

Comparative Perspectives on International Migration and Child Wellbeing

Alicia Adsera
Marta Tienda
Princeton University

International migration has been increasing since 1970, with the largest flows originating in developing nations and streaming into industrialized nations (Zlotnik, 2006). The United Nations estimated the 2010 global foreign-stock population at 214 million, up from approximately 82 million in 1970 (U.N., 2012; Freeman, 2006). About 3.1 percent of all people did not reside in their country of birth in 2010, compared with approximately 2.2 percent in 1970.¹ Contemporary international migration differs from that of earlier periods in several important ways that are related to the social and economic wellbeing of migrants, especially the young. First, the regional origins and destinations of migrants have changed. For example, many former European source countries have become immigrant-receiving nations (e.g., Spain, Italy, and Germany), while formerly immigrant-receiving South American nations now produce Europe-bound emigrants. Second, contemporary international migration is occurring against the backdrop of an unprecedented demographic divide—an aging industrialized world and a youthful developing world. In 2005 nearly one-third of the developing world’s population was between 10 and 24 years old—precisely the age range that has witnessed a steep rise in migration rates (McKenzie, 2008). Finally, the age and gender composition of international migration flows has changed as growing numbers of women and children cross national boundaries (Freeman, 2006; Zlotnick, 2003).²

The feminization of migration flows has been amply documented, but there has been less systematic empirical research about the involvement of children and youth in international

migration and the consequences for their psychosocial, physical, and economic wellbeing. Notable exceptions are studies that focus on child and adolescent labor migrants (e.g., McKenzie, 2008; Lloyd, et al., 2005); the children of immigrants (second generation) in developed countries (e.g., TIES and ICSEY);³ and highly vulnerable groups, such as victims of trafficking for sex, labor, or armed conflict (e.g., Carey and Kim, 2006; Zimmerman 2003).⁴

Whether and how migration improves or diminishes the life opportunities of children and youth is poorly understood for several reasons: (1) research about child development is seldom connected with the study of migration and economic development; (2) much research that focuses on young people with migration backgrounds is based on case studies that may not be generalized readily;⁵ and (3) estimates of world migration streams were not disaggregated by age until very recently (U.N., 2012). Using 2010 international censuses, the United Nations estimated that globally about 16 percent of all migrants were less than 20 years old and that more than one-third of migrant youth were under age 10 (U.N., 2012). Case studies based on small and unrepresentative samples are not well suited for systematic comparative assessments of child and youth migration.

Unless migrant youth are engaged in the labor market, they often are ignored by international reports about migration and development.⁶ For example, the *2007 World Development Report*, which focused on children, claimed that countries with burgeoning youth populations could reap economic dividends by investing in health, education, and job training, but the report did not underscore the unique challenges confronted by youths with migration backgrounds and how their experiences differ across receiving nations and according to their generational status. This omission partly reflects differing focus: studies about migration and economic development concentrate on remittances and employment, while researchers

concerned with child development often ignore the implications of migration status for social and emotional wellbeing.

Toward a Child-Centric Approach to Migration and Development

Human development and geographic mobility are social processes that evolve over time. Therefore, understanding how migration influences the wellbeing of young people and how migrant children fare in their host countries *ideally* requires longitudinal data as well as information about their origin and host societies. Because information about origin communities is seldom available to researchers (but see González-Ferrer, Baizan and Beauchemin, this volume), few studies portray the selection process that determines whether or not children migrate with their parents, follow them later, or remain behind and wait for their return. Rather, most studies about children with migration backgrounds focus on migrant children at their new destinations and draw inferences about integration prospects by comparing migrant and second-generation youth with citizens of their host countries on various indicators of physical, social, and economic wellbeing.

Figure 1 presents a conceptual framework that situates child migration within the context of family, which represents the proximate decision-making unit. Family migration involves coterminous movement of parents and children. Notwithstanding disruptions necessarily associated with geographic moves, this arrangement should produce the least deleterious outcomes for children because it does not involve separation of parents and their offspring, as, for example, when one or both parents migrate and leave the child behind. Although not directly involved in migration, children left behind are impacted by the absence of their parents, and their relative wellbeing depends not only on the level and regularity of remittances but also the length

of parental separation (Harttgen and Klasen, 2008; Rossi, 2008; González-Ferrer, et al., this volume). Child migration commands a great deal of media attention because it involves minors crossing international boundaries without their parents. Depending on age at migration and motivation for moving (e.g., to pursue education or work versus involuntary trafficking), the significance of child migration for wellbeing varies appreciably. There are no reliable estimates regarding the global prevalence of child migration without a parent because international data suitable for estimating prevalence of migration by age lack information about reasons for migrating.

