisting of two phases. First, as shown in the Section 3.1, the study summarises and analyses the relevant policies implemented by China's government and legislature to safeguard children's survival and sustainable development and the temporary guardianship system during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2022). The purpose is to understand whether these responses are in line with the

need to address the developmental crises faced by children, and to define the subjects who are legally mandated to assume temporary guardianship. Then, we conducted in-depth interviews to explore whether the relevant statutory subjects with temporary guardianship responsibilities were able to provide support to children during the COVID-19 pandemic that was consistent with children's health needs, sustainable development, and objective well-being.

3.3. Setting and Participants

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with the subjects involved in the work of temporary guardianship for children. These relevant subjects include the civil affairs department, villages' committees, urban residents' committees, minors' assistance and protection institutions, child welfare institutions, relatives, and foster families. However, since civil affairs departments generally transfer the temporary guardianship work that they are responsible for to minors' assistance and protection institutions or child welfare institutions in accordance with the relevant laws and regulations, this study did not specifically interview civil affairs department staff. Besides, based on the similarity of the functions and the nature of institutions, villagers' committees and urban residents' committees are categorised as the same type of subjects, while minors' assistance and protection institutions and child welfare institutions are also categorised as the same type of subjects. Accordingly, the target group for the in-depth interviews included the staff of villagers' and urban residents' committees and minors' assistance and protection institutions and child welfare institutions, as well as relatives and foster families.

Table 1. Summary of laws and regulations relating to the temporary guardianship regime in China.

Law or Regulations	Issuing Year	Issuing Agency	The Connected Subjects of Sustained Guardianship
Law on the Protection of Minors	2020	Chinese National People's Congress	Civil affairs departments, relatives, foster families, minors' assistance and protection institutions, child welfare institutions
China's Civil Code	2020	Chinese National People's Congress	Villagers' committees, urban residents' committees, civil affairs departments, other statutory social organisations
Proposing Measures to Care for, Protect and Aid Children Left Unattended after the Virus Outbreak	2020	The Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China	Villagers' committees, urban residents' committees, civil affairs departments, minors' assistance and protection institutions
Opinions on Doing a Good Job of Rescuing and Protecting Minors in Custody Deficit Due to the Impact of Emergencies	2021	Ministry of Civil Affairs of the State Council	Civil affairs departments

A total of 12 in-depth interviews were conducted with the relevant staff of the four main types of subjects (see Table 2 for the list of interviewees). The 12 interviews were one-to-one participant interviews based on a pre-prepared semi-structured interview outline. All interviewees were informed of the purpose of the interview and their consent was sought prior to the interview. All selected participants were from the four main categories of temporary guardianship subjects mentioned above. In order to identify and recruit participants, researchers conducted purposive sampling, which raised the bar for quality in the study [54].

Table 2. Interviewees.

Number	Type of Interviewees	Specific Institutions or Individuals
1	Villagers' and urban residents' committees	Villages' committee
2		Urban residents' committee
3		Urban Residents' committee
4	Individuals	Relative
5		Relative
6		Relative
7	Foster families	Foster family
8		Foster family
9		Foster family
10	Minors' assistance and protection institutions and child welfare institutions	Minors' assistance and protection institution
11		Minors' assistance and protection institution
12		Child welfare institution

3.4. Data Collection

Data collection was conducted through face-to-face individual interviews and observation notes by two researchers. All semi-structured interviews were conducted in Chinese by the first and second authors. A total of 12 semi-structured interviews were conducted, each lasting approximately 30 min. During the interviews with the participants, audio recordings were made along with the transcripts [55]. To ensure accuracy, the audio recordings were checked against the transcripts and then deleted.

A guide was prepared before the semi-structured interviews began. The main elements of the semi-structured interview guide included what support the interviewee or the institution in which the interviewee worked could provide for the children; the difficulties faced in the process of taking the children into temporary guardianship; and the interviewee's suggestions for possible solutions; see Table 3 for details.

