



School enrollment effects in a South-South migration context

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ABSTRACT

In contrast to the heavily studied South-North migration of Latin Americans to the United States, this investigation assesses the lesser-studied influence of South-South labor migration on left-behind children's educational attainment. Specifically, it asks the question, 'Does the migration of Nicaraguan parents to Costa Rica contribute to better or worse education outcomes for their left-behind children?' Based on migration and education data for 3951 children from 1858 distinct households collected within Nicaragua's 1998 and 2001 Living Standards Measurement Studies, fixed effect model results indicate that paternal migration has a depressive effect on school enrollment but has no effect on school attendance or grade-for-age progression. Given the relatively low bar to migration establishment vis-à-vis the lack of barriers that necessitate significant monetary commitments and time delays, school enrollment results are unexpected.

1. Introduction

In developing world economies, South-North international labor migration and attendant remittances have been touted as catalysts for stimulating economic growth (e.g., Durand et al., 1996a,b) and alleviating poverty (e.g., Adams and Page, 2005, 2004). However, as with most phenomena, international labor migration has its share of downsides. Empirical studies have demonstrated that left-behind children's human capital formation can be disrupted by family member absences (e.g., McKenzie and Rapoport 2011, Nobles 2007, Dreby 2007, Abrego 2014). The development potential of international migration is constrained by structural barriers such as highly restrictive international immigration laws that inflate migration startup costs and heighten physical risks. These barriers can throttle migration success and its positive contribution to sending-community development. Conversely, South-South international labor migration, which is *not* often laden with as many structural barriers to migration success, may represent a more practical household livelihood strategy. Even though South-South migration surpasses South-North migration, representing over a third of all international migrations, is not nearly as well studied as South-North migration – especially in the Americas (World Bank 2016). A distinctive quality that differentiates South-North from South-South migration is the vast majority of the latter (80 percent) involves migration to nations that are geographically contiguous (Ratha and Shaw 2007). South-South migration may be especially advantageous for poorer households that cannot afford the initial startup costs associated with the hiring of a human smuggler and/or the short-term absence of a productive wage earner (Hobbs and Jameson 2012). To delve into the development

potential of South-South labor migration, this investigation addresses the effect of Nicaragua to Costa Rica parental migration on left-behind children's enrollment, attendance and grade-for-age progression.

Prior to evaluating the migration/education dynamic objectively with Living Standards Measurement Study data, Section 2 contrasts the challenges inherent in South-South labor migration of Nicaraguans to Costa Rica. Section 3 summarizes the international migration and education literature; while Section 4 briefly describes Nicaragua's education system. Section 5 introduces the study's data and variables; while Section 6 describes the fixed effect analytical strategy and study results. Section 7 discusses mechanisms that explain the negative effect of South-South migration on school enrollment and the non-effect on school attendance and grade-for-age progression.

2. South-South International Nicaraguan migration to Costa Rica

Similar to most Central American countries, Nicaraguan households that contemplate international migration as a livelihood strategy have two primary destinations where over 90 percent of Nicaraguan emigrants reside: Costa Rica and the United States (Unión Europea 2013). However, especially for undocumented migrants, the two international destinations present vastly different potential rewards and risks. The most obvious difference lies with the potential monetary gains to be had. Wage differentials between Nicaragua and the United States are substantial – per capita international purchasing power (IPP) is 13 times higher for an average U.S. versus Nicaraguan resident (Razavi 2011). However, the five-fold difference in average wages between Nicaragua and Costa Rica is also impressive (Razavi 2011). Therefore,

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compared with non-migrants, successful Nicaraguan migrants to the United States and Costa Rica have the potential to earn substantial amounts of money.

Although potential economic gains are about 60 percent lower when a Nicaraguan chooses to migrate to Costa Rica versus the more lucrative United States, South-South migration has many advantages and fewer risks. To illustrate, there are numerous structural barriers that challenge undocumented Nicaraguans' wishing to establish themselves in the United States, that do not apply to Costa Rican migrants, including: (1) predation by criminal organizations and extortion by unscrupulous law enforcement officers (Nazario 2007); (2) deportation both in transit and once established in the United States (Sundberg and Kaserman 2007); (3) physical risks such as crossing deserts to evade detection (Sundberg and Kaserman 2007, Cornelius 2001); and (4) time constraints related to travel and establishment in new U.S. communities. To some extent, the physically challenging journey through Mexico and into the United States can be mitigated through the use of *coyotes* (human smugglers). However, given that the fees charged by coyotes to transport undocumented Central Americans to the United States can run as high as US\$ 10,000, this option is cost-prohibitive for many Nicaraguan families (UNODC 2010).

In contrast the more arduous U.S. migration possibility, it is quite easy to travel between Nicaragua and Costa Rica – there are few places within Nicaragua that require more than a day's journey on an inexpensive bus to reach the Costa Rican border. While Costa Rica is not a partner to the *Plan de Integración Migratoria Centroamericana* which allows for unimpeded travel among four Central American countries (El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua), there are numerous informal routes between Nicaragua and Costa Rica that allow for relatively affordable, easy and safe back and forth travel (IOM 2001, Samandú and Pereira 1996). According to Garcia et al. (2002), there are two main methods for Nicaraguans to enter Costa Rica without documents: by hiring a *coyote* or following a fellow migrant. In both cases individuals choose undocumented migration due to the more expensive costs to procure legal documentation (Funkhouser et al., 2002). Legal documentation fees were approximately US\$ 115 compared with US\$ 20 to hire a human smuggler in 2001 (Garcia et al. 2002).