Figure 1 About Here

Migration requires youth to make sense of a new country by learning to navigate the social institutions of their host society and, more often than not, a new language. The difficulty of these challenges depends on the age at which youth migrate, whether they moved alone or in the company of one or more family members, the similarity of the host society to their origin culture, the generosity of welfare institutions, and the general acceptance of foreigners in their destination. Many migrant children must cope with unwelcoming communities, particularly if they settle in places where residents are unaccustomed to foreigners.

Increasing numbers of children with migration backgrounds in both traditional and new immigrant-receiving nations raise important research and policy questions about how children's migration status is associated with their integration prospects, and why migrant youth fare better in some host countries than in others. Until recently, research about the consequences of migration for youth was highly fragmented by destination, research method, and the outcomes of interest. Furthermore, with few exceptions (Berry, et al., 2006), most of the empirical literature about the social and cultural integration of immigrant youth and children of immigrants was

based largely on the experience of the United States, with less attention based on other major immigrant-receiving nations such as the United Kingdom, Germany, and France, as well as new immigrant nations like Spain and Italy.

Several comparative and country-specific studies about youth with migration backgrounds have been developed during the past decade or two to fill this research void. However, the vast majority of these studies focus on the children of immigrants—the second generation, born in their new countries—with uneven attention to those who migrated during their youth. Furthermore, except for case studies based on specific groups or localities, research about the second generation mainly considers the experiences of adolescents and young adults. For example, the Integration of the European Second Generation (TIES) study, which focuses on the transition to adulthood in eight European countries, is based on urban samples of second-generation youth and adults ages 18 to 35, with only retrospective information about early-childhood experiences. To be sure, this multi-country study will generate rich comparative insights about the transition to adulthood for young people whose *parents* migrated from Turkey, Morocco, or the former Yugoslavia, but will have little to say about the integration challenges of young people from these countries who *themselves* migrated as children or adolescents. As we discuss below, several longitudinal birth-cohort studies permit researchers to fill this long-standing gap in the research about the second generation.

Empirical evidence attests that cognitive, social, and emotional competencies acquired in early childhood facilitate later learning (Heckman, et al., 2006). Because early mastery of these three competencies provides the foundations for many adult outcomes, a focus on children and adolescents with migration backgrounds—both those born in their native countries those born after their parents migrate—permits researchers to identify preventable circumstances that can

thwart successful integration. Therefore, longitudinal data that follow children over time is essential to understand whether and how youth with migration backgrounds may be disadvantaged compared with their native counterparts whose parents are not migrants.

At least four birth-cohort—the Millennium Birth Cohort Study (MCS) in the United Kingdom, the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFS) and the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (ECLS) in the United States, and the Longitudinal Survey of Australian Children (LSAC) in Australia—are well suited for comparative analyses of second-generation children’s wellbeing. Despite their long immigration traditions, similar language and cultural traditions, the health-care, educational, and social institutions of Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States differ in ways that have direct implications for integration of immigrants. To take one example from this volume, Deborah A. Cobb-Clark and her co-authors report country differences in the ages at which children begin school. A late school-entry age is less consequential for native youth than for immigrant youth, who must learn the host language before they are able to study in the language.

Despite the absence of longitudinal data spanning many years, it is possible to infer links between migration status and various indicators of social and economic integration using cross-sectional data, provided analysts have a clear understanding of the implicit counterfactuals in causal comparisons. For instance, would a child have been better off if the parents had not migrated? What if the parents had migrated to a different country, or if the parents had migrated at a different point in the child’s life cycle? Alternatively, would a child have been better off if the parents had waited until after migration to have their baby? Each question presupposes a different counterfactual and can be used to understand later outcomes by asking, for example, how adult outcomes might differ if children had migrated at a different point in their life cycles.

As demonstrated by several articles in this volume, age at the time of migration provides a bridge between the rich literature about child development and studies of immigrant integration because it allows researchers to evaluate the costs of adapting to a new society vis-à-vis exposure to host-country institutions, particularly schools. That the ability to master a second language declines with age provides a strategic window to evaluate the life-cycle consequences of child migration.

