

# Children: migration and human capital

José-Ignacio Antón

## Migration, child well-being, and human capital

The hope for improving living conditions – particularly, of children – represents one of the main motivations behind the massive migration flows that characterize the current age of globalization. In this context, how migration can make a difference in minors' lives represents one of the prime focuses of current research in social sciences. The aim of this essay is to provide a summary of the current state of research on the impact of migration on child welfare from an economic perspective, which has been concentrated in the last three decades.

Migration influences households' outcomes in several ways, but one of its most crucial channels of impact refers to child well-being. In particular, what happens to youth is largely linked to how migration affects their human capital. Human capital is a broad concept that includes all those nonphysical features embedded in individuals that determine their productivity and ability to create economic value. Children's cognitive and noncognitive abilities and their schooling and health status are relevant issues of study not only because of their value per se for individuals' self-development but also because they are the key factors in explaining the productivity of people and countries. Therefore, human capital formation is considered as an unequivocal sign of success of both individuals and nations.

The most common framework for the analysis of human capital formation in economics is the production functions of education and health. Parents are assumed to choose those inputs that maximize their children's well-being, subject to the production function,

prices, and budget constraints. Monetary resources, along with the time spent with the children, the environment, and health knowledge are the main inputs in the process of human capital formation.

In addition, migration can also affect the labor supply of youth and minors by altering the budget constraints of households and eventually change the allocation of power within the family. Nevertheless, the specific consequences of migration on the labor supply of this population group have not yet been studied in detail.

## Channels of effects of migration on child human capital

Migration can affect the lives of children in two ways, depending on whether or not they migrate with their parents (or relatives). When children accompany their parents, on the one hand, they can enjoy several advantages in moving from a rural to an urban area or from a developing to a developed country. Essentially, they are likely to benefit from the larger material resources available to the family because of better economic opportunities for their relatives, which increase their chances of receiving better-quality education and health care. In addition, migration to more developed communities can lead to improved access to piped water, sanitation, security, and schooling. On the other hand, however, migrants also face important disadvantages from the displacement, such as psychological problems associated with separation from part of the family and adjustment to a new environment, exposure to new diseases and, especially just after migration, residential segregation and the possible existence of strong barriers to the use of health or educational services for legal or economic reasons. Furthermore, if their progenitors send money home or face important barriers to employment, migration could result in a depletion of savings in the short term.

When children remain in their communities of origin and are left behind by the migrant household members, migration impacts children's education and health by different channels as well (McKenzie 2006). The most obvious one is represented by remittances. Money sent back home by migrants means increased monetary resources for the family, which might contribute to improving children's education and health by relaxing liquidity constraints and acting as an insurance mechanism against income shocks (unemployment, natural disasters, etc.), which can negatively affect children's schooling or health status. This extra money not only permits larger and better possibilities of consumption but also facilitates investments in education (allowing households to pay school tuition fees and other expenditures), access to health services, or even housing improvements which can positively affect children's academic performance and health.

However, the evidence suggests that the effects of migration on children are not limited to remittances; on the contrary, migration can lead to increased levels of mothers' health knowledge (about health practices, contraceptive measures, diet and exercise, etc.), even with spillover effects on nonmigrant households (Lindstrom & Muñoz-Franco 2006). Furthermore, if children are left behind, the migration of their parents can have a negative impact on them that is related to the psychological impact of separation on mental health and the smaller amount of time available in households with absent parents to spend on educating and caring for children. In some cases, when fathers are absent, it is even possible that children have to take charge of more household responsibilities, with less time available for their studies. Obviously, in these cases, the negative impact of migration can be attenuated if other relatives successfully fulfill the role of parents. In addition, some authors have suggested that migration can negatively affect school enrollment among children left behind if they perceive migration as an alternative path to socioeconomic success from schooling, which results in a lack of motivation at school and poor academic performance (Kandel & Massey 2002).

Finally, it is also possible that minors migrate alone, which is likely to foster the disruptive effects of migration (for example, less strict parental monitoring can lead to lower school enrollment or higher risk of being involved in illegal activities).

### Empirical research

To assess the effect of migration on schooling and health outcomes in reality is a hard task, as, in general, migration is not a random phenomenon and breaking down the effects of migration on children's outcomes is a very difficult task (McKenzie 2006; McKenzie et al. 2010). Although the effects of migration have traditionally received much attention from development researchers, it was not until recently that their impact has begun to be assessed using modern evaluation tools.