Table 3. Semi-structured interview guide.

Type of Question	Question
Basic information	Identities, positions
Specific questions	Thinking back to your experience of providing temporary care services during the COVID-19 pandemic, what were the major jobs you were responsible for?
	What aspects of support for children can be provided by your institution or by yourself. (Prompts: food, housing, medical services, psychological care)
	Do you think the temporary guardianship provided by your institution or yourself meets the children's health, survival, and developmental needs?
	What are the biggest challenges faced when providing temporary guardianship?
	Do you think there is anything that needs to be improved in the regime or in the implementation of temporary guardianship?

3.5. Data Analysis

The data were analysed with reference to the qualitative content analysis strategy described by Graneheim and Lundman [56], using manual coding to provide clear and insightful guidance [56,57]. Steps included identifying, labelling meaning units, and categorising codes to form themes [56]. The second author transcribed all audio recordings.

After a thorough reading, the first and second authors combined the transcripts into a single text and then assigned codes and compared the similarities and differences of the codes. Themes were then created based on an inductive process of constant comparison [56]. The first and second authors independently reviewed the code assignment of the data and commented on the appropriateness of the coding categories and emerging themes. The thematic analysis was employed to analyse and refine the textual data. In conjunction with the dimensions chosen to assess children's objective well-being in the pre-design of this study, two different specific themes were delineated, including the support that temporary guardianship provides to children and the deficiencies in the process of temporary guardianship implementation. The former theme was further divided into six sub-themes, including diet, accommodation, education, medical care, psychological assistance, and social interaction.

3.6. Ethical Consideration

Our study did not require further ethics committee approval as it did not involve animal or human clinical trials and was not unethical. The interviews were conducted with various types of institutional and individual subjects who provide temporary guardianship services, and the contents of the interviews were limited to the specific services and jobs that these subjects provide in the process of temporary care. In accordance with the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki, all participants provided informed consent before participating in the study. The anonymity and confidentiality of the participants were guaranteed, and participation was completely voluntary.

3.7. Trustworthiness

To increase credibility, we checked members by feeding the analyses back to participants for validation. Participants reviewed and provided feedback, which included some clarifying but not contradictory comments. Additionally, researcher bias was limited by bracketing and transcripts were analysed by two researchers [58]. Each researcher analysed the data independently and reached consensus through iterative discussions. Other strategies were incorporated into the research procedures to maximise rigour and limit bias, including diary entries, bracketing, coding checks, and member checks and peer debriefing with external researchers during data collection and analysis [55]. Furthermore, English–Chinese and Chinese–English translations and back-translations of the guides and records were carried out to ensure conciseness of the issue guides, clarity of language, and validity of the records [59]. Finally, the study was reported according to the Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research [60].

3.8. Preliminary Results: Semi-Structured Interviews with Relevant Subjects

The purpose of this study was to examine whether the temporary guardianship system provided for children in China during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic could in fact safeguard the children's objective well-being, health, and their sustainable development, thereby achieving SDGs 3 and 4. As well-being can often be viewed as the quality of a person's life or an individual's life situation, one way to broadly conceptualise children's well-being is to categorise it into objective and subjective well-being [61]. The children's objective well-being usually refers to the external conditions of life, which can be measured through various statistical indicators, such as material resources, immunisation rates, risk behaviours, and the living environment. Research on objective well-being is usually based on three to seven dimensions and three to thirty-four indicators [62]. F Gassmann's study measured children's objective well-being in terms of six dimensions: education, physical health, housing well-being, communication, protection, and emotional well-being [63], whereas Y.C. Wong, who also adopted six dimensions, chose diet, clothing, housing conditions, home facilities, education, and social interaction [64]. B Martorano examines the objective well-being of children in terms of five dimensions: material well-being, child health, education, behavioural risks, and housing environment [65]. An

example of choosing four dimensions for analysis can be found in R Orsi's study looking at cognitive development, physical health, mental behavioural development, and socio-emotional competence [66].