New Insights on Child Migration and Social Integration

The articles in this volume use both cross-sectional and longitudinal data to assess the integration experiences of migrant children and youth, focusing on educational outcomes, health status, and family arrangements. The first three articles focus on educational attainment of youth with migration backgrounds, but they differ in their comparative scope and depth. Cobb-Clark, Mathias Sinning and Steven Stillman analyze data from the 2009 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) to compare scholastic achievements of migrant and native youth in 34 OECD countries. Their consideration of institutional arrangements is an important innovation of their approach because it enables them to identify opportunities for policy interventions. Specifically, they identify significant cross-national variation in the age at which children begin school, in the prevalence of preschool, in educational expenditures, and in national policies about testing youth in the host or origin-country language. They find that scholastic-achievement gaps are wider for migrant youth who arrive at later ages and for youth who do not speak the test language at home but that the magnitude of the achievement gaps also depends on institutional arrangements, such as the age at which compulsory schooling begins and education expenditures. Although earlier school starting ages generally benefit migrant youth, this result is not universal

across countries. Partly this may reflect differences between the languages of the host country and the origin country.⁷

Davide Azzolini, Philipp Schnell and John Palmer use 2009 PISA data to investigate how children with immigrant backgrounds compare with native students in reading and mathematics skills in Italy and Spain. These “new” immigration countries not only share a recent and remarkable growth of migratory inflows but also notable similarities in the structures of their economies, labor markets, and welfare systems. In both, youth with migration backgrounds underperform academically relative to natives, with the largest gaps between natives and first-generation migrants followed by that between natives and second-generation migrants. Children of mixed couples, i.e., those having one native and one foreign-born parent, are indistinguishable from natives. Azzolini and his associates find that socioeconomic background and language skills explain a similar share of the achievement gap in both countries, but that language spoken at home is more strongly associated with achievement in Italy. The authors suggest that different immigrant selectivity regimes between the two countries account for the larger mathematics achievement gap of first-generation students observed in Spain. They reinforce the claims made by Cobb-Clark and her associates in this volume about the importance of institutional arrangements for academic achievement of youth with migration backgrounds by showing, for example, that tracking is strongly associated with students’ test scores in Italy—a finding that is further clarified by Alessandra Minello and Nicola Barban article.

In addition to characterizing the nature of Italy’s tracking system, Minello and Barban analyze a recent nationally representative survey of native and foreign-born students (ITAGEN 2005–2006) in Italy to address variation in educational aspirations of eighth graders. They find that family socioeconomic status and students’ friendship ties are associated with choice of

secondary school—whether university-bound or vocationally oriented—as well as their future college aspirations, but migration status is not associated with tertiary aspirations. Minello and Barban also consider whether the educational aspirations of native peers attending the same school are associated with the educational goals of youth with migrant backgrounds. Their results indicate that, immigrant children attending a middle school where at least one-third of their Italian peers expect to attend high school are more likely to report high-school expectations than immigrant youth who attend schools with smaller shares of highly motivated Italian natives.

A second set of papers examines several social consequences of child migration, including family disruption and reconstitution, intermarriage, and fertility—all outcomes that have important implications for assessing the sustainability of generous welfare policies in aging industrialized countries. Amparo González-Ferrer, Pau Baizán and Cris Beauchemin are pioneers in examining the likelihood of child-parent reunification either in the destination or origin country. Their innovative study uses a unique survey, Migration between Africa and Europe (MAFE), that includes interviews with migrants or their relatives in the sending country (Senegal) and migrants residing in three European destinations (Italy, Spain, and France). Separations among family members are relatively common, and many are long, especially if the absent parent is the father. When reunifications occur, whether they take place in Senegal or in Europe is associated with markedly different family types and migration strategies. Parents who end separations by returning to Senegal often belong to families that are polygamous, have large numbers of children, and have grandparents alive in Senegal—a clear departure from the Western nuclear model. When the absent parent is the mother, when migrants belong to an ethnic

group that follows maternal lineage, and when Senegalese families follow Western family arrangements, family reunification is more likely to occur in Europe than in Senegal.

