

The Contribution of Migration to Children's Family Contexts

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Summary

Research addressing child well-being often emphasizes the role of family structure. This research suggests that children benefit substantially from growing up in a stable household consisting of two biological parents. Much of this work compares children in two-parent households with children living with a single parent following nonmarital fertility, divorce, or death. In many developing societies, however, a common source of family disruption arises when one parent leaves the household to work elsewhere for an extended period of time. In this study I characterize children's family experiences in a setting where labor migration is often a defining feature of family life.

For children, migration may have considerable substantive differences from parental absence following nonunion fertility or union dissolution. However, one of the key mechanisms through which migration may affect child well-being remains the same: the duration of time spent apart from parents. Currently, we have limited population-level evidence describing children's experience of parental migration. If we believe that parental absence affects children's outcomes, it seems valuable to assess how migration shapes family context over the course of childhood.

I develop multistate life tables for use with the Mexican Family Life Survey (MxFLS) data to examine the roles that nonmarital fertility, union disruption and death play with respect to children's experience of parental presence in the household, and add the important element of migration to these estimates. MxFLS is a nationally-representative, longitudinal survey of Mexican households. Mexico has a long history of both internal and international labor migration. While women are increasingly engaging in this type of movement, they typically do so before entering a union or later in the life course, when children are grown. For this reason, I focus on the migration of Mexican fathers.

Period life tables succinctly describe how a population experiences a particular phenomenon at the aggregate level. They are a tool used to infer dynamic outcomes when data are limited. This is particularly valuable when considering a phenomenon like temporary migration, for which extended-period longitudinal data do not typically exist.

The life table approach uses available data on transition rates to estimate what a hypothetical, or synthetic, cohort would experience if it were subjected to observed age-specific "death" rates at each year of life. The multistate life table builds upon the traditional life table approach by allowing individuals to move between a number of states as opposed to just two. In addition, individuals may leave a state after entering it. To fit the life table approach to something as complex and evolving as household structure, these two additions are particularly important. The "states", then, in this analysis are the different forms of household composition in which children live.

I use these tables to estimate children's unconditional probabilities of being in a state at any given age, the cumulative conditional probabilities of making transitions at some point during childhood, and the expected percentage of childhood spent in any state. The results suggest that paternal migration contributes substantially to time apart from fathers for Mexican children. When constructed childhood years are pooled, migration accounts for

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nearly the same percentage of childhood spent apart from fathers as parental union dissolution. Not taking into consideration migration significantly underestimates the extent to which children in Mexico spend time in “single” parent homes.

The cumulative probabilities calculated over the course of childhood provide prevalence estimates of household disruption that are strikingly different from cross-sectional incidence estimates. MxFLS data reveal that 7 percent of Mexican children in 2002 have migrating fathers. Yet, initial multistate estimates suggest that 17 percent of children born into two-parent homes are expected to experience a migrating father at least once during their childhood. Similarly, 8 percent of Mexican children are living with a single mother following union separation or father’s death in 2002, though 20 percent of Mexican children born into two parent homes are expected to have a father exit the household following union dissolution or death by the age of 14. Other results also highlight key differences in children’s experiences by urban status at birth and by the education levels of their parents.

My results underscore the role of migration as a substantial contributor to time away from parents in settings where labor migration is common. From the perspective of child development and well-being in later life, it may be critical to consider not only those children in homes with single mothers, but also children who spend a nontrivial percentage of their early years with fathers working and living in other communities.

This paper builds a foundation for further exploration into the substantive differences for children between parental migration and other types of household disruption. In both cases, children experience physical and, in some cases, psychological separation. Yet, other mechanisms that link divorce to child outcomes may be less applicable to labor migration.