Combined with consideration of the prevalent choices of dimensions for assessing children's objective well-being, this paper chose to measure six dimensions—diet, accommodation, education, medical care, psychological assistance, and social interaction—to gauge whether the relevant temporary guardianship subjects were able to meet the needs of safeguarding children's well-being, health, and sustainable development during the COVID-19 pandemic. As many schools stopped their offline programmes during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, the assessment criteria for education included the availability of online learning for children. The medical dimension refers to the ability of the institution or individual to provide timely medical care for children who are sick or infected with the virus, such as timely transport to a hospital for treatment and the ability of the institution or individual to provide simple medical care themselves. Psychological assistance includes either professional counselling or non-professional daily heart-to-heart talks for the neglected children. Further, social interaction is an assessment of whether the child has access to opportunities to socialise with the outside world during the period of temporary guardianship, such as interacting and entertaining with peers or participating in community activities.

Through in-depth interviews with the staff of institutions or individuals providing temporary guardianship for children, the study assessed the various types of support that can be provided to children by the four main types of temporary guardianship subjects, including villagers' and urban residents' committees, individuals, foster families, and minors' assistance and protection institutions and child welfare institutions. The preliminary results of the assessment can be seen in Table 4.

Table 4. Support available to children from different institutional staff and individuals.

Type	Number	Assessment Dimensions					
		Diet	Accommodation	Education	Medical Care	Psychological Assistance	Social Interaction
Villagers' and urban residents' committees	1 2 3	Yes *	Yes	Yes	Yes	No *	No
Individuals	4 5 6	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Foster families	7 8 9	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Minors' assistance and protection institutions and Child Welfare Institutions	10 11 12	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

* 'Yes' represents that the interviewee can provide the relevant support; 'No' represents that the interviewee cannot provide the relevant support.

Based on the preliminary results of the interviews with the staff concerned, it can be seen that almost all the institutions or individuals responsible for temporary guardianship provide the support needed for the children's sustainable development, health, and objective well-being, with the exception of the villagers' and urban residents' committees, which are not sufficiently competent in the provision of psychological assistance and social interaction. In other words, the choice of relatives, foster families, minors' assistance and protection institutions, and child welfare institutions as places where children can live temporarily during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic is fully in keeping with the need to safeguard the children's objective well-being and is also conducive to the continued achievement of SDGs 3 and 4 during this period.

4. Results

The occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted, to some extent, the original family guardianship structure for children. Disruptions in the continuity of guardianship can affect the sustainability of children's education, physical development, normal residential environment, and social interactions, thus impeding the achievement of SDGs 3 and 4. It is, therefore, necessary to adopt special policies to protect the health, well-being, and sustainable development of children in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic [67]. Accordingly, the Chinese government has chosen to establish a 'temporary-long-term' children guardianship structure through the temporary guardianship system, in order to provide sustained guardianship for children and thereby safeguard children's health, sustainable development, and well-being.

4.1. System Implementation Statistics

At the implementation level, the 'temporary-long-term' child guardianship strategy became an important means of ensuring the sustained guardianship of children at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some statistical data related to temporary guardianship imposed on children can be obtained from China's 2020–2022 Statistical Bulletin on the Development of Civil Affairs [68]. The scope of this data from China's Ministry of Civil Affairs includes civil affairs departments, villagers' and urban residents' committees, minors' assistance and protection institutions, and child welfare institutions. Data on temporary guardianship of children by means of kinship and family fostering are not covered, since their implementation is not always carried out officially but in some cases through private contacts by parents.

From 2020 to 2022, China provided temporary assistance to 13.806, 11.986, and 11.001 million individuals, respectively. In addition, in each of these three years, minors' assistance and protection institutions and child welfare institutions assisted 0.9, 0.7, and 0.9 million children, respectively, whose survival sustainability deteriorated due to sudden events. By the end of 2022, China's minors' assistance and protection institutions and child welfare institutions had in fact supported a total of 46,000 individuals [68]. However, in 2019, China implemented temporary assistance for 9.932 million people [69]. In the first year of the large-scale outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the use of this system saw a growth rate of 39.01%. Accordingly, it can be observed that during the COVID-19 pandemic, the use of temporary guardianship increased considerably, and the effectiveness of the system was recognised by the administration.

