

“Children with an absent parent: are they worse-off?”

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Abstract

While it is taken as a given that the absence of a parent, main caregiver, or other family member can significantly affect many aspects of child well-being, the precise relationship between parental absenteeism through migration and child well-being outcomes is still uncertain. Within the field of migration studies increasing attention has been paid to the “left behind”, individuals who remain in the country of origin following the emigration of a household member. Available evidence on the lives of children left behind is scattered, however, due to the limited scope and depth of previous studies, many of which address the phenomenon through small-scale, qualitative studies.

Migration of a household member could have both positive and negative effects on the well-being of children who remain in the country of origin: the transfer of remittances and availability of additional resources could enable the household to make increased investments in the education and health of children while enabling them to meet daily consumption needs without problem. At the same time the absence of a care giver could imply less supervision and greater emotional challenges for children. There are generally no universally positive or negative impacts of migration on well-being outcomes. Kandel and Kao (2001) note that there is a tendency to over-simplify potential positive benefits of migration, and nuance is often lost by failing to balance greater material resources against losses of less-easily measured impacts (such as parental supervision).

Using data from two large-scale, nationally-representative household surveys conducted in both Moldova and Georgia--each containing approximately 2,000 households with at least one child--the present paper provides greater nuance into the effects of migration on children left behind by empirically evaluating different dimensions of child well-being. The concept of child well-being used in this study reflects the notion that well-being is multidimensional and that deprivation in any number of dimensions can result in the failure of an individual to achieve well-being (Alkire, 2002; Sen, 1993; Alkire & Foster, 2011). The review of previous attempts to define and measure child well-being as well as the guiding principles for the development of a child-specific index proposed by Ben-Arieh (2000) and by Roelen et al (2009) provided the framework for the analysis. Well-being of children is broken down by different dimensions of well-being and defined as:

“a multidimensional state of personal being comprised of both self-assessed (subjective) and externally-assessed (objective) positive outcomes across eight realms of opportunity: education, physical health, nutrition, emotional health, material living standards, housing, protection, and information and communication”.

Children have different emotional and physical needs at different stages of their lifecycles, which are uniquely affected by the absence of family members through migration. This is taken into account by comparing children in households with a member currently in migration to those in non-migrant or return migrant households along different characteristics such as age, household composition, and characteristics of the migrant. Each of the eight dimensions of well-being is examined individually and then aggregated into a multidimensional well-being index. As well-being is not only a matter of age or migration status, multivariate analysis is applied to identify other correlates that affect well-being in separate domains.

Contrary to the scenarios described in much past research, the results suggest that children in households containing a migrant—whether a parent or other household member—do not necessarily suffer from many of the problems that are associated with (care-giver) migration when compared to other children. Some exceptions exist: children in migrant households achieve worse outcomes in the dimensions of emotional well-being and material living standards than their counterparts in non-migrant and return migrant households. In general, children in return migrant households are better off in the dimensions of physical and emotional health, experiencing better outcomes than children living in other types of households, while children in current migrant households are less likely to enjoy material well-being. Within current migrant households, who has migrated—a mother, father, both parents, or someone else—does not significantly affect attained well-being. When the effect of remittances on well-being is analysed, this additional source of income appears to positively affect the material and emotional well-being of children living in migrant households.

The findings suggest that age matters for well-being across different dimensions in different ways. Significant differences can be observed in specific dimensions such as health, nutrition, education, social protection, and emotional well-being. Children in older age groups generally experience the highest well-being rates, which suggests that multidimensional deprivations of children are age-sensitive. This finding importantly illustrates the need for social protection measures to more specifically target the most vulnerable groups of children, including those in the youngest age cohorts.

Several policy implications arise from this study. While there has been a tendency to focus on household migration status as a proxy of vulnerability, particularly in Moldova, the findings suggest that attention should rather be paid to sources of child vulnerability that have a more significant role in determining child poverty. Children experiencing the absence of a caregiver or other household member are not necessarily more likely to be multidimensionally poor than children in non-migrant households. Age, for example, proves to be a more important determinant of child well-being than household migration status. Furthermore, differences in wellbeing rates differ considerably among the eight dimensions, suggesting the importance of analysing and addressing each dimension (i.e. health, education, nutrition, etc.) separately. Given overlapping rates of well-being or deprivation across different dimensions of well-being (such as housing and social protection), the results also hint that child poverty is

comprised of a constellation of interconnected domains that reinforce each other. This could suggest that policy could better target specific dimensions or indicators of well-being rather than trying to tackle child poverty as one undifferentiated problem. Policy could further target particular indicators of well-being that show very low rates of attainment, which could increase both efficiency and effectiveness of existing child-specific interventions.

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