Two papers use detailed information about age at migration to investigate several adult consequences of child migration. Most migrant youth likely move with their parents. Hence, the household decision resulting in their move is plausibly independent of the various statuses they achieve as adults, including labor-market participation, educational attainment, and family structure. Because early arrival affords child migrants more time to attend local schools and learn the rules of their host societies, age at arrival is bound to shape the nature and extent of adaptation. Audrey Beck, Miles Corak, and Marta Tienda find a clear association between the stage of development upon arrival, which they argue involves sensitive periods of human development, and educational attainment; in turn, education attainment has consequences for the capacity of youth to become fully integrated into the American mainstream as adults. They use the 5 percent public use file from the 2000 U.S. Census to show that, as predicted by child development theory, the likelihood of graduating from high school decreases significantly each year for children who arrive after the age of eight. Using an instrumental variables approach to correctly estimate the impact of educational attainment on adult outcomes, they find that arriving in the United States after age eight leads to variations in educational attainment that influence how well children speak English in adulthood and whom they marry. Youth from non-English-speaking countries are much less likely to report speaking English very well, much less likely to be married to an English-speaking person, and much more likely to be married to someone from the same country of origin if they arrive after that critical age.

In another paper that focuses on age at arrival and variation in family formation, Alicia Adsera, Ana Ferrer, Wendy Sigle-Rushton, and Ben Wilson examine how the fertility of women

who migrated as children relative to that of natives varies by age at migration. They employ data from the Canadian Census 1991–2006 for Canada; the “Enquête sur Trajectoires et Origines” (TeO) 2008 for France; and a subsample of the Office for National Statistics Longitudinal Study (ONLS) set of linked census records (1971–2001) for the United Kingdom. Despite differences in the selectivity of the migration policies in the three countries compared, results show broadly similar family formation patterns, with fertility increasing with age at migration, particularly in adolescence (although this profile is flatter in Canada). When the association between age at immigration and fertility is allowed to vary by place of birth, results from England, Wales, and France reveal that the fertility effect of exposure to the host country varies somewhat by country of origin. This finding underscores the importance of taking into account the heterogeneity of the foreign-born population for assessing the long-term integration prospects of youth migrants.

The last set of papers exploits the longitudinal dimension of birth-cohort data to examine variation in physical and mental health status of children with migration backgrounds. The first two use the Fragile Families Study (FFS) from the United States and the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) from the United Kingdom to analyze variations in the health practices and outcomes of mothers who differ in ethnic background and migration status. Margot Jackson, Sara McLanahan, and Kathleen Kiernan investigate whether the immigrant advantage in health behaviors regularly found in the United States extends to mothers in the United Kingdom. Importantly, given the different source countries of immigrants and the relative size of the second generations in each country, the authors distinguish between ethnicity and nativity. Jackson and her associates confirm that immigrant women in the United Kingdom engage in healthier behaviors, and they find very small differences in mother’s receipt of early prenatal care in both countries. In the United Kingdom, South Asian, black African and Caribbean, and

other immigrant mothers are less likely to smoke during pregnancy, less likely to smoke around their children, and more likely to breastfeed. This generalization applies for both socioeconomically disadvantaged and advantaged mothers. The authors also find that these differences persist throughout early childhood, which suggests a “universality” of healthier behaviors among foreign-born mothers that transcends racial/ethnic and socioeconomic groups, time, and distinct policy contexts.

Melissa L. Martinson, Sara McLanahan, and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn also use MCS and FFS longitudinal data to investigate ethno-racial and socioeconomic variation in child overweight. They find that minority and immigrant status are risk factors for child overweight in both countries but that the salience of socioeconomic status operates differently for minorities than for whites. In the United States, low income and low education are associated with lower obesity risks for children of black mothers. A similar association (albeit not statistically significant) obtains for Hispanic children in the United States and for all minority groups in England. Surprisingly, Martinson and her colleagues find that mother’s age at migration does not moderate the association between immigrant status and child overweight and mother’s obesity; however, mother’s obesity is consequential only for children of selected demographic groups. Indeed, mother’s age at migration accounts for between 20 and 30 percent of the higher obesity risk among native-born black and Hispanic children in the United States, and for about 10 percent of the higher obesity risk among foreign-born black children in England. Martinson and her co-authors also find that the association between maternal obesity and family socioeconomic status is stronger for school-age children than for toddlers in both countries.

Finally, Lucinda Platt examines the social and economic wellbeing of children of mixed ethnicity partnerships in the United Kingdom—a focus that merges the themes of health and

social outcomes. Using data from both the Household Labour Force Survey from 2002 to 2005 and the MCS, she considers whether interethnic partnerships influence the likelihood that a child is exposed to a set of potentially adverse outcomes. Platt finds that children in families with mixed parentage face a higher risk of living in a family where neither parent works compared with youth who live with ethnically homogamous parents. However, this result depends on the specific ethnic combination of the couple. Although interethnic partnerships are not associated with a higher risk of maternal depression, lone motherhood is associated with maternal depression, except among low-educated black Caribbean mothers. Having parents from different ethnic groups was not associated with children's chances of experiencing social and emotional difficulties at age three, after controlling for appropriate risks factors such as maternal depression and education as well as lone parenthood.