4.2. Positive Impact Analysis

Interviews with relevant institutions and individuals provided information on how they provide temporary life care for children. The vast majority of institutions and individuals are able to provide comprehensive life support that meets the needs of children's health and sustainable development and the criteria for the assessment of children's objective well-being, including the children's basic living, education, health care, and psychology. In addition, in order to guarantee the continuity of guardianship and personal development, it is necessary to consider how the children would live after the end of the temporary guardianship to achieve the transition between temporary and long-term care.

4.2.1. Physical Sustainability Support

The implementation of temporary guardianship can provide a safe and protective environment for children in crisis and distress in their survival and physical development as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. By entrusting children to the care of temporary guardianship subjects such as minors' assistance and protection institutions, children's welfare institutions, and relatives, it is possible to effectively prevent these children from suffering further harm to their physical or mental health. Temporary guardianship not only focuses on the safety of the children, but also ensures that their basic needs are met [70], which includes adequate food, clean water, suitable temporary housing, and basic medical

care. Through the fulfilment of these basic needs, the temporary guardianship system contributes to the maintenance of children's normal physiological functioning and state of health, and lays the foundation for their future growth and development [71], which is also required for the achievement of SDG 3.

> "My family and I are happy to take on temporary childcare. My wife and I have raised two children growing up who are currently working in other cities. We can provide the food and room that a child needs to live. We also know how to put ourselves in the children's shoes and think for them". (Interviewee 7: Foster family)

> "We can provide some simple medical care's like when a child has a cold or a fall. Agencies of our type usually require the recruitment of a staff member with a medical background". (Interviewee 10: Minors' assistance and protection institution)

> "Even though we don't have a big workplace, we do have some separate rooms for children without parental care to stay in temporarily. We would ask the children to eat with us. In addition, we could easily take the kids for vaccinations as we are close to the community hospital". (Interviewee 2: Urban residents' committee)

During the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, the health and well-being of children without parental care were greatly challenged. In the process of temporary guardianship, children are provided with daily life care, regular medical check-ups, rehabilitation, and medical services in accordance with national standards. While guaranteeing the basic livelihood of children, this can provide a certain degree of health support to reduce the likelihood of children being infected by COVID-19, as called for in SDG 3. In short, the temporary guardianship system allows these children to receive timely and temporary material assistance from the outside world to ensure their continued survival and sustainable development and subsequent return to parental care.

4.2.2. Psychological Support

The implementation of the temporary guardianship system can provide psychological and social interaction support for children in distress. Despite the existence of numerous dimensions of the objective well-being of children, almost all of them include the normal physical development of the children as well as the health of the children's psychological state [72]. Thus, children's overall health, well-being, and personal development cannot be defined as remaining in a normal state, whether it is physically traumatised or psychologically impaired, but the achievement of SDG 3 requires ensuring healthy lives and promoting the well-being of people of all ages. During the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, children were often lonely, confused, and fearful in the face of the loss or temporary separation of their families. The institutions or individuals responsible for temporary guardianship provide not only material support but, more importantly, emotional comfort and psychological support [73,74].

