Parental migration and the children left behind

by Alina Botezat
November 30, 2018

I’m sure most of us would agree that “home” is where our families are. But for many children whose parents are working abroad, “home” means the absence of parents, emotional and psychological distress, and often physical and mental health problems. These children usually stay behind in the care of close relatives: grandparents, older siblings, uncles and aunts. The phenomenon of children left behind, which is having a profound effect on societies in Eastern Europe, Asia and South America, is causing serious concern in the affected communities. Indeed, in some places it has been called a national tragedy.

Social scientists are showing increasing interest in understanding the consequences for children’s development of living in transnational families. In terms of financial and material resources, the children left behind may be better off. Yet being deprived of their primary caregivers can have a very harmful effect on children’s overall well-being.

How does parental migration affect children’s school performance?

The scientific evidence on the relationship between parents’ migration and the education of the children they leave behind is mixed. Some studies suggest that children whose parents are absent spend more time doing household work at the expense of study time, which has a negative impact on their educational outcomes.

Other studies, however, point out that the remittances migrants send home increase household income, making it possible for caregivers to invest more in children’s schooling. Those remittances benefit secondary school students more than children in primary school.

There is no consensus regarding the effects of parental migration on the school achievement of the children they leave behind; study findings are country-specific and highly dependent on the socio-emotional family environment and children’s ages, as well as on the data used and how those data are analyzed – i.e., whether researchers examine causation or only correlation.

How does parental migration affect the mental and physical health of the children who are left behind?

Unfortunately, little research has been done to learn more about how living in a migrant family affects children’s health outcomes. The main problem is a lack of relevant data. The effects on children’s mental health, in particular, have received little attention, and as a result we may be underestimating the overall impact of international migration. More and more, we are recognizing that mental health is an essential component of overall health, as well as of a fulfilling social life.
Recent research shows that children who remain behind when their parents leave their countries of origin are more likely to experience depression, anxiety, and other emotional and mental health problems. Children are particularly affected when their mothers leave. Some studies also indicate that children from transnational families are more likely than their peers to exhibit behavioral problems. Such issues are more prevalent among boys, while girls are more likely to experience emotional problems.

“Children who remain behind when their parents leave their countries of origin are more likely to experience depression, anxiety, and other emotional and mental health problems.”

My colleague Friedhelm Pfeiffer and I recently conducted a study to learn more about the causal effects of parental migration on the mental health of the children who are left behind. Using data from Romania, the EU country that has experienced the greatest increase in emigration over the past few decades, we show that for children left behind, parental migration is linked to an increase in serious health problems and a greater likelihood of depression, relative to children living in non-migrant households. Our results also reveal that living in a transnational family is particularly harmful for girls and for children from rural areas.

When I presented the results of our study to students at our local university in Romania, I was unaware until these students shared their experiences that some of them, too, had been left behind by parents seeking work abroad. They also pointed out something that our research had not considered: Another factor with a negative impact on their well-being was the psychological stress experienced by their caregivers, who were often overwhelmed by the responsibility of caring for these children.

This confirms the findings of other studies, which show that these children’s mental health issues are associated not only with their parents’ migration, but also with the mental health and overall life satisfaction of their current caregivers.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the children who are left behind by migrant workers may suffer long-lasting consequences.

This article was published on BOLD, the Blog on Learning and Development. If you would like to share it with others, please do not use this PDF but instead link to the original post at https://bold.expert/parental-migration-and-the-children-left-behind/.