Unsurprisingly, empirical evidence has been largely based on experiences of migrant households in developing countries, with Mexico, China, the Philippines, Bangladesh, and Tonga being the most important fields for testing the effect of migration on children's education and health. The quality of available databases has been the main criterion driving the selection of such cases. Most of the literature in the field focuses on the situation of the children who stay in their communities of origin, irrespective of whether they are separated from their parents, whereas fewer research studies have tried to assess what happens with children who follow their parents in the migration process, even in the case of rural–urban migration. Though South–South migration currently represents around half of total migrants from these countries, the bulk of studies have focused on recent population flows to Western countries.

The empirical findings based on both qualitative and quantitative methods are in general quite discouraging, as evidence widely differs across countries and specific studies (Kanaiaupuni & Donato 1999; Fajnzylber & López 2007; Cortés 2008). In relation to education, having a migrant family member abroad does not unequivocally lead to better schooling outcomes. Recent studies for South America and

the Caribbean, and for China, tied to migration flows, have shown that children in migrant households have a higher educational attainment than other children in their communities, but other research for Mexico, Tonga, and Moldova have found no effects of migration or even a negative impact on the education of children. The findings are quite similar regarding health. Whereas some authors suggest that migration is likely to exert a positive effect on birth weight, maternal knowledge, nutritional status of children, and access to health care, an important body of literature suggests that children left behind tend to suffer from diseases to a larger extent than the children of nonmigrants and present poorer anthropometric indicators.

There are also several studies focused on what happens to children who migrate with their parents, especially from rural areas to towns. There is very scant evidence on how migration affects schooling, but the available studies suggest that the children of migrants tend to show poorer health outcomes than urban children who have never been exposed to migrations, but have a better chance of survival than those who stayed in the community of origin (Brockhoff 1994).

Finally, it is worth mentioning that the migration of children alone which, to a large extent, is a phenomenon associated with South–South population flows, has received much less attention than other kinds of migrations, mostly because of the limited availability of high-quality data. Nevertheless, there are reasons for thinking that the net benefits of this type of migration are smaller than for children moving with their families, since minors migrating alone are likely to experience a higher risk of being involved in crime and drug consumption and to suffer from psychological problems than those who move with their close relatives.

## Summary

This essay has discussed the effects of migration on child well-being. It has been argued that, contrary to the conventional wisdom, the positive effect of migration on children's schooling and health outcomes has been far

from completely proved. Although migration might mean a larger amount of income available for consumption and investment in children, it can have a disruptive effect on minors, especially if they are left by their parents in the place of origin.

SEE ALSO: Child labor and migration; Children of migrants; Children and migration: disease and illness; Children: migration, and human rights; Refugee families and children

## References and further reading

- Antón, J. I. (2010) The impact of remittances on nutritional status of children in Ecuador. *International Migration Review* 44, 269–299.
- Brockhoff, M. (1994) The impact of rural–urban migration on child survival. *Health Transition Review* 4(2), 127–149.
- Cortés, R. (2008) *Children and Women Left Behind in Labor Sending Countries*. Working Paper, UNICEF Division of Policy and Practice. New York: UNICEF. At [www.globalmigrationgroup.org/uploads/gmg-topics/children/2.C\\_Children\\_and\\_women\\_left\\_behind\\_UNICEF%20WP.pdf](http://www.globalmigrationgroup.org/uploads/gmg-topics/children/2.C_Children_and_women_left_behind_UNICEF%20WP.pdf), accessed Dec. 19, 2011.
- Fajnzylber, P. & López, J. H. (eds.) (2007) *Close to Home: The Development Impact of Remittances in Latin America*. Washington, DC: World Bank.
- Hildebrandt, N. & McKenzie, D. (2006) The effects of migration on child health in Mexico. *Economía* 6(1), pp. 257–289.
- Kanaiaupuni, S. M. & Donato, K. (1999) Migradollars and mortality: the effects of migration on infant survival in Mexico. *Demography* 36, 339–353.
- Kandel, W. & Massey, D. S. (2002) The culture of Mexican migration: a theoretical and empirical analysis. *Social Forces* 80, 981–1004.
- Lindstrom, D. P. & Muñoz-Franco, E. (2006) Migration and maternal health services utilization in rural Guatemala. *Social Science & Medicine* 63, 706–721.
- McKenzie D. J. (2006) Beyond remittances: the effects of migration on Mexican households. In Ç. Özden & M. Schiff (eds.), *International Migration, Remittances, and the Brain Drain*. Washington, DC: World Bank; Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

#### 4 CHILDREN: MIGRATION AND HUMAN CAPITAL

McKenzie, D., Gibson, J., & Stillman, S. (2010) How important is selection? Experimental vs. non-experimental measures of the income gains from migration. *Journal of the European Economic Association* 8, 913–945.

McKenzie, D. & Rapoport, H. (2006) Can migration reduce educational attainments? Depressing evidence from Mexico. Centre for Research and Analysis of Migration Discussion Paper No. 01/06.