> "Many of the children who came here during the COVID-19 pandemic were away from their parents for the first time and they would often cry. I studied psychology at university, and I could offer them some psychological counselling. Actually, I'm not the only staff member with a background in psychology, we have a dedicated counselling room". (Interviewee 11: Minors' assistance and protection institution)

> "I am the boy's relative. I also have a daughter his age. He was able to talk and watch TV with my daughter while he stayed with me. I feel that he got over the upset of his parents being taken to hospital for treatment very quickly". (Interviewee 6: Individual)

In the course of temporary guardianship by minors' assistance and protection institutions, child welfare institutions, or relatives, the children's living environment has changed from what it was before, but it does not remove them from social group life. Children have access to regular psychological counselling and group activities, and the trauma they have suffered as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the separation from their parents may be gradually recovered in the process [75]. As A Lareau observes, community support, family structure, social cohesion, and social perceptions of children's rights also have a profound impact on children's health and well-being [76]. Children may be able to reduce isolation and increase their sense of social belonging by expressing their feelings to the temporary guardianship subjects or by bonding with peers experiencing similar situations.

4.2.3. Sustainable Educational Support

The implementation of the temporary guardianship system ensures that the educational well-being of the children is preserved, which is required for the achievement of SDG 4. In a sense, education is the key for children to realise their personal potential and improve their future living conditions. By ensuring that children continue their education, the temporary guardianship system lays a solid foundation for their future development [77]. China's Administrative Measures for Child Welfare Institutions stipulate that child welfare institutions shall, in accordance with the law, ensure that children under temporary guardianship continue to receive education appropriate to their age, and that children born with physical or mental disabilities receive special education [78]. Whether through formal schooling or through informal educational activities in temporary foster homes and communities, children can be helped to learn the necessary knowledge and skills, improve their sense of self-efficacy, and prepare for their future social and professional lives [79].

> "During the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, many schools switched to distance learning. We would help the children to set up their internet equipment and log on to the class website. It's not a hassle". (Interviewee 3: Urban residents' committee)

> "I would love to teach him to learn more. The important thing was that he was only a second grader and tutoring his math homework was not difficult for me. He can also use my laptop for online classes". (Interviewee 4: Individual)

> "It was a real hassle to take so many children to their respective schools, but fortunately the schools were running distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. We could provide good network environment and electronic devices". (Interviewee 10: Minors' assistance and protection institution)

With the help of the institutions or individuals who assume temporary guardianship, children can mitigate the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic on their learning and educational processes, thus ensuring the continued advancement of their intellectual capacities, which is an important aspect of children's well-being and the sustainability of their development and is desired by SDG 4.

4.2.4. Preparing for Long-Term Guardianship and the Future Achievement of the SDGs

The temporary guardianship system is an important part of China's strategy to promote 'temporary-long-term' guardianship, which means that the child is eventually returned to a permanent and stable developmental environment. In other words, temporary guardianship is only a transition in the process of sustained guardianship of the children. Long-term guardianship is essential for the children's sustainable personal development and the advancement of SDGs 3 and 4. For most children, the best permanent guardianship arrangement is reunification with their original family, provided that the original family environment has been made safe and conducive to the children's growth and development [80]. During the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, many children were assisted in their continued survival and sustainable development through the temporary guardianship system, as their parents were quarantined in accordance with the policy after being infected

with the virus. However, when parents were cured and wanted to regain permanent guardianship of their children, it was not straightforward but was subject to a rigorous review process. The Civil Affairs Department, which is responsible overall for temporary guardianship, conducted a comprehensive assessment of the parents' physical health and ability to raise the children to ensure that parental guardianship is not compromising the health of the children and, thus, the achievement of SDG 3.

> "Parents who had recovered from hospital treatment or ended medical isolation and wanted to take their children home from here needed to show proof that they were physically fit and would not cause their children to be infected with the COVID-19 virus and affect their survival and development". (Interviewee 12: Child welfare institution)

> "We had to be sure that their parents were healthy before we let their children go back, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Even though we were not their long-term guardians, we had to take responsibility for the children's health". (Interviewee 9: Foster family)

The temporary guardianship system was put in place not only to allow children to receive material and psychological support and assistance during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, but also to ensure that the health, well-being, and developmental sustainability of the children were also in a normal state after the event. What the system does is to ensure that the children receive sustained guardianship and, more importantly, that the subsequent guardianship is not detrimental to the children's interests, health, and future development [81], thereby ensuring the continued advancement of SDGs 3 and 4.