To further contextualize Nicaragua to Costa Rica migration, the two countries have much in common: a border (Fig. 1); similar geographies and natural resources; the same official language (Spanish); and similar cultural norms and ancestry. The two countries also share a long history of labor migration that can be traced back to European colonization (Alvarenga 1997). Compared with the turbulent political and economic history of much of Central America during the latter half of the 20th century, Costa Rica sustained a more tranquil development. The growth of commercial agriculture and tourism has created a need for cheap labor that has largely been filled with unskilled Nicaraguans (Goldade 2011). Nicaraguan migrants work throughout Costa Rica but are concentrated in low-skilled professions such as agriculture, construction and domestic work in Costa Rica's capital city (San Jose) and in areas near the Costa Rica/Nicaragua border (Marquette 2006, Lee 2010b).

The lower monetary commitments, minimal physical dangers and ease and speed of travel between Nicaragua and Costa Rica would suggest that South-South labor migration is akin to internal migration within Nicaragua, but with higher potential rewards. In contrast to undocumented migration to the United States where migrants are arguably a captive population, the fact that Nicaraguans are neighbors with Costa Rica, in addition to the relatively lax border security between the nations, makes circular migration between them relatively easy. This may allow for more regular Nicaraguan family reunions during holidays and other important periods. While still offering significant monetary potential, the totality of these factors may make travel to Costa Rica for Nicaraguans a less risky livelihood strategy than travelling northward. This may be especially attractive for lower-class Nicaraguan households that cannot afford the prohibitive costs required to reach the United States safely and/or the time required to recoup

short-term wage losses incurred during migration establishment (Hobbs and Jameson 2012).

3. Migration and education literature

While there is a growing literature on the influence of South-North migration on left-behind children's educational attainment in Latin America, this endeavor represents a rare analysis of the influence of South-South migration on education outcomes there. The South-North migration and education literature has found mixed results. Many early studies on the remittances side of this subject found positive investments in education (e.g., Adams and Cuecuecha 2010, Yang 2008) and school enrollment/attendance (e.g., Acosta 2011, Calero et al., 2009, Edwards and Ureta 2003, Lu et al., 2011). However, more contemporary research on the fuller effects of the migration event, that combines both parental absences and remittances, on children's education identifies numerous harms including: poor achievement (Cebotari and Mazzucato 2016); reduced study time (Antman 2011); high dropout rates/low school enrollment (Creighton et al., 2009, Halpern-Manners 2011, McKenzie and Rapoport 2011, Lu 2014, Davis and Brazil 2016); and low school attendance (Lara 2015). Explanations for these outcomes include lengthy migration establishment periods that prevent speedy compensation for costs accrued to reach the destination (Davis 2016, Hoang et al. 2015). Additionally, some children lack the motivation to thrive in school while others are harmed when one or more parents is not around to assist with schoolwork. Finally, a 'culture of migration' effect that disincentivizes educational attainment could also be at play (Kandel et al., 2002).

The inclusion of South-South labor migration to the migration and education literature in a Latin American context is novel. Many of the harmful effects inherent in travel from poorer economies to more affluent areas with very strict entry requirements may not apply in travel between two lesser developed Latin American economies. There is a little literature on this subject globally and even less so for Nicaragua. While not addressing educational attainment specifically, results from work by Macours and Vakis (2010) show that South-South seasonal migration of mothers between Nicaragua and Honduras had a positive effect on children's early development. They attribute this finding to a higher economic standing outweighing the disruptive effect of maternal absence. In a qualitative study of migration between Haiti and the Dominican Republic, children that accompanied their migrant parents suffered from high levels of discrimination in both their ability to enroll in school and being the targets of abuse by fellow students (Bartlett 2012). South-South migration research in South-east Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa suggest that in some cases, left-behind children suffer psychosocial harm from parental absence (Graham and Jordan 2011, Jordan and Graham 2012, Mazzucato et al. 2015). Maternal migration absences, for instance, have translated into lower school enrollment in left-behind children in Thailand (Jampaklay 2006) but not for self-reported school enjoyment or performance in Indonesia, Philippines or Vietnam (Jordan and Graham 2012). In contrast, father's absences were found to be positively correlated with school pacing and academic results in both Bangladeshi and Filipino children (Kuhn 2006; Asis et al., 2013). In two recent Sub-Saharan African studies, a variety of migration and education outcomes in different geographical settings were found. In Mozambique, Yabiku and Agadjanian (2017) discovered that father's migration to South Africa was associated with lower levels of school discontinuation. However, the effect was limited to left-behind male children. In a second Sub-Saharan African study, Cebotari and Mazzucato (2016) found international parental migration from Ghana, internal migration accompanied by union dissolution in Nigeria and dual parental absence in both settings to be correlated with poor test results.

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