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Internal migration, international migration, and physical growth of left-behind children: A study of two settings



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ABSTRACT

Parental out-migration has become a common experience of childhood worldwide and tends to have important ramifications for child development. There has been much debate on whether overall children benefit or suffer from parental out-migration. The present study examines how the relationship between parental out-migration and children's growth differs by the type of migration (internal vs. international). This comparison is conducted in two diverse settings, Mexico and Indonesia. Data are from two national longitudinal surveys: the Mexican Family Life Survey and the Indonesian Family Life Survey. Results from fixed-effect regressions show that international migration tends to have a less beneficial, sometimes even more detrimental, impact on the growth of children left behind than internal migration. Results also reveal contextual differences in the role of parental out-migration. Possible explanations are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Hundreds of millions of people in developing countries migrate to urban areas (internal migration) or to more developed countries (international migration) for better living conditions. Recent estimates indicate that about 214 million people from developing nations live outside their home country (United Nations, 2009). Internal migration occurs at even higher rates, but the scale is difficult to accurately determine (International Organization for Migration, 2005). As a result, children in developing settings are increasingly affected by migration (UNICEF, 2007). While some children migrate with their parents, many children are left behind as one or both parents migrate for work.

Parental out-migration (international and internal) is a form of family transition with conflicting consequences, as a result of parent-child separations and economic improvement through remittances. These countervailing processes have generated much debate on the overall effect of parental out-migration on child well-being such as education and health (McKenzie, 2005; Parreñas, 2005; Toyota et al., 2007; Dreby, 2010; Hoang and Yeoh, 2012). The discrepancies among previous studies point to a research direction for identifying the conditions under which children benefit or suffer from parental out-migration. A comparative perspective is particularly helpful in these respects because it specifies different conditions in which to examine the effect of

migration and allows for identifying similarities and differences of the effect.

The present study examined how the role of parental migration differs by stream of out-migration (internal vs. international). The focus is on children's physical growth, a relatively under-studied area. Specifically I assessed how each group of left-behind children (by internal or international migrant parent) compares to children not left behind. Previous studies have suggested that internal and international migration are alternative strategies in response to broad social and economic forces, and can be studied under a unified framework (Pryor, 1981; Castles and Miller, 1998; DeWind and Holdaway, 2008). I argued that internal and international migration entail different levels of family disruption and economic return, which can potentially have different ramifications for children.

To evaluate the generalizability of results, the cross-stream comparison was conducted in two diverse settings, Mexico and Indonesia. The two countries share broad similarities as developing countries and both experience large-scale internal and international migration (Hugo, 2005; Mishra, 2007). In the meantime, the two countries differ in potentially important ways, for example, in terms of the level of socioeconomic development and population nutritional status (World Bank, 2005), that may have implications for the relationship between migration and child growth. To the extent that the cross-stream similarity or difference holds in the two study settings, there is more confidence that the results reveal a fairly general pattern.

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I studied children's physical growth, an important health indicator linked to health and productivity later in life (Alderman et al., 2006). This focus adds to existing research that largely concentrates on educational outcomes or early-life health measures such as birth weight and infant mortality (Borraz, 2005; Lopez-Cordoba, 2005; Amuedo-Dorantes and Pozo, 2010). Moreover, the analysis covered a wider age range of children than in previous studies, using the expanded WHO child growth standards.

2. Background

2.1. Children's physical growth

Children's physical growth, mainly measured by height and weight growth, is a critical dimension of child development. It has been linked to health and mortality, cognitive and mental development, educational achievement, and even adult outcomes (Mendez and Adair, 1999; Alderman et al., 2006; Case and Paxson, 2008; Scholder et al., 2013). Growth faltering can significantly increase a child's risk of mortality and persistent cognitive and behavioral dysfunction in the long term. For this reason, child height is often considered a useful indicator of child health and welfare (Waterlow et al., 1977).

A number of factors shape children's physical growth. Innate characteristics inherited from parents are unarguably crucial determinants of child height and weight. But beyond genetic disposition, ample evidence points to the pivotal role of children's living environment (Mosley and Chen, 1984; Thomas et al., 1991). The living environment is associated with children's physical growth through exposure to malnutrition and frequent morbidity such as infections and diarrhea (Martorell and Habicht, 1986).