5. Discussion: Pending Issues Regarding Children's Well-Being and the Achievement of SDGs

It is undeniable that the temporary guardianship system provides support and guarantees for children's basic material life, mental health, sustainable education, and future guardianship. However, through interviews with relevant subjects, it can be found that there are still some deficiencies in the implementation of temporary guardianship, which may affect the effectiveness of the system in achieving children's sustainable development. Meanwhile, they may also leave the purpose of continuing to advance SDGs 3 and 4 through the system unfulfilled.

5.1. Skills Deficits and Work Pressure of Urban Residents' and Villages' Committees

It can be seen from Table 3 that the villages' committees and urban residents' committees do not seem to be able to provide adequate psychological assistance and social interaction support when they are responsible for the temporary guardianship of children. Such a situation is closely related to the shortcomings of the villages' committees and urban residents' committees themselves. In China's political structure, villagers' committees and urban residents' committees are positioned as basic self-governing mass organisations, not as professional social welfare agencies, and, therefore, they are often vulnerable to problems such as shortage of materials and human resources [82]. The staff of urban residents' committees and villages' committees, as the grassroots staff, are faced with a variety of complicated matters every day and work under great pressure. Particularly during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, they had to put in a lot of manpower and material resources every day to take part in such work as statistics on the movement of people in rural and urban areas, public health management, and so on, and their workload was enormous. When they were given the job of providing temporary care for children, all they could do was to provide basic material living support, and they might not have sufficient manpower and materials to undertake other support, such as arranging for specialists to provide psychological counselling, which may pose a risk to the children's well-being and health.

> "We can provide food and rooms for children, and we can take them to hospital when they are sick. That's all we can do. We don't have enough staff and expertise to look after children's mental health. We have a lot of other things to do". (Interviewee 1: Villages' committee)

> "We need to get more financial support and manpower support. If we allocate too many staff to take care of children and carry out temporary guardianship, we will be under great pressure to work". (Interviewee 2: Urban residents' committee)

> "We work in a small place and can only provide temporary guardianship for a very few people. Those living together may not all be children but would also include some disabled and elderly people. So children who live here because of the temporary guardianship policy may not always be able to play with their peers". (Interviewee 3: Urban residents' committee)

Despite the fact that the relevant regulations and laws provide for a wide range of subjects to undertake temporary guardianship, the number of children who need to be provided with temporary guardianship in times of sudden public events is unimaginable. Thus, we cannot use the availability of alternative subjects as an excuse to overlook the inadequate aspects of villages' and urban residents' committees as temporary guardianship subjects. When children are under the temporary guardianship of these subjects, the problems of increased work pressure and skills mismatch are likely to result in children continuing to suffer from neglect and even cold violence, which is clearly detrimental to the safeguarding of children's well-being and health as well as to the achievement of SDG 3. Accordingly, the Chinese government has recently proposed some responses. For example, the newly revised China's Emergency Response Law 2024 includes provisions requiring regular training for the staff of urban residents' and villagers' committees [83]. Article 39 of this law suggests that urban residents' and villagers' committees can establish grassroots emergency rescue teams in advance to prepare for rescuing children. In addition, article 81 requires that social workers be directed to provide psychological assistance to children affected by emergencies and in temporary guardianship, which further compensates for the lack of capacity of villages' and urban residents' committees.