Collectively and individually, the papers in this volume add to the literature about child migration through their systematic comparisons of traditional and “new” immigrant-receiving nations as well as their attention to variation in institutional arrangements that are important for successful integration of youth with migration backgrounds. Their framing of analyses within the child development literature as well as their attention to differences within and between countries provide a strong framework for future work regarding the integration prospects of migrant youth.

References

Berry, John W., Jean S. Phinney, David L.Sam, and Paul Vedder. 2006. *Immigrant youth in cultural transition: Acculturation, identity and adaptation across national contexts*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.

- Carey, Robert, and Jane Kim. 2006. *Tapping the potential of refugee youth*. New York: International Rescue Committee.
- Freeman, Richard B. 2006. People flows in globalization. *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 20 (2):145-170.
- Harttgen, Kenneth and Stephan Klasen. 2008. Well-being of migrant children and migrant youth in Europe. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Global Network on Child Migration. Available from www.globalnetwork.princeton.edu (accessed 6 February 2012).
- Heckman, James J. 2006. Skill formation and the economics of investing in disadvantaged children. *Science* 312 (5782): 1900-1902.
- Lloyd, Cynthia B., ed. 2005. *Growing up global: The changing transitions to adulthood in developing countries*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.
- McKenzie, David J. 2008. A profile of the world's young developing country migrants. *Population and Development Review* 34 (1):115-135.
- Rossi, Andrea. 2008. The impact of migration on children in developing countries. Paper presented at the Youth Migration Conference, 24 April-26 April 2008. Bellagio, Italy.
- United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division. 2012. The Age and Sex of Migrants 2011 Wallchart. New York: United Nations. Available from <http://www.un.org/en/> (accessed 5 February 2012).
- World Bank. 2006. *World development report 2007: Development and the next generation*. Washington, DC: World Bank.
- Zimmerman, Cathy. 2003. The health risks and consequences of trafficking in women and adolescents: Findings from a European study. London: London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

Zlotnick, Hania. 2003. The global dimensions of female migration. In Migration Information Source [online magazine]. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute. Available from www.migrationinformation.org (accessed 6 February 2012).

Zlotnik, Hania. 2006. The dimensions of migration in Africa. In *Africa on the move: African migration and urbanisation in comparative perspective*, eds. Marta Tienda, Sally E. Findley, Stephen Tollman and Eleanor Preston-Whyte, 15-37. Johannesburg, South Africa: Wits University Press.

Notes

¹ The 1970 world population stood at about 3.7 billion compared with 6.9 billion in 2010. Estimates of international migration for 2010 are from *The Age and Sex of Migrants 2011 Wallchart*, and those for 1970 are taken from Freeman, 2006.

² Global estimates of women's migration behavior were unavailable until 1998, when the United Nations released sex-specific global estimates of the foreign stock population (Zlotnick, 2003).

³ TIES (The Integration of the European Second Generation) focuses on the Turkish, Moroccan and Ex-Yugoslavian second generation in 15 European cities across eight countries, including nations with long immigration traditions, like Germany and France, and new destination nations like Spain. ICSEY (International Comparative studies of Ethnocultural Youth) is a completed cross-national study about the psychosocial adaptation of second-generation youth in 13 industrialized nations. See Berry, et al., 2006.

⁴ According to Carey and Kim (2006), roughly half of 30 million people displaced by armed conflict worldwide are children.

⁵ Zimmerman's (2003) study of women trafficked for sex, for example, is based on interviews with less than 30 women.

⁶ Youth were largely absent from the United Nations 2006 report on International migration, as well as from the agenda of the first meeting of the Global Forum on Migration and Development the following Year.

⁷ Presumably youth who migrate from South America have less difficulty learning Italian compared with migrants from China or other countries that do not use the alphabet.

FIGURE 1
Child-Centric Migration Framework

Migration Status		Final Child Destination	
		New Country	Home Country
Migrant Parent	Migrant Child	Family Migration	----
Migrant Parent	Non-Migrant Child	----	Children Left Behind
Non-Migrant Parent	Migrant Child	Child Migration	----
Non-Migrant Parent	Non-Migrant Child	----	Stayers