Children's nutrition intake depends on the amount and quality of foods and feeding (Seckler, 1982). This is especially true for young children, who depend much on breastfeeding and supplementary foods to thrive. In this respect, the quantity and quality of child care and household economics are critical for child growth. Any familial conditions that can deplete the parent's or caregiver's ability to nurture the children, or that deprive material resources to be spent on children are likely to put children at high risk for growth deficiency.

Child morbidity is especially sensitive to households' sanitation levels. Household hygiene, such as clean water supply and sewage system, protects children from environmental contamination that can cause repeated episodes of diarrhea and illness (Seckler, 1982; Mosley and Chen, 1984). Such health problems initiate metabolic responses to biological stressors and could reduce the efficiency of conversion of food into energy, and thus physical growth. Factors such as household economic resources are closely related to sanitation, with well off families better able to provide children with a sanitary living environment.

2.2. Parental out-migration and child growth

Several strands of literature provide a useful framework for understanding the potential impact of parental migration on children's growth. The literature on family dissolution and parental employment on child development demonstrates the critical consequences of parental presence or absence, with high-levels of parental input improving a wide range of child outcomes while parental absence exerting detrimental impacts on children (McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994; Waldfogel, 2006). The literature on the economic and social impact of migration perceives migration as a household strategy for improving household economic welfare (Stark and Bloom, 1985). This view necessitates the

importance of family in fully understanding the decisions to and consequences of migration. On the one hand, a large fraction of migrants' incomes are devoted to remittances, which reduce the economic vulnerability of the original families (Azam and Gubert, 2006; Semyonov and Gorodzeisky, 2008). On the other hand, the family separation as a result of out-migration has inevitably led to changes in family life and could put strains on family relationships (Parreñas, 2005; Dreby, 2010). A synthesis of these bodies of literature suggests that the impact of parental out-migration is multifaceted.

First, the adverse impact of parental absence noted in the broader family literature tends to arise in the context of migration. Parent-child separation due to out-migration leads to reduced parental input essential for child growth (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2004; Parreñas, 2005; Toyota et al., 2007; Dreby, 2010; Graham and Jordan, 2011; Hoang and Yeoh, 2012). The remaining parent or caregiver may face additional household responsibilities, thus further occasioning a decline in the quantity and quality of care provided to children (McKenzie, 2005).

Relevant to child health, the out-migration of parents likely leads to less time and energy available for caregivers to provide child care. This may limit the caregiver's ability to prepare and serve a good variety of quality foods, carry out sanitary child care practices (clean child frequently), and to use health services to boost child health (immunize children) (Hildebrandt et al., 2005). Specifically for young children, time constraints can severely disrupt feeding practices, leading to shorter periods of breastfeeding, less attentive feeding, and thus insufficient or less nutrient intake (Hildebrandt et al., 2005). Such disrupted practices are likely to hinder the proper growth of children. Much of the detrimental impact of family separation due to out-migration carries over even after family reunification (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2004).

One important yet understudied question is how the level of family disruption may vary by international and internal migration. International migration may imply a longer duration of separation and less frequent contact than internal migration (DeWind and Holdaway, 2008). Such prolonged separation may result in substantial reductions in parental input and disrupted childcare practices that can ensue over a child's growth (Dreby, 2010). By contrast, internal migration can be quite circular and usually generates shorter episodes of disruption (DeWind and Holdaway, 2008).

Second, parental out-migration is distinct from many other types of parent-child separation (e.g., divorce, parental death), which are commonly accompanied by declines in economic well-being (Garfinkel and McLanahan, 1986). Households with migrants often receive substantial remittances (Semyonov and Gorodzeisky, 2008). These resources serve as a critical means for enhancing family income and standard of living, allowing for more resources to be allocated toward health-related expenses such as better quality and quantity of food, household sanitation, and use of health care services (Amuedo-Dorantes et al., 2007; Antón, 2010). Remittances may also help mitigate the time and energy constraints of the remaining caregiver (Brown and Poirine, 2005), enabling them to dedicate more time to caring for children.

These economic benefits, however, may be constrained, especially in the initial stage of out-migration when households receive limited remittances while suffering from reduced household labor (Kandel, 2003). Because of a common time lag before remittance receipt, one immediate aftermath for families left behind is financial hardship, which could compel caregivers to shift more time from childcare into home production and force families to reduce spending on children. The time lag between out-migration and improved household welfare tends to increase over time—especially for families of undocumented migrants—as a result of the rising costs and difficulties of out-migration. Even at later

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