5.2. Inadequate Number of Minors' Assistance Institutions and Child Welfare Institutions

According to China's Law on the Protection of Minors, in order to fully realise the temporary guardianship of children, the civil affairs departments of the people's governments at or above the county level in China should all establish minors' assistance and protection institutions. In other words, there should be as many minors' assistance and protection institutions as there are county-level governments in China. As of December 2022, there were 2843 county-level administrations in China; however, by the end of 2022, there were only 925 child welfare institutions and minors' assistance and protection institutions in China [68]. Accordingly, it can be seen that the number of minors' assistance and protection institutions currently established in China is far below the requirements of the laws and regulations. These institutions, which are specifically set up to help children, have the most reasonable management methods and the most professional staffing. During the COVID-19 pandemic, these institutions were undoubtedly the most appropriate subjects to safeguard children's health, access to education, well-being, and personal development. It is also a strong guarantee that SDGs 3 and 4 will continue to be met in times of sudden public emergencies. However, the large gap between the actual number of minors' assistance and protection institutions and the number required by law is likely to be detrimental to the promotion of the temporary guardianship system and the protection of children's well-being, and will make it impossible to fulfil the original objectives and goals for which the institutions were established.

> "Not all regions have minors' assistance and protection institutions. A friend of mine who lives in a relatively backward county had to have her children temporarily cared for by a relative after she was infected with the COVID-19

> virus. However, that relative had three children of her own to look after. I felt that my friend's kid did not receive the same level of care as in the minors' assistance and protection institutions where I work. But the good thing was that child was still given a place where he could live temporarily". (Interviewee 10: Minors' assistance and protection institution)

The mismatch between the actual number of minors' assistance and protection institutions and child welfare institutions and the statutory number of such institutions is not a problem that can be solved in a short time, as it also involves financial and land considerations. Especially in some of the more economically disadvantaged county regions, they may choose to invest more of their financial resources in programs that generate revenue. Accordingly, the Chinese government has made various policy responses. First, in China's 14th Five-Year Plan for the Development of Civil Affairs [84], it is proposed that during the 14th Five-Year Plan period (2021–2025), work on the protection of minors and child welfare will be strengthened, including the construction of a series of new and rebuilt minors' assistance and protection institution and child welfare institutions, and the enhancement of the capacity and quality of the services provided by these institutions in the area of child welfare protection. In addition, some courts in China are currently attempting to include some private minor protection organisations in the selection of temporary guardianship subjects when dealing with cases concerning the determination of temporary guardianship subjects for children. For example, an organisation called SOS Rescue Village in China has been recognised by the court as the temporary guardian for children [85]. To a certain extent, these initiatives and practices have helped to alleviate the obstacles to the implementation of the temporary guardianship system due to the insufficient number of minors' assistance and protection institutions and child welfare institutions, which further contributes to the achievement of the SDGs in China and in times of sudden public events.

5.3. Optimisation Proposals

As important subjects in the implementation of the temporary guardianship system, the villagers' and urban residents' committees, as well as the minors' assistance and protection institutions and child welfare institutions, their insufficient capacity and lack of numbers will indirectly put greater pressure on the work of the other two main types of subjects. Once the workload of temporary guardianship exceeds the capacity of the two other main types of subjects, relatives and foster families, the child rescue system provided by the temporary guardianship system is at risk of collapsing. During periods of sudden public events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, without a reliable child rescue and protection system, the inequalities and diminished well-being faced by children neglected by their original families and parents are exacerbated. Based on the above deficiencies, China's "temporary-long-term" guardianship strategy needs to be further optimised. The paper makes the following recommendations for policy optimisation:

Firstly, greater human and financial support should be provided to villagers' and urban residents' committees in order to enhance their capacity to undertake temporary guardianship of children. Adequate financial support would allow these institutions to further optimise their basic material environment for temporary guardianship and improve their deficiencies. Especially in providing psychological support, villagers' and urban residents' committees do not perform well compared to other temporary guardianship subjects. Thus, apart from directing social workers to provide psychological counselling for children that is proposed in the Emergency Response Law 2024 [83], villagers' and urban residents' committees can also incorporate some indicators for psychological professionals when they conduct staff recruitment. Through the combined effect of their own personnel reserves and external personnel assistance, it may be possible to improve to some extent the deficiencies of the villagers' and urban residents' committees in the provision of psychological support and social interaction.

Additionally, it is necessary to build or renovate more minors' assistance and protection institutions and child welfare institutions to accommodate the large land area and

population of China. However, if the option of a quantitative increase is not achievable within a short period of time, then optimisation in terms of the internal set-up of the existing institutions can also be considered. Drawing on the organisational set-up of child protection institutions in developed countries such as the UK and the US, the minors' assistance and protection institutions can generally be divided into four branches within the institution: the department for receiving and processing reports of child abuse and neglect, the department for investigating and assessing, the department for assisting and supervising parents, and the department for the temporary placement of children. The internal structure of China's minors' assistance and protection institutions can be set up in accordance with such a setup, thereby realising consistency with the scope of responsibilities. In short, the optimisation of minors' assistance and protection institutions and child welfare institutions can be carried out by both increasing the number of institutions and optimising their internal structure.

Finally, while the role of temporary guardianship in safeguarding the children's well-being, health, and sustainable development and in contributing to the achievement of the SDGs has already been recognised in the preceding section, the effectiveness of the system could be further enhanced by the inclusion of some monitoring provisions in relevant laws and regulations. A similar system in Germany, for example, has a monitoring mechanism that requires the temporary guardian to report regularly on his or her guardianship and to correct and penalise wrongdoing in a timely manner [86].

6. Conclusions

Given the continuing trend of declining global fertility rates and the declining proportion of children in the global population, the protection of children's well-being has recently become a topic of increasing interest in policy formulation and academic research [87,88]. Meanwhile, children's health, well-being, and education have also emerged as aspects that require attention in order to achieve the SDGs [1]. Inevitably, during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, the children's health, well-being, and personal sustainable development would have been threatened. In such cases, children may fall into hunger, deteriorating health, and stagnation of intellectual level due to lack of care and support from their parents and families. While the roles of financial programmes, big data technology, and medical technology in safeguarding the health and well-being have been well recognised and have, therefore, attracted public attention, the contribution of the relevant legal system and social health policy should not be overlooked.

The 'temporary-long-term' guardianship strategy provided by China during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic could provide children deprived of family care with an opportunity to gain sustainability in their survival and development. Through temporary guardianship, children are provided with supports in terms of place of living, food, education, medical care, psychological care, and social interaction, among others, which are closely related to the health, objective well-being, and personal development of the children. However, despite the many legislative and practical successes of the system, there are still some areas that need to be optimised, such as the number of institutions that take on temporary guardianship and human and financial support, which are linked to the maximisation of the children's well-being and personal development. Accordingly, the study makes recommendations in the areas that follow: firstly, provide more professionals and financial support to villagers' and urban residents' committees; secondly, address the problem faced by the minors' assistance and protection institutions and child welfare institutions through the dual approach of increasing the number of institutions and optimising their internal structure; and, thirdly, incorporate certain monitoring provisions for the policy and the system. Nevertheless, it is clear from the qualitative analyses that China's temporary guardianship system supports the safeguarding of children's health and well-being and deserves to be a blueprint and a sustainable system for continued achievement of SDGs 3 and 4 in times of sudden public emergencies.

This paper, based on a review of the literature, documents, and semi-structured interviews, provides mainly qualitative empirical analysis. There is a limitation of this paper that we would like to touch on. The variety and number of interviewees in the semi-structured interviews on which this paper is based is not sufficiently rich. For further research, it is suggested that differences in the performance of the same type of temporary guardianship subject in different regions could be examined to further analyse the reasons for the differences in the supports provided by the temporary guardianship subjects and how to specifically optimise the setup of the temporary guardianship subjects. Nonetheless, we hope that this introductory paper on China's temporary guardianship system during the COVID-19 pandemic will provide some useful insights for other countries to address crises in children's sustainable development, health, and well-being and to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals when responding to similar sudden public events.

Author Contributions: S.C. was responsible for conceptualisation, writing, and editing; Y.Z. and S.C. for the methodology, data acquisition, and data analysis. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by Special Funds for Science and Technology Innovation Strategy of Guangdong Province, China, Grant No. pdjh2023a0079.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article; further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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